

THE ARBOR AND THE PEARL: ENCAPSULATING MEANING IN “SPOT”

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In 1955, Charles Moorman worried that “possible allusions to the Roman de la Rose, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Dante, and the Vulgate and utilizing possibly heretical theology, the medieval dream-vision, the elegy, and the *debat*” make *Pearl* “a critic's land of heart's desire,” resulting in criticism that is varied, even contradictory, eventually becoming a “scholarly free-for-all.”¹ *Pearl* has been read as allegorical,² parabolic,³ and elegiac.⁴ Other readings have focused on the poem as an image of the medieval church⁵ or the medieval universe.⁶ In addition, critics have seen the poem as an exploration of theology and aristocratic modes of worship.⁷ And, *Pearl* has been

¹ Charles Moorman, “The Role of the Narrator in *Pearl*,” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 53, no. 2 (1955), 73-81 (p. 73).

² D.W. Robertson, Jr., “The *Pearl* as a Symbol,” *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 65, no. 3 (1950), pp. 155-161; Priscilla Martin, “Allegory and Symbolism,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Arthurian Studies XXXVIII, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1997/2007), pp. 315-328.

³ J. Allan Mitchell, “The Middle English *Pearl*: Figuring the Unifigurable,” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 86-111.

⁴ Oscar Cargill and Margaret Schlauch, “The Pearl and Its Jeweler,” *PMLA*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1928), pp. 105-123.

⁵ Ann R. Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem*, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

⁶ Edward I. Condren, *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002).

⁷ D.W. Robertson, “The ‘Heresy’ of *Pearl*,” *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (1950), pp. 152-155; Lawrence M. Clopper, “The God of the *Gawain-Poet*,” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (1996), pp. 1-18; Lawrence Beaton, “The *Pearl*-Poet and the Pelagians,” *Religion and Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2004), pp. 15-38; David Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain-Poet*,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Arthurian

viewed as a poem on the nature of language use.⁸ These readings are not exclusionary, fitting under the multiple headings that I listed and others I have not listed. Undoubtedly we might add to this list, bringing to light other readings of the meaning of *Pearl*. I do not intend to present a proscriptive reading of *Pearl* in this essay; in fact, I believe that the above readings will not be necessarily invalidated by this discussion.

Pearl is a poem of consolation, and it is a poem of theological concerns. It is also a poem that plays with language's imprecision; in addition, *Pearl* speaks to historical concerns and social upheaval. The poem provides a series of discussions between a bereaved Jeweler and heavenly-sanctioned instructress that allows readers to come to disparate, sometimes wildly disparate, interpretations. But this is also a poem of place, three specific places—the 'erber grene,' the paradisaal garden, and the New Jerusalem—surrounded by sections of debate and instruction. What I would like to consider is how the arbor, the 'spotte' of the first section, institutes a conception of place that allows for various interpretations of the poem. But before the discussion of spot and arbor, I would like to consider the nature of *Pearl* and its/her relationship to the Jeweler, a relationship that will illustrate the complexities of reading the poem that might inspire such vastly different readings.

Pearl and the Jeweler

The first nine lines of the poem focuses the reader's attention on not only the subject matter of the poem but also the shifting qualities of that central item, the pearl:

Studies XXXVIII, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1997/2007), pp. 91-101; Jennifer Garrison, "Liturgy and Loss: Pearl and the Ritual Reform of the Aristocratic Subject," *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2010) pp. 294-322.

⁸ Theodore Bogdanos, *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable. A Study in Medieval Poetic Symbolism*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983); Catherine Cox, "Pearl's Precios Pere: Gender, Language, and Difference," *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1998), pp. 377-390; David N. DeVries, "Unde Dicitur: Observations on the Poetic Distinctions of the *Pearl*-Poet," *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2000, pp.115-132; Tim William Machan, "Writing the Failure of Speech in Pearl," *New Directions in Oral Theory*, Ed. Mark C. Amodio, (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), pp. 279-305.

Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye
To clanly clos in golde so clere,
Oute of Oryent, I hardyly saye,
Ne proved I never her precios pere.
So rounde, so reken in uche araye,
So smal, so smothe her sydez were,
Queresoever I jugged gemmes gaye
I sette hyr sengeley in synglure.
Allas, I leste hyr in on erbere;
(ll. 1-9)

These lines demonstrate the uniqueness of Pearl, and how in the Jeweler's career, he never found her equal. This specific use of language, the idea of "precios pere" and "sette . . . sengeley in synglure," enforces the Pearl's image as a transcendent being, as she was without equal and was set apart from the finest jewels. The Jeweler, though bereft of joy, recalls specific facts and the order of Pearl's makeup: "so rounde, so reken . . . so small, so smofe." The order of his description reminds the reader of his profession as a jeweler; he starts with an overall impression of her shape and lovely appearance, moving to the minuter feature of her smallness and smoothness of sides, qualities that would show best under the focus of his loupe.

The opening description of the pearl, though, seems not to offer much beyond "very general terms, clos in gold and sette; the virtue of the pearl as a stone is described only in aesthetic and moral terms."⁹ What color is a pearl? Pearls, one might answer, are an off-white color, something like ecru. But a pearl's color is just a reflection, as pearls are composed of layers of a translucent compound that reflect all the spectrum's colors. A pearl, in essence, contains all colors, just like white light, and reflects those colors back to the eyes. By containing all the colors, the pearl is pure light, and, by the criteria of St. Bonaventure, a perfect symbol for a soul. The use of a pearl in this context offers layered meaning, "pearls also existed as the common property of the iconography of heaven . . . [and] Pearls were always already traditional point of commerce

⁹ Tony Davenport, "Jewels and Jewelers in *Pearl*," *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 59, No. 241 (2008), pp. 508-520, at p. 511.

between the earthly and the heavenly.”¹⁰ *The Peterborough Lapidary* describes a pearl or *margarita*, as the “chef of al stons pat ben wyzt & preciosse,” which bring comfort because “it clensep him of superfluite of humours.”¹¹ But the pearl of the poem is not simply a gem; “the gem must stand for something which the poet could represent as a pearl and at the same time as a maiden who had died in infancy and had been redeemed by Christ.”¹²

Even the description of the pearl could be seen as “appropriate mainly to a precious stone, but the second both to a precious stone and to a girl (with sydez meaning ‘flanks’).”¹³ The physicality of the description—we might imagine the Jeweler acting out the process of holding the pearl as he recounts her dimensions—speaks to the poem’s “incarnational aesthetic, which is expressed through sensory imagery that culminates in a highly literalized vision of Jerusalem, is founded, in a haunting and recapitulative poetic, on a human body, and even more exactly, on a lost human body.”¹⁴ This body, of course, is “without spot,” which could equally relate to issues of purity, including virginity.¹⁵ Unlike the more defined jewels of the New Jerusalem, with meanings well-established in the lapidaries and in Biblical exegesis, the image of the pearl allows for “a strange origin combining natural processes with a sense of mystery and evanescence, and in its roundness and whiteness providing ideas of perfection of form and purity of colour.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Allen J. Fletcher, “Reading Radical Metonymy in Pearl,” *Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures*, ed. Lawrence Besserman (New York: Palgrave, 2006) pp. 47-61 at p.55.

¹¹ *The Peterborough Lapidary, English Medieval Lapidaries*, eds. John Evans and Mary S. Serjeantson (London: Early English Text Series, 1933), pp. 63-118, at pp. 107 and 108.

¹² Marie Padgett Hamilton, “The Meaning of the Middle English *Pearl*,” *PMLA*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (1955), pp. 805-824, at p. 805.

¹³ A.C. Spearing, “Symbolic and Dramatic Development in *Pearl*,” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (1962), pp. 1-12, at p. 3.

¹⁴ Sarah Stanbury, “The Body and the City in *Pearl*,” *Representations*, No. 48 (1994), pp. 30-47, at p. 37

¹⁵ Nicholas Watson, “The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet, Arthurian Studies XXXVIII*, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1997/2007), pp. 293-313.

¹⁶ Davenport, “Jewels and the Jeweler in *Pearl*,” p. 519.

Of course, this use of pearl brings up a number of meanings: “The symbol of the Pearl may be thought of on four levels. Literally, the Pearl is a gem. Allegorically, as the maiden of the poem, it represents those members of the Church who will be among the “hundred “in the celestial procession, the perfectly innocent. Tropologically, the Pearl is a symbol of the soul that attains innocence through true penance and all that such penance implies. Analogically, it is the life of innocence in the Celestial City.”¹⁷ So for readers, we can be struck by the physical, economic, or spiritual qualities of the pearl. We might even hold all these ideas at once, or simply focus on one quality.

Such ideas might also be found with the jeweler who describes this missing pearl. The jeweler can be variously identified as an “appraiser of jewels, the retailer in precious gems, and the craftsman who cut and set them,” which was not yet a guild within London’s mercantile society, with jewelers found primarily on the continent.¹⁸ The Jeweler’s presence allows readers to make a series of connections, both theologically and economically. On the one hand, “God reassembles or recasts us a statute is reforged or as a jeweler, making a mosaic, puts the stones back together again,”¹⁹ drawing reader’s attentions to the conceptions of spiritual values of jewels and images of God within the framework of the poem. In fact, we might locate the biblical antecedents of our jeweler; “The ‘jueler’ referred to is the negotiator of Matt. 13. 45-46, who sold all of his jewels for a pearl of great price.”²⁰ But there is also the economic value of having a jeweler appraising and searching for a lost commodity. Not only is the jeweler a primary figure within the poem, the “language of the jeweler’s craft and trade precedes”²¹ any other language within the poem. It is our first image, and so it immediately establishes the frame of reference for the remainder of the poem. Here, the Jeweler can evaluate not only the worth or *prys* of pearl, he can do so within a framework of some objective qualifications, which seem to

¹⁷ Robertson, “The Pearl as a Symbol,” p. 160.

¹⁸ John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II*, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2001), p. 103.

¹⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 30.

²⁰ Robertson, “The Pearl as Symbol,” p. 158.

²¹ Felicity Riddy, “Jewels in *Pearl*,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Arthurian Studies XXXVIII, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1997/2007), pp. 143-155, at p. 145.

increase his personal attachment to the item.²² Even though the Jeweler may claim a personal relationship to the pearl, the use of a Jeweler forces larger, societal implications into the poem, aligning this figure with a “craft that had maintained a strong reciprocal relationship with the king, one redounding to the benefit of both parties, patron and artists alike.”²³ The immediate description of pearl “in the first four lines, is an economic function.”²⁴ This notion of aristocratic concerns allows that “*Pearl’s* use of the phrase “prynces 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.”²⁵ But this definition of the Jeweler as an actual jeweler presents issues too, not least of which is ownership; “Jewelers do not own jewels, or at least not permanently: jewels pass through their hands...brilliantly catches the temporariness of the relation between parent and dead child, as well as the latter’s preciousness. The representation of the dead child as a pearl at the very beginning of the poem thus sets up a language that is used throughout to address ideas of human preciousness, value and loss.”²⁶

Thus far, we have seen that the pearl can stand for theological, spiritual, and economic values. At the same time, it might also be a metaphor for a deceased body. Then there is the jeweler who might be an actual jeweler, though he does not describe any technical terms and seems not to understand the transitory value of his position; or the jeweler might simply be a stock, biblical figure. These ideas are, once more, not exclusive readings. I believe that these first nine lines of the poem speak to issues that can be seen throughout the remaining 1203 lines of the poem; in fact, through the use of “pearl as the controlling image of the poem, the poet sets

²² Nick Davis, “Narrative Form and Insight,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Arthurian Studies XXXVIII, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1997/2007), pp. 329-349, at p. 343.

²³ Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl*, p. 105.

²⁴ DeVries, “Unde Dicitur: Observations on the Poetic Distinctions of the *Pearl*-Poet,” p. 121.

²⁵ Garrison, “Liturgy and Loss: Pearl and the Ritual Reform of the Aristocratic Subject,” p. 315.

²⁶ Riddy, “Jewels in Pearl,” p. 145.

up in the reader’s mind a willingness to believe in the fact of multiple meanings.”²⁷

Initial Spots of *Pearl*

In the first six stanzas of the poem, the *Pearl*-poet uses “spot,” “spote,” or “spotte” on ten separate occasions that fall into two categories: construction of interiority and construction of moral landscape. Line twelve, the first appearance of spot, reads: “Of þat pryuy perle wythouten spot”; a use repeated in line 24, “My pryuy perle wythouten spotte.” “Privy,” whose meaning is best approximated to the modern word “private,” establishes a concept of possession and ownership; not only a physical ownership, but one that is internalized by the emotional and alliterative connection to Pearl. The uses of “privy” in Middle English vary: secret, concealed, confidential; private, personal, peculiar; unseen, invisible, imperceptible; and having to do with sex or procreation.²⁸ This use of “privy” in *Pearl* sets up a dichotomy between that which is personal and that which is public. The Jeweler’s Pearl is not open for public consumption; it is only to be found in a kind of “domestic space,” circumscribed by what readers imagine to be ivy covered trellises or walls of the arbor.²⁹ This idea of private consumption belies the ever-present issue that the Jeweler appears to be the least qualified person to understand fully the complexities of the Pearl. “Privy” also relates to the most intimate of human connections: the family, strengthening the idea of a father-daughter relationship. The first section also contains the construction of a moral landscape: “Syþen in þat spote hit fro me sprange” (ln. 13); “Pat spot of spysez mot nede3 sprede” (ln. 25). This use establishes a moral sphere of action; here, moral is used in the sense of perceptual or psychological. It is only in this spot, that of the arbor, where the Jeweler feels at peace, and it is only in this spot where he feels he can do anything. It is a landscape that allows him to live, though the Jeweler’s life does not appear to extend further than this arbor. In fact, this initial conception of “privy” might be viewed in terms of

²⁷ Sylvia Tomasch, “A *Pearl* Punnology,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (1989), pp. 1-20, at p. 2.

²⁸ *Middle English Dictionary*, Part 7. Ed. Sherman M. Kuhn (Michigan UP, 1983), pp.1331-1334.

²⁹ Georges Duby, ed., *A History of Private Life*, Vol. 2, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Belknap 1988), p.7.

the larger project of the poem: “*Pearl* does not let the public, outside world into the Dreamer’s dream, which in the Pearl poet’s case is wholly concerned with the Dreamer’s own private crisis and its relationship to the Christian truths that are recorded in the Bible.”³⁰ Of course, the very image of the pearl might complicate such a view, as “*Pearl*, in its luminescent, reflective structure and text, with its specular, saintlike intercessorial guide, is intended, I think, to serve as one of those mirrors for the *Pearl* audience.”³¹

While “privy” establishes interiority and morality, spot, too, can be connected to blemishing and morality.³² Critics maintain that the poem contains an intricate play “on *spot*, or *withouten spot*” to indicate Pearl’s purity as well as a marker of the place of loss.³³ This use of with and without also “increases the possibility of a pun.”³⁴ Complicating these well-established ideas, “spot” is but a deictic placeholder. It is a word that asks to have other words and concepts substituted for it. If taken in a strictly geometrical perspective, spot lacks dimension; in other words, spot needs a referent to establish both meaning and location. So how can there be two spots together or a spot without a spot? And the spot most often referred to is the pearl, which is itself, the poet claims, without a spot. What I refer to here is the problem of locating places of meaning—yes, spot seems to reference a specific piece of ground—but the qualities (physical and spiritual) of that location, and the physical construction of that location need clarification that the opening fails to address.

But a pearl is by its very nature round and difficult to grasp, as the Jeweler comes to find out. This inability literally to grasp the pearl can be equated easily with the idea of ineffability, the inability to grasp language for purposes of description. Just as the Jeweler cannot grasp Pearl neither can he properly describe it. There are similarly promising thoughts that note a “wholly semantic” dualism

³⁰ Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited*, Twayne’s English Author Series No. 512, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), p. 15.

³¹ Josephine Bloomfield, “Aristotelian Luminescence, Thomistic Charity: Vision, Reflection, and Self-Love in Pearl,” *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 108, Iss. 2, 2000, pp. 165-188, at p. 188.

³² DeVries, “*Unde Dictur*: Observations on the Poetic *Distinctiones* of the *Pearl*-poet,” p. 128.

³³ Stanbury, “The Body and City in *Pearl*,” p. 39.

³⁴ Tomasch, “A *Pearl* Punnology,” p.9.

of “spot,” which simply refer to “defect” or “place.”³⁵ Yet even by promising a complex play and duality, “spot” is still regarded by critics only as “place of stain and morality.”³⁶ *Pearl*, I would like to suggest, manipulates the very language of space and place to construct and visualize an eschatological architecture, both the formation of an afterlife but also an architecture that promotes thoughts of the afterlife.

If spot is a marker of place, then what does it describe? “Spot’s” use wants for specificity. The poet offers readers a seemingly serene landscape of a small arbor, and that arbor, ostensibly, fits into long-established modes of geographical description. Ralph Elliot believes that the poem never gives full weight to descriptions of place and space, relying rather on “topographical formulae and enumeration,” which is a by-product of the metrical construction of the poem, resulting in “traditional *description loci*.”³⁷

Spot, with respect to place, seems to refer to the very place where the pearl was initially lost. Aiding the view of spot as place marker is spot’s accompaniment by the qualifying “þat.” Spot and “that” are inexorably intertwined, and translations of line 61, “Fro spot . . .” [From that spot] remarry spot and that. Joined by the demonstrative pronoun, “that,” spot is a deictic gesture, pointing to the place where the Pearl was lost. The use of “that” adds “concreteness” to spot.³⁸ But the use of “that” denotes the speaker’s spatial separation from the spot. Furthering this disconnect from the spot and the speaker, all actions that take place at the “spot” occurred in the past, which is noted by the use of the preterite. The speaker is removed from the spot by not only location but by time. How is it that he can refer to that spot when he is no longer there? His presence at the spot assures a proper description of the place, and yet his very description of the place promotes the idea that he is truly absent. Through his description and his feelings, readers can

³⁵ Morton Donner, “Word Play and Word Form in *Pearl*” in *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1989), pp. 322-331, at p. 323.

³⁶ W.A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain Poet*, (London, 1978), p.11.

³⁷ Ralph Elliot, “Landscape and Geography,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet, Arthurian Studies XXXVIII*, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1997/2007), pp. 105-117, at p. 111.

³⁸ S.L. Clark and Julian Wasserman, “The Spatial Argument of *Pearl*: Perspectives on a Venerable Bead,” *Interpretations*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1979), pp. 1-12, at p. 5.

sense that he is emotionally tied to the place though not corporeally present.

The suspicion that the Jeweler is no longer at the spot has greater implications than scholars have considered previously. The acceptance of “spot” as marker of place and morality signals an understandable recognition of “that spot” being that spot within the arbor—that arbor where Pearl is buried. If that spot is indeed “the spot,” then one can refer to it as a fixed temporal-spatial point of both physical and emotional importance. But what if spot cannot be fixed? What if, as noted above, the Jeweler appears to be removed from that spot?

As noted above, “spot” might simply refer to place; it is, as it were, a placeholder. This place, for the Jeweler, is the spot where he lost his valuable pearl. “Spot” is a word that wants for a degree of specificity; due to this ambiguity of “spot,” it is not so difficult to see “spot” as a word that can be substituted for other words and other concepts. When we read spot, we substitute “arbor” for spot. We can also substitute “grave” for spot, and there is also the idea of “emotional loss” that can be read when “spot” appears. These various “spots” of meaning all have a seemingly logical place in the text. Substituting these concepts for “spot” works well because readers have the Jeweler as the guarantor of their validity. The Jeweler, however, is not present at the spot any more. While purporting to be present, he is truly absent. “Spot,” at its very center of meaning, has a multitude of binaries. It is reasonable to assert that spot most assuredly relates to presence, because readers, just as the Jeweler and critics have, can reasonably point to that spot as the one where Pearl was lost. The absence of the Jeweler allows for “spot” to then become more acquainted with absence rather than presence. If this binary, that of presence/absence is inverted, then what, and who, is to say that all binaries are not inverted? This small point of “spot” speaks to concerns within the poem to use language to instruct. Spot also locates the larger issue of language’s ability to enclose meaning in one spot, to inhibit it from deferring to other locations. Such concerns over actual location are not shared within the poem, “if the Dreamer fears that his pearl may have been “spotted” by her death, he never seems to doubt that she is, indeed,

in the "spot" where he left her."³⁹ This description of the spot speaks to language use that borders between what is and what is not. When describing heaven the Jeweler must use the language of man, when describing life he must use the language of man, when describing this sacred space of the arbor he must use the language of man. And so we must be readily able to understand how he uses his language, the very words of space and place, to try and approach most nearly the language of the Divine.

We use language daily to orient ourselves, including the word and concept of spot, as a means to define one's own location. Geometrical concepts are well founded in the *Pearl* manuscript. For example, the pentangle on Gawain's shield, signifying that Gawain was "ay faithful in five and sere fyue syþez, / Gawan watz for gode knawen" (ll. 632-633). Each point in the pentangle relates to a series of five ideals: five senses, five fingers, five wounds of Christ, five joys of the Virgin Mary, and the five virtues of Chivalry. These five points serve as rhetorical devices, as Gawain breaks each of these ideals, dissolving the symbolic star on his shield and his reputation. And so with the Gawain precedent, we may look at how the concept of spot/point applies to *Pearl*. A spot, in geometrical terms, is most nearly related to the concept of a point. But a point needs something else to be anything. Point needs other geometric figures to relate to, to be compared to, to have distance measured to, etc. A point, if only by itself, accomplishes nothing; it is a single entity in a geometric world of vast nothingness. It is technically there, but when existence depends on the existence of other entities—and without those other points and figures, existence is only a technicality—can that be truly classified as existence? Point, either singularly or as a part of a collective, lacks dimension. Yet even though it lacks this necessary quality, we always return to point. It is always a place of arrival and departure; and so it is with *Pearl*, the Jeweler's journey begins and ends with that spot, that point—that pearl, that arbor.

The Arbor of *Pearl*

Even though the Jeweler's use of spot suggests an inability of language to name and encapsulate, he still attempts to fix that spot to a location, naming it as "þat spot þat I in speche expoun / I entred

³⁹ Katherine Terrell, "Rethinking the 'Corse in clot': Cleanness, Filth, and Bodily Decay in *Pearl*," *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (2008), pp. 429-447, at p. 435.

in þat erber grene" (ll. 37-38). *Pearl* begins in a garden. This fact is suggestive on many levels, not least of which is the idea of beginnings. Gardens are a place of beginning, but also of loss, confusion, and error. This green arbor of *Pearl* relates to a multitude of tradition, as gardens are polyphyletic in origin. All scholarship will rightly point to the arbor of the first section and show how its construction relates to the Garden of Eden, the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Solomon, and even a cemetery. Yet even though this simple arbor is but a human construct and it relates to these particular tropes, the Jeweler's arbor holds qualities that modify the accepted forms of medieval gardens. Before readers can interpret the polygenetic influence on this garden, one must note how the arbor is treated in the poem. The arbor, in *Pearl*, stands as a place of order, fruitlessness, and purpose. Due to its competing roles and traditions, the arbor becomes an example of a sacred place; due to this instability in meaning, the arbor oscillates into the sacred, becoming a launching spot for the Jeweler's journey into the very heart of New Jerusalem.

The Jeweler's arbor is remarkable, which seems appropriate given the uniqueness of *Pearl*. The arbor, too, is unique because of its connection to order. Building establishes a bulwark in the midst of a "primeval disorder."⁴⁰ This arbor may appear to lack a proper order in the sense of the grand, cultivated gardens of Europe, but this is all that remains to the Jeweler. If one looks at the first section of the poem, there is little mention of anything outside of the arbor experience. When the Jeweler recounts his trade, it is in the past tense. His former life—the pearl and his trade—is but a memory; the world has faded away, and all that remains to the Jeweler is a small, green arbor where he lost his Pearl.

An *erber* "ranged in application from 'kitchen-garden' and 'cottage-garden' to 'grass-plot' and 'pleasure-garden,'" and even orchard, which is best defined as a "kitchen-garden, etc., with one or more fruit-trees."⁴¹ The description of the "erber-grene" is vague, but the manuscript illustration shows "Along the foreground, plants for one border; two rows of plants and one or two trees marking off other borders, and converging towards the background from left and

⁴⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 2005), p. 104.

⁴¹ C.A. Luttrell, "Pearl: Symbolism in a Garden Setting," *Neophilologus*, Vol. 49, Iss. 1 (1965), pp. 160-176, at p. 161.

right, to indicate, by their recession, the shape as a square or a rectangle; a curve, by a form of perspective, defining the limits of the erber—and beyond it trees in the distance.”⁴² But an arbor, as defined above, depends upon growth, specifically fruitfulness. This garden, however, seems trapped in an ambivalent existence, between death and life. Critics have questioned the relation between life and death in the arbor, whether one springs from the other.⁴³ However important that question is, the important fact of the debate is that the two are quite evidently related, and leads us to ask what the interplay of these two apparently disparate concepts appears to say about nature, about the nature of creation, and about the nature of this particular sacred place. What the question of death and life illuminates is this idea of fruitfulness. The garden appears to be fruitful. The narrator claims that it is a “spot of spysez mot nedez sprede” (ln. 25). Other possible evidence of the fruitful nature of the arbor is in the mentioning of flowers: “Blomez blayke and blwe and rede / Per schyne ful schyr agayn þe sunne” (ll.27-28). The poet also notes that “Flor and fryte may not be fede / Per hit down drof in molde dunne” (ll. 29-30). Every image that the poet provides reinforces the lack of fruitfulness of the arbor. When the pearl trundles down from the Jeweler’s hand, it lands in dead grass, a place where life does not exist. This lost Pearl, though, appears to bring life back to the arbor.

The arbor is, however, fruitless. Even at the mention of fruit, there is no tangible fruit to be picked. This absence of produce is underscored by the idea that this action takes place during the harvest: “In Auguste in a hy3 seysoun, / Quen come is coruen wyth croke3 kene” (ll. 39-40). The very use of August is suggestive of the difficulty of locating meaning within the poem. Critics have posited a number of August festivals and Christian holidays as the proper “seysoun,” which all have significance to the poem: the Assumption of the Virgin, when people “brought medicinal plants from their kitchen or infirmary gardens to that the healing power of the herbs might be sanctified”⁴⁴; Lammastide, the year’s first harvest festival

⁴² Ibid., p. 164.

⁴³ Edward Vasta, “*Peal*: Immortal Flowers and the Pearl’s Decay” in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. John Conley (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1970), pp.185-202.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Petroff, “Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature,” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1981), pp. 181-193, at p. 181.

“when the days were filled with sports and games”⁴⁵; or Feast of the Transfiguration which “agrees closely with that of the other images in the herber as a type and a symbol of the glory of the resurrection.”⁴⁶ These festivals celebrate both change and bounty, and so questions must be asked of the change and bounty of the arbor. The arbor’s fruitfulness is only secure when it comes to flowers. Flowers do not provide any sustenance, and they do not sustain life. These flowers imitate the generative power of nature, but these fall short of the power to give life. Additionally, the coincidence of both life and death reinforces the ambivalent nature of the Jeweler’s new world. He cannot escape death in the arbor, because even there death and life are so interlaced that the one must, and does, proceed from the other, which calls to mind the ever-present expression of obsequies, which stems from the creation narrative in Genesis 2:7: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

While the arbor does not appear to be successful with bearing fruit, it does serve a very real purpose. As noted above, the Jeweler remains outside of the scope of real life. All of his interactions with humanity have occurred in the past, and there does not appear to be any rationale for him to go into society. His world is contained in the arbor. The arbor provides for him an altar, as it were, to uphold the memory of his departed Pearl. The narrator describes his expectations for that place, as “Ofte haf I wayted, wyschande þat wele, / Þat wont watz whyle deuoyde my wrange / And heuen my happe and al my hele” (ll. 14-16). This arbor serves the same function as a church, a place where one goes for comfort. This place serves as his altar, but it also serves as a symbol of his hope for his precious pearl to be returned to him. The Jeweler’s arbor fails him, as it does not bring the Pearl back; rather, the arbor serves as the starting point for his ethereal journey to the very gates of Heaven, separated from Pearl by the river of Heaven. The arbor, in essence, becomes a sacred place, joining in that tradition with the Gardens of Eden and the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Songs.

⁴⁵ Michael Olmert, “Game-Playing, Moral Purpose, and the Structure of *Pearl*,” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1987), pp. 383-403, at p. 395.

⁴⁶ William J. Knightley, “*Pearl*: The ‘Hy3 Seysoun,’” *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (1961), pp. 97-102, at p. 100.

Symmetrically speaking, the journey of the Jeweler should begin in this small garden, this arbor, as the poem and the Jeweler attempt to create a space for his own understanding of life. This garden for “Competent fourteenth-century readers must have recognized the *erber(e)* as the Garden of Eden.”⁴⁷ Such a place is not simply paradise but also the place of humanity’s first fall. The medieval audience believed Eden was but a place waiting to be found. When one crossed over a mountain, there Eden might be found waiting.⁴⁸ Of course, this garden is also a place of loss for the Jeweler, as it is the place where Pearl is thrust into the cycle of life that involves death and decay. But it is not just that gardens would be associated with the Garden of Eden: “While heaven is to be much superior to the first paradise located in the Garden of Eden, in the later Middle Ages the difference seems to have been thought to be a matter of degree rather than kind.”⁴⁹ In addition to the Garden of Eden, reader’s thoughts must also travel to the garden from the Song of Solomon. Though the Jeweler’s garden relates to both the Garden of Eden and the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Solomon, the *Pearl*-poet’s modifies the commonly known frames of meaning for gardens and other standard literary tropes. The poet’s freedom for modification stems from the joining of traditions, allowing for a flexibility of interpretation and use.⁵⁰ In medieval literature, the dichotomy of forest and garden captures the divide between what was considered the domains of action for the sexes. Whereas the knight must enter the forest to perform a task, women are left to remain in the garden. When men are faced with the conquering of the incredible in the vast stretches of wild that dominate the landscape, women are forced into roles of waiting in the garden, a place formulated to “stimulate . . . through the presence of flowers, spices, and aromatic herbs.”⁵¹

But for whom are the flowers and the spices in the Jeweler’s arbor intended? The garden is “Pat spot of spysez mot nedez

⁴⁷ Hamilton, “The Meaning of the Middle English *Pearl*,” p. 807.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth A. Augspach, *The Garden as Woman’s Space in Twelfth- and Thirteenth- Century Literature* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2004), p. 12.

⁴⁹ J.T. Rhodes and Clifford Davidson, “The Garden of Paradise,” *The Iconography of Heaven*, ed. Clifford Davidson, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), pp. 69-109, at p. 73.

⁵⁰ P. M. Kean, *The Peal: An Interpretation* (London, 1967), p.31.

⁵¹ Augspach, *The Garden as Woman’s Space in Twelfth- and Thirteenth- Century Literature*, p. 1.

sprede" (ln. 25) filled with "Blomeȝ blayke and blwe and rede / Per schyne ful schyr agayn þe sunne" (ll. 27-28). The aromatic charms of the arbor are not to induce a woman into love, but for a man to forget of his life, a lethean draught. These spices work as a kind of incense, "substances that apparently in the late Middle Ages was believed to be most typical of the fragrance of heaven," allowing churches—and other sacred places—"true foreshadowing of heaven."⁵² The smells of *Pearl's* arbor stem from "plants that appear to be really dried spices, springing from the pearl, and flowering, with neither their medicinal nor spicing qualities brought out by the poem, but beauty and aroma, which is not synaesthetic, as if the narrator was seeing and smelling things by his sense of taste, are metaphoric, of healing properties."⁵³ The Maiden, too, becomes an example of this medicinal quality, as her presence as a healing balm is noted with her description as "þat special spyce" (ln. 235). The absence of other vegetation, especially notable of the harvest season, "suggests something else missing here—order and regularity."⁵⁴ The lack of actual vegetation reminds readers not that there is a lack of order, but that this space does not seem to conform to natural laws of English landscape. These are flowers and spices that are "divorced from season and geography, and [have] no place in physical dimensions."⁵⁵ These flowers and aromas draw the reader's attention that this place symbolizes a "higher reality . . . [suggesting] where to look for consolation."⁵⁶ The facts of the garden push the Jeweler to recognize the higher order and reality for consolation; however, his grief cannot allow any such perspective.

While aroma provides incentive for the garden, this fragrance may also act as a form of entrapment. A major concept of the *hortus conclusus* relates to the possessive nature of the garden, i.e., who controls the door of the garden. The arbor of *Pearl*, however, lacks the very tangible lock and key; rather, the arbor provides a perhaps weightier concept of control: life and death. Whereas the medieval romances emphasize control of every aspect of life, the Jeweler's

⁵² Clifford Davidson, "Heaven's Fragrance," *The Iconography of Heaven*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), pp. 110-127, at pp. 111 and 119.

⁵³ Luttrell, "*Pearl*: Symbolism in a Garden Setting," p. 170

⁵⁴ Petroff, "Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature," p. 184.

⁵⁵ Luttrell, "*Pearl*: Symbolism in a Garden Setting," p. 170.

⁵⁶ Petroff, "Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature," p. 187

weightier concerns show how illusory the control of the *hortus conclusus* is. The Jeweler understands how death's, in fact God's, mastery supplants any idea of dominance that humanity can try to display. This arbor is also a place of enclosure: "a locus in which the jeweler's bereavement and longing for the pearl are isolated and concentrated."⁵⁷ Our Jeweler, Pearl's father, attempts to control the world around him. The actions of the Jeweler are to remove himself from the world, making a space for worship, for vigil of the absent Pearl. The poem, mimicking this propensity, presents a "series of enclosure images rang[ing] from the simply enclosures of bodies, boxes, chests, graves, houses and arks, which are microcosms of the larger enclosures of temples and cities, to the special types of enclosures that are covenants, feasts and communities."⁵⁸ The Jeweler is not actively participating in the world; rather he is removed from all life. He seems to defy the logic that an individual cannot "be a subject of an environment . . . [only] a participant."⁵⁹

While the Jeweler appears to be subject to the environment, he reminds readers that the Pearl is truly subject to her surroundings, noting that it is not just an arbor when he says, "To þenke hir color so clad in clot. / O moult, þou marrez a myry iuele, / My priuy perle wythouten spotte" (ll.23-25). Here is an example of "spot" as relating to purity, and the Jeweler's emotional response to the fact that his spotless pearl is now covered in the wet, dark ground of the Earth. The Jeweler does think of death quite often, and the fact that the only place he considers himself at peace is the flowery grave of his daughter speaks volumes to that concept. Pearl's short life never achieved the ability to take her part in the continuation of life. She dies too young, still a virgin; and yet, she displays a fruitfulness. Her virginity actually attracts Christ's attention to her: "In hys blod he wesch my wede on dese, / And coronde clene in vergynté, / And pyzt me in perlez maskelle;" [On the throne he washed my clothing in his blood, / And crowned me pure in virginity, / And adorned me in spotless pearls] (ll. 766-768). Her life, though cut short, ensures her status as a favored subject in the kingdom of Heaven. Even though Pearl never reached sexual maturity, she still is able to give life, and the Jeweler misattributes her ability as a life-giver:

⁵⁷ Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem*, p. 171

⁵⁸ S.L.Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, "The Pearl-Poet's City Imagery," *The Southern Quarterly* XVI (1978), pp. 297-209, at p. 301.

⁵⁹ W.H. Ittelson, *Environment and Cognition* (New York, 1973), p.13.

Of goud vche goude is ay bygonne;
So semly a sede mozt fayly not,
Pat spryngande spycez vp ne sponne
Of þat precios perle wythouten spotte.
(ll. 32-35)

Even though Pearl never reached maturity, she is still human, and still is able to give her body to the Earth seemingly to perpetuate that beautiful spot of land. She is the source of happiness for the Jeweler, and she also guarantees the existence of life at that spot, as the beauty of the spices and flowers spring from her funeral mound, that small hill. The Jeweler points to a maxim “Of goud vche goude is ay bygone,” and he believes that the beauty and life of the arbor stems from Pearl. Life does stem from Pearl, but it is not life. It is, once more, an imitating of life. This body in the ground does not give rise to fruit to sustain life, rather flowers and spices that promote fantasies of life. Even though the Jeweler claims that seeds could not fail to sprout from her body, the spice has gone to rot. These rotten spices and the aroma of flowers mask the death of the arbor, giving hope for life where none might exist.

These various garden tropes and traditions that inform the *Pearl*-poet’s treatment of the arbor, and consequently affect our reading of the arbor, speak to the problem of multivalent traditions. When we read any kind of garden imagery, the text and the poet require us to think of all those form and tropes that inform that tradition. We must simultaneously think of the Garden of Eden or Error, the *hortus conclusus*, and grave imagery. Those past ideologies are fused with our present thoughts and ideas, forming a chronotope, which can be found to varying degrees “in all realms of the life of the world.”⁶⁰ So while we can clearly recognize that the Jeweler is stuck in-between modes of thought, we must think with a multivalent mind so that these places of meaning are not lost upon us. Buildings, here the arbor, do not make arguments; rather, “they represent by structuring experiences in order to imply thoughts.”⁶¹ This is not a

⁶⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.284.

⁶¹ Andrzej Piotrowski, “Architecture and the Iconoclastic Controversy,” *Medieval Practices of Space*, Eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka, Medieval Cultures Series, Vol. 23, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp, 101-127, at p. 106.

blank landscape; the arbor is a place that has become differentiated from the space that surrounds it through the emotions and traditions attached to it. We do not enter into places without thoughts; we “enter into places armed with our cultural memories.”⁶² *Pearl* engages with the historical moment of fourteenth-century English society, balancing the traditions of gardens, theology, and economics. It is also a poem that asks readers to engage with the needs of spiritual and physical loss. The “erber grene” takes these traditions and layers them upon each other—much like the natural process of a pearl’s formation—asking readers to engage with these various traditions to understand the poem’s progression from the arbor to New Jerusalem and back.

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⁶² Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, “Anglo-Saxon Horizons: Places of the Mind in the Northumbrian Landscape,” *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, eds. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), pp. 1-26, at p. 6.