

THE DREAMER'S 'MALENCOLYE': UNEARTHING DEPRESSIVE AND LOLLARD
UNDERTONES IN "PEARL"

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Fall Semester 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Prof. Amodio for introducing me to medieval literature and *Pearl* with his class, ENGL 222 Early British Literature, and for agreeing to supervise this thesis, to the creation of which his insight and instruction have been fundamental. His votes of confidence in my ability to continue writing, despite my hesitations otherwise, kept me motivated throughout. Thank you for your patience.

Thank you Prof. Kumar, for being my English major advisor, and for the jokes, encouragement, tennis matches, and helping me realize that being a professor is something I want to do someday.

I'd also like to thank my parents for believing in and supporting me during my four years at Vassar College — my interest in academia will always stem from something they instilled in me long ago, from when I was a child and they brought me to art exhibits I was too young to look at. And to Adri, my younger sister, who in some ways is the reason I find so much emotional depth in *Pearl* to begin with. Thank you.

Of course I must mention the rest of my family, not out of simple, familial obligation, but out of a genuine recognition that they are always there to help me: and so, I especially extend my thanks to all my grandparents, Avi and Iaia, Nonno and Abu Eca, and Mamina; to Marco, Mau, Ale, Montse, Xavi, Nuria, Ernest, Yumna; to Dani, Fiona, Nur, and Aroa; thank you Alejandro and Alfonso, for being the coolest great-uncles and most unique sources of inspiration; to the rest of my Venezuelan, Spanish, and Italian family; and Lola. Thank you.

Thank you Cassie Jain, for being my best friend and colleague at Vassar, for being a sounding board and editor to this thesis, and for engaging with every inane conversation topic I bring up. Thanks for listening to my criticisms of the world, and for countless hours spent in the darkroom (digitally or not) philosophizing, laughing, sharing, developing and printing and scanning.

Thank you Kira, for the emotional support and more. Your sense of humor, desire to listen, and above all, your endless kindness, have made the last two years of compromised college life beyond bearable — worthwhile. You are without spot.

Dedico el meu treball a la tieta Pilar. T'estimo.

I.

Pearl begins with a jeweler who loses a pearl amidst the soil of a lovely garden, and upon looking for it, falls asleep. He starts dreaming, and within this dream receives a lush, hallucinatory vision of Heaven separated from him by a river. On the other bank he sees someone richly dressed in pearls, someone who resembles his dead daughter. She eventually appears to be not just his dead daughter, but a matured manifestation of her that has already experienced the salvation of entering Heaven. They begin conversing, and the resulting dialogue forms the basis for the rest of the poem. Of the poem's 1,212 lines, around seven hundred are dedicated to their exchanges, where he shares his incomplete understanding of religious doctrine and she attempts to correct him on it. Eventually, he tries to cross the river to join her in Heaven, and in doing so ends the dream, leaving the poem situated within reality and with a prayer from him to God. The father is known as the Dreamer, and she, the Maiden.

Written anonymously in the late fourteenth century, *Pearl* forms part of the medieval dream-vision genre, which is one that begins in reality, moves to a realm of fantasy within a dream, and returns to reality. It necessitates a confused protagonist, through which an exploration of the dream's properties functions as a driving force for the action. Dream-vision poetry can be said to appeal to a learning audience, as grounding the story in something which actually occurs in reality — dreaming — has “a way of lending weight to a highly serious subject, at the same time pacifying an authority-minded medieval audience, to whom a frank fiction would probably have been equivalent to a lie” (Hieatt 66). There is therefore a practical purpose for the setting, but even if *Pearl* weren't a dream-vision there would still be reason to call it instructional. As suggested by *Pearl*'s dialogic form, that of a conversation between a fastidiously stubborn interrogator — the Dreamer — and someone who is self-described as “thurghoutly haven

crawnyng”¹ (Stanbury 859²) — the Maiden — we can imagine *Pearl* also occupies a didactic context similar to medieval debate poetry. Medieval debate poetry was also a popular genre of poems, wherein a dialogue between two perceived natural opposites, such as winter and spring or body and soul, would personify each participant’s character or ideology, and therefore, inform or convince the audience of whatever they are discussing. In *Pearl*, conceptual debates materialize in the form of contrasting details about the Dreamer and Maiden, respectively: a living and a dead person; the human and the divine; and even the threat of individualistic Lollardy versus communal normative Christianity. The conflict between human emotion and divine doctrine is embodied even in the Dreamer and Maiden’s contrasting conversational strategies, whereby “he is interactional and given to assertives and expressives, [and] she is transactional and primarily utters directives like commands, requests, advice, and recommendations” (Machan 289). Thus the Dreamer is not only a father, but a student, and the Maiden is not just a daughter, but a teacher.

A didactic context within a story usually implies a younger learning audience, but here the roles both characters play seem reversed to what they should traditionally be, where the father would be the teacher, and the daughter would be the student. Such a role inversion might be indicative of the poem’s target audience. Due to the time period in which it was written, it is very possible that *Pearl*’s audience included, or was even meant primarily for, parents whose children died during the Black Plague. During later outbreaks of the Plague, a higher percentage of children were dying compared to adults, presumably because the adults had lived through previous outbreaks and had benefited from acquiring antibodies. One example of childhood

¹ “thoroughly all-knowing” (859).

² All lines quoted from *Pearl* are taken from Stanbury’s edition. Translations of lines from *Pearl*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are my own. Lines from *A Disputacioun Betwyx þe Body and Wormes* are accompanied by Rytting’s translation.

mortality describes how “the churchwardens of the tiny Staffordshire parish of Adbaston received fees and bequests at the burials of at least twenty-two people, of whom twelve were children from only three families” (Morgan 121). The poem’s dialect places it within the Northwest Midlands, and further evidence shows that the poet’s native dialect may be, more specifically, within Staffordshire (Stanbury 7). This correlation does not conclusively establish provenance, but it does suggest that the social context for *Pearl* is charged with child death, as it appears that it would have been the standard in the surrounding area. The *Anonimale Chronicle*, a manuscript which compiles British histories from the biblical Flood to the (then) present, records the impact of later waves of the plague (nearly contemporaneous with *Pearl*’s creation at the end of the fourteenth century): “In 1369 there was a third pestilence in England and in several other countries. It was great beyond measure, lasted a long time and was particularly fatal to children. ... In 1378 the fourth pestilence arrived in York and was particularly fatal to children” (Horrox 88). At the time the poem was written, an adult audience could have related strongly to *Pearl*’s premise, as it is easy to imagine their dreams of loved ones lost to the Black Plague clashing with a religious doctrine that is incapable of easing the level of pain experienced by losing a child, in the same way that the Dreamer argues with the now-perfect, all-knowing Maiden. After all, it only makes sense to make the protagonist of a didactic story appeal to the specifics of the audience it is supposed to instruct. Retroactively studying the poem’s potential audience thus helps determine the circumstances which inspired its production: it was constructed in order to educate and console not just the Dreamer but also a population grieving the ongoing Black Plague.

If the social context for this poem is an environment of death and disease, it’s not an obvious one. The plague doesn’t appear here as explicitly as it does in other debate or dream-

vision poems, although it is also true that many others do not seek to ease such specific or sizeable pain as the loss of a child and are only meant to instruct in an entertaining fashion. One such mid-fifteenth century poem called *A Disputacioun Betwyx þe Body and Wormes* begins with the male *Disputacioun*-Dreamer gazing upon a freshly coffined female body. Upon seeing her, he falls into a dream state and overhears a conversation between her Body and the Worms that are eating it. The poem exemplifies the public's loaded consciousness with its opening lines "In þe ceson of huge mortalite / Of sondre disseses with þe pestilence" (Rytting 1-2)³, and instructs, in the *ubi sunt* tradition, for the body to remember all the great historical people who have also died as a way of calming one's own fears about death. Since the *Disputacioun* is both a debate and dream-vision poem, it makes a good point of comparison to *Pearl*, although the *Disputacioun*'s playfully gory imagery makes it more darkly comic in tone: "Nay nay we will not lit departe þe fro / While þat one of þi bones with oþer wil hange" (58-59)⁴. The Body in *Disputacioun* is indignant that the Worms are eating her flesh, but after asking "Now where be le knyghtes" (75)⁵ and hearing the list of nine worthy people who died before her (along with a few other *ubi sunt* tactics, like a reminder that Worms inhabit everyone even when alive), she quickly makes peace with her state, and even confesses her "reynawnde pryde so mykil for to mell / For myne abowndant bewte to so devyse" (158-159)⁶, before suggesting "Lat vs be frendes", and an ultimate submission to God: "To þat god wil þat I sal agayne vp pryse / At þe day of dome before þe hye justyse" (196-197)⁷. Though its underlying intended effect is much different than what can be surmised of *Pearl*'s, the dream-state's proper conclusion in *Disputacioun* provides a

³ "During a season of great mortality, / With pestilence reigning, and other disease," (1-2).

⁴ "No, no, we won't depart from you / While one of your bones with another's connected," (58-59).

⁵ "Now where are my knights?" (75).

⁶ "With a reigning pride too much to tell, / I thought of myself as a beautiful jewel" (158-159).

⁷ "Till I rise again at God's command / On Judgement Day, and before him stand" (196-197).

resolute feeling of positive change, one that contrasts with the *Pearl*-Dreamer's messy self-destructive ending. The difference in tone between two poems, that otherwise share many qualities, reveals their fundamentally different purposes. Poems like the *Disputacioun* combine the debate and dream genres in order to serve as a recreational and instructional tool, but they also serve as a form of consolation, and in their awareness of the need for that consolation, they suggest that the production of such poems is responsive to the psychological needs of the time and of the patron.

While *Pearl* is not a true *ubi sunt* poem, it shares the *Disputacioun*-Dreamer's desire to elaborate on what lies beyond the grave and find what has been lost, though the differences in their approach highlight the misattributed worries of the *Pearl*-Dreamer. The reasons for categorizing *Pearl* as 'recreational' and 'instructional' are self-evident in its inherently engaging poetic construction and emphasis on doctrine, respectively, but *Pearl* resists being also described as a 'consolation' because the Maiden is so unempathetic and stern in her high register: "Sir, ye haf your tale mysetente"⁸ (257). This single usage of the word "Sir" is one of the most painful moments in their exchange, as it is the first word she directs towards the Dreamer and yet it could not be less inviting, especially given his passionate greeting where he confesses that "Fro we in twynne wern towen and twayned / I haf ben a joyles jueler."⁹ (251-252). Essentially, this exchange is a confession of paternal love received with a cold, stiff salute. In addition to being so formal, the Maiden's tone is frequently scolding. Not only does she de-legitimize his profession with the "If" in "If thou were a gentyl jueler"¹⁰ (264), but she tells him that he is "no kynde jueler"¹¹ (276) due to the way he speaks of her. According to her, his actions have been so

⁸ "Sir, you have your tale misunderstood" (257).

⁹ "Since the moment we were torn apart, once entwined / I have been a joyless jeweler." (251-252).

¹⁰ "If you were a noble jeweler" (264).

¹¹ "Not a natural jeweler" (276).

impious that if he were to ask permission to enter Heaven, he might be refused: “Me thynk thee burde fyrst aske leve — / And yet of graunt thou myghtes fayle”¹² (316-317). Again, her diction bites. The word “burde” is slightly more forceful than Stanbury’s gloss of “ought”, defined as “with regard to faith or doctrine, morals, custom, duty, reason: he is under obligation”¹³. The finality of “fayle” combined with the relative apathy of “myghtes” continues the Maiden’s verbal punishment, as though she recognizes that he might very well succeed but chooses only to highlight the possibility that he won’t. There are many times where she is insensitive in this way, but the Maiden’s most overtly cruel moment is when she reminds him that the only way to rejoin her is to die, using a coarse description: “Thy corse in clot mot calder keve”¹⁴ (320). A line caked in soil, the word “corse” lands just as bluntly as our contemporary “corpse,” and “clot” and “calder” set the scene for a clotted, cold death. The hard alliterative consonants in this line merely add to this line’s potency. To specify how traumatic this must be for the Dreamer, consider that he is witnessing his daughter reprimand him for grieving her death, and she is also describing his future death in terms that remind him of hers: “For care ful colde that to me caght”¹⁵ (50). Our modern euphemisms for death — “passing away,” “gone,” “moved on,” etc. — implicitly recognize the delicate emotional state that is bereavement and how specific words can be triggering, and the Maiden ignores this entirely while speaking to the Dreamer. Overall, her manner of speech seems wholly inappropriate for the situation, and yet this tension between them expertly manifests the tension between the severity of doctrine and the torturous irrationality of emotion. If the poem is a consolation, then, it is a consolation in the sense that the

¹² “I think you must first ask for permission — / And such a request might fail.” (316-317).

¹³ All definitions of Middle English words are taken from the Middle English Dictionary. The specific entries for these words are footnoted: “biren v.” 1a. b.

¹⁴ “Your cold corpse must sink through soil” (320).

¹⁵ “For that cold seized me entirely” (50).

audience has someone to relate to in the form of the Dreamer, as the Maiden, who is the authority figure, provides no comfort.

In *Disputacioun*, the audience's and protagonist's consolation comes about from the provision of a larger context of mass death and commentary on the soul of the deceased; in other words, the ignorant party in this exchange is fully aware of the journey the soul takes after death, and they simply need a reaffirmation of the universality of death, what awaits the righteous, etc. Yet in *Pearl* the Dreamer cannot receive or engage with this kind of commentary because in the Dreamer's memory and affective understanding, the Maiden's selfhood remains inevitably linked to her body, which is why he can hardly understand, intellectually, that it is his daughter's soul (and *not* her body) that is in God's kingdom. His preoccupation with the "spot" in the poem is therefore not only a preoccupation of sin, but also the literal ground in which her body is buried, which is again a meaningless preoccupation because it is only her soul that now matters. This burial ground is so clearly important to him that it forms the basis for the exit from waking life and the entryway into the dream-vision: "Fro spot my spyryt ther spang in space"¹⁶ (61). The paradox of the Dreamer knowing on some cognitive level that she is in Heaven, and fretting about her earthly self anyways, shows the profundity of his inner dissonance. Perhaps he requires a different kind of consolation, then. By acknowledging the validity of the Dreamer's distress, as well as the flaws in his understanding, the poem is addressing the complicated work of human mourning, as opposed to dealing solely with a kind of consolation that is correct only by the strictest standard of scripture. The Dreamer cannot immediately mourn differently simply because he is told to do so – pedagogy works in slow degrees of change.

¹⁶ "From that spot my spirit sprang into space" (61).

Proof of this gradual change can be seen in how the Dreamer expects his ‘dream Maiden’ to act the way his ‘real Maiden’ did when she was alive, and time and time again his expectations of her are refuted. And still, he expects. The error of the Dreamer is having concluded anything about the Maiden’s eligibility for her divine reward, which is the error in seeking to comprehend the eternal joy of salvation in rational, logical terms. The Dreamer is unfit to understand these concepts because the Dreamer is only human, and humans like logic and reason – but humans also act in ways that are in conflict with these, since it is irrational and illogical to continually attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible. The apparent conclusion to the poem in which he restates his dedication to God is in conflict with the strong emotions raised by a child’s death, as it would lead one to believe that when the Dreamer decides to worship correctly, it is because he has realized that he must contain these emotions. Yet, worshippers will always encounter Christ and the limits of their ability to follow his doctrine. While they exist on this earth they will always face such a tension; nonetheless, they are told they must persist. Their perception of the divine will always be mediated through texts, and though it may confuse them — just as the hierarchy of heaven confuses the Dreamer — they must accept it as the truth. In placing the context of the plague in the background of the narrative and weaving its virulent characteristics into the larger symbology of the poem, the *Pearl*-poet attempts to recreate a kind of pseudo-therapeutic process for the reader, whereby they can learn from the Dreamer and Maiden’s discourse. However, they would not be necessarily learning from the poem’s homiletic qualities.

The poem is like a homily in that, for example, their conversation includes a retelling of the parable of the vineyard (lines ~497-720), where the Maiden speaks uninterrupted as would a priest, directly quotes Matthew, and makes reference to Mass: “As Mathew meles in your

Messe”¹⁷ (497). This citation immediately places her in a position of priesthood, as interpreter of Matthew. It is her commentary on this scripture makes her speech a homily, as she intertextually references the Fall from Eden, Christ’s sacrifice, and quotes Solomon and David to support her argument, respectively: “Of thys ryghtwys, sas Salamon playn, / How kyntly oure Koyntyse hym con aquyle.”¹⁸ (689-690); “David in Sauter if ever ye sey hit, / ‘Lorde, Thy servaunt draw never to dome, / For non lyvyande to Thee is justyfyet”¹⁹ (697-700). She uses the metaphorical model of the parable to demonstrate that heavenly relationships, particularly salvation and grace, operate on a different scale, one of celestial totality — a group — rather than earthbound binary or relative value. Her references to David and Solomon are, simultaneously, appeals to authority and part of the inherently instructional nature of the homily. But these are frigid, oratory techniques, not emotional aid. If the Maiden’s response to the Dreamer’s suffering is impersonal, it is also correct according to the Church, but it is not what the Dreamer actually needs. Through all of its superficial appeals to normative religious edification, the poem actually seeks to teach lessons that are not so obviously sermonic nor spoken directly by the Maiden — lessons which have to do with the visceral process of bereavement.

For those unfamiliar with *Pearl*, it may seem that all of these lessons on disease would be plainly visible. Yet the Maiden’s cause of death is never explicitly revealed, her corpse is never described, and even her status as his daughter can be contested. The poem’s subtle response to the Black Death is instead represented through a palpable and purposeful lack of direct depiction, one where the *Pearl*-poet instead relies on the multitudinous possible interpretations of words surrounding the Maiden in order to hint at the world of grief that forms the basis of the poem.

¹⁷ “As Matthew says in your Mass” (497).

¹⁸ “Of the righteous person, Solomon says plainly, / Wisdom welcomes them naturally.” (689-690)

¹⁹ “In the Psalter, David says / Lord, never hold your servant to judgement / For not one person is justified in your presence.” (697-700).

Pearl then makes layers of meaning by having the same words concatenate around inexact synonyms and rephrasings, which over time — and through their nuanced differences — form new implications and restructure old ones. This repetition structures the poem's own circularity, manifesting the shape of a literal pearl, the Eucharist, and the cycle of life and death. The *Pearl*-poet's concentration on the physicality of the body, within *Pearl*'s complex poetic construction and allusions to the Black Death, offers the poem's readers a solace that is not offered to the Dreamer himself: someone to empathize with.

II.

Pearl is an intricately constructed medieval English poem, and part of that intricacy comes from its concatenating words, which appear in the last line of every stanza within a fitt. The actual concatenation comes from the fact that in each fitt, the word that repeated in the previous fitt appears in the first line of the first stanza of the following fitt; for example, “spot” appears in the last line of every stanza in the first fitt, and in the first line of the second fitt. The amount of effort that must have gone into writing it suggests a great deal of intentionality behind making “spot” the first concatenating word. Opening *Pearl* with this word frames the rest of the poem within the context of the plague, but as it is open to interpretation, the poem’s significance can change. If we take the Maiden as a literal and metaphorical pearl, and take into consideration how pearls are valued based on their color and imperfections, then the Dreamer’s worry to see her “wythouten spotte” reflects a desire to see her as perfect. Given the religious context, that perfection might then translate to her sinlessness and consequently, a placement in Heaven. This discussion of *Pearl* understands “spot” in a similarly literal sense, as a stain on an otherwise perfect object, but applies it to the Maiden’s skin. In this light, the Dreamer’s worry over her spotlessness suggests that the Maiden’s real cause of death was the Black Plague, as “spot” makes reference to the eponymous black boils which appear on victims.

A reading of *Pearl* where “spot” is a placeholder for disease is supported by the fact that much of the vocabulary has to do with disease in the same sort of imaginative sense. There are many others within just the first fitt that make this connection as double entendres: “bolne” (18) has been glossed as “swell” by Stanbury and clearly describes the Dreamer’s heartache, but this lacks the added definition of becoming physically “distended; *specif.*, swell from infection,

poison”²⁰; “bele” (18) likewise does mean “burn” but it also is to “become inflamed, fester,” playing with the parallel pains caused by both fire and disease²¹; “moul” (23) which is both a “spot or a stain,” “mold, mildew,” and “earth, soil; *specif.* the soil of the grave”²²; “rot” (26), which is the most self-evident in its meaning but offers another interesting link to both the earth and the notion of the living Maiden as an ephemeral flower in that it describes the location where “spyses mot nedes sprede” but “such ryches to rot”²³ (25-26). Plants grow outward from the earth, and riches (i.e., pearls) rot into the earth, at once a reference to literally lowering the body into a grave and the bodies’ subsequent heavenly transformation through death. This vocabulary shows how even when simply describing an object’s appearance, the Dreamer is subtly making reference to sickness and funerary practices, as though the presence of the plague is enough to infect not just bodies, but language itself. The *Pearl*-poet’s diction consistently functions on these two levels, where the first reading of a word is often a literal description of the object or event, and then the second reading supplies a metaphor for that object through its secondary or tertiary meanings. Words and their meanings are buried to metaphorically mimic the suppression (burial) of emotions.

The Dreamer makes it evident that he is conscious of the burying he is doing. When his “spyryt” first appears in the dream, it arrives on a “balke” (62), which aside from Stanbury’s otherwise correct gloss of “mound,” the word’s full definition includes “a ridge or mound; the mound of a grave; an archery butt”²⁴. The fact that the Dreamer’s “goste” appears from a synonym for ‘grave’ is surely no small coincidence, as it recontextualizes the rest of the poem as

²⁰ “bolnen v.” 1.a.

²¹ “bēlen v.” 1.

²² “mōul(e n.(2).” 1.

²³ “Spice plants must spread” / “Such riches rot” (25-26).

²⁴ “balk(e)” 1.a.

the product of a sub-terranean entryway, effectively making the conversation take place in a Heaven that is as heavily encoded with what lies under the earth as with what grows above. Even words that describe hills are burdened with the possibility of burial, as the “bonkes” (110) are not just riverbanks but “an artificial earthwork”²⁵. The streamlets “brent”, a verb which here means “of objects: to shine, glitter, sparkle, glow; also, blush”²⁶ but whose usage more commonly refers to “be consumed by fire; burn, burn down,” extending the linkage of fire and disease by the earlier “bele”. The word’s presence is doubly impactful as a fiery descriptor when we consider that he is using it to describe a streamlet moving through a “fyrth”, a wooded area. Perhaps “brent” is more literal than other examples (in that maybe it just means the stream moves quick, like fire), but the Dreamer’s consistent employment of words that can act in both complementary and contradictory ways speaks again to the simultaneous understanding and misunderstanding of the Dreamer. The concatenating word “adubement,” or “adornment,” juxtaposes with the first’s fitt’s “spot,” marking the Dreamer’s dichotomous way of viewing the world as both adorned and secretly diseased.

Similarly present throughout *Pearl* are cleansing phrases, which paradoxically serve as another way to indirectly talk about the plague and as a way to metaphorically cleanse the Maiden. She is described in terms of spotlessness in “maskelles byrd”²⁷ (769), whose likening of the Maiden to the bird separates her from the earth; “glorious, withouten galle”²⁸ (915) employs both the “partaking of the glory and bliss of heaven” and “brilliant” of “glorious”²⁹ as well as the “sore on the skin” and “impurity” of “galle”³⁰. Since “sin was widely considered to be the

²⁵ “bank(e n.(1))” 3.

²⁶ “brennen” v. 4.b.

²⁷ “spotless bird”

²⁸ “glorious, without stain”

²⁹ “glōriōus adj.” 1.b, 2.a.

³⁰ “galle n.(2).” 1., 2.a.

principal cause of untimely death,” the “plague carried with it the implicit notion of moral as well as physical decay,” which is why the Dreamer is so preoccupied with her spotlessness (Morgan 121). If she is without disease, she is without sin. Because the Dreamer states she “lyfed not two yer in oure thede”³¹ (483), this is probably a baptismal concern, as aside from the original sin, it is unusual that a child less than two years old could commit a sin that merits such an untimely death as punishment. If she died unbaptized, it is truly a reason to worry for the Dreamer, as “the ranks of the living were similarly delineated since the deaths of pagans, Jews, suicides, and unbaptized children were regarded as qualitatively distinct from those of Christians” (Morgan 130). Discrepancies between emotional thinking — ‘a baby could not have committed such sin’ or ‘an unbaptized child should not have to suffer in Purgatory’ — and the mandates of the church — ‘an untimely death is a sinful death’ — are what might cause the Dreamer anxiety, because he is in disbelief of both possibilities, and finds comfort in confirming her spotlessness for himself. There is no sense of resolution for him if both these cases are true, furthering the sense that when the poem ends, the cycle of sadness and confusion will continue for the Dreamer.

There are many more cleansing phrases which echo previous phrases containing similar words or similar forms of the same words, such as “maskeles perle”³² (745), “so clene cortes”³³ (754), “Moteles may”³⁴ (961) and the triple threat of “coronde clene in vergynté”³⁵ (767) where the Maiden is simultaneously crowned, clean, and in a virginal state. Superficially, these phrases might make it seem as though the Dreamer is convinced of her newfound cleanliness, but the

³¹ “Lived not two years in our world” (483).

³² “spotless pearl” (745).

³³ “so cleanly refined” (754).

³⁴ “Spotless maiden” (961).

³⁵ “Crowned me in clean virginity” (767).

frantic repetitions of cleansing phrases de-stabilize this possibility because it's as though the Dreamer is trying to scrub over the image of her worldly spotted body with that of the heavenly, clean body before him in order to convince himself of that change. In fact, the phrase "maskeles under mone" (923) betrays that the Dreamer can see the Maiden as spotless only after she is illuminated by the moon's light, which is synonymous with the state of being in a dream because of the connection to the nighttime, implying he would otherwise be unable to think of her as anything other than a spotted body were he awake. Even though the Maiden describes her own entry into Jerusalem through terms of rot in "Fro that oure flesh be layd to rote"³⁶ (958), the plural pronoun "oure" and the detached, passive tone in which she speaks of her body's decay is indicative of the Maiden both distancing herself from her real-life body and correcting the Dreamer's preoccupations about that body. His attempts to cleanse her with language have failed, because the Maiden herself tells him that there is no real need to cleanse her in the first place. In other words, she depicts death as a positive experience that has made her spotless (because her perspective is no longer earthbound), whereas the Dreamer (who is still locked into the physical world) worries that it is death itself that has made her spotted.

The Dreamer's worry that death is a spot in of itself also manifests in how he describes other bodies in the poem through aspects of corporeal degradation. Again, it is as though the disease has the ability to infect bodies intertextually. For example, because the moon is an object qualitatively akin to the Maiden – both are heavenly bodies, and both are elements of the dream world – the moon itself is also characterized by the Dreamer as "To spotty ho is, of body to grym"³⁷ (1070), a descriptive personification that relies on the likeness of a sick human body as the reason to devalue the moon's power over New Jerusalem: "The mone may thereof acroche

³⁶ "Since our flesh be laid to rot" (958).

³⁷ "Too spotty she is, her body too grim" (1070).

no myghte”³⁸ (1069). She is spotty and grim, diseased and therefore sinful. Connections like these exemplify how the Dreamer transfers a subject’s external qualities to their internal qualities; purity is derived from outward beauty, and not the other way around. Even more important is the description of the Lamb’s glory as coexisting with his single wound: “Thagh He were hurt and wounde hade, / In His semblaunt was never sene, / So wern His glentes glorious glade”³⁹ (1142-1145). The Lamb has a wound, but this wound is not a spot, as “Thys Jerusalem Lombe hade never pechche”⁴⁰ (841) and “The Lompe ther wythouten spottes blake”⁴¹ (945). Nevertheless, this is evidently pestilential language, as “pechche” is a “blemish, impurity”⁴² and “blake” specifies that the “spottes” is “of a black color”⁴³. Following the Dreamer’s logic, this plague-encoded wound should be representative of the Lamb’s sin. Yet it is in spite of this wound that his glory persists; furthermore, it is precisely *because* of this wound that the sins of the world are taken away and the faithful can enter into heaven. Every other body has not been given the luxury of comfortably coexisting with their ‘wound’, whether that wound be necrosis or one of the many marks on the moon’s surface. Naturally, this discrepancy is yet another example of the Dreamer misunderstanding how cause and effect, in this case disease from sin, does not apply to heavenly bodies, especially one that is synonymous with Christ. What the Dreamer does not understand is that the Lamb’s wounded perfection shows that the mortal body in *Pearl* “reveals the gross decay that is a product of its flawed mortality *and*...it shows how that gross decay becomes necessary to immortality and perfection” (Coley 235)”. The Lamb’s wound, therefore, is symbolic of the concept in *Pearl* that spots are a terrible, but nonetheless

³⁸ “The moon will not seize any power” (1069).

³⁹ “That He was hurt, and wound sustained / Yet in His appearance there was no pain / So all His glances were gloriously glad” (1142-1145).

⁴⁰ “That Lamb of Jerusalem had no spot” (841)

⁴¹ “The Lamb is without black spots” (945)

⁴² “pechche” 1.

⁴³ “blāk” 1.a.

necessary, part of any human's salvation. Spots are stains, yet through them lies the path to cleanliness.

If the Dreamer's anxiety around disease is encoded in the way he talks about other bodies, perhaps this anxiety manifests itself in his self-oriented language as well. There are symptoms of another disease present in *Pearl*, but because of the veiled presentation of nearly everything in the poem and the presence of the more immediately visible (and therefore thematically dominant) Black Plague, these symptoms are even more obscured in the text. But if the Dreamer is sick, his sickness is not necessarily the same one that killed the Maiden – clearly, as he is still alive and seemingly not experiencing any pestilential symptoms. In fact, it may be akin to the sickness described by the protagonist in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*.

Composed c. 1370, it was commissioned by John of Gaunt in honor of his wife Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, who probably died from the plague two years prior. The text holds too many references to bereavement to not be, at least in part, direct commentary on the emotional process that Gaunt actually experienced; even Blanche's own name (French for "white") is exploited symbolically by Chaucer in his naming the character of the Black Knight, who has also lost a loved one. Understanding *The Book of the Duchess* as a roman-a-clef places Blanche as the unmentioned White Princess who, in her royal whiteness, shares the symbolism of purity that surrounds the equally white Maiden.

The similarities between the *Book* and *Pearl* continue past this initial comparison. Both of them are medieval dream visions with an element of debate poetry and resolve in inconclusive ways, with the mournful context for the *Book*'s commissioning linking it even further to *Pearl*. The *Book* shows that there was an awareness of sicknesses that weren't confined to just the body. Though states like the narrator's "malencolye" were thought of as produced by an excess of the

natural humor of black bile, Chaucer's attentive psychological analysis proves that there is a mental aspect to the sickness: "For sorweful imaginacioun / Is I hooly in my minde"⁴⁴ (14-15). The symptoms he describes suggest depression, though I make no claim that Chaucer's notion of the disease is the same as our modern one. He describes insomnia many times, and its direct connection to sadness: "Withoute sleep and be in sorwe; / And I ne may, ne night ne morwe, / Sleepe, and thus malencolye"⁴⁵ (21-23). This lack of sleep then influences his apathy towards the world, which is another symptom: "That, by my trouthe, I take no keepe / Of nothing, how it cometh or gooth"⁴⁶ (6-7). And more than simple disinterest, he finally expresses the crucial absence of the ability to feel joy: "hevinesse / Hath slain my spirit of quiknesse / That I have lost al lustihede"⁴⁷ (25-27). These three symptomatic details become immensely more worrisome when combined with the fact that he has "suffred this eighte year, / And yet my boote is never the neer"⁴⁸ (37-38). The Maiden also makes reference to a "boote" in the line "Thou blames the bote of thy meschef"⁴⁹ (275), indicating a thematic similarity through both poems' absent cures. Either the cure has never been found, like the *Book-Dreamer's*, or it is not accepted by the patient who stands to benefit, like the *Pearl-Dreamer*. Taken all together, these characteristics make a compelling case for a 'soft' literary diagnosis of the *Book-Dreamer* as someone with depression. At no point in *Pearl* does the narrator give similarly explicit details from which the same could be concluded, but some of this information can be extrapolated from the Dreamer

⁴⁴ "For sorrowful imagination / Is wholly within my mind" (14-15).

⁴⁵ "Without sleep, I am in sorrow / And I cannot, nor in night nor morning, / Sleep, and thus melancholy ensues" (21-23).

⁴⁶ "That honestly, I do not care / About nothing, how it comes or goes" (6-7).

⁴⁷ "heaviness / Has slain my quick spirit / That I have lost all lust for life" (25-27).

⁴⁸ "suffered for eight years / And yet my cure is never any nearer" (37-38).

⁴⁹ "You blame your cure for your misfortune." (275).

and Maiden's exchanges that nonetheless point to a depressive state: "That er was grunde of alle my blysse"⁵⁰ (372).

We know that this depressive state is not solely a product of the dream, as the *Pearl*-Dreamer describes it just before falling asleep in lines like "A deuly dele in my hert denned"⁵¹ (51) and "My wreched wyllle in wo ay wraghte"⁵² (56). The presence of the "hert" and "wyllle" suggests a primitive dual understanding of emotion as rooted in physical organs but with intellectualized, thought-based counterparts. In order to understand the root of the Dreamer's mental sickness, one might then have to look at the organs which are blamed for physical sickness. These anxieties are physically oriented, as the Dreamer employs the vocabulary of viscera which he then qualifies with the respective organ's ability to function. For example, the Dreamer's "braynes" are "bredful" (126), or in other words "completely filled, chock-full"⁵³. His "dom" (156, 223) is conquered⁵⁴ and baffled⁵⁵ by the "mervayle" he sees. There are two instances of "herte" (128, 135) where his heart strains due to an excess of joy — "straynes" in line 126 and "might not suffyse" in line 135 — complemented by two later instances where his heart is in danger of the metaphorical blow dealt by seeing his daughter once again: "Bot baysment gef myn hert a brunt"⁵⁶ (174) and "Such a burre might make myn herte blunt"⁵⁷ (176). The trauma of potentially having seen his decaying, spotted daughter's body has transformed into a fear of his own body malfunctioning, evident in these self-oriented corporal references. More specifically, he shows he is frightened of his heart and brain failing, not his liver, or lungs,

⁵⁰ "You were the ground for all my bliss" (372).

⁵¹ "A desolating grief lay deep in my heart" (51).

⁵² "My wretched will writhed in pain"

⁵³ "bred-ful" l.c.

⁵⁴ "adaunten" v. 1.

⁵⁵ "demmen" v. 1.

⁵⁶ "But confusion gave my heart a blow" (174).

⁵⁷ "Such a blow might make my heart stop." (176)

or anything else. In short, the concerns he has are only for the short list of organs which are believed to permit us our mental and emotional faculties. Even though “tonge” may seem like an exception to these, the “tonge” can be seen as an analogue for his “braynes” in that, because the tongue produces speech and the content of that speech is formed by the brain, the connection between the two becomes inherently part of the concept of personhood that is often associated with the brain. Because the Dreamer continually worries over body parts that are deeply symbolic of emotion and reason as well as basic human functioning, the Dreamer tells us that he is sick in a way that isn’t physiological — “malencolye.”

The failure of the tongue takes liberties in extending past the organ’s literal function of physically producing speech towards a metaphorical function of producing the speech itself. Failure of the body becomes failure of the mind, and for the tongue, that means an absence of speech. Just like Chaucer displays the *Book-Dreamer*’s sadness by distinguishing his lethargy and indifference, the *Pearl-Dreamer*’s acts of speechlessness are one of the markers of his depressive state. In a didactic context such as *Pearl*’s, moments where our protagonists are speechless are also moments where the audience may be subtly indicated to ask themselves if they too, would be speechless – and then the poem provides an opportunity for an answer to this question. The poem’s provenance suggests that its audience might be largely adult. The moments in which the Dreamer stays speechless are therefore crucial in understanding why any mention of the plague must stay underneath the surface of the poem:

When poets strongly apply inexpressibility to the subject of human loss, moreover, paradox includes the keeping of loss: that is, words say they cannot say the grief or the loss; and in so proving the unspeakable reality of loss, words keep loss present in the real world beyond metaphor and fictive language, that larger world where reader and poetic speaker ultimately seem to live, which is the world of all of us. (Watts 26)

The Dreamer's silence therefore works on three levels: it does justice to his level of emotional pain; it allows a space for a learning audience to insert their own experiences; and it provides an accurate representation of one of the Dreamer's possible symptoms. Moments of speechlessness are moments of particularly heightened grief in a situation already laden with grief; they are symbolic moments where the Dreamer reaches silence as a way to transmit his mental pain in a way that is more accurate and poignant than the act of actually describing it. Due to their ability to signal a distinctly powerful moment of emotion, acts of speechlessness serve as insight into the Dreamer's depression. There are four of these moments, two of which are short and on opposite ends of the poem. These two describe simple, albeit ironic, statements on why something merits silence: "Nis no wyy worthé that tonge beres"⁵⁸ (99) and "To much it were of for to melle"⁵⁹ (1118). They are ironic, of course, because the Dreamer is contradicting himself: in the first one, he goes on to describe in great detail precisely the splendor which he claims is indescribable; in the second one he quite literally anticipates that the poem will be "To much" for him, proving himself correctly soon after, with the dream's ending forced by his hand. The line "Nis no wyy worthé that tonge beres." (99) immediately connects a failure of the body to a failure of language, and "tonge" foreshadows its own appearance later on in the second longer inexpressibility. The verb choice of "beres" is also important because it means "to have (a body); have (sth.) as part of one's body," linking the singular tongue to a holistic sense of what the body can and cannot accomplish⁶⁰.

In between these two bookends of smaller speechlessness lie two longer instances of inexpressibility around lines 126-136 and 223-228. These passages are important because they

⁵⁸ "No worthy words a tongue could bear" (99).

⁵⁹ "It was too much for me to explain" (1118).

⁶⁰ "berēn v." 6.b.

come before and after the Dreamer witnesses, and subsequently attempts to describe, the Maiden. They are inexpressibilities that link, through the implications of their specific diction, a failure of language to a failure of the body — in both the linguistic (the Dreamer cannot use words to describe what he sees) and physiological sense (the Maiden's body passed away because it couldn't protect itself). The word "tonge" in "I hope no tonge moght endure / No saverly saghe say of that syght"⁶¹ (225-226), a line glossed by Stanbury as "I believe no tongue could manage, / Nor describe that sight in fitting speech," is a metonym directly linking the malfunctioning body part to the act of inexpressibility and reinforces the Dreamer's heightened anxiety around how bodies serve their intended purposes or not. What this transliteration lacks is the full weight of word "endure" that is not captured by the lesser "manage," because "endure" has the added implication of preservation, defined as "of things: to be sufficient or adequate; to remain serviceable, unimpaired, unspoiled; also proverbial [quot. c.1450 (c.1396) Chaucer]; of persons: to remain unspoiled"⁶². As "endure" is negated by the preceding "no," the meaning of the sentence might change to "I believe no tongue might remain unspoiled." If the Dreamer believes no tongue will remain unspoiled when it tries to describe that sight — i.e., your tongue will spoil if you try to describe the Maiden — and he has just finished describing that same sight, he is saying that he is sickened by the act of describing her. His use of descriptive, decayed language is directly connected to an increase in his own mental pain — the implication here is that if he is speechless, it is because he must be seeking a momentary respite from that sudden increase.

Perhaps, however, the Dreamer's employs silence as another manifestation of emotional suppression, so as to not appear selfish in front of his apparently selfless daughter, and moreover, to mourn 'correctly' in her eyes, which are the eyes of true doctrine. Many different

⁶¹ "I believe no tongue might remain unspoiled / Nor confidently say anything of that sight" (225-226).

⁶² "endūren v." 2.e.

circumstances surrounding death can create different kinds of mourning, and that of a parent outliving a child is universally agreed upon to be one of the most intense emotional processes. Now we know there is no proper way is to grieve, but there certainly was such a notion in Catholic 14th century England, which much like the parable of the vineyard does not allow for difference in circumstance in its ultimate judgement. To mourn incorrectly is to mourn incorrectly, no matter the relationship between mourner and deceased. Because of the Maiden's retelling of the parable of the vineyard and her participation in the "A hondred and forty thowsande flot"⁶³ (786), she begins to make an association between mourning correctly, community, and normative religion, and between mourning incorrectly, individualism, and non-normative religion. There is therefore, another symptom of depression which is not present in the *Book*, but is present in *Pearl* — a degree of egocentrism. This is not a derogatory term, for there is simply a certain kind of self-obsession that accompanies prolonged sadness (like the *Book-Dreamer's* eight-year long search for a cure) and it is this quality that is focused on in *Pearl*.

Around the time and place of *Pearl's* alleged construction, Lollardy was just beginning to come into being. One of its founders, theologian John Wycliffe, emphasized the concept of divine Lordship in *De Dominio Divino* (c.1373), in which he examines God's relationship with his creatures. He discusses the appropriate circumstances under which an entity can be considered to have authority over lesser subjects, coming to the conclusion that only God bestows dominion on everyone: "Beyond all doubt, intellectual and emotional error about universals is the root of all sin in the world" (Wycliffe 162). Wycliffe saw the practical application of this in the rebellious attitude of individuals — particulars — towards rightful authority — universals — and his influence in creating a vernacular Bible for the laypeople of

⁶³ "A fleet of a hundred and forty thousand" (786).

England is proof enough of this intellectual and emotional rebellion. Similar to depression, there is no evidence in *Pearl* that the *Pearl*-poet was aware of Lollardy as a movement, but these sentiments mingle amongst the discussion of depression because it was associated with a heightened concern over the self in relation to God, as opposed to the collective in relation to God. One could now read the Bible for oneself, and therefore form a connection with God that was unmediated by a priest. Particularities in the Dreamer's speech retroactively therefore tell us more about the social repercussions of the Dreamer's reaction to the Maiden's death, because the Maiden's authority frequently deems the Dreamer's mourning as normatively incorrect. Egocentrism, like speechlessness, is also a marker of 'malencolye' and is simultaneously connected to the poem's veiled depiction of Lollardy, because the 'malencolye' is symbolic of those 'incorrect' interpretations of doctrine which are characteristic of proto-Protestant movements. If mourning and depression are viewed as diseases with their own etiology — the basis for this etiology being the previously discussed link between the language of the body and the language of the mind — and sin and disease are connected, then, a sinful ideology such as Lollardy is symbolized in *Pearl* through the language of disease, which in the case of the Dreamer is in the form of individualistically encoded mental illness.

Because of the extent of his grief, it's hard to label the Dreamer as 'egocentric', but the use of the term 'egocentric' here merely describes the way he is always reorienting the situation around himself. Even when his phrasing could have otherwise included no mention of himself, he chooses to do so; for example, by needlessly using possessive pronouns such as "my lyttel quene"⁶⁴ (1147) to refer to the Maiden, who is no longer little nor his. More prominent examples of the Dreamer's egocentrism are contained within his responses immediately following the

⁶⁴ "my little queen" (1147).

Maiden's lessons. Even though these responses are directly tied to depression because all language used in discussing mental health is inherently self-oriented, his language is sufficiently selfish to merit the term 'egocentric' because the true subject of discussion should be the Maiden's salvation or the power of doctrine, not himself. The structure of their exchanges is exemplary of the plural/singular and Lollardy/Catholic dichotomies, as the Maiden will give correct advice that is wrapped in plural pronouns, and the Dreamer will respond with incorrect knowledge that is wrapped in singular pronouns.

The poem's usage of plural and singular pronouns is therefore useful when thinking about how it associates the concepts of solitude and mourning, in contrast to community and the resolution of that same mourning. One particularly illuminating example of the Dreamer's self-centered response to the Maiden can be found in lines 325 to 336, where the Maiden's lesson is within lines 301-324. She corrects him on three beliefs he previously stated: that he has found her, and sees the evidence with his own eyes (295-296); that he will stay with her in the dream land (297-298); and that he could pass through the water that separates them (299-300). As soon as she is finished speaking in line 324, the Dreamer breaks into his largest concentration of "I" within a single stanza; nine times in only twelve lines, with some lines sharing up to two utterances of "I". The Dreamer is explicitly asking that attention be paid to his personal suffering, both through the literal meaning of his statements — "My precios perle dos me gret pyne"⁶⁵ (330) — and through this subconscious uptick of self-centered pronouns. In another lesson on the Lamb's wound, between lines 781 and 900, the Maiden corrects the Dreamer's assertion that she specifically is "makeles" by using self-oriented language: three instances of "I" just between lines 781-784, an unusually high concentration for her. Her usage of the "I"

⁶⁵ "My precious pearl inflicts upon me great pain" (330).

is clearly a rhetorical tactic, as she moves from speaking about herself directly, to using herself as an example of the “hondred and forty thowsande flot” (786) which she is a part of. Her engagement with the ego of “I” is merely as a means of transitioning the Dreamer’s attention away from herself, which she knows he will want to hear about, and towards the “oure” (808, 851, 854, 860, 861), “uus” (813, 828, 853, 861-862), and “we” (849). The Dreamer’s response to her, in lines 901-936, contains nine instances of “I” (902-903, 905, 910-911, 913, 931-933) and not one instance of “oure,” “uus,” and “we.” The Maiden is basically explaining to him how God benefits everyone, and upon hearing this, the Dreamer seemingly re-center’s the conversation around himself. In the beginning, she specifically says that his “speche is to me dere”⁶⁶ (400) only once he corrects the brashness of his speech in the preceding stanzas, and that his “Maysterful mod and hyghe pryde” are “heterly hated here”⁶⁷ (401-402). Calling his sorrow the product of an arrogant mind and lofty pride shows the Maiden’s harsh characterization of the Dreamer’s mental problems as they relate to his adherence to community as his “speche” turns “dere” to her only after the Dreamer has verbally moved from “my perle” (376) to a record number (four) of plural pronouns in “And quen we departed we wern at on. / God forbede we be now wrothe — We meten so selden by stok or ston!”⁶⁸ (378-380). It is his return to selfish behavior — “I may not traw, so Gode me spede / That God wolde writhe so wrange away”⁶⁹ (487-488) — that then prompts the Maiden to recite the parable of the vineyard, which is the ultimate reminder of the correctness of God’s equal and undying love for the individual who successfully becomes part of the collective that is Heaven. The sharp contrast between the

⁶⁶ “speech is now dear to me” (400).

⁶⁷ “Arrogant mind and lofty pride / I assure you, these are deeply hated here.” (401-402).

⁶⁸ “And we were together, then torn apart / God forbid we be torn apart again — / We so seldom meet by stump or stone!” (378-380).

⁶⁹ “God forgive me, but I cannot believe / That God would make so wrong a mistake” (487-488).

Dreamer's individualism and the Maiden's collectivism can be felt in these moments where the Dreamer's explosion of self-centering language displays a need for individual attention, and an implied belief that his suffering demands special consideration even when she has just stated that everyone receives the same consideration from God.

The Dreamer's final speech betrays the underlying sentiments of Lollardy, as the poem's critique – that of the church being unable to *actually* help people in times of mourning, represented by the Dreamer's ultimate breaking away from Heaven, even if only within a dream – is veiled by its explicitly religious nature. On the surface, the speech is a prayer of renewed faith, which of course protects the poet from anyone who might have counter-criticized them for writing a protagonist that is so stubbornly questioning of doctrine, a feature characteristic of proto-Protestant feelings. The Dreamer's final speech makes itself suspicious by his use of the plural pronouns “us” twice and “our” once, which is unusual because he generally uses “I” nearly everywhere else, indicating the establishment of a conscious distance between the Dreamer and his prayer. It is strange that the Dreamer utters his final prayer with the apparent purpose of stating his rediscovered trust in God, and yet he also seemingly chooses to minimize his inclusion within it. The simple addition of “Amen Amen” may be a way of rectifying this without fundamentally changing anything about the poem. However, as he is alone when he says “us” (1210-1211), it is a clear invocation of a communal experience which is not taking place at the moment and implies to a wary reader that the Dreamer is conceptually returning from a solitary state of mourning to be a part of the congregation, albeit reluctantly and perhaps dishonestly. Were he truly convinced by the Maiden's explanations, it is unlikely that his concluding prayer would include three instances of “I,” given his penchant for the word earlier even within the same fitt, as the first two stanzas of the twentieth fitt both have seven uses of “I.”

In *Pearl*'s 1,212 lines, the word "I" appears an overwhelming 183 times, where it is used by the Dreamer 149 times and appears at least once, on average, every six or seven lines. This is as opposed to the nineteen uses of the word "us," seventeen of which are uttered by the Maiden (almost all of them while telling the parable of the vineyard), and the last two are uttered by the Dreamer in his last prayer. Of the fourteen instances of "oure," thirteen are uttered by the Maiden; of the seventeen instances of "we," the Maiden still holds a slight majority, having uttered ten of them. Even when the Dreamer is talking about "we" he is mostly talking only about himself and the Maiden, not some larger, generic group of devotees in the way that the Maiden does. Thus, the poem's personal pronouns code the Dreamer as an individual, and the Maiden as a part of a collective. The reason for this singular instance of "us" and "oure" on the Dreamer's part is that "in a diminished, dreamless world the speaker falls back on conventions of religious community, finding shelter in shared topoi of belief," depending upon "a convention partly outside language in muter rituals of mortality" to substitute for his inability to authentically pray (Watts 34). The Dreamer's final "us" and "oure" are a way to place — and hide — himself symbolically amongst the pews, where he is just another person singing grace to God, as opposed to a specific person who has just been saved by holy intervention. It is the underlying reluctance to include himself in the congregation which signifies egocentrism, the same kind of which denotes his sadness. The language of depression, because it inherently deals with feelings of isolation, is shared by the people trying to isolate themselves from the oppressive Catholic Church. In this light, *Pearl* becomes a space where mental health and normative religion are at odds.

Differences in interpretations of the final line "Amen Amen" (1212) likewise change the meaning of the poem towards one of subtle rebellion. On one hand, the uttering of "Amen

Amen” is wholly appropriate for the ending to a prayer. Yet it is difficult to believe that the poet would break their own carefully constructed poetic structure just for a wholly standard concluding line, when the final word before “Amen Amen” is “pay,” which is what allows the poem to concatenate into itself, linking this last line to the beginning: “Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye”⁷⁰ (1). Within the system of patronage that likely funded the production of the *Pearl* manuscript, such a hollow reaffirmation of devotion is a safe way to satisfy clients and appear devout. The other poems associated with the *Pearl*-poet – *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* — also feature final “Amens,” with *Sir Gawain*’s ending potentially supporting the theory that *Pearl*’s final “Amen Amen” is insincere. In fact, the first line of the poem is repeated at line 2,525 which would like *Pearl* bring the poem full circle, had it not concluded with a two-line prayer to Christ — “Now þat here þe croun of þorne, / He bryng vus to his blysse”⁷¹ — and a single “Amen” followed by the motto “hony soyt qui mal pence”⁷² (2529-2531). While pious endings to more secular poems like *Sir Gawain* were common, this ending is particularly clerical in tone, in a poem that is otherwise so narratively and creatively oriented. Like in *Pearl*, the ending prevents the poem from repeating unto itself. The “Amen” and the motto in *Sir Gawain* are clearly written in a different scribal hand, and because of their shared authorship (generally taken to be true, but unprovable), this detail also supports the notion that the “Amen Amen” in *Pearl* is not meant to be truly part of the poem. If these overly pious additions were made, they were made out of fear of the poem’s being misunderstood, and if the poems risked being misunderstood but not totally destroyed, such that only an edit of their relatively small size was deemed necessary to clarify their position, then it stands to reason that

⁷⁰ “Pearl, pleasant to a Prince’s eye” (1).

⁷¹ “Now that he wears the crown of thorns / He brings us to his bliss!” (2529-2530).

⁷² “Shame on anyone who thinks evil of it.” (2531).

there is just enough material in *Pearl* to provide an understated critique of the Church without the poet indicting themselves.

Much in the way that *Sir Gawain*'s motto is copied from elsewhere, the last stanza in *Pearl* seems cobbled together from other different prayers and religious sayings, which additionally protect the poet by showing the Dreamer's reconciliation. For example, "In Krystes dere blessing and myn"⁷³ (1208) is a phrase which appears frequently in the Middle Ages from parent to child. The first line of the last stanza mimics the first line of the first stanza, in that it affirms the pearl's status as enough to please a prince. However, the second half of the line changes subject, and the Dreamer is talking about himself when he is reconciled, as he is now been converted to the "god Krystyin"⁷⁴ (1202), and as much is stiffly re-affirmed in the following line: "A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin"⁷⁵ (1204). These colloquial phrases are useful to the Dreamer because don't reveal any real emotion, notably inconsistent with his earlier passionate confessions of grief and again show a disconnect between him and his prayer. The fact that the Maiden is referred to as "hit" (1207) may be further proof that the Dreamer is not progressing past, but returning to, where he was at the beginning of the poem, where the physical, literal pearl "it" was a representation of the Maiden "her." This reinforces the circularity of the poem and gives it a sadder ending, as it implies the Dreamer's mourning is never ending if the lively "she" becomes the deader "it" over and over again.

Under this interpretation, the Dreamer's sadness is yet another slightly blasphemous detail, as if he were truly "the god Krystyin," he would already have found closure through God. The reference to "bred" and "wyn" draws additional attention to the calculated nature of the

⁷³ "In Christ's blessing and mine" (1208).

⁷⁴ "good Christian" (1202).

⁷⁵ "A God, a Lord, a most excellent friend." (1204).

Dreamer's final prayer, because it connects it to the practice of receiving the Eucharist. The parallels between a pearl and the Eucharist wafer — in their round shape and as a symbol of purity and perfection — suggests that the dream of the pearl itself is a Eucharistic gift which has been given to the Dreamer as a way to become closer to God, which claims he has done in this stanza by reciting the usual prayers that surround the Eucharist: "The preste uus schewes uch a daye"⁷⁶ (1210). The parable of the vineyard is another stand-in for Eucharistic iconography, as it tells the story of a group of God's followers who receive a circular object each day, with the penny transforming into a synonym for the communion wafer. Taking into account the rest of the subtle Lollard undertones to Pearl, the presence of such communion is doubly important as the Lollards believed the bread and wine of the Eucharist to not be any different after it had been consecrated. The debate over whether or not Christ's body takes the form of consecrated bread and wine, the Real Presence, is the final debate underlining the Dreamer and Maiden's dialogue. If we then take the dream of the pearl to be symbolic of the Eucharist, and the Dreamer remains secretly unchanged after the dream ends, then the implication would be that the Eucharist had no effect on him, because the Eucharist itself is of little importance, effectively personifying the difference between normative transubstantiation and Lollard consubstantiation.

⁷⁶ "The priest gives us each day." (1210).

 III.

The notion that what *Pearl* offers is not a lesson, but a character for the reader to empathize with, is ultimately itself a difficult conclusion to offer. Of course, this is because it rests with the reader to decide whether or not the Dreamer evokes that empathy. But even if he doesn't, in the act of pulling meaning from *Pearl*, a friendly corpse is raised from the dead. It takes the shape of the imagined, unnamed commissioner, perhaps someone much like John of Gaunt, or in other words, a mourner. This person lives as a silent second audience, themselves an amalgamation of every other person who fit the Dreamer's basic features — a bereaved parent — sculpted for *Pearl*'s aforementioned didactic purposes but they are ultimately more useful as a reminder that real people suffered historical events. From this notion, we can hopefully re-imagine part of the psychology of those who might have created *Pearl*. It's often difficult to give the people who populate Middle English literature real agency the way we do contemporary fiction, in part out of a recognition that it would be overly presentist to do so, but also in part because their deeply emotive qualities are concealed beneath the social needs that the text prioritizes. The animation of this anonymous commissioner and poet falls not into presentism, but instead forms part of a basic recognition that we should give these Middle English characters and authors the full emotional license that we give other, more recent, works.

Of course, this license is only granted to us because the Dreamer's diction is full of a sadness that he emphasizes over and over, ever-increasing since the Maiden's death: "My blysse, my bale, ye han ben bothe; / Bot much the bygger yet was my mon / Fro thou was wroken fro uch a wothe." (373-375). His language is so potently littered with etymological and metaphorical allusions to death, funerals, and disease, and feelings of religious rebellion, that with a little analysis these details move past obscurity — for they are twice hidden, once by the poet, and

another by the hundreds of years that separate Modern English and Middle English — and into reality. To our anachronistic eyes they may seem overly submerged, but it will be the same with, for example, films that come out now dealing with mask-related imagery or themes of alienation; in a few hundred years academia will study COVID-19's influence on those films. A re-creation of *Pearl's* similarly pestilential subtext, which would have been readily available to the poem's audience at the time, is therefore necessary for a more complete understanding of the kind of work the poem is doing. Situating *Pearl* next to *A Disputacioun Betwyx þe Body and Wormes*, we can see that *Pearl* is indeed distinct in its presentation of the medieval dream-vision and debate poetry genres, as a consideration of genre reference points is necessary for the re-creation of subtext. Further comparison with Chaucer's *The Book of The Duchess* allows for an exploration of the notion of 'malencolye' within *Pearl*, as they are both two poets working at similarly high levels of poetic capability and writing about similar subject matter. The 'malencolye' is a mental state akin to contemporary depression, and whose hidden symptoms are present in the Dreamer in the form of speechlessness and egocentrism. It is only with careful attention to word choice, pronoun usage, and symbolic mutability – that lyrical ability of the *Pearl*-poet to make language pliable and layer metaphor upon metaphor through precise, continuous shifts in imagery – that these buried meanings are unearthed.

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