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Devotional Submission and the *Pearl*-Poet

*T*ransubstantiation is an invisible process. In this way, as writers of Middle English such as Robert Mannyng are fond of pointing out, the host's transformation is analogous to an individual believer's spiritual reform: it is internal and intangible but with very real consequences for the individual soul. Within Middle English writings, both transformative processes lend themselves especially well to metaphorical representation because a metaphor, by its very nature, highlights the dissimilarity between tenor and vehicle, even as it explicitly declares their equivalence. For the reader of Middle English texts, discerning Christ's presence in the host, recognizing the spiritual in one's own earthly life, and understanding a metaphor all demand the intellectual work of interpreting a material object in order to access another level of meaning. In many Middle English writings, metaphor and the Eucharist simultaneously invite and refuse interpretation, a feature that allows writers to explore the alienating nature of spiritual devotion to a God that is materially present but invisible. This mutually defining relationship between metaphor and the Eucharist is most fully developed in the most formally intricate poem in the Middle English canon: *Pearl*.

Pearl explicitly brings together its interest in both the Eucharist and metaphor in relation to individual spiritual transformation in its final stanza, a stanza that modern scholars too often ignore or dismiss. After 1,200 lines that explore the dreamer's resistance to Christian consolation in the wake of personal grief, the poem exhorts its audience:

To pay the Prince other sete saghte,
 Hit is ful ethe to the god Krystyin.
 For I haf founden Hym, bothe day and naghte,
 A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin.
 Over this hyul this lote I laghte
 For pyty of my perle enclyin;
 And sythen to God I hit bytaghte
 In Krystes dere blessing and myn,
 That in the forme of bred and wyn
 The preste uus schewes uch a daye.
 He gef uus to be His homly hyne
 And precious perles unto His pay.
 (1201–12)¹

Following his failed attempt to join the pearl maiden in the New Jerusalem, the awakened dreamer claims that he has learned to turn away from his lost beloved, his pearl, and toward God alone. In this closing stanza, he argues that liturgical devotion to Christ in the Eucharist is the solution to his problems of grief and longing. For many scholars, this claim seems disingenuous; they argue it provides an overly simplistic solution to a problem the poem has otherwise portrayed as spiritually and psychologically complex.² I disagree. In this chapter, I take *Pearl's* closing stanza seriously and argue that the poem's

1. All citations of *Pearl* are from: *Pearl*, ed. Sarah Stanbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

2. For example, David Aers calls the ending “theologically superficial and psychologically superficial,” while John Bowers labels it a “gratuitous assertion of the Real Presence.” David Aers, “The Self Mourning: Reflections on Pearl,” *Speculum* 68 (1993): 70; John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 53. Other critics who read this final stanza as either unsatisfying or unconvincing include: J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-poems* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2005), 77; Denise Louise Despres, *Ghostly Sights: Visual Meditation in Late-Medieval Literature* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1989); Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 32. Even the few scholars who have shown that eucharistic allusions occur throughout the poem are reluctant to take this ending at face value. The few modern critics who have written on the Eucharist in *Pearl* are decidedly apologetic in tone, seemingly unconvinced by the importance of the connections between the Mass and *Pearl*. See John Gatta Jr., “Transformation Symbolism and the Liturgy of the Mass in *Pearl*,” *Modern Philology* 71 (1974): 243–56; Heather Phillips, “The Eucharistic Allusions of *Pearl*,” *Mediaeval Studies* 47 (1985): 474–86. No doubt part of this reticence stems from a desire to distance themselves from Robert Max Garrett’s early and largely unsupported claim that the Eucharist provides the poem’s entire meaning: *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1918). Arthur Bahr has recently addressed the difficulty of the final stanza from the perspective of manuscript studies and the singularity of *Pearl's* manuscript. Arthur Bahr, “The Manifold Singularity of *Pearl*,” *ELH* 82 (2015): 729–58.

poetic complexity enables an equally intricate understanding of the Eucharist. In all four of the *Pearl*-poet's works, the poet draws on figurative language in order to argue that the Eucharist can effect personal spiritual reform. Particularly in *Pearl*, he argues Mass is a ritual that demands that the worshipper accept God's simultaneous presence and absence, a moment in which the divine is almost tangible but impossible to grasp. This focus on representing the intangible brings together the poem's interests in figurative representation and individual spiritual reform. Instead of constantly longing for that which is outside and beyond his grasp, *Pearl* insists that the dreamer must learn to recognize what it is he truly lacks: Christ. The Eucharist becomes a ritual method for the aristocratic subject to reform himself in light of this recognition.

THE *PEARL*-POET AND ARISTOCRATIC DEVOTION

Pearl's depiction of the individual subject's need for interior spiritual and emotional reform is dependent upon late medieval aristocratic understandings of the Mass.³ Fourteenth-century aristocratic liturgical practices particularly lend themselves to figurative representations precisely because of their internal and private nature. Drawing on these practices, the *Pearl*-poet consistently argues in all four of his poems that internal states have moral relevance and that liturgical devotion is essential to constructing a stable Christian identity for the aristocratic subject.

Fourteenth-century aristocratic liturgical practices were often individual—both in the sense that the aristocracy's experiences of the Mass were typically internal and in the sense that they used their wealth in order to mark out their individual social status within their churches.⁴ As I discussed in the previous

3. *Pearl* treats the Eucharist in the context of fourteenth-century aristocratic liturgical practice, a historical context that scholars too often dismiss or ignore. In recent years, *Pearl* scholarship has increasingly turned toward sociohistoricist. Several scholars have explicitly resisted discussing the poem's theology because they regard such a focus as a move away from its immediate historical moment and cultural context. However, when such scholarship ignores the Eucharist in favor of history, it denies the fact that the Eucharist itself has a cultural history. Historicist readings that explicitly resist theology include the following: Helen Barr, "*Pearl*—or 'The Jeweller's Tale,'" *Medium Ævum* 69 (2000): 59–79; Lynn Staley, "*Pearl* and the Contingencies of Love and Piety," in *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 83–114; John Watkins, "'Sengeley in synglere': *Pearl* and Late Medieval Individualism," *Chaucer Yearbook* 2 (1995): 117–36.

4. I use the terms "internal" and "interiority" to denote the aspects of a person that exist consciously within the self, but do not necessarily bear a direct relationship to physical behavior and experience. This interiority includes the elements that Caroline Walker Bynum has identified as composing medieval ideas of the self, such as thoughts, inner motivation, emotions, and

chapter, the late medieval form of the Mass encouraged lay people to engage in increasingly personal, inward-looking modes of devotion because their participation in the Mass was usually limited to silent reflection.⁵ Some members of the aristocracy would have been literate enough to understand the parts of the Mass spoken aloud in Latin, but the canon—the most sacred part of the Mass in which the consecration of the bread and wine takes place—was inaudible, said silently by the priest in order to avoid revealing the secrets of God.⁶ Late medieval guides to the Mass, such as the thirteenth-century *Lay Folks Mass Book*, encouraged their lay readers to devote themselves to prayers that often had little connection to the priest's prayers and actions.⁷ The late fourteenth-century poem, "How to Hear Mass" suggests that, during the Mass, its lay readers ought to "priueliche 3or preyers preye / To him þat may vn-bynde, / In saluyng of 3or synnes seuene / To þe mihtful kyng of heuene."⁸ Like Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, Middle English devotional literature frequently depicts the Mass, in general, and the elevation of the host, in particular, as a highly personalized encounter between Christ and believer in which believers reflect upon their own sins and individual need for redemption.⁹ Although Mass was ostensibly a social occasion, the fourteenth-century laity were encouraged to see the liturgy as an opportunity for inward reflection on the state of their own souls.¹⁰

This tendency toward personal devotion during the Mass is particularly characteristic of the aristocracy. Fourteenth-century aristocrats often used their wealth to set themselves apart physically from the wider parish community, thereby publicly performing their distinctly individual modes of worship. Beginning in the fourteenth century, members of the aristocracy and wealthy

psychological development. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 82–109.

5. Harper, *Forms and Orders*, 40–41; Jungmann, *Mass of the Roman Rite*, 1.117.

6. Harper, *Forms and Orders*, 119.

7. For example, the *Lay Folks Mass Book* directs its readers, during the consecration, to pray for such things as good weather or to simply repeat the pater noster until the elevation occurs. However, the *Book* does name several of the parts of Mass and gives its readers a general sense of the significance of the priest's actions.

8. Furnivall, "How to Hear Mass," in *Minor Poems of the Vernon MS*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS o.s. 117 (London: Kegan Paul, 1901, 493–511, lines 24–27.

9. See, for example, John Audelay, *The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. Ella Keats Whiting, EETS o.s. 184 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 62–81; "A Prayer to the Sacrament of the Altar," in *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R. T. Davies (London: Northwestern UP, 1963), 115; Robbins, "Levation Prayers," 131–46.

10. Discussing a slightly later period, Eamon Duffy notes that, with the increased use of prayer books, "devotion at Mass . . . became a matter of inner meditation on the Passion, using the stages of the liturgy as triggers or points of departure." Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 119.

members of the upper gentry often carried highly ornate and expensive books of hours with them to guide their prayers during the Mass.¹¹ By the end of the fourteenth century, the public use of the book of hours during Mass became so prevalent that many historians regard it as “the characteristic instrument of noble piety.”¹² Such books typically encourage their readers to have an instrumental view of prayer that focuses on gaining personal benefits for oneself and one’s family.¹³ When prayers in books of hours describe the Eucharist, they typically concentrate on the consecrated host as offering a personal encounter between Christ and the individual worshipper, and the accompanying illuminations usually depict the host in a monstrance or otherwise divorced from its liturgical, social context.¹⁴ Thus, the book of hours became an object that both marked aristocratic worshippers as socially distinct and encouraged them to turn increasingly to their own personal concerns and private devotions.¹⁵ Also in the fourteenth century, the aristocracy began to build private pews and private chapels for themselves within their parish churches.¹⁶ Even the pax—a sacred object passed from person to person at the end of Mass as a substitute for the reception of the Eucharist—was no longer a symbol of community and equality. Not only was the pax often passed according to rank but many members of the upper classes actually had private paxes.¹⁷ From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, wealthy individuals frequently donated decorations to cathedrals and parish churches—such as stained-glass windows depicting the donor in a devotional scene—a practice that individuated a communal space by simultaneously demonstrating the donor’s wealth and the donor’s

11. It was not until the early fifteenth century that books of hours became more affordable and available to a wider audience. See Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers 1240–1570* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006), 4.

12. Jeremy Catto, “Religion and the English Nobility in the Later Fourteenth Century,” in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981), 49. See also John Bossy, “Christian Life in the Later Middle Ages: Prayers,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th series, 1 (1991): 137–48; Duffy, *Marking the Hours*.

13. Bossy, “Prayers”; Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, 64.

14. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 156–59, 293, 297, 302.

15. On the connection between texts and the religious devotion of the upper classes, see Lawrence Besserman, *Chaucer’s Biblical Poetics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 8–26; Diana Webb, *Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 119–33.

16. Pamela C. Graves, “Social Space in the English Medieval Parish Church,” *Economy and Society* 18 (1989): 297–322; Colin Richmond, “Religion and the Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman,” in *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Barrie Dobson (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), 193–203.

17. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 116. On the pax as social ritual, see Bossy, “Mass as a Social Institution.”

personal relationship with the divine. Fourteenth-century windows suggest a particularly intimate relationship between donor and the divine because they typically depict the donor praying alone at the feet of the saints or Christ himself.¹⁸ As the Middle Ages progressed, more members of the aristocracy and even the gentry were building private chapels in their own homes and receiving papal approval to allow Masses to be performed there.¹⁹ Between the years of 1342 and 1352 alone, Pope Clement VI granted licences for the possession of portable altars to some hundred and fifty individuals in England.²⁰ More chantries were established for personal intentions and more Masses were celebrated outside of the parish setting.²¹ Although it is impossible to know what any given individual was thinking of or praying for during Mass, it is clear that the aristocracy was beginning to conceive of the Mass as an act of devotion that could be directed primarily toward personal growth and personal benefit. In contrast to histories of medieval selfhood that argue that medieval individual self-consciousness arose primarily out of a desire to identify oneself with a group,²² aristocratic liturgical practices suggest a different picture: being a member of the aristocracy actually enabled an increased focus on the individual as a self distinct from other selves.

The fourteenth-century aristocracy used public displays of their wealth and devotion as ways of constructing their own individual spiritual lives. In general, fourteenth-century vernacular religious texts increasingly focused on the internal and subjective elements of Christian devotion, a shift in focus that many scholars attribute to the influence of confessional discourse.²³ In a sense, the aristocratic focus on personal devotion during Mass is therefore typical of a larger trend in lay religious experience. What makes aristocratic liturgical practices unique, however, is both aristocrats' intent focus on interior states

18. Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 191–218.

19. As Diana Webb has shown, during the fourteenth century, there was a marked increase in private domestic piety, an increase largely limited to the upper classes because wealth provided unique opportunities for a more diversified living space and a larger number of material possessions, including books. Webb, *Privacy and Solitude*, 120–33.

20. Diana Webb, “Domestic Space and Devotion in the Middle Ages,” in *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 37.

21. Catto, “Religion and the English Nobility.”

22. This argument is most famously made in Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?”

23. For an overview of the increased interiorization of fourteenth-century devotional literature, see Nicholas Watson, “The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 293–313.

and the way in which they publicly performed their interiorization and individualization of religious practice. In her study of secular court rituals, Susan Crane argues that the late medieval aristocracy typically understood identity to be constituted through external performance: “What people manifest and articulate is what counts about them, not what is hidden and unexpressed. Performance is a reliable measure of who one actually is.”²⁴ Although Crane does not discuss religious practices at length—practices that I would argue tend to assume a sense of self that to some extent precedes social interaction—her work highlights the important role of performance in the formation of aristocratic selfhood. For the aristocracy, one’s interior life, including one’s emotions, thoughts, and motivation, was complex and absolutely central to the understanding of the Mass. Aristocrats seem to have felt that staging the distinctiveness of their religious devotion was an essential aspect of the practice of their Christian faith, an aspect that enabled and authorized devotion centered on individual self-examination.

Though, as we will see in the next chapter on *Piers Plowman*, some Middle English texts depict the Mass as both social and egalitarian, the *Pearl*-poet presents a version of eucharistic piety that is decidedly individualist and entirely focused on members of the aristocracy. For this reason, several scholars have suggested that the poet’s theology cannot be taken seriously precisely because it is not community oriented.²⁵ For example, Nicholas Watson argues that the poet demonstrates a watered-down “aristocratized theology,” and David Aers laments that, in the poet’s four poems, “The eucharist is assimilated to a discourse which has nothing to say about its role in cultivating union between fellow creatures in Christian communities.”²⁶ While it is

24. Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 176. Also useful on the relationship between identity and bodily performance in medieval texts are J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); Clifford Davidson, ed., *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

25. Colin Richmond makes such an explicit judgment of late medieval religious practices when he criticizes the fifteenth-century gentry’s religious practices by arguing, “Such folk, in becoming isolated from their neighbours, were also insulating themselves against communal religion, possibly even religion *per se*, for how can you be religious on your own?” Richmond, “Religion and the Fifteenth-Century,” 199. See also Colin Richmond, “Margins and Marginality: English Devotion in the Later Middle Ages,” in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1992 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Rogers (Stamford, CA: Paul Watkins, 1994), 242–52.

26. David Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain*-Poet,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 100. Nicholas Watson also criticizes the *Pearl*-poet for making his theology too suited to aristocratic tastes. However, Watson does not make this point through reference to the poet’s lack of social concern. Watson, “*Gawain*-Poet,” 312.

true that many fourteenth-century aristocratic practices were profoundly self-centered—in the sense of being primarily interested in the individual soul's relationship to God—that does not make the theological thinking associated with them merely a shallow celebration of individual wealth. On the contrary, as the works of the *Pearl*-poet show, the aristocracy's inward-looking religious practices enable complex theological thinking about the nature of the individual soul's relationship with the divine.

In all four poems of Cotton Nero A.x, the *Pearl*-poet draws on the Christian liturgy in order to argue that emotional control and the maintenance of a stable identity are Christian virtues. With his almost obsessive use of jewels, rank, courtly manners, and rich clothing as ways of expressing the nature of the divine, the poet is intently interested in examining how material objects correspond to divine reality; he thus presents his theological thinking in a way that is particularly suited to aristocratic tastes.²⁷ He appeals directly to the aristocracy by seriously exploring the aristocracy's interest in liturgical devotion as a largely inward-looking experience. In all four poems, the poet's primary interest with regard to Christian devotion is the individual Christian's inner life, particularly the believer's emotional control. For the poet, good external actions are important, but properly controlled thoughts and emotions are the cornerstone of being a good Christian subject; external acts are often significant primarily because of the way in which they reflect or affect internal states. He frequently expresses his fascination with interiority in reference to liturgy. In the three most explicitly didactic texts, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, the poet refers to moral lessons heard at Mass in order to point out methods of individual reform.²⁸ *Patience*, a text intensely focused on the prophet Jonah's inner response to God's commands, begins by referring to a Gospel reading that "I herde on a holyday, at a hy3e masse" (9). The poet goes on to retell Matthew's Beatitudes in a way that, far from emphasizing good works or issues of social justice, focuses on self-control. Most radically, he replaces "blessed are those who suffer persecution" with those "þat con her hert stere" (27). He thus

27. Class distinctions were very apparent to clerical authors, and it was not uncommon for pastoral texts to give class-specific guidance. For one example, see Michael Haren's work on the mid-fourteenth-century *Memoriale presbitorum*: "Confession, Social Ethics and Social Discipline in the *Memoriale presbitorum*," in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis (York: University of York Press, 1998), 109–22.

28. See *Pearl* 497, *Cleanness* 51, and *Patience* 9. I recognize that the poet cites the Mass partly because the Mass would have been most lay people's only direct source of scripture passages. However, his citation of the Mass also invokes a liturgical context within the poems. All citations from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from: *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 4th ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

invokes a liturgical setting in order to place his Old Testament subject in the context of controlled Christian interiority. *Cleanness* is much more explicit in its exploration of liturgy; it directly links internal virtue to the Mass by beginning with an explanation of priests' need for internal purity at the consecration. Even in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the least devotional of the four poems, Gawain intersperses his struggles to maintain self-control with regular attendance at Mass. At the center of all four poems is the individual's struggles to perfect and control his interior state—the dreamer's quest to overcome grief in *Pearl*, *Cleanness's* exhortations that readers must strive to remove the spots on their souls, Jonah's failures to acquire patience and understanding in *Patience*, and Gawain's continual dissatisfaction with what he perceives as his own moral failure at the end of *Sir Gawain*—and the poet views this struggle through the interpretive framework of Christian liturgy and ritual. Before discussing *Pearl*, I want to turn briefly to *Cleanness* in order to show the poet's abiding interest in exploring the importance of inward-looking liturgical piety by troubling the boundaries between literal and figurative meaning.

In *Cleanness*, the poet explicitly takes up the relationship between internal piety and external courtly behavior. *Cleanness* presents Christian interiority and courtly life as not only reconcilable but inherently complementary. The poet often makes this argument for the coincidence of internal Christian devotion and external courtly behavior through particular reference to the Mass.²⁹ *Cleanness* opens with the assertion that spiritual purity is essential to Christian life, and to prove this point, the poet draws on one instance in which the need for such purity is self-evident: when a priest prepares to celebrate the Eucharist. The poet explains the necessity of priestly purity in detail:

For wonder wroth is þe Wyȝ þat wroȝt alle þinges
 Wyth þe freke þat in fylþe folȝes Hym after—
 As renkez of relygioun þat redden and syngen,
 And aprochen to Hys presens, and prestez arn called;
 Thay teen vnto His temple and temen to Hymselfuen,
 Reken with reuerence þay richen His auter,
 Þay hondel þer His aune body and vsen hit boþe.
 If þay in clannes be clos þay cleche gret mede;
 Bot if þay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,

29. The amount of scholarship on *Cleanness* is small. However, Amity Reading also notes the importance of the Mass to the poem, arguing that the poem focuses on ritual sacrifice and feasting in order to explore “the hierarchical relationship between man and God.” Amity Reading, “‘The Ende of Alle Kyneȝ Flesch’: Ritual Sacrifice and Feasting in *Cleanness*,” *Exemplaria* 21 (2009): 275.

As be honest vtwyth and inwith all fylþez,
 Pen are þay sinful himself, and sulpen altogeder
 Boþe God and His gere, and Hym to greme cachen.
 (5–16)

Although the Mass generally rewards those who participate in it, a priest who touches Christ's body in the host without first ensuring his own internal purity is guilty of sacrilege and incurs God's wrath. A priest's internal impurity transforms the effects of his external public act. The Mass, as an outward performance that demands inner belief, is the ultimate example of a moment in which outer behavior and inner virtue must operate together.

Using this discussion of the Mass as a starting point, the poet equates proper priestly and aristocratic behavior on the grounds that both require external courtly displays of internal purity. The poet compares the Mass to an aristocratic feast at which God is presiding as a king in his court. According to the poet, God is distinctly courtly in appearance:

He is so clene in His courte, þe Kyng þat al weldez,
 And honeste in His housholde, and hagherlych serued
 With angelez enourled in alle þat is clene,
 Boþe withinne and withouten in wedez ful bryzt.
 (17–20)

The physical beauty and richness of God's court is clear evidence of its holiness. Throughout the poem, proper aristocratic manners and dress are indicators of internal purity. In one of Christ's most explicitly sacramental acts—the breaking of bread—his spiritual purity is most evident in the extreme delicacy and neatness with which he tears the loaf of bread. Christ is so clean, the poet tells us,

Forþy brek He þe bred blades wythouten,
 For hit ferde freloker in fete in His fayre honde,
 Displayed more pryuyly when He hit part schulde,
 Penne alle þe toles of Tolowse mozt tyzt hit to kerue.
 (1105–8)

Christ displays his holiness by serving food like a proper aristocrat would. For the poet, priests and aristocrats are fundamentally similar in that, in order to please God, both must match their internal piety with "cortaysye," a model of virtuous behavior that ultimately finds its origin in proper court manners.

Unlike *Sir Gawain*, in which the poet alludes to his characters' complex inner lives, *Cleanness* does not focus on the believer's internal state other than to suggest that spiritual purity is fundamentally internal. In *Cleanness*, the clearest indicator of one's internal state is the courtliness of one's actions.

The distinction between external and internal purity, between courtly manners and Christian piety, collapses over the course of the poem; the poem ultimately regards the two as inseparable. This conflation is most marked in the poem's refusal to consistently distinguish between literal and figurative filth. Near the start of the poem, the poet tells his readers that, when they come to the heavenly feast, they must wear clean and beautiful clothing. To demonstrate that clothing is only a figure for works, he explains,

Wich arn þenne þy wedez þou wrappez þe inne,
 Þat schal schewe hem so schene schrowde of þe best?
 Hit arn þy werkez, wyterly, þat þou wrozt hauez,
 And lyued with þe lykyng þat lyze in þyn hert.
 (169–72)

After this point, however, the distinction between literal dirt and the figurative filth of sin begins to disappear. When the poet describes Christ's nativity, he dwells almost exclusively on the spotlessly clean nature of the manger. As he envisions it, "Þa3 þay pouer were, / Watz neuer so blyful a bour as watz a bos þenne, / Ne no schroude-hous so schene as a schepon þare" (1074–76). In order to demonstrate the sanctity of Christ's birth, the poet has to imagine the stable as a different location; it becomes both aristocratic and priestly as the poet compares it to a bower and a sacristy, respectively. The poet prevents readers from understanding these comparisons as wholly figurative by insisting on such details as the stable's mysterious rose scent (1079). Although this description of the manger might seem to suggest that spiritual purity transcends physical filth, it also implies that it is almost unthinkable for the two to be found together. The poem thus makes a plea for its readers to engage in greater piety by aligning such piety with the aristocratic taste for physical opulence and cleanliness.

As the poet makes clear through the negative example of Belshazzar's feast, liturgical piety is essential to proper courtly behavior. At his feast, Belshazzar commits two interrelated sins. First, he defiles Jewish altar vessels and, second, he fails to make his feast courtly enough. The defilement of altar vessels is the first step away from proper court behavior. The poet finds it horrifying that the altar vessels would be used for anything other than religious purposes and, although the vessels are ostensibly Jewish, he implicitly invokes the

sacred vessels of the Mass by reminding readers that “in His sacrafyce summe wer anointed” (1497). Belshazzar’s feast becomes a sacrilegious parody of the Mass. However, this sacrilege is only the start of his sins. The poet explains that God is angry because “His jueles so gent with jaeules wer fouled” (1495), arguing that God believes his vessels to be of too high and noble a value to be used by those of low rank. The mixing of people of various classes and ranks is morally abhorrent; the poet explains with disgust how “þenne derfly arn dressed dukez and prynces, / Concubines and kny3tes” (1518–19). Like the sinful priests whom the poet condemns at the start of the poem, Belshazzar sins by touching liturgical vessels when he is internally impure; his internal filth is particularly manifest in his failure to observe proper courtly protocols of behavior.

Although the Mass is not the poem’s central focus, the poet continually invokes it to illustrate the urgent need for readers to maintain the cleanliness of their souls. In the middle of the poem, he warns readers that God is particularly angry at the impurity of his own followers because God considers Christian bodies to be holy vessels consecrated to him. Christians must therefore be wary because “His wrath is achaufed / For þat þat ones watz His schulde efte be vnclene, / Þa3 hit be bot a bassyn, a bolle oþer a scole, / A dysche oþer a dobler, þat Dry3tyn onez serued” (1143–46). This liturgical comparison is essential to the structure of the poem because, without it, there is no logical transition from Sodom and Gomorrah to Belshazzar’s feast. Both Belshazzar and the Sodomites sin against purity because they have made improper use of holy vessels; the difference is that the holy vessels defiled in Sodom were made of human flesh. The poet uses the liturgy as the ultimate example of an instance in which the coincidence of external courtly behavior and internal Christian purity is absolutely essential. Thinking about the Mass enables the poem to blur the line between figurative and literal cleanness and, in so doing, construct a model of purity that unites aristocratic behavior and Christian interiority perfectly. For the *Pearl*-poet, the Mass provides the aristocratic subject with an opportunity for personal reform, and that reform is best understood through figurative language.

METAPHOR AND SUBMISSION

Pearl, like the three poems that share its manuscript, argues that internal states have moral relevance for the aristocratic subject. Throughout the poem, the dreamer becomes increasingly frustrated because he cannot identify with either his lost beloved or with Christ, primarily because he can only perceive

them through textual mediation: the continually shifting pearl metaphor and the Lamb as an allegorical sign of Christ. The poem's emphasis on metaphor highlights the dreamer's own need to submit to external logic and to acknowledge his irreducible distance from the divine.

Of the four poems in Cotton Nero A.x, *Pearl* provides the fullest exploration of the relationship between liturgy and Christian interiority. Like *Sir Gawain* and *Cleanness*, it examines aristocratic Christian identity construction, but *Pearl* is unique in its explicit focus on interiority and emotional reform rather than social acts. The other three poems explore various ways in which external, social actions are results of internal states, but *Pearl* only examines external acts insofar as the dreamer allows them to affect his internal sense of identity and emotional control. The poet's choice of the dream vision genre is itself indicative of the poem's intensely inward focus. While *Sir Gawain* often refuses to discuss its protagonist's internal state, *Pearl* takes the dreamer's thoughts and emotions as its primary subject. Unlike *Sir Gawain*, who faces physical challenges in which he has some level of agency, the dreamer's struggles are entirely internal; he must learn to cope with the loss of his pearl, a loss over which he has absolutely no control. Rather than being concerned with how to integrate piety into courtly life, the poem explores how the aristocratic subject can transform his interior state through Christian doctrine and ritual. For the *Pearl*-poet, religious ritual is a necessary part of internal reform, and *Pearl*, unlike the other three poems, makes the nature of such reform an object of intense focus. In this sense, *Pearl* most closely resembles *Patience* because both focus on the individual's internal response to the intractable will of God. However, the two protagonists differ radically in that the dreamer has access to Christian liturgy and consolation while Jonah, as an Old Testament figure, does not. This access to Christian consolation through ritual is what allows *Pearl* to conclude on the hopeful note that the Mass is central to the reform of the interior self.

Pearl begins by describing the dreamer's moral failure to cope with his personal grief in a way that is consonant with Christian belief in the resurrection. His excessive and paralyzing sorrow is not a result of a lack of knowledge of Christian consolation; rather the source of this excess is his lack of emotional control. Before being overcome with sorrow and collapsing into sleep, the dreamer reflects on his pearl's burial place and tries to console himself with the thought that "for uch gresse mot grow of graynes dede, / No whete were ells to wones wonne" (31-32). In thus imagining his pearl as a seed in the ground from which grain will grow, the dreamer depicts his pearl's death as the beginning of new life. This attempt at consolation alludes to a passage from the Gospel of John in which Christ explains the necessity of his own

death by comparing human life to a grain of wheat: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). With this statement, the dreamer attempts to console himself not only with an image of rebirth derived from his physical location on the grave but also through reference to orthodox Christian belief. However, neither is effective. Even though he knows intellectually through scripture that life does not end at physical death, he continues to regard his pearl as utterly lost. He remains entrenched in grief, “Thagh kynde of Kryst me comfort kened” (55). The narrator admits that knowledge of Christ’s human nature, and therefore Christ’s resurrection from the dead, ought to have consoled him, but it failed to do so.³⁰ Instead of relying on his knowledge of Christian truth, the dreamer initially depends on his emotions and regards his pearl as a lost physical object rather than a soul that transcends physical existence. He locates her presence precisely in the ground when he reflects that “ther wonys that worthily, I wot and wene, / My precious perle wythouten spot” and mourns “my perle that ther was penned” (47–48; 53). Despite his prior knowledge of Christian truth, he emotionally relies on physical knowledge, a knowledge that leads him to wrongly believe that his pearl is firmly located in the earth.

The dreamer fails to rule his emotional state with rationality, instead allowing emotion to dominate over reason. The narrator reflects that “a deuely dele in my hert denned / Thagh resoun sette myselfen saght” (51–52). Although reason would have been a remedy for grief, the dreamer allows his sorrow to dominate. When the pearl maiden enters the poem, she immediately rebukes the dreamer for allowing his emotions to work in opposition to his reason. She calls his overwhelming grief madness and criticizes him for not fully believing Christ’s promise of resurrection. According to her, the dreamer’s sorrow is misguided because “thow demes nocht bot doel dystresse” (337). The dreamer only uses his rational judgment in the service of perpetuating his grief. He fails to realize what he should logically know: that Christ raised his pearl from the dead. In order to demonstrate the dreamer’s lack of rationality, the pearl maiden compares him to a wild animal whose moaning serves no purpose: “Fo thogh thou daunce as any do, / Braundysch and bray thy brathes breme, / When thou no fyrrre may to ne fro / Thou moste abyde that He schal deme” (345–48). Regardless of how loudly and endlessly he mourns, the dreamer is powerless to change God’s decisions about life and death. According to the pearl maiden, God never forgoes reason, and God ought to be a model for

30. I use the terms “narrator” and “dreamer” to distinguish between the retrospective voice of the first-person narrator and the character experiencing the dream, respectively. The poem often makes very little distinction between these two figures, and so I use the term “narrator” only when the tone is clearly retrospective.

the dreamer's own internal state. The poem's sixth section, in which the pearl maiden repeatedly chastises the dreamer for his grief, centers on the concatenated word "deme" because the dreamer's misconceptions about the maiden's heavenly state stem from his refusal to "deme" correctly, in the sense of both "to judge" and "to rule." The dreamer does not lack knowledge or reason; instead he refuses to use proper judgment in applying them to his own emotional state. He fails to rule himself properly.

Within the world of the poem, interior states are nearly tangible realities that the individual must control. As the dreamer wanders in the dream landscape, he allows the exterior world too much control over his internal state and becomes unable to maintain a firm distinction between what is inside and outside of himself. When he first perceives the place's beauty, "The dubbement dere of doun and dales, / Of wod and water and wlonke playnes, / Bylde in me blys, abated my bales, / Fordidden my stresse, dystryed my paynes" (121–24). He imagines that the beauty of the place has actively overcome his emotional state of sorrow in a way that he himself was wholly unable to do. He allows the landscape to have such an emotional effect on him that he begins to imagine his own interior life as if it too were a landscape. When he follows the river, "I bowed in blys, bredful my braynes" (126). Just as the river rises to the limits of its banks, his emotions nearly overflow from his mind. Even though he is actively walking along the river and trying to find a way across it, he conceives of himself as passive and responding involuntarily to the effects of the external world. He refuses to acknowledge his own emotional agency and prefers to let external stimuli overwhelm him. When he first catches sight of the pearl maiden, he claims that the sight "meved my mynde ay more and more," and when he begins to recognize her, the "baysment gef my hert a brunt" (156–74). His heart and his mind are not active or in control; instead they are acted upon, and he feels that he must endure whatever violence they are dealt from the external world. At this moment in the poem, he recognizes the nearly tangible reality of his mental and emotional life, but he fails to see that he has any control over its construction.

The poem argues that the dreamer sins by not containing his emotions within the boundaries of his body. In response to the pearl maiden's accusations, the dreamer excuses his dramatic expressions of mourning by explaining that "my herte was al with mysse remorde / As wallande water gos out of welle" (364–65). The dreamer compares the loss of his pearl to a gap at the opening of a well, suggesting that his emotional loss is similar to a physical loss having physical consequences. He claims that his grief was natural and uncontrollable; it was impossible to contain because the loss created a hole in his heart analogous to the opening of a well. The poem rejects the dreamer's

excuse by implying that he has a moral obligation to maintain the boundaries of his emotional state. It contrasts the dreamer's image of his emotions as water exceeding its boundaries with another image of flowing water that occurs throughout the poem: the river that marks the separation between the dreamer and the pearl maiden. The river has its origin in the New Jerusalem and serves as a mark of separation rather than overflow. For the Lamb, the river is a way of separating what is his—the community of the saved in the New Jerusalem—from what is not. In this image of ever-flowing but highly regulated water, the poem makes a morally charged contrast with the dreamer's emotions, which always threaten to exceed their proper boundaries.

In contrast, the pearl maiden perfectly controls the boundaries of her identity and emotions. There are many important differences between the dreamer and the pearl maiden—the most obvious being gender, age, and the maiden's resurrected state—but one of the most dramatic is their radically different levels of emotional control. Unlike the dreamer, the pearl maiden has sharp boundaries to her identity. When the dreamer first recognizes the maiden, he launches into a long description of her royal dress and appearance, with a focus on the boundaries of her body. The poem pays particular attention to the hems and borders of her garments, explaining that she wore sleeves “dubbed with double perle and dyghte, / Her cortel of self sute schene / Wyth precios perles al umbepyghte” (202–4). He describes the points of her crown and the outer covering of her hair. The maiden is like a jewel whose beauty is marked by its sharply defined edges. In part, this attention to the external indicates that the dreamer has not yet engaged discursively with the maiden, and so at this point, all of his knowledge is external; it also suggests that, to some extent, she holds the status of an object for him. However, the poem achieves both effects by revealing that the body of the pearl maiden has rigid boundaries, boundaries that are not only physical but also emotional. The dreamer is overjoyed to see the maiden and moves between grief, joy, shame, and disappointment over the course of the poem, but the pearl maiden herself expresses a very small range of emotions. Indeed, the dreamer is continually frustrated because of her refusal to engage him on an emotional level; she does not even acknowledge the intimacy of their previous earthly relationship. The only positive emotional response he receives from her occurs when she expresses pleasure that he professes to hold Christ as more important than her (400). She argues against emotional expression when she tells the dreamer that the only ultimate solution to grief is to stop external expressions of mourning altogether (349–60). For her, emotional containment is a moral imperative. As readers, we never get a sense of the pearl maiden's interior life because she is always in perfect emotional control. Although such contain-

ment is not particularly sympathetic to modern readers, the poem suggests that such control is the Christian ideal because the pearl maiden is perfect in the eyes of God.

The dreamer's grief undermines his ability to maintain a stable, contained identity, an identity that the pearl maiden has shown is essential for the Christian subject to have. The dreamer therefore attempts to overcome his grief through identification—the process of building up his own identity by claiming the pearl maiden's identity as a component of his own.³¹ When the dreamer first speaks to the pearl maiden, he attempts to overcome the differences between them. He bewails the differences in their emotional states:

Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned,
 And thou in a lyf of lykyng lyghte
 In Paradys erde, of stryf unstrained.
 What wyrde has hyder my juel vayned
 And don me in thys del and gret daunger?
 Fro we in twynne wern towen and twayned
 I haf ben a joyles jueler.
 (246–52)

The dreamer is not just lamenting his own emotional suffering but also expressing astonishment that the pearl maiden's experience was so emotionally different from his own. In protesting this disparity, the dreamer claims that they had a prior emotional unity: they were forced apart but their natural state is together. He identifies himself as a "jueler" for the first time at this

31. My description of identification in *Pearl* bears some resemblance to psychoanalytic discussions of the relationship between loss and identification. For Freudian psychoanalysis, identification occurs when the ego incorporates aspects of a love-object into itself in order to redirect love inward onto the ego; the subject only establishes a stable identity through this process of identification, which requires the ego to constitute itself with the elements of lost objects. My reading of *Pearl* differs from psychoanalysis in that, rather than propose that the ego must cover over and replace loss in service of pleasure, the poem argues that the Christian subject must acknowledge and accept the state of lack within the human self. See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243–58; Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995). For an excellent discussion of the tensions between medieval religious literature and psychoanalysis, see Louise O. Fradenburg, "Be not far from me': Psychoanalysis, Medieval Studies and the Subject of Religion," *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 41–54. For readings of *Pearl* that more directly deal with the similarities between psychoanalytic discussions of loss and *Pearl*, see Aers, "Self Mourning"; George Edmondson, "Pearl: The Shadow of the Object, the Shape of the Law," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 29–63; Sarah Stanbury, "The Body and the City in *Pearl*," *Representations* 48 (1994): 30–47.

moment, defining his identity as totally dependent on his possession of her because it is impossible to be a jeweler without a jewel. He implies that she is an essential part of his identity rather than a person with an independent subjectivity. Although the pearl maiden tells him that he ought not to grieve for her because she is not lost, he refuses to acknowledge that she understands herself as independent of him. Instead, he insists that, since she is able to enter the heavenly Jerusalem, he also must be entitled to do so. He exclaims, “I trawed my perle don out of dawes. / Now haf I fonde hyt, I schal ma feste / And wony with hyt in schyr wod-schawes” (282–84). At the moment he stakes a claim for his own right to enter paradise, he calls her “my perle” and uses the impersonal pronoun “hyt” to refer to her, treating her as his possession rather than a person. The dreamer’s grief makes him feel incomplete, and he attempts to overcome this feeling by constructing a stable, independent identity for himself. In order to do so, he imagines the pearl maiden as merely an extension of him.

In *Pearl*, mourning poses a threat to the dreamer’s individual identity precisely because mourning involves his admission that he is essentially incomplete without his pearl. The dreamer experiences the loss of his pearl as a loss to his own identity; he is initially unable to overcome his grief because he believes that, having lost her, he is missing an important part of himself. However, the dreamer’s attempts to identify with her are continually thwarted. As the pearl maiden repeatedly points out, he needs to gain control over his emotions, but he cannot do so by identifying with her. Instead the dreamer must acknowledge that his identity will always be lacking as long as he lacks Christ, and he can never truly have Christ until he reaches the afterlife. The poem suggests that, although the dreamer cannot overcome this lack, he can construct a more stable Christian identity for himself by recognizing his need for Christ.

As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that identification with the pearl maiden is impossible because there is a radical difference between the earthly and the heavenly, the living and the resurrected dead. When the pearl maiden describes the New Jerusalem and the Lamb, she explains that this difference is both emotional and rational: “Althagh oure corses in clottes clynge / And ye remen for rauthe wythouten reste, / We thurghoutly haven cnawying” (857–59). She argues that one of the most important distinctions between those living on earth and those living in heaven is that the saved have a complete understanding of their relationship with God. Such knowledge creates a distinct emotional difference between the two states. The living are always crying out for God’s pity because they cannot have full assurance and faith in their own resurrection, but the resurrected are able to cast out such cares and live

in a state of perpetual joy. In response to the pearl maiden's explanation of the joys of the afterlife, the dreamer temporarily rejects his attempts at complete identification with her. Instead of imagining the pearl buried in the dirt as an extension of himself, he identifies with the dirt itself, claiming that "I am bot mokke and mul among" (905). In this image, he affirms the difference between earthly and heavenly life by imagining himself as the very definition of earthliness. The poem depicts the living as existing in a state of lack: they are in a perpetual state of emotional uncertainty because of their distance from the divine.

The dreamer repeatedly attempts to overcome this lack through identification, but he fails because he is striving to remake himself for his own fulfillment, rather than for Christ. When he sees the maidens worshipping the Lamb in the New Jerusalem, he is overwhelmed with the desire to be one of them. He is fascinated by his vision of the Lamb, but he does not identify with it; it is his attempted identification with the pearl maiden that makes him want to wade across the river. Once he sees her, his attention abruptly turns away from the Lamb in the middle of the stanza:

Then saw I ther my lyttel queen
 Than I wende had standen by me in sclade.
 Lorde, much of mirthe was that ho made
 Among her feres that was so quy!t!
 That sight me gart to thenk to wade
 For luf longyng in gret delyt.
 (1147–52)

Although the precise referent of "that sight" is unclear—whether it refers to the entire vision of the New Jerusalem or his view of her happiness among the community of the saved—the order of the description suggests that seeing her provides the impetus for his attempt to cross the river. At this moment, the dreamer's "luf longyng" is more obviously sinful than the emotion that drove his grief at the start of the poem. At the beginning of the poem, the dreamer feels that the return of his pearl would rescue her from death, but by this point, the pearl maiden has already told him explicitly that she neither wants to return to him nor does she wish him to attempt to enter the New Jerusalem with her. If he were to succeed in crossing the river, he would betray the pearl maiden, violate God's laws, and contaminate the extreme purity of the New Jerusalem. Instead of recognizing these reasons for remaining on his own side of the river, the dreamer returns to imagining his emotions as the products of external forces and asserting ownership of the pearl maiden. He uses iden-

tification as a way of trying to reclaim pleasure for himself, regardless of the consequences.

Throughout the poem, the dreamer identifies with people and things that are radically unlike him instead of recognizing his own limitations and failures. When the dreamer sees the Lamb, he first imagines that he understands the Lamb's delight but is then puzzled by the wound in the Lamb's side:

Bot a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse
 Anende Hys hert thurgh hyde torente.
 Of His quyte side his blod outsprent.
 Alas, thoght I, who did that spyt?
 Ani breste for bale aght haf forbrent
 Er he therto hade had delyt.
 (1135–40)

The dreamer fails to recognize one of the Christian truths familiar to almost every medieval reader of devotional texts: Christ's wounds are the result of humanity's sins. The answer to the dreamer's question—"who did that spyt?"—is that the dreamer himself caused the wound. Because the dreamer is unwilling to see his own sinfulness and unworthiness, he imagines himself as one of the saved rather than seeing himself as he truly is: the source of the Lamb's disfigurement. When the dreamer exclaims that any person who caused such a wound ought to burn up in grief rather than experience delight, he unconsciously shows that his own response to the Lamb is completely inappropriate. He does not recognize that, although the Lamb experiences great delight despite his bloody, open wound, the dreamer himself ought to be in a state of grief and repentance. The dreamer's attempts at identification are sinful because he strives to claim others' identities as his own instead of acknowledging his own identity as an unworthy sinner.

Pearl contends that there are limits to individual identity and explores these limits through its use of metaphor. Metaphor is strikingly similar to identification because both are processes in which the identity of one thing is apparent only through its appropriation of the characteristics of another. Metaphor functions by likening two objects even as it assumes that the two are in most ways dissimilar. Through the metaphor of the pearl, the poem calls attention to the boundaries of identity even as it seems to collapse them. The pearl is the vehicle for several different tenors over the course of the poem, and it is often difficult to determine which tenor the poem is referring to at any given moment. At the start of the poem, the pearl is literally a lost gem, but as the poem progresses, the word "pearl" has an increasing number of referents,

including a dead girl, purity, the immortal soul, the kingdom of heaven, the Eucharist, and Christ himself. The pearl's constant shifts in meaning might to some extent signify the dreamer's spiritual progression from personal grief to divine contemplation; yet any such progression, to the extent that it occurs at all, is far from tidy. Even at the end of the poem, it is not entirely clear which meaning we are to finally attach to the word "pearl." The dreamer believes it is important and valuable to strive to be "precious perles unto His pay" (1212), but what precisely that involves is still an open question. However, trying to determine the final meaning of the pearl is not only futile but also beside the point. In its indeterminacy, the pearl represents precisely the failure of metaphor itself to totally appropriate meaning. Like the dreamer's failure to identify with the pearl maiden, the poem is never able to fully assimilate the pearl to a clear system of signification. The pearl's meaning must always remain just outside of the dreamer's, and the reader's, grasp. When the dreamer asserts that the pearl maiden is the pearl he once owned, she completely alters the terms of their discussion and argues that he never owned a pearl in the first place. She contends, "For that thou lestes was bot a rose / That flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef; / Now thurgh kynde of the kyste that hyt con close / To a perle of prys hit is put in pref" (269–73). The implication of her argument is not only that the pearl maiden herself was not a pearl while alive but also that all living things on earth cannot be pearls because they are subject to the changes of nature. True pearls cannot be grasped on earth, either physically or intellectually. In the poem's first section, the poet underlines the pearl's unearthly nature by concluding each stanza with the phrase "perle withouten spot." He puns on "spot," a word he uses to describe both physical location and impurity. To be a pearl "withouten spot" also means to be without any earthly location.³² The poet suggests that, although all Christians ought to strive to be pearls, the meaning and identity of the pearl remains fundamentally inassimilable to human earthly life. Although metaphor appears to collapse the boundaries of identity, the pearl as metaphor emphasizes the limits of similarity, comparison, and identification.

As the poem progresses, the dreamer gradually heeds the pearl maiden's advice and shifts at least some of his devotion from her to Christ. However, identification with the divine is even more difficult than identification with the pearl maiden. *Pearl* depicts an irreducible distance between the human and divine through its use of figurative language to describe Christ. In *Pearl*, the only way for humans to understand the divine during their earthly lives is

32. Sylvia Tomasch has extensively explored the shifting meanings of the word "spot" throughout the poem. Sylvia Tomasch, "A Pearl Punnology," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 88 (1989): 1–20.

through figuration; the divine can only be represented through that which it is not. When the pearl maiden initially describes the Lamb to the dreamer, she suggests that “the Lamb” is just a figurative name for Christ, calling him “My Lombe, my Lorde, my dere juelle, / My joy, my blys, my lemman fre” (795–96). In her formulation, “Lamb” is just one of the possible names of Christ and is therefore not a literal description of him. She furthers her depiction of Christ as Lamb by paraphrasing the prophet Isaiah: “As a schep to the slacht ther lad was He, / And as lombe that clypper in lande hem, / So closed He hys mouth fro uch query” (801–3). The word “as” explicitly indicates that the description of Christ as a Lamb is a simile. Because the pearl maiden insists that “the Lamb” is a figurative way of talking about Christ, it is startling for the reader to discover that, when the dreamer sees the New Jerusalem for himself, he does not see a human Christ. Instead, the Lamb is quite literally a lamb. When the dreamer notices the wound in the Lamb’s side, a wound that Christ received on the cross, the poet describes it as located “anende Hys hert thurgh hyde torente” (1136). The poem places alliterative emphasis on the word “hyde,” highlighting that the Lamb is literally an animal. The description requires readers to focus on the literal description of the Lamb rather than disregard it in favor of its allegorical referent. Unlike the pearl, whose relationship to its various tenors is constantly shifting, the Lamb is an allegorical sign with a single stable referent. The very stability of the sign highlights the distance between signifier and signified; the reader knows that Christ is not literally a lamb even though the poem insists on that representation. At the moment the dreamer expects to see God, he encounters a sign that refuses direct perception.

Within the dream, figural truths appear as if they were literal, but the pearl maiden insists that the dreamer ought to regard them as figurative. When the pearl maiden tells the dreamer about her home in the heavenly Jerusalem, the dreamer becomes confused, “Thou telles me of Jerusalem, the ryche ryalle, / Ther David dere was dyght on trone— / Bot by thysse holtes hit con not hone, / Bot in Judee hit is, that noble note” (919–22). The dreamer fails to recognize that the historical Jerusalem is a figuration of the heavenly Jerusalem because he wrongly assumes that his own experience is unmediated by signs and language. He thinks that, because he is directly experiencing it, the word “Jerusalem” must refer to a literal geographic location. This misunderstanding prompts the pearl maiden to teach him a lesson in biblical figuration, a lesson that seems to serve a more immediate purpose for the poem’s readers than for the dreamer himself (937–60). The pearl maiden addresses him as if he were reading rather than experiencing the dream in order to show him

that he ought to approach the dream as if it were a written text in need of interpretation.

Earthly humans can only perceive the divine through textual mediation. When the dreamer finally sees the New Jerusalem, he describes it through constant reference to a written text: the Book of Revelation. In the seventeenth section, every stanza ends with the concatenated words “the apostel John.” This constant citation of John’s voice both legitimates the dreamer’s vision as orthodox and suggests that his vision could not be authoritative without textual support. His vision makes no claims to being unmediated; he details that “as John these stones in Writ con nemme, / I knew the name after his tale” (997–98). The dreamer recognizes what he sees in front of his eyes through text rather than through vision. In the middle of his description, the dreamer explains, “I knew hit by his devyement” (1019), the word “knew” suggesting that he recognized it through John’s description and that John’s description actually enabled him to perceive it at all. In this section, knowledge of the afterlife is not possible without textual authority. At the beginning of the eighteenth section, however, the narrator recounts, “As John hym wrytes yet more I sye,” suggesting that his description is about to go beyond John’s (1033). And, in fact, the poem does describe elements not present in the Book of Revelation, but it rarely strays far from them, continuing to reference elements of the New Jerusalem that “John the appostel in termes tyghte” (1053). It is no coincidence that, at the moments when the dreamer relies on John’s textual support the least, his reason and self-control also begin to fade. He describes these extratextual elements as such great wonders that “no fleschly hert ne might endure,” and he becomes like a “dased quayle” upon seeing them (1082; 1085). The heavenly Jerusalem thwarts direct human understanding; a human becomes like an animal in witnessing it. The poem implies that to perceive the heavenly and remain both human and rational is necessarily to perceive it through textual mediation.

In order to even partly understand the divine, the individual believer must both accept mediation and totally submit to the external logic of divine authority. Throughout the poem, the dreamer misunderstands divine authority because he assumes that it must operate in exactly the same way as earthly royal authority does. When he hears that the pearl maiden is a queen in heaven, he is astonished because he thinks she died too young to merit such a high rank. He argues, “Of countes, damysel, par ma fay, / Wer fayr in heven to halde asstate / Other ells a lady of lasse aray— / Bot a queen! Hit is to dere a date” (489–92). Not only does he fail to understand the logic of heavenly reward, he struggles to grasp the idea that heaven might have a separate logic

of reward at all. For him, there is no other system than the English aristocratic one. Even though the pearl maiden explains heavenly logic in detail, the dreamer cannot break outside of his earthly aristocratic logic. He even worries about material concerns, asking about her castle, “Haf ye no wones in castel walle, / Ne maner ther ye may mete and won?” (917–18). For the dreamer, courtly rank manifests itself in material objects, and he is uncertain what it might mean to have a heavenly rank if it does not entail castles and manors. The hierarchical system of heaven within this poem closely mirrors that of an earthly court, but the dreamer cannot accept even small differences between the two because to do so would mean to submit to a power he does not understand.

Royal and divine power are similar insofar as they both demand that the good subject submit to laws whose logic exceeds the subject’s own perception. *Pearl*’s use of the phrase “princes paye” in both the opening stanza and the closing section demonstrates that royal and divine power both require individuals to subject their own desires to external judgment. In the very first lines of the poem, the dreamer praises his pearl on the grounds that royalty values it: “Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye / To clanly clos in golde so clere” (1–2). The value of the pearl is most evident in the fact that it is pleasing to princes; the dreamer does not believe that his own judgment is nearly as important or convincing. By the end of the poem, the dreamer has reexamined the pearl’s value and now regards it in relation to divine rather than royal power. Nevertheless, he still suggests that it is a princely figure, a figure of courtly authority, that ultimately determines value when he hopes that Christ “gef uus to be His homly hyne / And precious perles unto His pay” (1211–12). Whether the power is royal or divine, the good subject is one who submits to its external judgment.

LITURGY AND INTERNAL REFORM

Throughout the poem, this external authority is one that is divinely inscribed in a material object: either a text or the host itself. Acceptance of this authority involves acceptance of simultaneous absence and presence, an acceptance of heavenly logic that is crucial to both a belief in the Eucharist and to the workings of figurative signification. Although the poem’s ending is its most explicit reference to the Eucharist, liturgical themes pervade the poem to demonstrate that this submission to divine logic is essential to Christian worship. Eucharistic imagery circulates throughout the poem in a number of ways, not the

least of which is in the pearl's resemblance to the host: both are round white objects that inspire devotion.

It is in the maiden's retelling of the vineyard parable, however, that the poem begins its exploration of the significance of liturgical practice to the individual subject. In this moment, *Pearl* argues that the Mass is an instance when earthbound humans encounter heavenly logic and must submit to what they do not fully understand. The pearl maiden introduces the parable with the words, "As Mathew meles in your Messe," directly linking the narrative to a liturgical setting (497). When she describes each laborer receiving his penny at the end of the day, her description is very similar to a eucharistic reception line. The lord, like a priest at Mass, orders the reeve to "set hem alle upon a rawe" so that the people might each receive a single flat disc in exchange for their labor (545). It is likely that many readers would have recognized this part of the parable as referring to eucharistic reception since several late medieval devotional texts explicitly associate this parable with the Eucharist. The fourteenth-century *Book of Vices and Virtues*, for example, states that the Eucharist "is þe peny þat he 3yueþ to his werke-men whan þey comen at euen, þat is þe ende of here lif."³³ In the Mass, much like in the distribution of a penny to every worker, there is a radical equality among lay people, an equality that stands in sharp contrast to courtly rank. Although there are many ways in which lay people may seek to assert their social and economic dominance during the Mass—through location in the church, ownership of particular windows, the order of kissing the pax—every believer only receives one host, and each host is of equal value. The dreamer protests the logic of the parable precisely on these grounds of equality; he does not want to accept the idea that God will treat each Christian equally, regardless of rank or the number of his good works. In this parable, the poem thwarts direct correspondence between wealth and holiness. While this passage is not a rejection of all aristocratic liturgical practices—since the poem valorizes self-examination and a personal relationship with Christ in the host—it does critique the notion that wealth provides special access to God. It suggests that, despite all the aristocracy's efforts to gain personal spiritual benefits through private Masses and private prayer, God's favor is always beyond any individual's understanding and control. In this sense, the poem's version of the vineyard parable is

33. *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 111. Parallel passages appear in *Le Somme des Vices et des Vertues* and *A3enbite of Inwyt*. For further details on the connection between the penny and host in *Pearl*, see Robert W. Ackerman, "The Pearl-Maiden and the Penny," *Romance Philology* 17 (1964): 615–23.

less interested in providing a vision of the Christian community than it is in pointing out the individual's inability to control God's judgment. The liturgy of the Mass demands that believers submit to the rules of God even though such rules do not correspond to those of the socioeconomic hierarchies of medieval England.

In particular, earthly devotion to the divine involves acceptance of simultaneous absence and presence, an acceptance of heavenly logic that is crucial to a belief in the Eucharist.³⁴ Despite the pearl maiden's continual criticism of his overzealous behavior, the dreamer refuses to settle for mediation and actively strives for direct contact with the objects of his fascination and desire. When she tells him that the two of them cannot live together, the dreamer laments that he will return to his grief: "Now haf I fonte that I forlete, / Schal I efte forgo hit er ever I fine? / Why schal I hit bothe mysse and mete?" (327–29). He complains that he will experience even greater pain than his original grief because she will no longer be either fully lost or fully present to him. She occupies a space between absolute absence and absolute presence, and he finds this situation almost impossible to accept both conceptually and emotionally. Over the course of the poem, the dreamer struggles to accept the unbridgeable distance between himself and the object of his devotion, whether that object is the Lamb or the pearl maiden. He always desires more immediacy, and this desire culminates in his failed attempt to cross the river into the New Jerusalem. At the end of the poem, the dreamer recognizes that his inability to control his desire is sinful and he therefore turns toward the Eucharist. The Eucharist, with its promise of Christ's presence in a piece of bread that does not in any way resemble the earthly body of Christ, is a sacrament that directly challenges the worshipper's ability to believe in the reality of simultaneous absence and presence. The consecrated host is a figure for the presence of Christ, and so just as the pearl metaphor calls attention to the difference between tenor and vehicle, it highlights the worshipper's distance from the divine at the same time as it signifies the divine's immediate presence.³⁵

34. The paradoxical relationship between presence and absence in the Eucharist is an issue that theologians have long seen as central to an understanding of the sacrament. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.75. Modern scholars have also recognized this paradox's centrality. See Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 88–89; Bynum, "Seeing and Seeing Beyond,"; Catherine Pickstock, "Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist," in *Catholicism and Catholicity: Eucharistic Communities in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Beckwith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 47–68.

35. Although modern scholarship sometimes implies otherwise, many orthodox theologians affirmed the idea that the consecrated host was both a figure for Christ's presence and that presence itself. For one of the earliest and most influential discussions of this idea, see Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), 304–15.

The Eucharist thus demands that believers submit to external authority and acknowledge the limits of identification because the distance between figure and reality is so readily apparent. It offers the dreamer the chance to learn to be satisfied with his distance from the divine.

The description of the virgins' procession into the New Jerusalem presents the Mass as a method of worship that acknowledges divine absence even as it celebrates Christ's sacramental presence. The maidens' procession toward and worship of the Lamb is one of the poem's most explicit liturgical allusions. Solemn processions were one of the most recognizable liturgical activities in late medieval England because they were particularly frequent in the Use of Salisbury, the variant of the Roman Rite used throughout most of England.³⁶ In the Use of Salisbury, the priest and the other liturgical ministers would process around the church at the beginning of Mass, and since the altar itself typically lay behind a screen, this procession was one of the most visible parts of the liturgy. The poet's use of the word "prosessyoun" to describe the maidens' entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem could not help but invoke liturgical practice (1096). Although the procession looks liturgical, the poet explains that the maidens are not taking part in a Mass because the Mass serves a purpose for earthly spirituality that is unnecessary in heaven. He describes how, in the New Jerusalem, "Kyrk therinne was non yete— / Chapel ne temple that ever was set. / The Almyghty was her mynster mete, / The Lombe the sakerfyse ther to refet" (1061–64). The immediate presence of Christ obviates the need for Mass because the celebration of Mass assumes Christ's absence; if Christ is fully present, there is no need to celebrate his invisible presence in the Eucharist. Since the image of Christ as a lamb draws on sacrificial language and the poet argues that the presence of the Lamb replaces earthly sacrifice, the ever-bleeding Lamb on his throne is analogous to the consecrated host on the altar. The maidens' worship of the Lamb is not a Mass but a perfection of it because it is a completely direct way of worshipping Christ. By arguing that God himself is the Church and the Lamb himself is the sacrifice, the poem depicts the heavenly Jerusalem in the terms of the Mass even though it recognizes that those terms have been superseded.

Through its description of the differing responses of the maidens and the dreamer to the Lamb, *Pearl* argues that participation in the Mass ought to involve emotional and physical control. In their perfect worship of the Lamb, the maidens model ideal liturgical devotion, in both their physical posture and emotional response. As they approach the Lamb's throne, "thagh thay

36. Terence Bailey, *The Processions of Sarum and the Western Church* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1971). The Use of Salisbury is often referred to as the "Use of Sarum."

werne fele, no pres in plyt, / Bot mylde as maydenes seme at mas / So drov they forth with gret delyt” (1114–16). The poem praises the maidens because, although they are experiencing the utmost joy, they are completely emotionally contained and physically orderly. The word “seme” is highly significant to this description. It suggests that a particular set of thoughts and emotions is not essential to proper liturgical devotion. What is most important is that the worshipper exercise control over her emotions so that she can “seme” mild from the outside. In contrast to the maidens, the dreamer has exactly the wrong response to Christ’s presence within this liturgical setting. First, he misunderstands the sacramental meaning of the Lamb’s wound and is horrified rather than engaged in worship or penitence. However, the dreamer’s greatest failure in liturgical behavior is his inability to contain his emotional response. The dreamer is allowed to see this celebration only until he lets his emotions overtake his physical actions, until “delyt me drof in yye and ere” (1153). Once his emotions drive his devotion, he attempts to cross the river and is forced to awaken from his dream. The poem presents emotional containment as an ideal of liturgical behavior, an ideal that the dreamer utterly fails to achieve.

Although it is the site of the dreamer’s greatest failure, the poem argues that repeated participation in the liturgy is the only way for him to reform; the poem enacts this call to inner change through ritual in its form. The repetition of the Mass—as a religious ritual that requires the worshipper to accept simultaneous presence and absence, and to accept the limits of one’s own subjectivity—is a way of training the self into proper spiritual discipline. Repetition itself lies at the heart of *Pearl*’s formal artistry. Each stanza of the poem begins by repeating the concluding words of the previous stanza, and the poem’s last line echoes its first line; within each section, every stanza ends with a variation on the same concatenated word or phrase. The poem thus uses repetition to create internal connections between each stanza and section and, as virtually every formal analysis of the poem remarks, the form itself strives to imitate the perfection and roundness of a pearl.³⁷ This form—with its rigid structure and symbolic use of repetition—also imitates the repetitive nature of religious ritual. By showing how each repetition alters the meaning of the repeated word, *Pearl* argues that repetition itself can be a catalyst for inner change. Repetition is both a marker and a cause of inner transformation during the seventh section, which concatenates the phrase “grounde of alle my blysse.” Over the course of this section, the repetition of this phrase draws attention to the dreamer’s shifting understanding of the true nature of bliss. At

37. For an overview of the highly complex formal structure of *Pearl*, see H. N. Duggan, “Meter, Stanza, Vocabulary, Dialect,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 221–42.

the beginning of the section, the dreamer asserts that, in life, the pearl maiden was the source of his bliss. Over the course of a few stanzas, he reinterprets the concatenated phrase to refer only to Christ, whom he now considers the only true and lasting source of happiness. The repetition of key words forces the dreamer to continually reformulate those words' meanings and highlights the way that meaning changes over the course of the section. Through its formal focus on repetition, the poem enacts what the dreamer realizes when he turns to the Eucharist at the end of the poem: regular repetition is the key to meaningful internal change.

Pearl's final stanza argues that eucharistic devotion provides a way for the individual subject to practice emotional and spiritual control. Upon awaking from his dream, the dreamer recognizes that his lack of emotional control forced him out of his vision of the New Jerusalem. He allowed his desire to push him to the point of madness when he should have submitted wholly to God's will, "And yerned no more then was me gyven, / And halden me ther in trwe entent" (1190–91). The dreamer was unworthy of the vision because he failed to contain and control his desire. When the dreamer then proposes the worship of the Eucharist as a solution to his sinfulness, he suggests that the sacrament can help the individual believer to gain control of his inner self. Although this suggestion may initially seem simplistic, the poem argues that the process of emotional containment and accepting the state of lack within the self is ongoing and therefore always incomplete; like the Mass, it must happen "uch a daye" (1210). When the dreamer proclaims, "To pay the Prince other sete saghte, / Hit is ful ethe to the god Krystyin" (1201–2), he is not stating that it is easy for him to please God. On the contrary, he has gone into great detail to show that he himself is not a good Christian. Eucharistic worship is a process of identity reform, a process whose goal it is to create that "god Krystyin" within the self so that pleasing Christ can eventually become a task that is "ful ethe." The Mass is not the end point of spiritual perfection; it is a ritual in which the individual learns and practices self-control.

In her introduction to *Pearl*, Sarah Stanbury describes critics' interpretive dilemma with regard to its final stanza in the following way: "Does [the dreamer] become, as he asserts, a docile subject (taking the sacrament), or does he remain a single consciousness, separate from the vision of metaphoric accumulation that he witnesses?"³⁸ Although this formulation accurately describes current scholarly approaches to this stanza, it creates an inaccurate opposition between eucharistic devotion and individual subjectivity within

38. Sarah Stanbury, "Introduction," in *Pearl*, ed. Sarah Stanbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 17.

the poem. The dreamer's turn toward the Eucharist is not a movement away from individual consciousness; it is a turn inward. The dreamer's decision to worship Christ in the sacrament is a direct result of his realization that he must firmly contain his emotions and desires. As in *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet argues in *Pearl* that the good aristocratic subject enacts his Christian devotion primarily through self-control and inner reform rather than external actions. In *Pearl*, the Eucharist is integral to individual reform because it forces the believer to accept the limits of his own subjectivity. Through Christ's simultaneous absence and presence in the Mass, worshippers encounter their desire and inability to identify with Christ. The good Christian acknowledges that there will always be a loss at the center of the self during earthly life because Christ is never fully present. For the *Pearl*-poet, rigid control of one's emotional state is essential if one is to accept the profound state of lack that defines human earthly life.

For the *Pearl*-poet, liturgical devotion is an internal act of textual interpretation of a figurative textual object: the consecrated host. *Pearl* uses metaphor in order to explore the limits of identification between believer and divine, between bread and Christ's body, between tenor and vehicle and to examine the reader's and believer's thwarted desire to bridge these categories. Like Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, *Pearl*'s presentation of the believer's inability to identify with Christ depends upon an Ambrosian understanding of the Eucharist as a sacred object. In the next chapter, I will explore a more Augustinian approach to the Eucharist and the challenges of constructing a community that identifies with and as the mystical body of Christ. For Middle English writers, this Augustinian focus necessarily demands the use of not metaphor but allegory.