

OUT, OUT, DAMNED SPOT: *MOTE* IN *PEARL* AND THE POEMS OF THE *PEARL* MANUSCRIPT

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Of the many noted and notable aspects of poetic artistry on display in the Middle English poem *Pearl*,¹ one of the subtlest is the pervasive deployment of a semantic dialectic.² Not only does each fitt develop a tension of meanings inherent to its concatenating word, but definitional play infuses instances of these words in other fitts. Just as the Dreamer's levels of understanding are built up in spirals of learning,³ so too are the reader's apprehension and

¹ All references to *Pearl*, as well as references to *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, are taken from the critical editions of these poems found in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996); my textual translations are based on this edition. With regard to *Pearl*, I will refer to the two main characters as the Dreamer and the Maiden. For general statements on the poem's poetic artistry, see, for example, A. C. Spearing, "Poetic Identity," p. 41; Felicity Riddy, "Jewels in *Pearl*," p. 147; H. N. Duggan, "Meter, Stanza, Vocabulary, Dialect," pp. 232-238; and, Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," pp. 297-298, all in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999).

² Britton J. Harwood, "*Pearl* as Diptych," exploits the concept of a semantic dialectic, but in a far different, more structurally restrictive manner than in the present article; in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, Robert M. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman, eds. (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 61-78.

³ Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," acknowledges, but rejects, the view of many that the Dreamer, to varying degrees, does not learn anything, p. 299, while Nick Davis, "Narrative Form and Insight" (in *A Companion*), finds that the Dreamer both learns and does not learn, p. 344. Helen Cooper, "The Supernatural" (in *A Companion*), discusses the Dreamer's journey to understanding, pp. 279, 285; and, Priscilla Martin, "Allegory and Symbolism" (in *A Companion*), remarks on the Dreamer's growing understanding, pp. 316, 323, 325. Lynn Staley Johnson, "The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour," finds the Dreamer in need of last-minute

appreciation of lexical meaning informed by refinements of word usage across the poem. Thus, to better understand the meaning of Fitt XVI's concatenating word *mote(les)*, one must not only tease out its valences within the fitt, but must also engage with those fitts (all earlier) that participate in the process of its meaning-building: Fitts I, XIII, XIV, and XV. The first of these prior fitts, which concatenates on *spot*, establishes the simplest, most literal understanding of *mote* as either a spot, stain, blemish or a location, place. The latter three fitts expand and enrich the dialectic of meanings of *mote* that are fully realized in Fitt XVI. Thus, in the process of explicating Fitt XVI, I will attend to the above-noted earlier fitts, with the particular goal of developing a locus of meanings for *mote* in *Pearl*. Following that, I will expand this investigation into *mote* by considering its twelve total appearances in the other three poems of the *Pearl* manuscript. As we shall see, religious valences predominate in the first three poems (*Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*), while secular valences (including to the hunt) cluster in the last poem (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). Finally, of these four poems, *Pearl* (and only *Pearl*) evinces an additional meaning of *mote* (once as a noun, and once as a verb), denoting conflict, argument, or strife. While *mote* appears only three times (and prosaically) in works by Geoffrey Chaucer, this final type of *mote*, with its legal overtones, occurs not infrequently in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*.⁴

instruction, p. 11, while Jane Chance, "Allegory and Structure in *Pearl*: The Four Senses of the *Ars Praedicandi* and Fourteenth-Century Homiletic Poetry," concludes that, as a result of successful learning steps, the Dreamer returns from his vision "educated, illumined," pp. 38, 43; both in *Text and Matter*.

⁴ All references to Chaucer's works are taken from *Chaucer's Major Poetry*, Albert C. Baugh, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Incorporated, 1963); all references to *Piers Plowman* are taken from *Piers Plowman: The C-Text*, Derek Pearsall, ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999). For the general practice of using Chaucer and Langland as companion authors for reading the *Pearl*-poet's corpus, see, for example, David Aers, "Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain*-Poet" (in *A Companion*), pp. 91-101; Spearing, "Poetic Identity," pp. 35-51; Riddy, "Jewels," p. 149; and, Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," p. 295.

Meanings of *mote* and its close synonyms and antonyms

The two dominant and competing meanings of *mote* in *Pearl* (and especially in Fitt XVI) are those denoting spot, stain, or blemish⁵ and those denoting location, place,⁶ or, more specifically, city/citadel (through metonymy, a moat signifies that which it surrounds).⁷ The negative *moteles*, however, applies only to the former definitional set, as in spotless, stainless, blemishless,⁸ or, when formulated as *wythouten mote*, without spot/stain/blemish;⁹ neither means without location or place. The only other negative usage is idiomatic: *not a mote/myte*, not a bit/jot.¹⁰

Mote and *moteles* find several important analogues throughout the poem. *Spot*, the concatenating word of Fitt I, signifies both of the above dominant meanings,¹¹ and *spotlez* is synonymous with *moteles*;¹² *wythouten spot*, however, may mean either *spotlez* or of indeterminate location.¹³ *Maskle* and *maskellez* (a shared concatenator of Fitt XIII) refer only to spot, stain, or blemish and to spotless, stainless, or blemishless, respectively;¹⁴ there is no spatial implication to either. On the other hand, although *makelez* (Fitt XIII's other concatenator) means matchless or peerless (literally, without mate)¹⁵ and so is asynonymous with the preceding terms,

⁵ *MED*, *mot*, *mote* (n.(1, defs. a and d)).

⁶ *MED*, *mot*, *mote* (n.(3, def. 1c)).

⁷ *MED*, *mote*, *mot* (n.(1, defs. b and c)).

⁸ *MED*, *moteles* (n.), from *mot* (n.(1)). Note that *moteles* is misidentified as a noun; it, like its analogues *spotles* and *maskelles*, is an adjective.

⁹ *MED*, *mot*, *mote* (n.(1d)).

¹⁰ *MED*, *mot*, *mote* (n.(1c)), including the idiomatic *mountaunce of a litel mote*, found in *Patience*.

¹¹ See *MED*, *spot* (n.(1, defs. 3, 4b, and 5)).

¹² *MED*, *spotles* (adj.).

¹³ See *MED*, *spot* (n.(1, def. 3)). While this definition does not compass a negative location, the Glossary entry in Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems*, notes that the two senses of blemish and location are “perhaps combined in *wythouten s[spot]*” (p. 348).

¹⁴ For *maskel*, see *MED*, *maskel* (n.(def. a)); in general, *maskel* and *mote* often occur together, in either order, as in *maskel or mote*. For *maskelles*, see *MED*, *maskelles* (adj.); note that all of the listed textual citations to this word are from *Pearl*.

¹⁵ *MED*, *makeles* (adj., def. a, and also b).

the Dreamer confuses it with *maskellez*, for which error he receives correction.¹⁶

Mote in Fitt XVI

Here follows my translation of Fitt XVI, bracketed by a brief summary of the immediately preceding and subsequent material.

Fitt XV: About Christ in the New Jerusalem, with a long paraphrase from Revelation. In the final stanza, the Dreamer acknowledges the differences between himself and the Maiden, and begs her to consider his humble request.

Fitt XVI

Stanza 1

913 “Nevertheless, shining one, I beseech you,
if you can see to it that it be done,
915 as you are glorious without blemish (*galle*, syn. of *maskel*),
do not reject my piteous request:
Have you no dwelling (*wonez*) within a castle’s wall (*castel-walle*)
nor manor (*maner*) where you may sup and live?
You tell me about Jerusalem, the royal realm,
920 where noble David was installed on the throne,
but by these woods it is not situated –
it’s in Judea, that noble place (*note*).
As you are completely spotless (*maskelez*),
your dwelling (*wonez*) must be **without spot** (*wythouten mote*).

Stanza 2

925 “This **spotless** (*motelez*) company you speak of,

¹⁶ In general, only Christ and Mary are *makeles* (see, e.g., l. 757 and l. 436, respectively), though, once, the Pearl of Price is referred to as both *makellez* (l. 733) and *maskelles* (l. 744). When the Dreamer mistakenly refers to the Maiden as *makeles* as well as *maskellez* (l. 780), the Maiden clarifies that, while she is indeed *maskelles* and one of heaven’s queens, she never averred that she was a “*makelez quene*” (l. 784); that title inheres only to Mary. For additional contemporary references to Mary as *makeles*, see Lyrics 10 and 54 in *One Hundred Middle English Lyrics*, rev. edn., Robert D. Stevick, ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and, Lyric 77 in *Medieval English Lyrics, 1200-1400*, Thomas G. Duncan, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

- so great a company of thousands in a crush,
 a great city (*cetê*), as you are so many,
 you must have, without doubt.
 So comely a group of lovely jewels
 930 would be done badly should [they have to] lie outside,
 yet by these banks where I stroll,
 I see no dwelling (*bygng*) anywhere about.
 I think you only come and linger [here]
 to gaze on the beauty of this lovely stream.
 935 If you have sturdy dwellings (*bygnggez*) elsewhere,
 direct me now to that fair **citadel** (*mote*).”

Stanza 3

- “That **citadel** (*mote*) you speak of in Judea,”
 that precious spice then said to me,
 “That is the city (*cytê*) that the Lamb visited
 940 in which to suffer pain for man’s sake;
 understand [it] as the old Jerusalem,
 for there was the old sin destroyed.
 But the new [Jerusalem], which came down from God’s
 messenger,
 the apostle gave an account of it in Revelations.
 945 The Lamb who is without [any] black spots (*spottez*)
 has ferried His fair host there;
 and, as His flock is without blemish (*flake*),
 so is His **citadel** (*mote*) **without spot** (*withouten moute*).

Stanza 4

- “Plainly [I] speak of two **citadels** (*motez*),
 950 though both are called Jerusalem,
 which to you means nothing more than
 ‘city of God’ or ‘vision of peace.’
 In that one, our peace was achieved –
 the Lamb chose it [in which] to suffer with pain;
 955 in that other, there is nothing but peace to glean
 which shall last forever without end.
 That is the city to which we press
 after our flesh is laid to rot;
 there, glory and bliss shall ever increase
 960 for the company that is **without spot** (*withouten mote*).”

Stanza 5

- “**Spotless** (*Motelez*) maid, so meek and mild,”
 I then said to that lovely flower,
 “Bring me to that pleasant burg (*bylde*)
 and let me see your blissful bower.”
- 965 That shining one said, “God will prevent that –
 you may not enter within His castle (*tor*).
 But, from the Lamb, I have appealed you
 for a sight of it, through great favor.
 From without, to see that perfect cloister
- 970 you are permitted, but [you may go] within not one step –
 to wander its walks you have no ability,
 unless you were clean, **without spot** (*withouten mote*).

Fitt XVII (beginning)

- “If I this **citadel** (*mote*) shall reveal to you,
 come up toward this river’s head;
- 975 I, opposite you on this side,
 shall go, until you are in view of a hill.”

The Dreamer then does this and sees the New Jerusalem; its description follows.

Note, in Fitt XVI, that *mote* in its unmodified form refers only to a location, a citadel. *Moteles* occurs twice, once in reference to the Maiden’s heavenly companions and once in reference to the Maiden herself, where it reinforces her prior description in the first stanza as *maskelez*. All other occurrences of *mote* in the fitt are modified by *withouten*. This phrase forms the final two words of Stanzas 1 and 3-5; they do not occur at the end of Stanza 2, as would be expected, as a result of the fitt’s central preoccupation, discussed below.

That this fitt concentrates the dialectic, previously developed in the poem to this point, between location-spot and blemish-spot is evident from the sheer repetition of place/structure words (e.g., *wonez*, *maner*, *Jerusalem*, *bygyng*, *cyté*, *burg*, *tor*, occurring a total of 27 times) and spotless/purity words (e.g., *withouten mote/galle/flake/spottez*, *maskelles*, *motelez*, occurring a total of 10 times). Indeed, it is only the spotless – the Lamb, the heavenly elect, and the Maiden – who occupy these spots. This central connection is made express in the Maiden’s final words (in this fitt) to the Dreamer: You may look, but you cannot touch, as you are not one of us. Additionally,

in terms of this fitt's concatenatory structure, citadel lies, literally, at its heart, while the heavenly company enclose and infuse it, and the Maiden (fittingly, in her role as guide-instructrix) frames them both, as the following schematic reveals:

<u>Stanza 1:</u>	...
	923 <i>you [Maiden] spotless</i>
	924 <i>your dwelling without spot/speck/stain</i>
<u>Stanza 2:</u>	925 <u>spotless/stainless company</u>
	...
	936 citadel
<u>Stanza 3:</u>	937 citadel
	...
	947 <u>His flock without blemish</u>
	948 His citadel without spot/speck/stain
<u>Stanza 4:</u>	949 citadels
	...
	960 <u>company without spot/speck/stain</u>
<u>Stanza 5:</u>	961 <i>spotless/stainless Maiden</i>
	...
	972 without spot/speck/stain

Line 948 deserves special attention for two *mote*-worthy reasons: It is overladen; and, it acts as the fulcrum on which the two halves of the fitt balance. In the original, the line reads: "So is Hys mote withouten moote." This highly unusual doubling of a concatenator in a single line crystallizes the importance of the New Jerusalem, its status as the locus of spotless purity, and the larger role of spiritual purity in the poem. Note as well that, in this fitt, four *mote* words/word-forms precede this line, and four follow it. Ultimately, if we are to understand what it means to be without blemish, we must always turn our inward eye to Christ's kingdom in heaven; there, and only there, is spotlessness perfected. Lastly, the final two lines of Stanza 1 (ll. 923-24) parallel the final two lines of Stanza 3 (ll. 947-48), but with an important difference: As the lines of the former refer only to the Maiden, the dwelling in which she is presumed to reside is not yet specified as the citadel which is the central concern of the fitt; in the complementary lines of the latter, both the host and their citadel are identified as belonging to the Lamb. Thus, the only *mote* line that stands outside this heavenly

synchrony is the final line of the fitt, wherein it is revealed that the Dreamer cannot participate in this dynamic unless he too is pure.

Despite this moral and actual warning and the Dreamer's eventual disregard of it, the (possibly surprising) numerical superabundance of place words over spiritual-condition words in this fitt accords well with its specific poetic context: The three preceding fitts articulated lessons about the two Jerusalems, the actions of Christ and the Lamb within each, and the nature of the divine (non-)hierarchy;¹⁷ the succeeding three fitts recount the Dreamer's unmediated experience of the New Jerusalem, the Lamb, and the heavenly host. In this regard, Fitt XVI marks the turning point in the apex of the dream-vision, the transition from theological instruction to esoteric knowledge.¹⁸

The anomalous nature of the immediately preceding fitt (XV), with its surfeit of stanzas, has been the subject of much scholarly debate.¹⁹ Beyond focused attempts to reconcile its irregularity, it has often been implicit or explicit in offering schemata for the overall structure and movement of the poem.²⁰ Without expressing any

¹⁷ On issues of divine hierarchy in the poem, see generally Brewer, "Introduction," pp. 14-15, 17; Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," pp. 303-304; and, Davis, "Narrative Form," p. 344. Josephine Bloomfield, "Stumbling toward God's Light: The Pearl Dreamer and the Impediments of Hierarchy," *The Chaucer Review* 45.4 (2011): 390-410, offers a thorough analysis of the issues and problems of hierarchy in the poem; she also analogizes, *pace*, *Pearl* to Julian of Norwich's *Shewings*, though she finds the Dreamer, unlike Julian, "only an accidental spiritual pilgrim," pp. 400, 407.

¹⁸ A useful counter-example is the first (short) version of Julian of Norwich's *Shewings*, in which her visions are related without theological explication, and the second (long) version, in which she theorizes the spiritual meaning of her visions. See *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, Georgia Ronan Crampton, ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), "Introduction," pp. 1-23, especially pp. 1-3. On Julian's text as relevant to the *Pearl*-poet generally, see Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," pp. 295-296; with specific attention to her use of *poynnt*, see Davis, "Narrative Form," p. 336.

¹⁹ For an overview of the major lines of contention, see the note to ll. 841-912 in Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems*, p. 94.

²⁰ On the numerical structure of *Pearl* generally, see, e.g., D. S. Brewer, "Introduction" (in *A Companion*), p. 18; and, Martin, "Allegory and Symbolism," p. 319. Chance, "Allegory and Structure," finds a tripartite division of the poem, framed by the opening and closing fitts, which reflects the three senses of non-literal reading, p. 33. Harwood, "Diptych," posits a

views on Fitt XV's stanzaic surplus, I would argue that it both serves as the crisis point in the poem's inner conflict—the theological debate between the Dreamer and the Maiden—and marks its resolution. Prior to Fitt XV, the Dreamer has repeatedly challenged the Maiden's doctrinal lessons, very often in a way that reveals his inferior understanding.²¹ In Fitt XV, the debate ends: There is little additional conversation between the Dreamer and the Maiden, and she offers no further religious instruction to him. Indeed, the final lines of Fitt XV inaugurate a different relationship between the two. The Dreamer is now a humble petitioner who makes one request, knowing his very question may be unworthy of response. The Maiden is no longer the didact, becoming instead the granter of boons: First, she considers his request; and, then, she facilitates its fulfillment as both procurer of favor (the final stanza of Fitt XVI) and guide (the first stanza of Fitt XVII). From this point forward, the Dreamer's instruction is experiential, visual, and unmediated.

Regarding this transition, one may ask: Does the poem offer a critique of purely didactic theology, in favor of experiential spirituality?²² Or, does the Dreamer's failure to truly understand the latter suggest that, while it may be the higher form of knowing, all we humans can hope to aspire to is to understand and internalize what we are taught? At any rate, it seems clear that a sound grounding in theology, at least for the Dreamer, was insufficient

diptych structure for the poem, with Fitts 10-11 as the central pair, all others paired in descending/ascending order, p. 61. For the most recent detailed numerical analysis of *Pearl* and its companion poems, which includes significant discussion of earlier scholarship in the same vein, see *The Epistemological Perspective of the Pearl-Poet*, Piotr Spyra (Farnham, Eng.: Ashgate, 2014).

²¹ See, e.g., Aers, "Courtly Subjects," p. 101; Richard Newhauser, "Sources II: Scriptural and Devotional Sources" (in *A Companion*), pp. 268-269; Cooper, "The Supernatural," pp. 283-285; Martin, "Allegory and Symbolism," pp. 324-325; Davis, "Narrative Form," pp. 331, 342; and, Bloomfield, "Stumbling toward God's Light," pp. 390, 405.

²² See Newhauser, "Sources II," p. 268. Charlotte Gross, "Courtly Language in *Pearl*" (in *Text and Matter*), remarks on the Dreamer's "paucity of progress," reflected in his repeated inappropriate use of courtly/romance language, p. 85. Spyra, *Epistemological Perspective*, finds no real dialogue between the Dreamer and the Maiden, such that, at the end, the Dreamer has learned nothing, pp. 27, 34.

preparation for his ecstatic vision.²³ The Dreamer's repeated learning failures are reminiscent of both Jonah's (in *Patience*) and Gawain's (in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) similar failures;²⁴ it may well be, in the poet's estimation, that cycles of failure constitute the human experience, in response to which all we can do is brush the dirt (*mote*) off ourselves and keep trying to improve and to understand.²⁵

In this pursuit, we are not without help, for, within our fallen world, there remains one token of our prelapsarian past, one symbol to guide us in our mortal struggle toward spotlessness: the pearl. That the pearl is indeed such a symbol is attested to in Fitt XIII, where the Maiden refers to it as not only *maskellez*, but also *makellez* (l. 733). Recall that *makeles* may only otherwise properly describe Christ/the Lamb and Mary. The Maiden goes on to explain the pearl's participation in divine singularity: It is like the realm of pure heaven, according to God, because it is flawless, pure, and bright, endlessly round, of gentle spirit, and common to (shared by) the righteous (ll. 735-39).²⁶ It is symbolic of heaven and its perfection, the only terrestrial object deserving the description of matchless, an orb that, literally, reflects light and, symbolically, reflects the unity and purity of original creation, unable to be either sullied or

²³ On the results of the vision itself, see Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," p. 305. On the Dreamer's misapprehension of the river as a spiritual boundary separating the pure from the impure, see Paul F. Reichardt, "Animal Similes in *Pearl*" (in *Text and Matter*), p. 19; this focus on category separation so as to avoid contamination is a central concern of *Cleanness*.

²⁴ On the Dreamer's, Jonah's, and Gawain's failures, and their similarities to each other, see Cooper, "The Supernatural," pp. 278-279; Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," pp. 300, 310; Martin, "Allegory and Symbolism," pp. 316, 319; Newhauser, "Sources II," 262, 268, 270-271; and, Spyra, *Epistemological Perspective*, pp. 35-47. On the cyclical patterns of human existence as reflected in poetic structure, see Davis, "Narrative Form," p. 338.

²⁵ For a similar conclusion, see Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," p. 293. Bloomfield, "Stumbling toward God's Light," concludes that "the poet seems to be encouraging his audience on their own spiritual journey," p. 410.

²⁶ Tony Davenport, "Jewels and Jewelers in *Pearl*," *The Review of English Studies*, n.s., 59 (Sept. 2008): 508-520, 511, notes that the "virtue of the pearl ... is described only in aesthetic and moral terms."

improved by mankind.²⁷ Consider, in this regard (and across all of the manuscript's poems), the pearl's unique position in the divine and created order:

Inventio (God)	Imitatio Inventis (Man)
"Kynde" categories Sexual behavior Rites/Religious observance	Deviant sex Despoiled rites
<u>Pearls</u> All other raw materials: Gems, metals/ores, fuels, wood, stone, etc.	Finished gems and jewelry Objects of gold, silver, copper, etc. Objects of stone, wood, thatch, clay, etc. Structures and their support (water, fire, etc.)
Animals	Food, clothing, shelter, fuel, fertilizer Labor, transportation, protection, adjunct (e.g., hunting)
Plants	Food, medicine Clothing, shelter Fuel, fertilizer
Language potential Artistic potential	The "audible" arts: poetry, writing, song, music, etc. The "visual" arts: dance, theater, sculpture, painting, etc.

With regard to all of God's creation, mankind is able to improve on the many raw gifts given; with regard to higher things, to divine law,

²⁷ It may become bespattered, but can be cleaned; it may be set into gold or clothing, but is not altered in order to be so mounted (unlike gemstones, for example). On this unique quality of the pearl, see Spearing, "Poetic Identity," pp. 41-42.

action by mankind can, however, only lead to corruption.²⁸ The sole terrestrial exception is the pearl, which human action cannot improve. It alone of all creation participates in and reflects the divine.²⁹

The *Mote* Problem

One of the larger problematics in the poem as a whole is that of location. Where exactly does the poem open and close? In a garden; at a gravesite?³⁰ And, where is the dream garden into which the Dreamer first enters?³¹ What land(scape) does the Maiden occupy? As she is always on the far bank, is the river a sort of moat-*mote*, walling off this ‘heavenly’ space from the larger dream space? And then, there is the more specific problem of distinguishing the city-*mote* of the Old Jerusalem from that of the New Jerusalem. Finally, in all of these spaces, what does it mean to be *mote-d* or *moteles*? To be stained or unstained? Are some of these spaces both *moteles* and *withouten mote*?

Fitt I, with its concatenation on *spot*, serves as the entry into this problematic. Note that, unlike Stanza 2 of Fitt XVI, all five stanzas of Fitt I end with the phrase *withouten spot*.³² In the first two stanzas, it is a *priuy perle* that is without (a) spot; in the final three stanzas, the *perle* is *precios*. Each of the fitt’s four opening-stanza *spot* references (as well as its carry-over into the first line of Fitt II) seems clearly to denote a location: the place in the *erber* where the Dreamer has lost his pearl, mourns its loss, contemplates its potentially productive ‘after-life’, and, ultimately, falls into his dream-sleep. It would be

²⁸ This is a central preoccupation of *Cleanness*; see, generally, Watson, “Vernacular Theologian,” p. 309.

²⁹ As medieval lapidaries attest, pearls are engendered from heavenly dewdrops. Davenport, “Jewels and Jewelers,” analogizes the spiritual processes the Dreamer must go through, post-vision, to the growth of a pearl: “a speck [*mote*] in the process of shaping its own spiritual nacre,” p. 520. For another statement on the pearl’s unique association with purity, see *Cleanness*, ll. 1117-1132. In this sense, the pearl represents God’s art, while polished, faceted gemstones are artful; see Davis, “Narrative Form,” p. 333. For an extended discussion of jewels in *Pearl*, see Riddy, “Jewels,” pp. 143-155; see also Martin, “Allegory and Symbolism,” pp. 322-323, 328.

³⁰ See Newhauser, “Sources II,” p. 267.

³¹ See Newhauser, “Sources II,” p. 267; Cooper, “The Supernatural,” pp. 284-285; and, Martin, “Allegory and Symbolism,” pp. 323-324.

³² In this fitt, *spotlez* does not occur.

easy to read *withouten spot* as an equally specific reference to the pearl's physical appearance, its blemishless quality.³³ If we accept the pearl as a metaphor for a deceased young child, it would likewise refer to her innocence, her sinless state at death.³⁴ It is also possible, however, to read *withouten spot* as denoting a location problem: The Dreamer states that he has lost this pearl because it slipped from his hand; he even castigates the soil for mucking it up. If he is indeed at the spot where he lost it, he ought to have been able to find it; if it is a gravesite, then he is at an empty spot, knowing not in what new spot his lost child now resides. And, while *precios* marks this pearl as special, costly, and/or unique, *priuy* may suggest, in addition to private or personal, hidden, and so, without a known location.³⁵

In this sense, Fitt XVI represents part recapitulation of and part movement beyond Fitt I.³⁶ In Fitt I, the lost pearl's location is unknown – it may be in the ground of a flowerbed, or in a grave; Fitt XVI addresses two locations as well (the Old and New Jerusalem). Whereas the two sites of Fitt I are indistinguishable, those of Fitt XVI are clearly elucidated. Furthermore, while the Old Jerusalem is literally 'on the ground' (i.e., in Judea), the New is accessible only through the grave. Additionally, the pearl of Fitt I is lost, locationless (*withouten spot*), homeless (*priuy*). In Fitt XVI, the Dreamer several times asserts that the Maiden must have a home somewhere nearby, as indeed she does; she is neither lost nor homeless. Indeed, the Dreamer remarks that it would not be mete for the heavenly host to lie outside, a reversal of the condition of the lost pearl of the poem's opening.

The connections between Fitts I and XVI extend beyond the parallels of the semantic synonymy between *spot* and *mote*, the preoccupation with dual locations, and the appropriateness of inside and outside, as additional motifs from Fitt I recur in Fitt XVI. Spices and flowers, some of which are specifically enumerated, form part of the lost pearl's setting in the former, while, in the latter, the

³³ See Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems*, p. 54, note to ll. 12-60.

³⁴ As *Pearl*, ll. 483-485, suggests. See, e.g., Brewer, "Introduction," pp. 2, 7, 21; Malcolm Andrew, "Theories of Authorship" (in *A Companion*), p. 25; Riddy, "Jewels," p. 154; and, Watson, "Vernacular Theologian," p. 306.

³⁵ For a similar reading of *spot* and its problems in this fitt, see Davis, "Narrative Form," p. 337.

³⁶ Harwood, "Diptych," however, pairs Fitt XVI with Fitt V, on the basis of a shared "topos of enclosures," p. 68, a reading with which the present author disagrees.

Maiden herself is Spice (l. 938) and Flower (l. 962). Likewise, the earlier motifs of gleanings and the harvest and of rot and decay are reiterated in this later fitt (ll. 955, 958). Finally, as the Dreamer's emotional tenor has shifted from a chaotic range of strong feelings in Fitt I to a calm curiosity in Fitt XVI, the comfort that Christ brings, not accessible to the Dreamer in the former, is now available to him, in the form of a vision of the New Jerusalem, in the latter. Thus, by virtue of this pre-vision, the totality of Fitt I has been transformed in Fitt XVI, a necessary precondition to the coming vision of the New Jerusalem.

This pattern of recapitulation with transformation extends throughout the remainder of the poem, a process inaugurated in the final (surplus) stanza of Fitt XV.³⁷ As mentioned above, Fitt XV marks the end of the Maiden's instruction of the Dreamer; note that all of Fitt XIV and the first five stanzas of Fitt XV consist entirely of the Maiden's speech, her final and most important lesson. While Fitt XIII teaches that the Pearl is a symbol of Heaven, Fitt XIV begins the process of distinguishing the Old Jerusalem from the New; the New Jerusalem is the focus of Fitt XV. By Fitt XIV, the Dreamer now knows that the Old is not to be found in the 'land' he now occupies, such that he requests a vision of the New, which wish is granted. Not only does Fitt XVI hearken back to, while also moving beyond, Fitt I, but the subsequent fitts do likewise, as follows:

- Fitt XVII (the end of the Dreamer's conversation with the Maiden) :: Fitt IV (the beginning of his conversation with her)
- Fitt XVIII (the astounding beauty of the city) :: Fitts II and III (the astounding beauty of the dream 'paradise')
- Fitt XIX (the sight of the Maiden causes the Dreamer to want to cross the River) :: Fitt V (the sight of the Maiden causes the Dreamer to want to cross the river)
- Fitt XX (after the abrupt end of the vision, the Dreamer realizes he cannot enter the heavenly kingdom until after death) :: Fitt VI (the Maiden tells the Dreamer that he cannot enter her realm until after death)

³⁷ Harwood, "Diptych," believes the poem doubles back after Fitt X; in his reckoning, Fitt XVI ought to be paired with Fitt V, pp. 61, 68. As my argument makes clear, I disagree with both statements.

Thus, not only does the final line of the poem ‘return’ us to the poem’s beginning, but the final five fitts have all been preparing us for this return, a return not so much to the beginning, but to a new, and hopefully improved, beginning.³⁸

Mote in the rest of Pearl and elsewhere in the Pearl Manuscript

Beyond this focused attention to *mote* in Fitt XVI of *Pearl*, it may prove instructive to consider its additional uses and contexts throughout the poem, as well as in the other three poems that comprise the *Pearl*-manuscript. Within *Pearl*, *mote* occurs as follows:

Fitt XVI (wherein *mote* is the concatenating word)

- spot/speck/stain – ll. 924, 948, 960, 972
- citadel – ll. 936, 937, 948, 949
- spotless/stainless – ll. 925, 961

Elsewhere in *Pearl*

- spot/speck/stain – ll. 726, 764, 843
- citadel – ll. 142, 973 (concatenating carry-over into Fitt XVII)
- spotless/stainless – ll. 899
- argument/conflict/strife – ll. 613 (verb), 855 (noun)
- phrase “not a myte (mote)” – l. 351

Combining these uses of *mote* reveals the following frequency distribution:

- spot(less)/stain(less): 53%
- citadel: 32%
- argument/conflict/strife: 11%
- phrase: 5%

As the above illustrates, the two dominant meanings of *mote* on display in Fitt XVI accurately reflect the term’s meaning within the poem as a whole: In 85% of cases, *mote* refers either to spot, stain, blemish (or the lack thereof) or to location (specifically, citadel). Note, however, that, whereas in Fitt XVI, citadel (and other

³⁸ Bloomfield, “Stumbling toward God’s Light,” finds that the Dreamer “seems finally able to see himself potentially as a spiritual pearl ... though he cannot yet be described as ‘enlightened,’” p. 409.

structural terms) took precedence over blemish (for reasons elucidated above), the overarching semantic emphasis attributed to *mote* in *Pearl* is the quality of being stained or unstained.

This primacy of meaning extends to the manuscript's two other religious poems, where, though *mote* occurs rarely, it most often refers to purity or the lack thereof:

Cleanness

- spot-/speck-/stainless – l. 556 (= 100% frequency)³⁹

Patience

- spot/speck/stain – ll. 268, 299 (= 50% frequency)
- citadel – l. 422 (= 25% frequency)
- phrase “mountaunce of a lyttel mote” – l. 456 (= 25% frequency)

Such is not the case, however, in the manuscript's final poem, wherein secular meanings predominate:

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

- citadel – ll. 635, 764 (specifically, a moat), 910, 2052 (= 57% frequency)
- hunting horn/horn blast – ll. 1141, 1364 (= 29% frequency)
- phrase “not a mote” – l. 2209 (= 14% frequency)

Importantly, not only are there no usage references to stain/blemish or purity, but all of the citadel references are to strictly secular locales. In the preceding three poems, when *mote* is used to denote a locale or citadel, the reference is specifically religious/Biblical.

Chaucerian and Langlandian *Motes*

For comparison purposes, let us consider uses of *mote* in the works of two major contemporary figures: those of Geoffrey Chaucer and of William Langland. Across the Chaucerian corpus, *mote* only occurs three times: once in a phrase (“naught a moote”), once proverbially (“motes in the sunne-beem”), and once in

³⁹ This line reads as follows: “Withouten maskle oþer mote, as margerye-perle.” Not only is this a direct echo of the pearl and the Maiden in *Pearl*, but the passage in which this line appears (ll. 545-556) recapitulates ll. 971-972, and surrounding context, of Fitt XVI.

reference to a hunting horn (“a gret horn blew thre mot”).⁴⁰ Neither *moteles* nor *withouten mote* appears in Chaucer’s works, and, clearly, *mote* is neither common to his lexicon nor vested with any spiritual significance.

Despite the overtly religious and didactic nature of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, *mote* does not take a spiritual register in that text either (all versions, though citations are only given for the C-text). Rather, as much of *Piers Plowman* is devoted to the dialogic pursuit of truth and justice, the most frequent use of *mote* (and related word-forms) activates its connotation of debate, argument, or strife, often with specifically legal overtones. Twice, *mote* appears in verb form, meaning to plead a legal case (I, l. 172; III, l. 197); twice, as the gerund *motyng*, meaning the pleading of a case (IV, l. 132; IX, l. 54); twice, as the compound *mo(e)t-halle*, meaning the court where cases are pled (IV, ll. 148 and 163); and twice, as the noun *motyef*, meaning the subject matter of a (scholarly) debate (XV, l. 130; XVI, l. 231). The only two other uses of *mote* refer to a defensive moat around a building or structure (VII, l. 233; XXI, l. 366).⁴¹ Again, neither negative form of *mote* occurs. For Langland, while *mote* (and related forms) is not uncommon in his text, it is generally circumscribed by legal understandings and processes.

Finally, a scan of two volumes of (roughly contemporaneous) Middle English lyrics, including many devotional lyrics, reveals that *mote*, *moteles*, and *withouten mote* do not readily occur; rather, words meaning clean, pure, bright, etc., are more often used. Thus, in the wider ambit of major works by important authors of the time, as well as in other poetic compositions (secular and devotional), the poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript stand out as uniquely *mote*-worthy as a signifier for purity (or its lack), and none more so than *Pearl* (and Fitt XVI) itself.

⁴⁰ *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, l. 1603; *The Canterbury Tales*, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” l. 868 (compare to *Patience*, l. 268, where Jonah entering the whale’s mouth is likened to a “mote in at a munster dor,” the small particle one sees when sunlight shines in through an open door); and, *The Book of the Duchess*, l. 349, respectively.

⁴¹ *Mote* appears in the B-text, in a passage not found in the C-text, as part of a paraphrase of the Latin Matthew 7:3: “a mote in thi brotheres eye.”

Final thoughts on *mote*

It ought not escape our attention that the poem's focus on *mote* (and its negatives) comes just before the Dreamer's vision of the New Jerusalem. Although, prior to Fitt XVI, the larger project of distinguishing the pure and the impure, as well as of apprehending our physical spot (be it the world of the garden/gravesite, of the dream garden, or of the heavenly kingdom) had been developed in various ways, it is only in Fitt XVI that these notions come together. Quite literally, our quality of spotted- or spotlessness determines both our location and our condition in the world, the recognition of which can (and ought to) motivate reparative and restorative spiritual movements. Without such efforts, we are doomed, both in this world and the next; with them, we too may become a pearl of price to the Prince. It is, then, no joke to proclaim, "Out, out, damned spot!"

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