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"PRECIOS PERLE WYTHOUTEN SPOTTE": ACCEPTING THE UNKNOWABLE IN *PEARL*

by

Jana Ishee

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

The fourteenth-century Middle English poem *Pearl,* authored by the anonymous *Pearl*-poet, survives in a manuscript known as London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.x. This dream vision, narrated by a grieving father, tells the story of his journey to Paradise, where he encounters his infant daughter, now older, regal, and wise, proffering admonishments with the authority of God to her tearful father. meeting with her in Paradise. Drawing on Caroline Walker Bynum's work on medieval European conceptions of death and resurrection, J. Stephen Russell's work on the dream vision genre, and Karl Steel's work on oysters as liminal figures, this thesis reads *Pearl*'s function as a dream vision as a rhetorical strategy that demonstrates new ways of conceptualizing the ambiguities of death and the afterlife. As the Dreamer attempts to reconcile the disparity between what he sees (bodily decay), and what he is asked to believe (the Christian promise of resurrection), the poem argues that this disparity is unavoidable and that a methodical or scientific understanding of resurrection is not just impossible, but unnecessary. The liminality of the dream vision genre combined with the cognitive dissonance present in the poem's dialogue and the ambiguity of the Pearl-Maiden's appearance and symbolism allow Pearl to address the liminality, cognitive dissonance, and ambiguity present in the discussion of Christian death, resurrection, and the afterlife.

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DEDICATION

For Ken and Teresa Ishee, those who made me possible.

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“PRECIOS PERLE WYTHOUTEN SPOTTE”:

ACCEPTING THE UNKNOWABLE IN *PEARL*

The fourteenth-century Middle English poem *Pearl* survives only in London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.x alongside the other three works attributed to the anonymous *Pearl*-poet: *Cleanness, Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Based on the texts’ dialectic features, *Pearl* was likely composed in the northwest of England sometime in the mid-fourteenth century, but was not recorded in writing until as late as the beginning of the fifteenth century (“Pearl”). The poem begins with a prologue in which the speaker sits at his daughter’s graveside, lamenting the loss of his “precios perle wythouten spotte” [precious pearl without spot] (lines 12, 24, 36, 48, 59–60).[1] After falling asleep, the speaker enters a dream in which he follows a path to Paradise and encounters his infant daughter, now older, regal, and wise, proffering admonishments with the authority of God to her tearful father.

While the poem is editorially named for the child, there is no indication in the work that the girl was named Pearl. Rather, her father refers to her as a pearl, seemingly as a descriptor of her value to him or as a descriptor of her purity at her death. After a lengthy debate between the *Pearl*-Maiden and the Dreamer concerning the seeming contradictions of the Christian afterlife (namely that a deceased and decomposing body will somehow be resurrected whole in Heaven), the Dreamer jumps into the stream that separates him from his daughter, attempting to reach Paradise, and is roused from sleep.[2]

[1] All references to *Pearl* are to Armitage’s *Pearl: A New Verse Translation* (2016). Parenthetical citations refer to line numbers. Translations are my own.

[2] I refer to the speaker of the poem as “the Dreamer” and the version of his daughter that he meets in Paradise as “the *Pearl*-Maiden.”

In the poem's epilogue, the Dreamer reflects on his vision and conversation with his daughter, concluding that he no longer wishes for her return to him, but decides instead to offer her to God (1206). The Dreamer's inability to understand the wisdom given to him by the *Pearl*-Maiden in the debate is evidenced by the fact that he attempts to swim across the stream to Paradise despite the *Pearl*-Maiden's insistence that he must undergo a bodily death in order to reach Paradise through resurrection. However, his speech in the epilogue denotes that he has overcome his fear of loss (of both his daughter and himself) by accepting on faith alone that bodily resurrection is possible, even though his experience with death and deterioration of the body might lead him to think otherwise.

Pearl is one of many religious dream visions written in England in the fourteenth century; Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, completed his *Book of the Duchess* around 1370 (Benson 329). Neither the form nor the content of *Pearl* is unusual for its time; many religious texts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were written as dream visions, and many of them tackled the topic of the process of bodily resurrection. What makes *Pearl* unique, though, is the way that its form and content work together to offer a nuanced perspective on the issue of resurrection that does not appear in its contemporaries. Rather than asserting definitive answers to questions about the decomposition and eventual resurrection of the human body, the poem allows the uncertainty associated with these questions to simply exist. *Pearl* never lays out specific instructions or reveals a specific method or philosophy by which a decomposed body might be wholly resurrected after death. Instead, the *Pearl*-poet emphasizes the dissonance inherent in anticipating bodily decay while also anticipating bodily resurrection, working within the already liminal

genre of the dream vision and crafting dialogue and characters that embody the blurring of boundaries that defines faith in the promised resurrection.

The *Pearl*-poet's works are considered part of the alliterative revival of the later Middle Ages, when the alliterative style of Old English poetry became popular once again in Middle English (O'Mara 103). *Pearl,* along with the other three works written by the *Pearl*-poet, center on themes of purity and defilement, piety and reward, doubt and punishment. These poems were written sometime in the mid-to-late-fourteenth century, but significant literary conversation *about Pearl* did not begin until the poem was published for study in 1864 (Johnson 27).

Arguments about the form of *Pearl* have claimed that the poem is a semi-autobiographical elegy (Schofield), while others consider it a religious allegory (Hillman) or a courtly debate poem (Pierson). *Pearl*'s form is regarded as "extraordinarily intricate" by J. A. Barrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, who note that the first and last lines of the poem overlap "so that the poem is itself a pearl in shape" (202). Critics have described the *Pearl*-poet's style as having been influenced by both religious and courtly poetry, as he employs both Biblical and romantic tropes in his works. Sandra Pierson describes the *Pearl*-poet as "a courtly poet, in the sense that he presumably writes for a courtly audience" (2). Furthermore, Phillip F. O' Mara asserts that "the poet knew the chivalric conventions as well as the commercial language of his time" (104). In *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form*, J. Stephen Russell considers *Pearl* to be primarily a dream vision and asserts, "*Pearl* is, from first to last, a serious doctrinal poem concerned with nothing other than crucial truths of eschatology […] *Pearl* attempts to bring human discourse to bear on a subject, only to discover human discourse to be inadequate as a

medium" (160). Russell argues that *Pearl* deconstructs the discourse of eschatology, but he fails to acknowledge that the poem's lack of definitive answers surrounding death and the afterlife is precisely the poem's point. While I concede that *Pearl* is deconstructing the discourse of eschatology by attempting to explain the unexplainable, I do not agree with Russell's sentiment that the poem is proving human discourse to be inadequate as a medium to discuss the complexities of death and the Christian afterlife. Russell overlooks the fact that the contrariness and seeming illogicality embedded in the poem's diction is itself a way of making meaning. *Pearl*'s form as a dream vision allows the content of *Pearl* the freedom to address questions about what happens when we die, but without the responsibility of providing a definitive answer.

Dominant threads in scholarship on the content of *Pearl* have included analysis of the poem's theological implications (e.g., Blenkner, Hillman, Kellogg, Robertson, Russell), likely influences on the *Pearl*-poet's content and form (e.g., Bennett, Breeze, Pilch), and feminist readings of the *Pearl*-Maiden (e.g., Ackerman, Harper, Moorman). Additionally, some scholars take a more material view of the poem's manuscript context, as in Murray McGillivray and Christina Duffy's work on the details revealed through multispectral imaging techniques applied to Cotton Nero A.x, the manuscript containing *Pearl* alongside *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*. Of particular relevance to this thesis, Katherine H. Terrell's "Rethinking the 'Corse in Clot': Cleanness, Filth, and Bodily Decay in *Pearl"* interrogates the connections between the Dreamer's vision of his daughter's decomposing corpse and his own fears surrounding death. While Terrell deals with the Dreamer's specific fears and how those fears are presented in the poem, I extend Terrell's discussion by exploring how the poem's genre

allows it the opportunity to assuage those fears surrounding death, bodily decay, and the afterlife.

This thesis is concerned not only with the poem's genre, nor only with what the poem claims to know about death, burial, grief, resurrection, or God's will. Rather, I am most interested in the spaces between these things, between form and content, the place where cognitive dissonance is not just possible, but demanded. Most crucially, I am interested in the blurring of lines between two seemingly opposing ideas: the knowable and the unknowable. Functioning as religious *memento mori* literature, *Pearl*, as I argue, invites us to rest, however uncomfortably, between what we can and cannot know about the afterlife.

Where prior scholarship has tied form and content in *Pearl* (e.g., Blenkner, Macrae-Gibson, Russell), my approach innovates by viewing *Pearl* through the lens of liminality: the liminality of the dream vision genre, the liminality of the language of the poem, the liminality of the poem's characters, and the more immaterial liminality of the poem's message concerning bodily resurrection. I take the poem's ambiguities (in all their forms) as a representation of the ambiguities inherent in the conversation surrounding death and bodily resurrection of which the poem is a part. Rather than parsing out the complexities and contradictions of the poem's structure and language, I read those complexities and contradictions as purposefully unparsable. Through exploration of the key characteristics of the dream vision genre, followed by analysis of the poem's debate scene and the material description of the *Pearl*-Maiden, this thesis demonstrates that *Pearl* responds to ambiguities of death and resurrection in the Middle

Ages by staging the tension between certainty and uncertainty about the Christian afterlife, but ultimately allowing that tension to persist.

Liminality in the Medieval Dream Vision

Pearl is a typical example of the medieval dream vision, a common genre of Middle English poetry, characterized by the framing of a narrator's experiences or journeys as a dream. In its most basic form, a dream vision usually has a dreamer who narrates their experience, a guide who helps the dreamer navigate the dream, and a conversation that reveals some wisdom to the dreamer (Spearing 1–5). In *Pearl*'s case, the modern title of the poem is misleading; Charles Moorman points out that the wisdom around which *Pearl* is built is intended for the father who narrates the tale. While the poem's "pearl" is the one doling out the wisdom in the conversation in the dream, "it is for [the father's] benefit that the girl talks and it is his consciousness which is directly affected by her remarks" (Moorman 105). The father is centered in the poem; he is the narrator and the Dreamer, while his daughter, the *Pearl*-Maiden, is the guide who reveals valuable wisdom to him.

The *Pearl*-poet's use of the dream vision genre serves as more than simple adherence to traditional structures, however. Just as the *Pearl*-Maiden's ambiguities make her the perfect mouthpiece for sharing ambiguous information, the liminality inherent in the dream vision genre is what renders the poem capable of navigating the blurred lines of its content. As J. Stephen Russell defines the genre, the dream vision exists in in-between spaces: "The dream vision had its origin in the gaps, the interstices of two parallel taxonomies in medieval thought… the poems invaded and deconstructed

these two taxonomies" (2). According to Russell, the dream vision genre exists between two common uses of dreams in classical and medieval literature: dream as event and dream as apocalypse. The former is simple: a dream as an event in a narrative is merely a plot device that can move the story forward, reveal inner truths about a character, or function as a sort of realism that makes the narrative more concrete. The latter is more complex: a dream as an apocalypse is a vision of universal truth, often considered factual or inarguable by its readers. It is separate from the context of the dreamer experiencing it, as the message of the dream is true for the world rather than solely for the dreamer themself. A dream as an event can be written off as irrelevant to its readers' realities or only applicable to the character who experiences it, but a dream as an apocalypse is set up to be perceived as universally true (see Russell 21–49).

A dream vision, as it sits between these two literary poles, is both personal and universal, general and specific, truth and fiction. About dream visions generally, Russell writes: "The genre takes the didactic integrity and brilliance of the apocalypse and puts it in the head and in the 'story' of a suspect, individual dreamer and, ultimately, draws its energy from its position or space between the two genres, a space within which readers can never be sure whether the words they read are God's or those of one who has dreams" (48–49). The dream in *Pearl* exists in this space between somatic dreams and apocalyptic visions, as a dream sparked by specific emotional conditions within the Dreamer's life but also which imparts some universal wisdom to the Dreamer and the medieval audience rather than simply revealing an internal change in the Dreamer or moving the plot forward. The dream event in the poem is the product of the Dreamer's experiences and reactions, but the dream's message is not reliant on context within the

plot of the poem in order to be relevant to its readers. The dream vision of *Pearl* is neither entirely dream as event nor entirely dream as apocalypse. It exists in the space between those types of literary dreams.

Drawing on Russell's description of the dream vision, I assert that the genre's in-betweenness makes it a fitting vessel for addressing the contradictions and inconsistencies present in medieval Christian discussions of death and resurrection. *Pearl* presents a two-fold crisis on the part of the Dreamer: first, the Dreamer struggles to conceptualize both resurrection and decay simultaneously, and second, when he cannot reconcile these two competing images, the Dreamer struggles to believe in the possibility of bodily resurrection after death. Rather than resolving the first of the Dreamer's crises, *Pearl* addresses the second issue in a way that renders the first crisis irrelevant. The liminal genre of the dream vision makes it possible for *Pearl* to assert that an understanding of resurrection is not vital to a belief in it.

Cognitive Dissonance in the Debate

Most of the dream in *Pearl* takes place in Paradise, where the Dreamer engages in a debate with the *Pearl*-Maiden, questioning her as she attempts to explain the "rules" of Paradise. The *Pearl*-Maiden's assertions in the debate eventually reveal that faith in resurrection requires some cognitive dissonance on the part of the believer. For example, the Dreamer must believe that the loss of his daughter is actually a gain. He must accept that she is somehow both infant and maiden, and that she reigns in Heaven as both Christ's bride and Christ's daughter.[3] Most strikingly, though, the Dreamer must maintain

[3] Heaven is often depicted in medieval dream poetry as a monarchy or kingdom (Newman 17).

a belief that his deceased daughter stands before him whole in the dream, even as he sleeps at her graveside, where he earlier lamented her deterioration: “hir color so clad in clot; / O moul thou marrez a myry juele” [her color so clad in clot; / Oh, dirt, you mar a merry jewel] (22–23). The Dreamer must believe simultaneously in ideas that, to his human mind, contradict one another.

The conversation between the Dreamer and the *Pearl*-Maiden jumps from point to point, but it maintains a steady emphasis on this seemingly tenuous logic of resurrection and the Christian afterlife. This had been a topic of considerable discussion since long before the composition and recording of *Pearl.* As historian Caroline Walker Bynum writes in *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* the general theological debate concerning the specifics of death, embodiment, the origins of identity, and the method by which bodily resurrection occurs took on countless and varied perspectives over the centuries. By the late Middle Ages, mourners frequently contemplated the slow degeneration of the deceased’s corporeal form, and the Dreamer in the poem is no different.[4]

In the decades following the Black Death, which reached England in 1348, medieval Christians dealt with the prolific loss of life by creating *memento mori*, or what historians now refer to as “medieval death art” (Cohen 1–11). Paintings, sculptures, and written works depicting dancing skeletons, personifications of death encroaching on humanity, and rotting remains attempted to make sense of the contradictory ideas that humans can die, decompose, and be resurrected whole in a perfect body. However, the

[4] On this fixation on the deceased’s body in the Middle Ages, I am influenced most heavily by Caciola, Chapman, Geary.

prolonged study of these questions led to proliferating and divergent interpretations of eschatological matters (Bynum 19–226). Medieval authors and artists presented several attempts at explaining the ambiguity of the Christian afterlife, but this only led to an ongoing debate about the exact scientific and spiritual nature of resurrection that never reached any consensus (Bynum 227–341).

The lack of consensus around the corporeal nature of the afterlife is best captured in the creation of cadaver or *transi* tombs, which began near the end of the fourteenth century. In the preceding centuries, *gisant*-style tombs (depicting the deceased at peaceful rest as they looked in life) were most common amongst those wealthy or religiously important enough to receive a church burial with an effigy. In the fourteenth century, however, many medieval Christians opted for the transi tomb (depicting the deceased as a decaying corpse), a decision which was, according to Kathleen Cohen, influenced by "a combination of a strong sense of anxiety about the fate of the soul with an intense preoccupation with death" (48). Near the end of the fourteenth century, many medieval Christians adopted a new, even more complex effigy style that parallels the contradictions and in-betweenness which *Pearl* is depicting.[5] These cadaver tombs were a double-decked structure, depicting both a living, prime-of-life human being above, as well as their deteriorating or sometimes even skeletal remains below. These double-decker cadaver and gisant-style tombs literally illustrate the contradiction of resurrection:

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[5] Jawacki has also written of a comparison between the cadaver tomb and another Middle English poem *The Awntyrs of Arthure;* however, his work ultimately concludes that the depictions of a living and dead version of Arthur's court "casts a light on death and a shadow on life, inviting the reader to view the luxury of Arthur's hall—and of their own lives—as transient, passing, and ephemeral" (99). In contrast, my argument is directed at the distance between a whole body and a deteriorating one and the importance of accepting that the method by which that distance is closed is not knowable.

rather than depicting the transition from decomposing body to whole resurrected body, they simply stack one atop the other, leaving a gap in-between and the opportunity for viewers to reflect on the incredibly small distance between being dead and decaying on Earth and being alive and resurrected in Heaven.

Pearl is one example of this sort of art, and the poem reveals how difficult it is to put the concept of bodily resurrection into words. Russell explains that much of the debate between the *Pearl*-Maiden and the Dreamer is paradoxical, illogical, and nonsensical in the context of human logic. He points out that the *Pearl*-Maiden's claims that she is both the Bride of the Lamb and the Queen of Heaven are "superficially outrageous" and that her explanations for how both she and the Virgin Mary can reign simultaneously may be "true and ha[ve] a rich history in Christian apocalyptic writing […] but we cannot lose sight of the fact that what she says is also exceedingly odd" (162, 64). However, where Russell argues that this oddness is a way of demonstrating that the questions being posed are unanswerable through human discourse, I see the contrariness of the *Pearl*-Maiden's arguments as the poet's invitation to readers to enter and *linger* in the space between what humans can understand and what humans cannot know.

As Boethius's sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy* explains, a text which was widely influential in medieval Christianity, there is an important distinction between earthly logic and divine logic: "Many kinds of knowledge belong to different and diverse substances [...] But reason belongs only to human kind, as intelligence only to the divine" (417). Boethius differentiates between human reason and divine intelligence, making an important distinction between the logic that humankind has access to and the logic that divine beings have access to. The *Pearl*-poet, rather than planting the poem's message

firmly in either human reason or divine intelligence, instead leads readers into the space between those two types of knowing. In the debate in *Pearl*, the *Pearl*-Maiden has access to this divine intellect, but the Dreamer is only capable of human reason, leaving readers with one foot in each concept, never receiving an entirely reasonable or intellectual explanation for the question of how someone may come to Paradise.

The debate demonstrates yet another layer of contradiction as the conversation between the Dreamer and the *Pearl*-Maiden is both punitive and soothing for the Dreamer. His fears of bodily loss and the impossibility of resurrection are at once confirmed and assuaged in the same dialogue, and it is the person whose death most disturbed him that is able to reassure him. The Dreamer exhibits this fear of the possibility of bodily loss prior to his dream, when he begins to question whether or not his daughter's body has a "spot." Despite his constant nods to her purity—asserting that she is "wythouten spot" [without spot] (12, 24, 36, 48, 59–60) and references to the "whyt" [white] of her skin (163, 177)—the Dreamer is keenly aware of what is happening to his daughter's physical form in death. The first five stanzas of the poem end in the phrase "precios perle wythouten spot," an epithet that denotes value, purity, and innocence. However, the Dreamer's tone changes drastically in the fifth stanza. He repeats the same sentiments as the first four stanzas, but now with an air of fear and disgust: "I playned my Perle that ther watz spenned… / such odour to my hernez schot" [I pined for my pearl that there was imprisoned… such odor rushed to my mind.] (53–57).[6]

[6] Although editors like Burrow, Turville-Petre, and Armitage amend the word "spenned" in line 53 to "penned," I have chosen to use "spenned," as it used in the original manuscript. According to the *Middle English Compendium*, "penned" is used to refer to something "equipped with feathers" or "written," whereas "spenned" refers to "grasping, enclosing, imprisoning, or capturing." It is possible that the poem was composed for oral delivery, so the combination of "watz penned" would sound like "watz spenned."

Rather than imagining his daughter as a source of fruitfulness as he does in earlier stanzas, her body is now a prisoner in the ground, and the odor of the flowers overwhelms his mind instead of consoling him. The poet uses the term "spot" throughout the first five stanzas in two ways: as a mark of sin and as the place in the ground where the *Pearl*-Infant's corpse is laid.[7] The Dreamer refers to her grave exclusively as "þat spot," which is a usage of "spot" that is otherwise unattested in Middle English poetry.[8] As the Dreamer ends the fifth stanza, like all others up to this point, with the phrase "wythouten spot" (60), his surety in the *Pearl*-infant's existence in the ground falters. This time, though, "wythouten spot" takes on a different meaning; the phrase now signals that the Dreamer is unsure about the location of the *Pearl*-infant's grave and, by extension, her physical body (line 60). The Dreamer fears that his daughter's body has no definitive location.

Karl Steel, in his work on the fifteenth-century poem *Disputation Between the Body and the Worms,* characterizes such a fixation on objectification in death as a fear of the inevitability of becoming a victim of some life-ending event: "Everything is amid abysses where no appetite can escape the appetites of others. Amid this turbulence, everything is vulnerable… [we fear] the 'not being able' to elude being made use of by others" ("Abyss" 94). Despite humanity's view of itself as the dominant perceiver of the world, in death humans are actually just another object to be perceived, used up, or even devoured. Writing on appetites in a literal sense (worms devouring a corpse), Steel's

[7] There are many repeated words and phrases in *Pearl*. For more on the recycling of language in the poem, see Devries.

[8] Many other contemporary texts prefer the word "grave" in the context of a person's burial place. The *Middle English Compendium* lists more than 45 quotations in which the word "grave" is used to refer to a tomb or resting place between the years of 1300 and 1500.

work on the *Disputation* reminds us that there was a real fear of bodily decay in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, precisely because it was at odds with the doctrine of resurrection. While this fear is explicit in *Disputation*, it is much less obvious in *Pearl*. The Dreamer does not explicitly mention the *Pearl*-Infant's body being devoured by worms or scavengers, but he instead focuses on how the dirt "marrez a myry juele" [mars a merry jewel] (23). The Dreamer tiptoes around the concept of bodily rot, but it is implicitly present in his mentions of her becoming unclean in the grave.

The Dreamer's fears are carefully exposed in his meeting with his daughter in Paradise. After falling asleep at his daughter's graveside, he enters a dream vision in which he follows a path to Paradise, only to find his daughter on the opposite bank of a stream. She is no longer an infant, but appears to have aged into an adult and is dressed as a bride of Christ.[9] Upon seeing her, the Dreamer exclaims:

> Much longeyng haf I for the layned
>
> Sythen into gresse thou me aglyghte.
>
> Pensif, payred, I am forpayned,
>
> And thou in a lyf of lykyng lyghte,
>
> In Paradys erde of stryf unstrained!
>
> [Much longing have I lain for you since you slipped from my grasp into the grass. Pensive, damaged, I am in pain and you are in a life of contentment in Paradise unstrained by strife!] (244–48).

---

[9] Depictions of the dead at the prime of their life were common in medieval death art. For instance, gisant-style effigies on tombs were often sculpted to look like a person at the age of 33 (regardless of their age at the time of their death) as an homage to Christ's death at 33 (Cohen 84). Neither the *Pearl*-Infant's age nor that of the *Pearl*-Maiden is ever explicitly addressed in the poem, despite the fact that many other details of her appearance and personality are made explicit.

The Dreamer describes the pain and longing he has felt in the *Pearl*-Maiden's absence, specifying that it began after she "slipped from [his] grasp into the grass" (245). It is her bodily death and burial that upsets him, making him pensive. As Steel explains, medieval death art focuses on "humiliations of human pretensions to worldly dominance" (95); in the moment that the Dreamer loses his pearl, the Dreamer is reminded that, to borrow Steel's words, "death is at once an end and a flourishing of other appetites that in turn will be consumed by others" (95). All beings, including humans, will die, and, in death, will become the object of another appetite. This realization of the inevitability of losing one's subjecthood is what makes the prospect of dying so frightening: death is that which reduces subject to object.

The Dreamer's interaction with the *Pearl*-Maiden does not just expose his fears, though. In a seemingly illogical way, the conversation also soothes the Dreamer's fears. His gleeful reaction at the sight of his daughter "in Paradise erde, of stryf unstrained" [in a life of contentment in Paradise unstrained by strife] (248) signals a turn away from his prior fear of objectification and disembodiment. The *Pearl*-Maiden's response to his complaint of becoming a "joylez jueler" [joyless jeweler] (252) after she slipped from his grasp is at once a rebuke and a comfort. She chastises the Dreamer for having his "tale mysetente" [tale mistold] (257), but this does not embarrass the Dreamer. He is also reminded that the *Pearl*-Maiden, despite having previously been a marred jewel in the clot, is now "in this gardyn gracious gaye, / Hereinne to lenge for ever and play" [in this gracious gay garden, here to linger and play forever] (260–61). His complaints are met with didacticism from the *Pearl*-Maiden. She lectures him on his inability to believe without seeing, reminds him that he is incapable of understanding God's will while he

remains an earthly being, and explains that death is a gain rather than a loss. Rather than disappointing or embarrassing the Dreamer, these comments comfort him by providing him with proof that goodness will be rewarded in the afterlife. Despite the fact that the Dreamer is made fully aware by the *Pearl*-Maiden that his daughter is dead (and lost to him in an earthly context), seeing the *Pearl*-Maiden having blossomed in Paradise has, at least for the moment, replaced the image of her corpse in the grave, allowing him a respite from his anguish and an opportunity to believe that like his daughter, he will maintain subjecthood in death. The Dreamer replaces the image of his daughter's corpse with an image of embodiment and opulence, all while he sleeps at the *Pearl*-Infant's graveside.

The *Pearl*-Maiden's Ambiguity

The *Pearl*-Maiden represents the contradictions and ambiguity of the Christian afterlife by embodying a set of contradictions herself. Rather than casting the *Pearl*-Maiden in his dream vision as a revenant or a corpse-like visage of death, as the returning dead were often depicted in religious texts of the time, the Dreamer envisions her as a white-clad image of innocence, but also opulence. The *Pearl*-Maiden is representative of both corporeal wholeness and holy knowledge; she is both materially and immaterially valuable, comparable to both a saint's relic and the reliquary in which that relic may be kept. Her "araye ryalle" [royal array] (191) is adorned with "the myryeste largarys" [the merriest pearls] (199), denoting her purity and the noble status she has gained in Paradise. Her linen gown, pearled bodice, and jeweled belt call to mind the image of the opulent

reliquaries housed in churches across fourteenth-century England, and her ability to cure the Dreamer's crisis of faith parallel a relic's sacred capabilities.

Reliquaries, the vessel which contain and protect a sacred relic, are as Cynthia Hahn explains, "insistently material" but seek to "represent the immaterial and divine" (136), a description that can be applied to the *Pearl*-Maiden herself. According to Hahn, relics, the actual sacred object in need of protection, possess an "ability to effect a holy transformation to cleanliness" (136). This "holy transformation" can be understood as a cleansing of sins or a return to the purity of one's faith in Christ and his promise of redemption. The *Pearl*-Maiden's task in the Dreamer's narration of events is to "effect a holy transformation to cleanliness," but cleanliness has two meanings in the world of the poem: spiritual and physical (Hahn 136). The *Pearl*-Maiden must clear the Dreamer of his heretical doubts about God's promise of resurrection and afterlife by assuring the Dreamer that his physical body will be resurrected unmarred and whole.

In medieval Christianity, visiting a relic was believed to cleanse and purify the pilgrim physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In the case of *Pearl*, what ails the Dreamer is his lack of faith in the promised resurrection of his body. The *Pearl*-Maiden offers the Dreamer insight, knowledge, healing, and a cure for those fears in the form of wisdom passed down to her by Christ that reveals details of resurrection and the Christian afterlife. The *Pearl*-Maiden is adorned, bejeweled, and maintains an outward appearance of holiness, and the knowledge she carries within and imparts on the Dreamer purifies him and incites a return to honest, doubtless faith, just as a relic is expected to do.

While the *Pearl*-Maiden represents intangible divine knowledge to the Dreamer, she herself is "insistently material" (Hahn 136). All the details of her appearance and

status paint the *Pearl*-Maiden as a perfectly pure bride of Christ, a figure that is both materially and spiritually superior to the Dreamer. Her clothing is called “araye ryalle” [royal array] (191) and her expression is likened to that of a “doc” or “erle” [duke or earl] (211). The Dreamer emphasizes the material value of her appearance as he describes her:

> A pyȝt coroune ȝet wer þat gyrle,
> Of marjorys and non oþer stone,
> Hiȝe pynakled of cler quyt perle,
> Wyth flurted flowrez perfet upon;
> To hed hade ho non oþer werle;
> Her lere-leke al hyr umbegon.
> Her semblaunt sade for doc other erle,
> Her ble more blaȝt then whallez bon.
> As schorne golde schyr her fax þenne schon,
> On schylderez þat leghe unlapped lyȝte;
> Her depe color ȝet wonted non
> Of precios perle in porfyl pyȝte.
> [A crown that girl wore, set with pearls and no other stone, high pinnacled of clear pearl, with flowers upon it; her head had no other circlet, her linen face covering all around her wrapped. Her semblance like that of a duke or earl, her color more white than whale bone, as shorn gold her hair shone, on shoulders it lay unbound, and her collar yet lacked no set of precious pearl.] (205–16)

Even when describing her natural, unadorned features, the Dreamer compares them to gold and whale bone, two particularly valuable materials that were used in the decoration of reliquaries and relics. Indeed, gold was preferred in the creation of reliquaries, considered impervious to defilement, a trait that is "easily subject to metaphorical interpretation: gold is pure, natural, and incorruptible" (Hahn 40).[10] Additionally, the reference to bone is also indicative of the *Pearl*-Maiden's status as a relic, as many relics are literal bones of saints.

The *Pearl*-Maiden is not only decorated as a reliquary would be, but she is also endowed with a sacred power like a relic. She is at once the vessel and the holy relic within, further marking her as a figure of ambiguity. The Dreamer focuses especially on the presence of pearls in her crown and on her collar and gown, even pointing out that she is adorned with "non oþer stone" [no other stone] (206), emphasizing her purity, which would make her a valuable vessel for a holy relic. In the context of medieval Christianity, pearls acted as a symbol of purity and innocence (Hahn 38–44). In the case of the *Pearl*-Maiden, it is particularly telling that the Dreamer conjures up an image of his daughter in Paradise adorned mostly in pearls: a vision of purity to dispel a vision of rot.

Moreover, references to the conflicting traits of innocence and superiority abound in the Dreamer's description of the *Pearl*-Maiden's material appearance. The descriptions of the *Pearl*-Maiden from lines 189–216 emphasize not just her nobility, but also her innocence: her "ryalle" gown is white and studded with pearls (191); she wears a "lere-leke" [face linen] beneath her circlet (210); and her hair is "unlapped" [unbound] (214).

[10] Hahn explains that Pliny the elder praised gold for three qualities: it loses no substance by fire, it is found in a perfect state, and it is immune to rust (40). Notably, Pliny also praises the thinness of gold leaf, which is the "shorn gold" to which the Dreamer refers when describing the *Pearl*-Maiden's hair.

The details of the *Pearl*-Maiden's appearance allude to marriage traditions of the Middle Ages, but they also call to mind images associated with baptismal and funerary traditions of the time. As Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane explain, medieval Christian infants were dressed in a special veil called a "chrismal" directly following their baptism (110). This chrismal was traditionally made from a length of fine white linen (as fine and white as parents could afford for their child) and was wound tightly around the child's body after they had been baptized. The *Pearl*-Maiden's white linen gown, called a "biys" [precious linen garment] (197) by the narrator, hearkens to this tradition, acting as both a baptismal and a bridal gown. Her clothing is contradictory as she represents a newly-baptized infant and an adult bride. Her status is ambiguous: is she infant or adult? This ambiguity allows the Dreamer to view the *Pearl*-Maiden as both his infant child and a bride of Christ, a symbol of the holy unknown. The Dreamer's vision of the *Pearl*-Maiden allows him an answer to his anxieties without providing any definitive information; she offers him the relief of knowing that he does not have to know.

Because of this overlap between baptism and marriage, the *Pearl*-Maiden herself is an ambiguous figure. Her age is never made clear by the Dreamer or the poet, and she embodies both the innocence of youth and the wisdom of advanced age. Her clothing denotes both secular social status and religious standing. The *Pearl*-Maiden's ambiguity parallels the ambiguities present in any attempt to understand bodily resurrection or the ascendance to Paradise. And just as the *Pearl*-Maiden's contradictions do not render her incapable of helping the Dreamer, the contradictions of the Christian afterlife do not render it incapable of comforting medieval Christians fearing their own death and bodily loss.

As the Dreamer comes upon the *Pearl*-Maiden in Paradise and begins to recognize her, he rejoices, saying that her appearance “stonge myn hert, ful stray astount” [stung my heart, stunned into bewilderment] (179) when he beheld her “fayre front, her vysage whyt as okayn yvore” [fair face, her complexion as white as ivory] (177–78). Seeing her “wythouten spot” (12) as he had imagined her before the dream seems to stun and delight him. After fretting over the vision of his infant daughter’s corpse marred by “moul” [grave soil] (23), this image of the *Pearl*-Maiden as someone embodied, whole, and majestically adorned brings him “suche gladande glory” [such gladdening glory] (171). The *Pearl*-Maiden’s appearance in Paradise is pure and whole, precisely the opposite of what the Dreamer feared for his infant daughter’s body and, by extension, his own. His dream vision, and specifically his vision of the *Pearl*-Maiden, is crafted to specifications that fit his needs: the *Pearl*-Maiden’s materiality works to defeat the Dreamer’s fears of objectification in death.

The ***Pearl*-Maiden’s Contradictions**

Through her description as a pearl, I read the *Pearl*-Maiden as representative of both innocence and opulence. She is pure and unblemished, but she is also regal and opulent. By being described metaphorically as a pearl, in addition to being bedecked in pearls, she embodies two almost-contradictory human conceptions: she represents material value in the form of wealth and status while simultaneously representing immaterial value in the form of purity.

The *Pearl*-Maiden is both earthly and divine, and her “pearlness” is a perfect example of this. A pearl is a precious stone, a valuable material used to adorn the

clothing, jewelry, and other fineries of the highest social classes. But a pearl is also something of the earth. A pearl represents the immaterial religious concepts of innocence and purity, but materially speaking, it is merely countless layers of organic material secreted over time by an oyster who is simply fulfilling an evolutionary need to protect itself from parasites or other invaders.

If the *Pearl*-Maiden is to be read as a pearl, then her father may be read as the oyster which created her, especially considering that there is no mention of a mother in the poem. As Steel explains in *How Not to Make a Human*, oysters are themselves liminal figures. For centuries, philosophers have taken oysters as an example of the type of being that exists between inanimate and animate (Steel 139–45). In the Middle Ages, oysters were often characterized as beings that mechanically follow instincts, yet were not completely un-alive like a sedentary stone (although they were sometimes compared to rocks).

Steel explains that thinkers like Descartes, Plato, Boethius, and Ficino have considered the oyster as something incapable of pleasure or desire, something with only one motive: survival (145). Steel references Philippe de Thaon's early twelfth-century bestiary: "Pearls generate when oysters open themselves 'de lur gre' (at their own will; 3036) to the dew of the heavens, 'cum fusent vives creatures' 2-1 (as if they were living creatures; 3039). The ambiguity—a mixture of having a will and not quite being alive—neatly encapsulates the oysters uncertain form of existence, which traverses life and non-life, desire and mere mechanicity" (Steel 141). Based on Steel's conception of oysters and what they can represent, I read the Dreamer as an oyster, a mixture of the alive and the unalive: an object that has some agency but is not all-knowing or entirely capable.

Steel goes on to explain that there is not so much difference between the conditions of being human and the conditions of being an oyster: “What is represented, again, is a kind of border existence, an attempt to imagine a psychic nullity […] For humans to catch a touch of oystermorphism is not to recognize that we cannot do anything, nor that agency is impossible, but to recognize that whatever our agency, we are still bodily, bounded by space and time” (Steel 143, 164). Within the confines of the Christian conceptions of Earth and Heaven, humanness is a border existence. Humans have some agency in the form of free will, but as the Dreamer in *Pearl* models, humans do not have access to all time, all knowledge, and all action as a divine being does. While humanity is not *totally* incapable or lacking *all* agency, humans cannot know everything. As Boethius noted, humankind only has access to reason, whereas divine beings have access to true intelligence, something that seems to be superior to (or at least working outside the bounds of) human logic. We are limited by our humanness, but it is also our humanness, (especially having a body that cannot last forever) that allows us the opportunity of resurrection, and *Pearl* illustrates this through the behavior of the Dreamer. He only has access to human reason and, even when given access to divine intelligence, lacks the ability to interpret it. But whether he is capable of understanding divine intelligence or not, he is still soothed by his encounter with the *Pearl*-Maiden, which demonstrates the poem’s provision of some degree of comfort within the unknown.

Conclusion

As is common in medieval dream visions, the dream in *Pearl* ends with the Dreamer’s awakening and an epilogue in which he reflects on the dream. Upon being

presented with a vision of the injured and bloodied Christ after his crucifixion (referred to in the poem as "the Lamb"), the Dreamer jumps into the stream separating him from the *Pearl*-Maiden and attempts to swim across to Paradise. He struggles in the waters, frustrating readers with his inability to take the *Pearl*-Maiden's advice on viewing death as a gain rather than a loss.[11] As Russell puts it, "Readers are made to see that the dreamer-character's futile exertion is analogous to their own futile attempts to put Heaven in earthbound terms, an intellectual thrashing about in a foreign medium that is equally exhausting and equally doomed to fail" (128). But I do not read this "thrashing about" as a failure. Instead, I read it as a careful, nuanced, and nontraditional approach to eschatological discussion. *Pearl* does not "fail" to reveal some universal truth about resurrection by refusing to lay out an exact scientific or methodical explanation for what happens in the time between the *Pearl*-Infant's death and the *Pearl*-Maiden's resurrection. Instead, *Pearl* draws the Dreamer's and the readers' attention to the potential of that in-between time. *Pearl* allows the Dreamer and the audience to linger in that time, accepting that they cannot know what takes place in the moments between bodily death and bodily resurrection, but this lack of definitive explanation does not mean that the poem is not somehow consolatory or effective in terms of helping medieval Christians cope with their fears surrounding death. Just like the Dreamer, they can choose to take solace in the relief of knowing that they do not have to know how resurrection works in order to believe that it is possible.

As the Dreamer wakes, so too do readers, ready to determine what they can take

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[11] See Moorman, Russell.

from the dream. The Dreamer finds himself seated in the same spot from which he lamented his daughter's death and reflects on his dream:

> Over this hyul thos lote I laghte,
> for pyty of my perle enclyin,
> & sythen to God I hit bytaghte,
> In Krystez dere blessing & myn.
> [Over this mound I was cleansed of pity for my pearl, and to God I offered her with Christ's blessing and my own.] (1204–7)

Although the Dreamer does not seem to understand the *Pearl*-Maiden's explanations of divine logic during the debate, he wakes refreshed and soothed. The *Pearl*-Maiden explains to him that he must trust that death is not the end of his existence and that his fear of dying and grief over losing her is a misunderstanding of God's will. Within the dream, however, the Dreamer never stops asking the *Pearl*-Maiden to return to him or to allow him to come to her. Despite his unwillingness to heed the *Pearl*-Maiden's advice in his dream, upon waking, he is no longer frightened or doubtful. Instead, he is reassured.

The Dreamer comes to realize that trying to understand death, resurrection, or the afterlife is not futile but simply unnecessary. Rather than waking from his dream and continuing to pine for his daughter or doubt the possibility of bodily resurrection, he freely gives his daughter to God, accepting that her death is her gain rather than his loss, whether he understands exactly what happened to her in death or not. If *Pearl* were an apocalyptic vision, the poet would be expected to leave the Dreamer and the poem's audience with definitive information about what happens when we die. If *Pearl* were simply a dream event within a larger narrative, the content of the dream might be integral

to the narrative's plot and movement but irrelevant to readers. But because *Pearl* is a dream vision, it can exist between these two purposes. Whether the knowledge embedded in the poem is logically sound is irrelevant to the fact that, upon waking, the Dreamer is consoled by his dream. The liminality of the dream vision genre, combined with the cognitive dissonance present in the poem's dialogue and the ambiguity of the *Pearl*-Maiden's appearance and symbolism, allows *Pearl* to address the liminality, ambiguity, cognitive dissonance present in the discussion of Christian death, resurrection, and the afterlife.

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