The Pearl-Maiden's Two Lovers

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by Jane Beal

IN her contribution to *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Jane Gilbert analyzes gender and sexual transgression in *Cleanness*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and she argues that *Pearl* contains implications of incest: "Feminist critics have long (Greer 1971) complained that women are infantilized in Western culture—that the features which are considered to constitute their sexual attractiveness are in many cases those of the child. . . . In *Pearl*, this combination works powerfully to emphasize the idea of incest with a very young daughter, and thus to render the desire the Dreamer expresses disturbing."[1] Gilbert's claim depends on an "elegiac" reading of *Pearl*, a reading that originated with Richard Morris in 1864 when he edited the poem for the Early English Text Society. In his introduction, he wrote, "the author evidently gives expression to his own sorrow for the loss of his infant child, a girl of two years old,"[2] and this view, that the relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden is one between a father and a daughter, has been widely accepted.

When an elegiac reading is combined with an analysis of courtly love language in *Pearl*, such as the one by Charlotte Gross, Gilbert's argument about incestuous desire gains additional support. Gross begins her essay by acknowledging the father-daughter relationship in

[1] Jane Gilbert, "Gender and Sexual Transgression," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathon Gibson (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 59.

[2] Richard Morris (1864), reprinted as "On *The Pearl*, an Excerpt," in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 3.

Pearl: "When the bereaved narrator of *Pearl* at length encounters his daughter face to face. . . ."[3] She goes on to evaluate the use of courtly love language in the poem, noting borrowings from the Song of Songs, medieval French vocabulary, and courtly love lyrics. She then contrasts the Pearl-Maiden's description of her mystical marriage to Christ with the Dreamer's description of the Pearl-Maiden herself, arguing that the Pearl-Maiden uses courtly love language correctly, but the Dreamer does not: "while the Pearl-Maiden correctly employs courtly language as a metaphor for the ineffable, the dreamer's spiritual condition is such that he consistently misapprehends her teaching. . . . The dreamer-narrator's own inappropriate use of courtly language betrays his spiritual misorientation."[4] Although Gross accepts that the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden are father and daughter and discusses the Dreamer's "inappropriate" use of love language, she does not ultimately reconcile the conflict inherent in a father addressing his daughter like a lover. Gilbert, on the other hand, "resolves" the problem of interpretation by suggesting that the poem contains evidence of repressed incestuous desire.

While the idea of a father-daughter relationship and the use of love language have been generally acknowledged in *Pearl* scholarship, implications of incest have not. Such implications remain, however, if the Dreamer is the Pearl-Maiden's father. Yet as W. H. Schofield once wrote, the poem lacks "any statement of the poet on which to build the prevalent notion that 'the Pearl' . . . is his own child. Never once does he refer to her as such, nor does she a single time refer to him as a father."[5] If the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden are not father and daughter, what kind of relationship might they have to one another?

Pearl is the kind of poem that prompts many answers to this question, including allegorical ones,[6] but I wish to suggest that the textual evidence and the historical context of the poem both support the possibility that the Dreamer was the Pearl-Maiden's lover in life who now mourns her loss in death. Mother Angela Carson first suggested this in

[3] Charlotte Gross, "Courtly Language in *Pearl*," in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1991), 77.

[4] Ibid., 83.

[5] W. H. Schofield, "Symbolism, Allegory, and Autobiography in *The Pearl*," *PMLA* 24 (1909): 658.

[6] The notable example is Sister Mary Maldeva, *Pearl: A Study in Spiritual Dryness* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1925). See also Ian Bishop, *"Pearl" in Its Setting: A Critical Study of the Structure and Meaning of the Middle English Poem* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968).

1965, but except for a dismissive review by Lawrence Eldridge in 1977, the argument has received little or no attention.[7] In order to explore the idea of a courtly love relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden, I will revisit the textual evidence in favor of the father-daughter interpretation to show its ambiguity and then consider two illustrations from the *Pearl* manuscript that may support a lover-beloved reading. An analysis of the Song of Songs imagery in Marian hymns and secular love lyrics will show that *Pearl*'s larger literary context supports an interpretation of the Dreamer-as-lover and the Pearl-Maiden-as-beloved. Finally, having established this possibility, I will reread the poem with attention to the dialogue between the two protagonists in order to demonstrate its effects on interpretation of themes in *Pearl*.

I. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DREAMER AND THE PEARL-MAIDEN: AMBIGUITIES AND POSSIBILITIES OF TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Certain key lines from *Pearl* form the basis of the opinion that the Pearl-Maiden is the Dreamer's two-year-old daughter:

(1) At þe fote therof þer sete a faunt
A mayden of menske, ful debonere (161–62)
(2) Ho watz me nerre þen aunte or nece:
My joy forþy watz much then more (233–34)
(3) Þou wost wel when þy perle con schede
I watz ful ȝong and tender of age (411–12)
(4) To make þe quen þat watz so ȝong (474)
(5) Þou lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede
Þou cowþez neuer God nauþer plese ne pray,
Ne neuer nawþer Pater ne Crede—
And quen mad on þe fyrst day! (483–86)
(6) And syþen to God I hit bytaȝt,
In Krystez dere blessyng and myn
Þat in þe forme of bred and wyn
Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye (1207–10)[8]

[7] Mother Angela Carson, "Aspects of Elegy in the Middle English *Pearl*," *Studies in Philology* 62 (1965): 17–27. Reviewed in Lawrence Eldridge, "The State of *Pearl* Studies Since 1933," *Viator* 6 (1975): 171–94.

[8] All *Pearl* quotations are from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

The initial passage describes the Pearl-Maiden when the Dreamer first sees her, but before they have spoken to one another. Malcolm Andrew argues that *faunt* indicates that the Pearl-Maiden is a child:

> The *O.E.D.* informs us that *faunt* is an aphetic form of the Old French *enfaunt*, *enfant*, compares the Italian *fant*, and glosses "infant, child, young person." In the *M.E.D.*, three distinct senses are specified: (a) "a young child of either sex, an infant, babe," (b) "a son or daughter," (c) "*fauchun fantes*, the young of a falcon." Putting aside the highly specialized (c)—which is clearly not relevant to *Pearl*—we are left with (a) and (b), each of which denotes both young and close relationship, and, furthermore, is illustrated by examples which have unmistakable connotations of warmth and tenderness. These could hardly be more appropriate to the situation in *Pearl*—provided the Maiden is understood literally.[9]

Andrew goes on to say that the poet uses the word specifically to indicate a child of one or two years of age. However, this assertion is problematized by three things: first, the Old English definition of "young person"; second, Andrew's later qualification that "in most of the [*MED* citations] the word *faunt* is used to describe a child of *unspecified* age" (my emphasis);[10] and third, line 162, which apparently defines *faunt* as "a mayden of menske, ful debonere." As Carson explains, "*Faunt* is the only descriptive phrase in the poem which might imply that the Pearl is a young child; the possible implication of the term is cancelled, however, by 'a mayden of menske, ful debonere' (l. 162) which is in apposition to it."[11] The word clearly has a range of meanings which can denote a child or a young person. While there can be little doubt that the Pearl-Maiden was young in either a literal or a spiritual sense when she died, an idea confirmed in passages 3 and 4 above by the Pearl-Maiden and the Dreamer respectively, there is no need to assume from line 161 that she was a two-year-old infant.

Passages 3 and 4 speak in general terms of the Pearl-Maiden's youthfulness, leaving her exact age unspecified and thus conveying the same ambiguity already seen in lines 161–62. It is worth noting, however, that the Pearl-Maiden's "youthfulness" at death may have been spiritual rather than literal. In the twelfth section of the poem, the Pearl-Maiden alludes to a story told in all three of the synoptic gospels that features the disciples attempting to prevent little children from approaching Jesus.[12] Jesus rebukes them, saying, according to the Pearl-Maiden, "Do

[9] Malcolm Andrew, "*Pearl*, Line 161," *Explicator* 40 (1981): 4.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Carson, "Aspects of Elegy," 26 n.
[12] See Matthew 19:13–15, Mark 10:13–16, and Luke 18:15–17.

way, let chylder vnto Me tyȝt; / *To suche* is heuenryche arayed" (718–19, my emphasis). In other words, the Pearl-Maiden reinforces Jesus' point that, in order to enter heaven, a person must be childlike. So, in speaking of her "tender age" (411), the Pearl-Maiden may have the sentiments of Christ's axiom in mind.

Perhaps partially for this reason, arguments in favor of the Pearl-Maiden's infancy have generally relied most heavily on the fifth passage, lines 483–86, and the Dreamer's assertions that the Pearl-Maiden "lyfed not two year in oure þede" and learned neither her Paternoster nor her Creed. Literally, "þede" means land or country. Allegorically interpreted, "þede" parallels *saeculum* and stands in contrast to the heavenly realm in which the Dreamer finds himself—hence the notion that the Pearl-Maiden lived two years on earth and then died. Yet "oure þede" could be a much more specific reference to England or to a particular part of England, such as the Southwest Midlands.[13] If this were the case, then the Pearl-Maiden might have been an adult traveler, immigrant, or guest who lived less than two years in a "country" she shared with the Dreamer during a later part of her life. As Carson explains, "A fair and possible conclusion to draw from the statement [in 483–86] is that [the Pearl-Maiden] came from another land. If, as the Jeweller says, the Pearl died without having learned the Pater and Creed, it does not necessarily follow that she died as a child. It is true that children were taught these prayers, but it is also true that the learning of them would be requisite for a newly baptized adult."[14] Thus, although a first reading of lines 483–86 may suggest a convenient age for the Pearl-Maiden at the time of her death, upon closer examination, the lines prove to be ambiguous.

The *Pearl*-poet is even more ambiguous in the second passage given above, lines 233–34, when he asserts that the Pearl-Maiden was to him "nerre then aunt or nece." Although this passage is typically cited to support the argument that the Pearl-Maiden is the Dreamer's daughter, the lines obviously do not make his relationship to her explicitly clear. The passage implies a close relationship either through blood kinship or emotional intimacy or both, and it excludes the possibility that the Pearl-Maiden is the Dreamer's aunt or niece because she is "nearer" than that. The passage would seem to allow for four other kinds of roles for the Pearl-Maiden: mother, daughter, sister, or beloved. Other pas-

[13] The modifier "oure" is also significant, reinforcing as it does the Dreamer's belief that he shared his country with the Pearl-Maiden.

[14] Carson, "Aspects of Elegy," 19.

sages insisting on the Pearl-Maiden's youth (passages 3 and 4 above) make it unlikely that the Dreamer refers to his mother, who could not have been younger than the Dreamer himself when she died. Looking at these lines in isolation, however, the Pearl-Maiden could be the Dreamer's daughter or sister.[15] The lines neither confirm nor deny these two possibilities.

However, their context in the poem suggests the Dreamer expresses a remembered and still desired emotional intimacy with the Pearl-Maiden, comparable to that between two lovers, rather than a blood kinship. The lines occur in a passage before the Dreamer first addresses the Pearl-Maiden but after seven stanzas in which he has deeply admired her:

> No gladder gome heþen into Grace
> Þen I quen ho on brymme wore;
> Ho watz me nerre þen aunte or nece:
> My joy forþy watz much þe more.
> Ho profered me speche, þat special spyce,
> Enclynande lowe in wommon lore,
> Ca3te of her coroun of grete tresore
> And haylsed me wyth a lote ly3te.
> Wel watz me þat euer I watz bore
> To sware þat swete in perles py3te!
> (231–40)

The Dreamer asserts there is no happier man ("gome") than he as he watches the Pearl-Maiden bowing in a womanly fashion ("in wommon lore"). He remembers how close the two of them used to be and the joy he experienced as a result. He calls her "that special spyce," an allusion to the Song of Songs,[16] and blesses the day that he was born because it has allowed him to converse with the Pearl-Maiden. The interaction suggests an encounter between a man and a woman he loves.

In the final passage, lines 1207–10, Norman Davis sees a formula of greeting typically used in medieval letters addressed to children from

[15] The weight of scholarly opinion in favor of the Pearl-Maiden-as-daughter interpretation has apparently prevented most critics from arguing that the Pearl-Maiden is the Dreamer's sister. Ian Bishop, who accepts the Pearl-Maiden-as-daughter reading but prefers allegorical interpretation of the poem, does note in passing in *"Pearl" in Its Setting* that the Pearl-Maiden "may have been a god-child, a grandchild or even a *younger sister*" (8, my emphasis). This latter possibility is at least as likely as the suggestion that the Pearl-Maiden is the Dreamer's daughter.

[16] According to Andrew and Waldron, "Spice is a traditional metaphor for an admired woman, probably as a reminicence of Song of Songs 4:12–16" (*Poems*, 65 n.).

their parents: "In Krytez dere blessyng and myn" (1208). He therefore uses this line in conjunction with the second passage discussed above, lines 233–34, to reach the conclusion that "the poet is speaking of his child."[17] However, as Davis himself later discovered and added in an appendix to his original article when it was reprinted: "The use of the formula outside of letters is not restricted without exception to a parent addressing a child."[18] In addition, *Pearl* is not, in terms of genre, a letter, nor are lines 1207–10 formulated as a greeting. They are contained within the concluding stanza of the poem and comment upon the awakened Dreamer's willingness to commit his sorrow over his lost pearl to God.

Thus, in each of the six passages usually given in support of the argument that the Pearl-Maiden is the Dreamer's two-year-old daughter, the textual evidence proves ambiguous. The "faunt" of line 161 seems to be a "mayden of menske, ful debonere" (161); the nearness of line 233 may express the Dreamer's feelings of emotional intimacy with the Pearl-Maiden; the youthfulness of lines 412 and 474 may be granted without assuming infancy, especially given that they might have a spiritual rather than literal connotation; the two years in "oure thede" (483) may indicate two years in a longer life span when the Pearl-Maiden lived in a country shared with the Dreamer, and the formula "In Krystez dere blessyng and myn" (1208) is not restricted to parental missives. These readings mean the relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden may be a courtly one.

Two illustrations from MS Cotton Nero A.x. may suggest as much.[19] The illustrations, which occur on folio 42 of the manuscript, provide the only known fourteenth-century commentary on *Pearl*.[20] As such, they act as "glosses" pertinent to our interpretation of the poem. In the first illustration, "The Dreamer Sees the Maiden," the Dreamer stands in the foreground at a lower level than the Pearl-Maiden while she looks down on him from across the stream, full of fish, which flows between them.[21]

[17] Norman Davis, "A Note on *Pearl*," *Review of English Studies* 16 (1965): 233–34; as reprinted in *The Middle English Pearl*, ed. John Conley, 329.

[18] Ibid., 330.

[19] The illustrations have been reproduced in Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, *From Pearl to Gawain: Forme to Fynisment* (Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 1995), 95–96.

[20] See Jennifer Lee, "The Illuminating Critic: The Illustrator of Cotton Nero A.x," *Studies in Iconography* 3 (1977): 17–46. The illustrations I am discussing are also reproduced in this article.

[21] The illustration titles used here originate with Blanch and Wasserman.

He wears a dark, loose-fitting robe with large sleeves; he has a beard and wavy hair. Foliage surrounds him. He holds out two open arms toward the Pearl-Maiden as if in entreaty. In contrast, she stands with her hands against her chest, palms outward, as if to warn him away. Notably, the Pearl-Maiden is depicted as a grown woman. She is dressed in a gown with a pleated skirt gathered at the waist. Her hair is braided into a single braid which falls over her chest, and she wears a crown. Trees and other foliage grow on either side of her.

In the second illustration, "The Dreamer Debates the Maiden," the arrangement of the two figures is essentially the same, with the Dreamer in the foreground and the Maiden looking down on him from across the river (again with fish, though only two this time). However, the hand gestures of both the Pearl-Maiden and the Dreamer have changed. The Dreamer's hands are clasped as if in prayer, his face is tilted upward, and his gaze is definitively fixed on the Pearl-Maiden. She, meanwhile, stands behind a wall marked with eight crosses, a tower on her right and a building on her left, both also enclosed within the wall. Her left arm is extended downward in the direction of the Dreamer; her right is bent so that her hand points under her chin, presumably at her heart. Again her hair is braided, and her head is crowned.[22]

A medieval reader glancing at these illustrations would not suppose the Dreamer is speaking as a father to his daughter. Instead, the man's lower position in relation to the woman's elevated one might suggest a submissive lover conversing with his lady. The iconography of the Pearl-Maiden's crowned head and castle home, the Dreamer's outstretched hands, and the garden setting all suggest *amour courtois*.[23] This is not the only possible interpretation of the poem, and modern critics might well disagree with the illustrator's understanding of it. Yet it seems to me, to borrow a phrase from Gross's essay on courtly language, that the illustrations evoke "the invariable triad of the courtly love-lyric: a lady identified with ideal perfection, a lover who aspires to and is en-

[22] Note that the *Pearl*-poet describes the Pearl-Maiden's hair as free-flowing, not braided (213–14). The fact that she is depicted with braided hair in the illustrations contrasts with Jennifer Lee's claim that the illustrator is consistently faithful to the text of the poems he illustrates. For a discussion of the possible significance of the Pearl-Maiden's hairstyle, see Peter J. Lucas, "The Pearl-Maiden's Free-Flowing Hair," *English Language Notes* 15 (1977–78): 94–95.

[23] For the image of a lover's outstretched hand in a garden setting, compare the illustrations from the *Pearl* manuscript with an image of two lovers playing a game in the Luttrell Psalter (folio 76v), reproduced in Janet Backhouse, *Medieval Rural Life in the Luttrell Psalter* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 47.

nobled by that perfection, and the inviolable distance separating the two."[24]

This effect parallels that of the love language in the poem. The language of love in *Pearl*, as I have already suggested, is contextualized by the Song of Song's influence on both Marian hymns and courtly love lyrics. An investigation of the larger literary context of *Pearl*'s love language will lend further support to the idea that the poem depicts a lover-beloved relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden.

II. LOVE LANGUAGE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE SONG OF SONGS, MARIAN HYMNS, COURTLY LOVE LYRICS, AND *PEARL*

Interpretation of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages consistently affirms that the literal, sexual use of love language was a device intended to make readers ponder the allegorical, spiritual meaning of love. As E. Ann Matter and Ann Astell have shown, beginning with Origen's *Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum* in the third century, medieval Christian commentary on the Song of Songs encouraged a spiritual rather than sensual understanding of its love language, but only with difficulty.[25] As Astell states, "The first problem arises from what the Song leaves unstated; the second from what it actually says."[26] Unlike Hosea in the Old Testament or the Apocalypse in the New, the Song of Songs does not explicitly state that the Bridegroom is God and the Bride is a figure of Israel or the Church or an individual Christian soul. Origen provides a model for all later commentators when he attempts to harmonize the apparent contradiction between the carnal love which is described in the Song and the spiritual love that is supposedly intended by it. In doing so, he completely subverts the literal reading in favor of the allegorical one:

Epithalamium libellus hic, id est nuptiale carmen, dramatis in modum mihi videtur a Solomone conscriptus, quem cecinit instar nubentis sponsae et erga sponsum suum, qui est Sermo Dei, caelesti amore flagrante. Adamavit enim eum sive anima quae ad imaginem eius facta est, sive ecclesia. Sed et magnificus his ipse ac perfectus sponsus quibus verbis usus sit ad coniunctam sibi animam vel ecclesiam, haec ipsa scriptura nos edocet.

[24] Gross, "Courtly Language," 83.

[25] E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Ann Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[26] Astell, *Song of Songs*, 1.

[It seems to me that this little book is an epithalamium, that is to say, a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God. And deeply indeed did she love Him, whether we take her as the soul made in His image or as the Church. But this same scripture also teaches us what words this great and perfect Bridegroom used in speaking to the soul, or to the Church, who has been joined to him.][27]

Partly as a result of Origen's influence, "Medieval Latin commentary on the Song of Songs . . . was always allegorical."[28]

The spiritual or allegorical understanding of the relationship depicted in the Song of Songs had three basic manifestations during the Middle Ages. Origen was the first to identify the Bride with the Church or the soul. In addition to these two readings, the Bride was also identified with the Virgin Mary. Medieval commentators believed that the interaction between the Bride and the Bridegroom reflected Mary's historical relationship with Christ. These readings, together with the fact that the Song of Songs was the most frequently interpreted book of medieval Christianity, reveal a medieval fascination with the epithalamium. This fascination held throughout the Middle Ages, but developed meaningfully in twelfth-century Europe when members of religious orders began to join as adults, rather than as children:

Many were drawn from aristocratic circles; a high percentage had been married; most were familiar with secular love literature; some—notably the trouvère Folquet—had written secular love songs prior to their entrance. The spiritual formation of recruits such as these required (and inspired) a body of monastic love literature which is notably different from earlier writings on charity in its incorporation of feminine imagery and in its preferred symbolism of God's love for humanity by the love between a man and a woman—a symbolism explicitly derived from the Song of Songs.[29]

Astell's analysis here reveals, in essence, that twelfth-century interpreters of the Song of Songs had a lived experience in secular society that included exposure to secular love lyrics and sexuality itself. The secular experience of the commentators may explain the nature of their meditation on the Song, the influence of the Song on both sacred and

[27] Text from *Origène: Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, ed. Luc Brésard (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1991), 80; translation from *Origen: The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), 21.

[28] Matter, *Voice*, 6.

[29] Astell, *Song of Songs*, 9.

secular lyrics, and importantly, the soft blurring of distinctions between spiritual and sensual love language which sometimes occurred in them.[30]

This blurring of distinctions also occurs in fourteenth-century English literature. Middle English Marian hymns and secular lyrics both use the same language to express love. The influence of the Song of Songs pervades the love language used in both genres to describe devotion to either the Queen of Heaven or the "hertes quene," that is, to Mary or to the lady loved by the poet. Typically, despite similar language, the object of the poet's affections—whether the heavenly queen or an earthly one—is clear. However, that clarity is not always evident from the outset of a lyric. A close reading of key lines from three lyrics will show that the lyricists deliberately played with word choice, permitting and enjoying the resulting ambiguity about who or what was being signified. This play forms a model for understanding the language of love in *Pearl*. Although one might suppose that imagery from the Song of Songs in *Pearl* would have been interpreted by medieval readers in a spiritual sense, just as the Song of Songs itself was, the tradition of secular love lyrics shows that the meaning of love language in *Pearl* is not predetermined.

The first lyric, "Quia amore langueo," uses the language of love in its spiritual sense and is a striking example of Marian piety. Written in the voice of Mary herself, it employs a Latin refrain taken directly from the Song of Songs: *quia amore langueo*, that is, "because I languish from love." In the Song of Songs, the line occurs twice, both times spoken by the Beloved:

> Introduxit me in cellam vinariam ordinavit in me caritatem
> fulcite me floribus stipate me malis quia amore langueo
> (Song of Songs 2:4–5)

[He led me into the wine cellar, he governed love in me. Strengthen me with flowers, surround me with apples, because I languish from love.]

And:

> Adiuro vos filiae Hierusalem si inveneritis dilectum meam ut nuntietis ei quia amore langueo
> (Song of Songs 5:8)

[30] See Jaufré Rudel, "Lanquan li jorn son lonc en may," accessible online as of 4 June 2002 at http://perso.wanadoo.fr/moulin.veste/rudel.htm; or *The Songs of Jaufré Rudel*, ed. Rupert T. Pickins (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978).

[I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my love, that you tell him that I languish from love.][31]

By extracting "quia amore langueo" from the Song of Songs and recontextualizing the phrase in a Marian hymn, the poet plays the role of commentator; his poem becomes an interpretation of the Song of Songs. The Bride is Mary, who languishes because she longs for reunion with "mankinde" (7). The separation between the two of them causes her profound sorrow:

I longe for love of man my brother,
I am his vokete to voide his vice;
I am his moder—I can none other—
Why should I my dere childe dispise?
If he me wrathe in diverse wise,
Through flesshes freelte fall me fro,
Yet must me rewe him till he rise,
Quia amore langueo.

(9–16)[32]

The poet portrays mankind collectively as Mary's son (thereby making mankind comparable to Jesus) whom she loves. Throughout the lyric, Mary speaks to her "child" and pleads with him to seek her and God, as if they were parents, asking rhetorically, "Why was I crouned and made a quene? / Why was I called of mercy the welle?" (81–82). In the concluding stanza, however, the mother-son relationship shifts to a lover-beloved relationship. This shift perfectly demonstrates the influence of the Song of Songs, interpretative commentaries upon it, and the orthodox use of the language of love in devotional writing:

Nowe, man, have minde on me forever.
Loke on thy love thus languisshing;
Late us never from other dissevere;
Mine helpe is thine owne; crepe under my winge.
Thy sister is a quene, thy brother a kinge,
This heritage is tayled; sone come thereto;
Take me for thy wife and lerne to singe,
Quia amore langueo.

(89–96)

[31] Latin biblical quotations are from *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgata Versionem*, ed. B. Fischer et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellchaft, 1994). The translations are my own.

[32] "Quia amore langueo" is found in MS Bodleian 21896 and edited from this manuscript in Maxwell S. Luria and Richard L. Hoffman, eds., *Middle English Lyrics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 187. It is also found in MS Douce 322 and printed in Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 234–37. My citations of "Quia amore langueo" are from the Hoffman and Luria edition.

Mary is thus depicted as mother, sister, and beloved wife. In Mary's voice, the poet shows that man's relationship with heaven's queen parallels, and at the same time exceeds, every human relationship between a man and a woman. The relationship between the Christian and Mary is like the relationship between mother and son, sister and brother, husband and wife, but in an idealized and purified sense.

The language of love from the Song of Songs was also used in a less than ideal, pure, or orthodox sense in secular love lyrics. The first stanza from a second lyric is a fine case in point:

> O excellent sovereigne, most semely to see,
> Both prudent and pure, like a perle of prise,
> Also fair of figure and oreant of bewtye,
> Bothe cumlye and gentil, and goodly to advertise;
> Your brethe is sweeter than balme, suger, or licoresse.
> I am bolde on you, thoughe I be not able,
> To write to your goodly person which is so ameable
> to reason.
> For ye be both fair and free,
> Therto wise and womanly,
> Trew as turtil on a tree
> Without any treason.
>
> (1–12)[33]

Two commonplace references to the Song of Songs are apparent here: the fragrant breath of the beloved and the comparison to the turtle-dove. Later lines develop allusions to the Song of Songs; for instance, "Your chere is as comfortable as blossome on brere" and "Your necke like the lillye" together remind us of "Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens" (Song of Songs 2:2). The general sentiments concerning the beauty of the beloved are also similar.[34]

However, what is perhaps most striking about the first stanza is its potential for either a spiritual or a secular reading. "O excellent sovereigne" sounds suspiciously like an address to Mary; only in later stanzas will it become clear that the lady in question could not possibly be Mary, first because the poet mentions Mary in an aside which makes

[33] "O excellent sovereigne, most semely to see" is found in MS Bodleian 12653 and printed in Luria and Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics*, 42. See also R. H. Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 126–28.

[34] For a discussion of the influence of the Song of Songs on select medieval lyrics, see Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1968), 80–81, 101, 175–76; and Dronke, "The Song of Songs and Medieval Love-Lyric," in *The Bible and Medieval Culture*, ed. W. Lordaux and D. Verhelst (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979), 236–62.

it plain that she is not the object of his affection addressed here: "For Jesus' sake that bought us dere / And his moder, that meiden clere, / Helpe to comforte my careful chere" (33–35). Second, the poet clearly has sexual intentions toward his beloved which he could not appropriately direct toward the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the love language of this lyric parallels similar language used by the Dreamer to describe the Pearl-Maiden. Compare, for instance, the lyric's "perle of prise" to any number of references to pearls in the longer poem; "fair of figure" to "fayre fygure" (747); "oreant of bewtye" to "Perle pleasaunte . . . oute of oryent" (1, 3); "free" to "frely" (1155); or "wise and womanly" to "wommon lore" (236). The lyric's use of "perle of prise," a phrase which alludes to the parable of the Pearl of Great Price, would particularly seem relevant to interpretation of *Pearl* since in this secular love poem it is clearly a romantic epithet expressing an earthly desire.

The use of love language in both Marian hymns and secular love lyrics derived from the Song of Songs engenders ambiguity and questions, questions raised for readers at the beginning of hymns and lyrics that are only answered at the end of them—if at all. Who is being addressed, Mary or beloved? What kind of love is at issue, spiritual or sensual? How can readers, medieval or modern, read love word signifiers for their correct signified referents? The following lyric raises each of these questions:

> Upon a lady my love is lente,
> Withoutene change of any chere—
> That is lovely and continent
> And most at my desire.
>
> This lady is in my herte pight;
> Her to love I have gret haste.
> With all my power and my might
> To her I make mine herte stedfast.
>
> Therfor will I non other spouse
> Ner none other loves, for to take;
> But only to her I make my vowes,
> And all other to forsake.
>
> This lady is gentill and make,
> Moder she is and well of all;
> She is never for to seke,
> Nother too grete nere too small.

Redy she is night and day,
To man and wommon and childe infere,
If that they will aught to her say,
Our prayeres mekely for to here.

To serve this lady we all be bounde
Both night and day in every place,
Where ever we be, in felde or towne,
Or elles in any other place.

Pray we to this lady bright,
In the worship of the Trinite,
To bringe us alle to heven light.
Amen, say we, for charite.

(1–28)[35]

As with the second lyric, which began "O excellent sovereign, most semely to see," the first line of this lyric, "Upon a lady my love is lente," does not make the object of the poet's affections clear. It may, in fact, suggest the wrong object, but deliberately so. The author of the second lyric is at play among the words that suggest Marian devotion; conversely, the authors of the first and third are at play among the words that suggest sexual love. This third lyricist keeps his readers in suspense with regards to his object for three and a half stanzas—half of his poem—before revealing that his "spouse" (9) is Mary, "Moder she is and well of all," the lady on whom his love is settled. This play of love language has particular relevance for *Pearl*.

Pearl inherits the language of love from the Song of Songs along with everything such an inheritance implies: potential for spiritual or sensual interpretation of the primary relationship it depicts; problems, to use Astell's terms, with what is stated as well as what is unstated; and the possibility that its love language may refer to either heavenly or earthly objects of desire. When the lyricists use phrases like *quia amore langueo*, "O sovereigne quene," "perle of prise," and "spouse," the words can refer equally well to Mary or human beloved. When such love language occurs in *Pearl*, what does it signify? Seen in the historical context of the Song of Songs, Marian hymns, and secular love lyrics, *Pearl*'s love language makes it possible to read the relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden as one between lover and beloved. As it turns out, however, the Dreamer is not the Pearl-Maiden's only lover.

[35] "Upon a lady my love is lente" is found in MS B. M. Cotton Cleopatra D.vii and printed in Luria and Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics*, 177.

III. THE PEARL-MAIDEN'S TWO LOVERS: COMPETING SUITORS, A MATCHLESS BRIDE, AND THE FRIENDSHIP OF GOD

Pearl begins in a garden, the *hortus conclusus* of medieval love lyric, and with a lover who claims, "I dewyne, fordolked of *luf-daungere* / Of þat pryuy perle withouten spot" (11–12, my emphasis). W. R. J. Barron convincingly glosses "luf-daungere" as "love frustration," and Andrew and Waldron note, "The compound may be the poet's own, but the word *daungere* ('feudal power') signifies the power of the mistress over her suitor, specifically her power to keep him at a distance, and is so personified in the *Roman de la Rose*. . . . *Luf-daungere* is here used metaphorically to suggest longing for, and separation from, any loved object, and the whole line is perhaps reminiscent of the phrase *quia amore langueo*."[36] The garden setting and the poet's word choice suggest that the narrator is a suitor suffering the pains of love.

Once he falls asleep, the Dreamer encounters and speaks to the Pearl-Maiden. Characterized by some as a *debatio*, the conversation takes up the majority of *Pearl*'s sections (twelve out of twenty). It consists of eleven questions by the Dreamer and twelve responses by the Pearl-Maiden, and it develops in three stages: reacquaintance, disagreement, and renewed desire. Excluding the Dreamer's first and final addresses to the Pearl-Maiden, each stage features three questions by the Dreamer, the third of which provokes an important revelation from the Pearl-Maiden. At the end of the reacquaintance stage, the Pearl-Maiden reveals to the Dreamer for the first time her marriage to her "Lorde the Lombe" (413):

> Bot my Lorde þe Lombe þurȝ Hys godhede,
> He toke myself to Hys maryage
> Corounde me quene in blysse to brede
> In lenghe of dayez þat ever schal wage;
> And sesed in all Hys herytage
> Hys lef is. I am holy Hysse.
>
> (413–18)

This revelation distresses and angers the Dreamer, and it leads him to question the validity of the Pearl-Maiden's marriage: first by saying that only Mary can be the queen of heaven (424–29), then by asserting the Pearl-Maiden sets herself too high in heaven, and finally by claiming her story is "vnresounable" (590) because she has received a reward greater than she deserved.

[36] Andrew and Waldron, *Poems*, 11 n.

The Pearl-Maiden puts an end to the Dreamer's disagreement with her by means of a retelling and explication of the Parable of the Vineyard that lasts for twelve uninterrupted stanzas. At the end of the Pearl-Maiden's learned dissertation on the nature of the heavenly rewards, the grace of God, innocence, and righteousness, however, the Dreamer responds with a complete *non sequitur*:

> "O maskelez perle in perlez pure,
> Þat berez," quoþ I, "þe perle of prys,
> Quo formed þey þy fayre fygure?
> Þat wroȝt þy wede he watz ful wys;
> Þy beauté com neuer of nature—
> Pymalyon paynted neuer þy vys,
> Ne Arystotel nawþer by hys lettrure
> Of carped þe kynde þese propertéz;
> Þy colour passez þe flour-de-lys,
> Þyn angel-hauyng so clene cortez."
> (745–54)

In other words, while the Pearl-Maiden was speaking, apparently the Dreamer was not listening to her with attention, but gazing at her with desire. He takes note of her "fayre fygure" (747), her lovely clothes (748), her "beauté," (749), her color, which surpasses the fleur-de-lis (753), and her angelic bearing (754). In the middle of these praises, he makes a secular allusion to Pygmalion, the sculptor of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who fell in love with the statue he made himself. According to Ovid,

> Interea niveum mira feliciter arte
> Sculpsit ebur formaque dedit, qua femina nasci
> Nulla potest, operisque sui concepit amorem.
> Virginis est verae facies, quam vivere credas,
> Et, si non obstet reverentia, velle moveri.
>
> [(Pygmalion) made, with marvelous art, an ivory statue,
> As white as snow, and gave it greater beauty
> Than any girl could have, and fell in love
> With his own workmanship. The image seemed
> That of a virgin, truly, almost living,
> And willing, save that modesty prevented,
> To take on movement.][37]

[37] Text from *Ovid: Metamorphoses*, ed. and trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 10.247–54; translation from *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1983).

The Dreamer's allusion to this Ovidian tale betrays his earthly mindset. Like Pygmalion, he wishes to possess the beautiful woman he beholds with his eyes and, in a sense, creates according to the dictates of his own imagination. The longer he watches her, the more his desire increases.

The Dreamer's secular reference to Aristotle, like the allusion to Pygmalion, suggests earthly, even academic preoccupations. In this passage, Aristotle stands for human reasoning and the limits of "lettrure" (751). He appears as a "figure of logic," emblematically implying the Dreamer's circumscribed understanding of *kynde*, an understanding that reflects "the Dreamer's unswerving faith in his own reason and in his ability to rely on observations of the phenomenal world."[38] Whereas the Pearl-Maiden has discoursed at length on the Parable of the Vineyard, very much like a preacher explicating the spiritual sense of Scripture in a homily, the Dreamer has been meditating on how far the Pearl-Maiden's "propertéz" exceed those described by the Philosopher. The contrast in their meditations could not be more stark, and the Pearl-Maiden recognizes this.

The Pearl-Maiden responds to the Dreamer's suit by asserting, "My makelez Lambe þat al may bete . . . Me ches to Hys make" (757, 759). The "matchlessness" of Christ's love implies that it easily surpasses the Dreamer's; that love has won the Pearl-Maiden, and she has become Christ's "make," that is, His bride. She repeats the words of love which the Lord used to woo her for the Dreamer's benefit: "Cum hyder to me, My lemman swete, / For mote ne spot is non is þe" (763–64). Christ's suit is a translation of the Song of Songs 4:7–8 ("Tota pulchra es amica mea et macula non est in te") and represents his desire for spiritual union with the Pearl-Maiden. Re-vocalized here in her discussion with the Dreamer, Christ's words have the effect of his presence; the Dreamer and the Lord compete in their own *debatio*, mediated by the Pearl-Maiden, to love and be loved by her.

The Dreamer responds rather negatively to the reiteration of his Pearl's love affair with another suitor:

> Why, maskellez bryd þat bryȝt con flambe,
> Þat reiatéz hatz so ryche and ryf,
> Quat kyn þyng may be þat Lambe,
> Þat þe wolde wedde vnto His vyf?
> (769–72)

[38] Blanch and Wasserman, *From Pearl to Gawain*, 56.

The tone of the Dreamer's speech appears to be one not of awe, but irony. First, he lets out an exclamation of surprise and incomprehension: *why*. Then he compliments the Pearl-Maiden by calling her an "unblemished bride," as if he accepts the marriage she has reported to him. But then he asks, *quat kyn þyng*—what kind of thing—is the lamb that he would marry the Pearl-Maiden? After asking this somewhat antagonistic question, the Dreamer concludes his address to the maiden with another subtle compliment, calling her, "a makelez may and maskellez," that is, a matchless and flawless maid. "Makelez," or matchless, can mean both without peer and without mate. Here the pun suggests that the Dreamer has *not* accepted the marriage of the Pearl-Maiden or the success of his rival, the Lamb, who has washed the Pearl-Maiden in "Hys blod" (766), crowned her in virginity, and arrayed her in pearls (767–68). The Pearl-Maiden immediately understands the implications of the Dreamer's word choice. She accepts "maskellez" as an appropriate compliment, but rejects "makelez": "Bot 'makelez quene' þenne sade I not" (784). She goes on to explain that her Lord has many brides and also enters into a lengthy discourse on Christ's crucifixion in Jerusalem.

After this, the Dreamer finally begins to realize he cannot compete with God: "I schulde not tempte þy wyt so wlonc; / To Krytez chambre þat art ichose" (903–4). Yet he still seeks to be near the Pearl-Maiden, from whom he has been kept throughout their conversation by the stream that flows between them. He asks her where she lives (917–18), and then he asks to "se þy blysful bor" (964). The Pearl-Maiden warns the Dreamer that he "may not enter withinne Hys tor" (966), but says she has obtained permission for him to see her dwelling place. Their conversation ends, and the Dreamer has a vision of the New Jerusalem. As he watches, the Dreamer is filled with delight.

The word "delyt" is used throughout *Pearl*, but it is especially important as the poem nears its conclusion. In section 19 of the poem, the word is repeated in the last line of each stanza. The Dreamer uses the phrase "gret delyt" to express a spiritual admiration for the vision of the New Jerusalem and the procession of the Lord and his 144,000 brides. However, the Dreamer's sentiments do not remain on the level of spiritual admiration. Instead, they increase in an agitated and earthly fashion:

> Þat syȝt me gart to þenk to wade
> For *luf-longyng* in gret *delyt*.
> *Delyt* me drof in yȝe and ere,

My manez mynde to maddyng malte;
Quen I seȝ my frely, I wolde be þere
Byȝonde þe water þaȝ ho were walte.
(1151–56, my emphases)

"Delyt" in the passage stems from the "manez mynde"—from the Dreamer's corporeal, earthly self, not his heavenly spirit—and as such, the word suggests sensual, not spiritual, longing and desire.[39]

"Delyt" and "luf-longyng" are equated in this passage. "Luf-longyng," the Middle English equivalent of *quia amore langueo*, is a perfect example of love language from the Song of Songs which may have either a spiritual or sensual meaning.[40] Julian of Norwich, a contemporary of the *Pearl*-poet, uses "luf-longyng" in a spiritual sense: "Glad and mery and sweet is the blisfull lovely cher of our lord to our souleis; for he havith us ever lifand in *lovelongeing*, and he will our soule be in glad cher to gevin him his mede" (my emphasis).[41] However, the word was also used to denote sensual love, as in the following lyric, which celebrates a poet's romantic love for Alisoun:

Ich libbe in *love-longinge*
For semlokest of alle thinge:
He may me blisse bringe;
Ich am in hire baundoun.
(5–8, my emphasis)[42]

The Dreamer's "luf-longyng" seems to participate in both the spiritual and sensual meanings of the word. He longs for a place in the Lord's procession while at the same time longing for reunion and possession of the Pearl-Maiden herself. In the end, however, since crossing the stream is an act the Maiden warned him against, the "luf-longyng" that spurs him to attempt the crossing is more earthly than heavenly. It is a frustrated love which he unsuccessfully tries to resolve by reaching out to a woman who belongs entirely to God.

[39] "Delyt" can denote both joy and sensual pleasure. Chaucer's remarks in the consummation scene in *Troilus and Criseyde* suggest an instance when the word conveys both sentiments: "Of hire *delit* or joies oon the leeste / Were impossible to my wit to seye; / But juggeth ye that han ben at the feste" (3.1310–13, my emphasis). See *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

[40] Andrew and Waldron note, "Implicit in this passage is the familiar metaphor drawn from secular love, of passion overcoming reason and the lover being smitten by beauty through the eyes" (*Poems*, 108 n.).

[41] *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion C. Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), 114.

[42] "Bitwene Marsh and Averil" is found in B. M. Harley 2253 and printed in Luria and Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics*, 23.

The Dreamer's attempt to cross the stream can be interpreted as a jealous act motivated by a desire to possess his beloved Pearl-Maiden, an act that is forestalled by Christ himself. It constitutes the climactic conclusion of the Dreamer's longing to join the Pearl-Maiden after his efforts to woo her have failed. As he plunges into the water, he suddenly wakes to ponder the implication of his dream and explicate what he has learned. Although his admiration for Christ does not reach the heights of the Pearl-Maiden's, it is nevertheless present: "For I haf founden Hym, boþe day and naȝte, / A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin" (1203–4). Only through his dream-vision, through an interaction with the woman he loved in life but could not possess in death, is the Dreamer able to overcome the greater part of his grief and discover solace in the friendship of God.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Pearl is an exquisite and beautiful poem, the complexity of which cannot and should not be readily reduced to a single, definitive reading. While the poem may depict a father mourning the death of his daughter, it may also represent a man grieving over the loss of the woman he loves. The textual evidence supporting the idea that the Dreamer is the Pearl-Maiden's father is sufficiently ambiguous to allow for this possibility. The love language of *Pearl*, which led one critic to suggest the poem contains implications of incest, may in fact express a lover's desire for his beloved. The influence of the Song of Songs on secular Middle English love lyrics creates a historical context for interpreting the relationship between the protagonists in *Pearl* in just this way. While the Dreamer may love the Pearl-Maiden, he is compelled through his encounter with her to learn about the love of God. This knowledge transforms him from a suitor to a servant, one who affirms the Lord "gef vus to be His homly hyne, / Ande precious perlez vnto His pay" (1211–12).

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