

“PYȜT”: ORNAMENT, PLACE, AND SITE – A  
COMMENTARY ON THE FOURTH FITT OF *PEARL*

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The refrain-words of Fitt IV of *Pearl* play on the varyingly pitched semantic valences of the word *pyȝt*, often in alliteration with the phrase *precios perle(ȝ)*, and—in two of the five stanzas—also with the word *pyece*. Attention to the function of *pyȝt* in the language of this section—especially in relation to the dynamics of a proliferation of ornament and desire as played out within the spatial dynamics of place or site—will provide the main conceptual thread of this commentary.

### Two Preliminary Glosses

#### 1. *more*, the link.

Before proceeding to discuss *pyȝt*, a preparatory excursus on the concatenating word from the previous fitt is necessary. The concatenating form of the poem places the word *more*, from the refrain on *more and more* in Fitt III, as the first word of the first stanza of Fitt IV.<sup>1</sup> While all the sections of the poem carry over such concatenation, the overflow of *more* beyond the bounds of its proper section, with its connotations of excess and desire, would seem to constitute a special paradigmatic case. The status of *more* as a

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<sup>1</sup> For further description of the generative formal restraints of *Pearl*, see Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 34. See also, E.V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), xxxvi-xli, 87-90; and Marie Borroff, trans., *Pearl: A New Verse Translation*, (New York: Norton, 1977), 32-5. References to specific lines of *Pearl* within sections of the commentary given parenthetically in line numbers. All references to *Pearl*, unless otherwise noted, from E. V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). References to glossaries from editions of *Pearl* given in the format, “Gordon, *Pearl*, sv.”

comparative adjective reminds the reader that there is always “more” without answering the question “of what.” This link thus threatens the reader with at least two exhilarating and terrifying aspects of the mechanics of desire. 1) As critic George Edmondson argues, in Lacanian terms, *Pearl* is a poem about desire not only in that it dramatizes the preemptory loss of the Real that constitutes the subject, but also in that the poem confronts the reader with “a desire—or rather a *desirousness*—in the makeup of the Other that, once perceived, disrupts the illusion of the Other as ‘whole’.”<sup>2</sup> There is always more; and yet the pearl can always circulate as symbol, signifier, and allegory for such a dizzying array of readings because it can mark the “traumatic *punctum* of the Other’s desire.”<sup>3</sup> *More* is *less* than you might think. This is in part why the dreamer opens the first stanza of Fitt IV with the exclamation of fear, “[m]ore þen me lyste my drede arose,” even at the site/sight of what he will soon discern as the lost object of his desire, his pearl/maiden.<sup>4</sup>

2) Paradoxically, at the same time that it inserts the reader into a psychoanalytic logic, this instance of *more* (the semantic, thematic, and decorative importance of which modestly poses as a mere exigency of *concatenation*) insists on the facticity of a kind of phenomenological experience. This insistence follows from the way that the overflow of *more* into Fitt IV offers *more* as a substantive and perhaps even suggests the substantiality or materiality of *moreness*.

This substantialization of *moreness* will not only associate *more* with *þyzt*, but will also set up Fitt IV to maintain the focus built up by the description of the dream-landscape in Fitt III—namely, the material dynamics of desire in a material and overwhelmingly ornamental landscape containing, among the “dubbement dere of

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<sup>2</sup> George Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object, the Shape of the Law,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 42, 52. According to Edmondson, this incompleteness of the Other is conditioned by what Lacan marks as  $S(\emptyset)$  (read *S*, *barred-O*), or the “signifier of the lack in the Other” (48).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> A number of critics comment on the dramatization of these mechanics of desire in this most basic form. *Viz.* Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object,” 40-41, 52-55; and Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London: Longman, 1996), 155-56. See also J.J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-Poet* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 26; Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996), 161-62.

doun and daleȝ” (121), “[a] crystal clyffe ful relusaunt” (159). Far from a hazy immaterial dream, as A.C. Spearing characterizes it, the dream world offers, “a science fiction landscape: it is planetary or lunar in its strangeness, and has a technicolour harshness in its brilliance.”<sup>5</sup>

## 2. *Pyȝt*

In recorded literary usage, the Middle English (ME) word *pyȝt*, past tense of ME *picchen*, had a highly variable semantic range—the result of a semantic fusion of at least two Old English (OE) verbs (possibly verbs distinguishing intransitive/transitive and/or causative/non-causative verbs from one or two homophonic stems, *pic* and *pytt*) as well as the likely influence (if not direct involvement in the fusion) of Latinate cognates.<sup>6</sup> This fusion may very well have

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<sup>5</sup> A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 143. See also, Theodore Bogdanos, *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable: A Study in Medieval Poetic Symbolism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon’s glossary to *Pearl*, sv. *pyȝt*, records an etymology from unattested OE Class I weak verb *\*piccan* (pa. t. *pihte*). The *Middle English Dictionary* (MED, online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>) offers the same etymology by comparison with attested cognates in Old Icelandic (*pikka*, *þjakka*) and other medieval Germanic languages (MED, sv. *picchen* (v.), etym). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, online at <http://www.oed.com/>) entry for modern *pitch*, a reflex of ME *picchen*, records “etymology uncertain,” noting that the word is “perhaps the reflex” of unattested OE class I weak verb *\*piccan* (OED, sv. *pitch*, v<sup>2</sup>, etym). The situation in OE is particularly confusing because even in identifying a related noun or a verbal root one would have to first distinguish between *pic* and *þic*. This latter means pitch, resin, or tar, and forms the stem for OE verb *pician* (to cover in pitch)—and so constitutes a red herring in our discussion of *pyȝt* (Joseph Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller and Alistair Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), sv. *pic*, *þic*, and *pician*; this work cited hereafter as Bosworth-Toller). The OED further suggests that *\*piccan* may itself have been a causative formation from a stem shared by the verb for which modern *pick* is the reflex, with the caveat that we do not know if the stem vowel was long (as that particular causative construction would have required) (OED, sv. *pitch* v.2). Until the *Dictionary of Old English*—a perhaps more systematic lexicographical authority—is able to publish a *p*-fascicule, we can only lay out the complexities of the extant material. Indeed, Toller’s *Supplement* deletes *pican* (“to use a *pic*, to remove by means of a *pic*”) and redirects us to the *Supplement* entry for *þytan*,

been a superficial and incomplete homophonic convergence that may have undergone subsequent fission, or, at any rate, was temporary—as attested by Present Day English *pit*, *pitch*, *peak*, and *pike*, and even the ubiquitous near function-verb *put*. In any case, the result was that *pyzt* represented the enfolding of a whole host of related senses into either a single verb or verbs so homophonic and varyingly spelled that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), and critical glossaries of *Pearl* have a difficult time efficiently distinguishing them; these senses include: making a hole with a pointed tool, removing something from a hole with a pointed tool, thrusting or throwing a pointed tool towards a particular spot, thrusting something into the ground so as to place it, placing/pitching a tent or other structure, shaping a tool into a point,

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meaning “to push, poke, thrust, put out the eyes” (Bosworth-Toller, Supplement, sv. *pican*). Loosely speaking, phonetically, the ME verb *picchen*, with its medial palatal affricate, *could* be the reflex of a verb with a stem ending in a [k] that underwent gemination and subsequent palatization, or the reflex of a verb ending in [t] with an infinitive in *-ian* (also resulting in palatization). This is the case whether or not the OE verbs in question are causative, and regardless of how they were formed. It would seem *possible*, even *probable*, that the apparent semantic variability in ME *picchen* could result from the fusion of two distinct OE verbs. Relatively unique among European languages, “Old English causative pairs often develop into single double-functional verbs, that can be used both with an intransitive and causative meaning” (Luisa García García, “Morphological Causatives in Old English: The Quest for a Vanishing Formation,” *Transactions of the Philological Society* 110.1 [22]: 123). However, the OED also notes the potential influence of post-classical Latin *picchiarre* (to pitch hay), an “apparently isolated attestation,” and Anglo-Norman *piccher* (to drive in foundation piles)—and the relationship of such words to ME *picchen* must probably remain unclear in the same way as that of ME *pike* (presumably from OE *pic*, and, presumably a word suggesting a device with a certain pointed shape, used in the activity described by *piccher*—whether in detailing jewelry or metalwork or pitching a tent) (OED, sv. *pitch* v.2, etym; and sv. *pike* n.1, etym). Regarding the etymology of *pike* in relation to both Germanic and Latinate cognates, the OED notes that “[t]his group of words presents many difficulties both in Romance and Germanic; the pattern of borrowing within and between Romance and Germanic languages appears to have been particularly complex, with individual words and senses being borrowed in different directions and at different times, in many cases reinforcing pre-existing words or senses” (OED, sv. *pike* n.1, etym.).

and decorating/arraying/adorning an object.<sup>7</sup> This last sense may seem like a sweeping denotative shift, but in fact can be considered an instance of semantic narrowing/amelioration: adorning an object can be one potential result of a careful picking away at or pitting of a surface, an expert placement of jewels or other ornamentation, and/or the production of (an array of) small spikes (as in a crown). So what links the semantic field is not counterintuitive, but the slope is slippery; it can be put in terms of a slurry of homophonic Present Day English reflexes: to make a pit you might use a pike, which is, of course, peaked—but might also be pitched, which might mean that you have put that peaked pike in a pit; and similarly, to put a tent in place you might pitch a pike into a pit.

And it would seem that some, if not all of this wider semantic variability should be understood as simultaneously active in occurrences of *pyȝt* in *Pearl*—especially in its occurrences as the refrain word of this fourth fitt. O. D. Macrae Gibson points out that the function of *pyȝt* as a concatenating word stresses its capacity to mean both *arrayed* and *set*.<sup>8</sup> Gordon glosses the word as varying in sense throughout the poem between “set,” “fixed,” and “adorned” (in the past tense form *pyȝt*), and “set,” “placed,” “fixed,” and “adorned (with gems)” (in the past participle form *pyȝte*).<sup>9</sup> Andrew and Waldron gloss the word under their entry for the dialectical form of the uninflected infinitive *pyche*, recording variations in sense in *Pearl* between “array,” “dress,” and “decorate,” and, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Cleanness*, between “fasten,” “strike,” “stick,” and “occupy.”<sup>10</sup> Sarah Stanbury’s student-aimed marginal glosses vary between “fixed,” “decorated,” “trimmed,” and “embroidered.”<sup>11</sup> The MED records occurrences of similarly inflected/conjugated forms of *picchen* in *Pearl* as examples of its primary and tertiary definitions. The primary definition is expansive, reflecting a sense of transitive thrusting, throwing, or less powerful setting-into-motion of an object—along a precise

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<sup>7</sup> See note above.

<sup>8</sup> O.D. Macrae-Gibson, “*Pearl*: The Link Words and the Thematic Structure,” in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 206-07; reprinted from *Neophilologus* 52 (1968): 54-64.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, sv. *pyȝt*.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, sv. *pyche*.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Stanbury, ed. *Pearl* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2001), at lines 117, 192, 204, 216.

trajectory—resulting in the firm placement of that object in an equally precise place.<sup>12</sup> The MED records the occurrence of *pyȝt* at line 216, in the third stanza of Fitt IV, as an example for the specific sense of “to set something firmly in place, fix, embed.”<sup>13</sup> The secondary sense offered by the MED, concerning setting up and building (especially pavilions or tents), needs to be understood as a variation on the sense of setting or thrusting a stake or pole into the ground which metonymically comes to refer to setting up the tent of which the pole is a part. Thus, in the alliterative *Morte Arthur*, the men of the round table “pight pavis [shields] on port [port-side]” much as one pitches a tent or as a jeweler fixes, sets up, or thrusts the gems of an ornament into particular places.<sup>14</sup>

The “poetic” senses of *pyȝt* (“adorned” or “arrayed”)—to which readers of *Pearl* often leap—must be understood as concepts of adornment intimately related to and derived from a semantic field that coordinates concepts of place and spatial relations as well as technologies of emplacement and related locating, aiming, and architectonic activities/technologies.

That we should be alert to how multiple regions of this semantic field may overlap in any given occurrence of the term in *Pearl* is reinforced by key occurrences of these terms across the *Pearl*-poet corpus.<sup>15</sup> When, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Pearl*-poet describes Bertilak’s castle as it first appears to Gawain, it is “pyched on a prayere [meadow], a park al about/ Wyth a pyked [spiked, peaked (?)] palace pyned [enclosed] ful pik.”<sup>16</sup> We are not here told about any building materials or procedures, only of the place of the castle, and so it would seem that the “pyched” castle is referred to less as “built” than as “situated” or “set”—or, alternately,

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<sup>12</sup> See MED, sv. *picchen* (v.), 1.

<sup>13</sup> MED, sv. *picchen* (v.), 1c.

<sup>14</sup> See Larry D. Benson, ed., *King Arthur’s Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthur* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986), 325. Cf. MED, sv. *picchen* (v.), 2a.

<sup>15</sup> Even aside from the now commonplace attribution of the poems of the London, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x (art. 3) to a single author, accounts of thematic development across the MS have long been commonplace in *Pearl*-criticism. E.g. Lynn Staley Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Norman Davis, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), lines 768-9.

that this usage derives from a metaphorical application of the verb for pitching or erecting a tent to the construction of a more permanent type of structure. The word *pyked* occurs as well in the following line, part of a cross-line alliteration on *p*-, but with the seemingly quite clear sense of “peaked” or “spiked” in reference to towers or battlements. By comparison, consider the use of the word in the account of the rich man’s banquet from the Gospel of Matthew as retold in *Cleanness*, in which the rich man invites the poor wretches into his house so that “my palys plat full be pyȝt al aboute.”<sup>17</sup> The term is here used more clearly in its “poetic” sense, as “arrayed” or “adorned,”<sup>18</sup> an implicit metaphor raising the social and aesthetic rank of the feast of the poor guests to that of decorations in a rich man’s palace.

Following this philological excursus, the refrain of *pyȝt* in this fitt should also be read as a direct echo of the refrain on *spot* in the opening fitt of the poem. *Pyȝt* provides the poem with parallel but alternative puns related to *place* and physical location. In the following glosses on each stanza of Fitt IV, *pyȝt* will mark an obsession with spatiality, location, and the threshold of the site—despite influential readings of the poem that favor the prejudices of the pearl-maiden’s exegesis and argue that the dreamer moves towards “a love uncircumscribed by the limits of the physical world.”<sup>19</sup> Insofar as she is *pyȝt*, she will remain circumscribed by a notion of spatiality.

**181-192:**

More þen me lyste my drede arose.  
 I stod ful style and dorste not calle;  
 Wyth yȝen open and mouth ful clos  
 I stod as hende as hawk in halle.  
 I hoped þat ghostly watȝ þat porpose;  
 I dred ondende quat schulde byfalle,  
 Lest ho me eschaped þat I þer chos,  
 Er I at steuen hit moȝt stalle.

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<sup>17</sup> Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., “Cleanness,” in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), line 83.

<sup>18</sup> See Moorman’s marginal gloss on this occurrence, Charles Moorman, ed., *The Works of the Gawain-Poet* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), line 83.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet*, 162. See also 170.

þat gracios gay wythouten galle,  
So smope, so smal, so seme slyzt,  
Ryse3 vp in hir araye ryalle,  
A precios pyece in perlez pyzt.

The vertical trajectory of *drede* (dread) in line 181 is matched by the rising of the delayed subject of the stanza's final sentence: the "precios pyece in perlez pyzt" (192). The *precios pyece*, however, is contrastingly placed within a decorative radial field, and rises in her "araye ryalle." The *dread* itself, were we to visualize it in its contrast to the *pyece*, would appear as dull in finish but not necessarily entirely unpleasant. It may be only an instance of litotes when the dreamer reports the dread arising "[m]ore þen me lyste"; but, even so, it marks the extent to which the dreamer's experience is here constituted by a play of *enjoyment* (as distinguished from "pleasure").<sup>20</sup> One *can* desire and enjoy desiring an arising of dread, *but only to a point*. Critics have suggested that the dreamer's fear of losing the maiden a second time, or, alternately, that his confrontation with some abstract paradox causes this dread;<sup>21</sup> however, the matching vertical trajectories of the maiden and the dreamer's dread would seem to couple the two together, and so confirm that it is indeed the maiden herself which appears as dreadful.

This vertical trajectory itself is not insignificant. The upward movement of the dread in contrast to the grounded position of the dreamer's body parallels the vertical movement of the dreamer's "spryt" in contrast with his heavy "body on balke" in the garden at the beginning of the poem (61-2). In her argument that the axes of spatial perception in the dream-world are more complex than those of the *erber* of the first fitt (giving the lie to the maiden's demand that the dreamer give up on trusting his physical senses), critic Sarah Stanbury notes that the dream-world includes horizontal and both upward and downward vertical trajectories—in contrast to an

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<sup>20</sup> As medievalist L.O. Aranye Fradenburg writes, "Please protect us from *jouissance* by delivering as much *jouissance* as the *I* can bear and still be there to bear it." See *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Viz. Edmondson, "*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object," 50; Theodore Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable: A Study in Medieval Poetic Symbolism* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 70-1).

exclusively downward-moving vertical trajectory coupled with the immobilizing circular trajectory of the *erber*.<sup>22</sup> This rising “araye ryalle” invokes an even more complicated spatiality, combining a circular or radial set of axes with vertical motion—demonstrating the possibility of a radial spatiality not bound to horizontal planar arrangement (as the flowers of the *erber*) and yet still sensibly substantial.

The simile describing the dreamer’s stance and silence “as hende as hawk in halle” has been read in ways both more and less sympathetic to the dreamer—from marking a reasonable affectively induced paralysis to marking an unredeemed and possessive desire of the narrator signaled by his affinity with a violent bird of prey.<sup>23</sup> Although Bogdanos does discuss the image of the hawk as a reflection of “the dreamer’s rapacious possessiveness toward the Maiden,” he also points out that “this self-imposed simile” follows a conventional medieval humility topos and cultivates pathos on behalf of the dreamer.<sup>24</sup> As much as the hawk is a bird of prey, we should also keep in mind Bogdanos’s reminder that the hawk is a “heraldic, noble bird.”<sup>25</sup> As part of an elite, human hunting ritual, hawks (ME *hawk*, *hawk*, can refer to hawks or falcons, to any type of falcon used for hunting) are an high status,<sup>26</sup> extremely valuable bird (so much so that King David II of Scotland may have procured a gyrfalcon from a locale as exotic as Greenland before David II sent it to Edward III in the early fourteenth century).<sup>27</sup> As such, the hawk

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 17, 19, 21.

<sup>23</sup> For sympathetic readings see: Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-Poet*, 29; Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 149; and, Spearing, “Symbolic and Dramatic Development in *Pearl*,” in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, Ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 132, reprinted from *Modern Philology* LX (1962): 1-12. For a “predatory bird” reading, see Paul F. Reichardt, “Animal Similes in *Pearl*” in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing Company, 1991), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 73.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> MED, sv. *hawk* (n.(1)).

<sup>27</sup> Kirsten A. Seaver, *The Frozen Echo: Greenland the Exploration of North America ca. A.D. 1000-1500* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 82-85.

is also an animal that represents less unbridled predatory violence than an important medieval instance of ritualized human control of non-human animal violence and meat-eating—in the sort of ritual that Karl T. Steel discusses as a “fundamental tool” of human domination of animals in attempts to produce human distinctiveness.<sup>28</sup>

This hawk is not a salivating, wild, carrion bird, nor is it even a trained hawk diving after a sparrow; this hawk behaves as one “hende in halle.” While Gordon glosses this particular occurrence of *hende* as “quiet, still,” Andrew and Waldron are more sensitive to the word’s more specifically courtly valences, offering “noble, gracious, courteous,” in addition to the flatter sense of “meek, well-behaved.”<sup>29</sup> The adjective appears later in this poem as a substantive, meaning, according to Andrew and Waldron, “gracious knight, lady,” and to Gordon, “gracious one.”<sup>30</sup> As its most primary sense, the MED offers “[h]aving the approved courtly or knightly qualities, noble, courtly, well-bred, refined, sportsmanlike.”<sup>31</sup> Since the hawk in this simile is specifically “in halle”—perhaps the implied scene, since it is not a hawk on the hunt, is that of a rare hunting bird presented as a gift to a King in a lavish court setting—it would seem that these courtly valences apply. Chaucer’s image of Troilus, riding with retinue through a valley “in wyse of curtasie” with “hauke on honed” is sufficiently courtly,<sup>32</sup> but a hawk *indoors*, is a bird of high nobility, well-controlled on another level entirely.

The dreamer’s state as compared to a hawk that is “courtly” in a hall is important too in its implications not only for the dreamer’s moral and spiritual attitude/status with respect to the pearl-maiden, but also for the relationships of place and space in this stanza vis-à-vis the rising of the pearl “in perleȝ pyȝt” (192). Along with the pearl comes an “araye ryalle,” and so the rising of the pearl decorated or placed in pearls carries with it, by its very virtue of being “in perleȝ pyȝt,” a whole set of courtly placements and relationships—

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<sup>28</sup> Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011), 65.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, sv. *hende*; Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, sv. *hende*, *hynde*.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, sv. *hynde*; Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, sv. *hende*, *hynde*.

<sup>31</sup> MED, sv. *hende* (adj.), 1.a.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd. edn., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 5:64-5.

transforming this site within the landscape into a set of vectors connecting a decorative or *pyȝt* space that radiates from the wonder-pearl mentioned below (221). As *courtly*, this array situates the dreamer as just such a hawk in a hall, among the other bright spheres of nacre.

Here, the ornament is primary, preceding and determining the subsequent social, moral, and figural space. This primacy of ornament overwhelms and unsettles the dreamer. So while the “dred” of this stanza might suggest, as one critic would have it, “fluctuating emotions,” or a precise feeling of “uncertainty” as to the status of the maiden as living or dead,<sup>33</sup> it could also be read as a more overwhelming and much more unsettling phenomenon of worldly life, as suggested by Bogdanos’ sense of the dreamer’s encounter with an interplay of life and death, or Edmondson’s sense of the dreamer’s fundamental psychic trauma before the Thing.<sup>34</sup>

It is, however, more a crisis of how to react to this intensity of decoration than an inability to understand any particular figural content that poses an immediate problem and silences the dreamer. The dreamer “hoped þat ghostly watȝ þat porpose” (185). Andrew and Waldron read this line as, “I thought that quarry [porpose] was spiritual”—a continuation of the hunting metaphor from line 183, in which the dreamer remains a hawk and his metaphorical sparrow-prey is the maiden.<sup>35</sup> Gordon reads *porpose* as “significance” (ie. “I thought/hoped the significance of it was spiritual”).<sup>36</sup> In either case, the dreamer, far from failing to be able to read figurally, as many critics allege (and as is surely the case in other instances), is here *all too eager* to supply an allegorical reading, to reduce the complexity of thing to sign, to sublimate an encounter with decorative aesthetics into *significance*. A sign fully reducible to (spiritual) significance would be easier to take in; but the maiden appears as perceptible in terms of a phenomenon of unavoidable complexity.

Readers should keep in mind that at this point in the poem, what the dreamer beholds is not a girl transformed into allegorical

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<sup>33</sup> Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-poet*, 184.

<sup>34</sup> Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 30; Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object,” 51.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, n. line 186.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, sv. *porpose*.

meaning so much as a girl calcified—transformed to pearliness.<sup>37</sup> Critics have long recognized that the description of the pearl-maiden here as “[s]o smope, so small, so seme slyzt,” echoes the description of the lost pearl in the first stanza; that first pearl is, “[s]o rounde, so reken in vche araye,/ So small, so smope her syde3 were” (5-6).<sup>38</sup> The explicit echo here to these lines thus not only lithifies or ossifies the pearl-maiden, but also paradoxically suggests that she simultaneously occupies the space of a human body, of a bewilderingly vast landscape, and of a small round pearl. While the maiden ostensibly has the shape of a recognizable human body, the description of her size as “so seme slyzt” recalls the description of the smallness of the pearl in the opening lines (“so small, so smope”). And, this description of the pearl-maiden also recalls the roundness of the pearl, in that this line is immediately followed by a description of the maiden rising in her “araye ryalle”: she may have the shape of a human, but the nacre of her pearls exudes an incandescence all around her in a glowing spherical aura of ornamental vectors. The scene thus also implies a certain paradox of scale: the pearl/maiden is small, but arises in a fully royal array. The little pearl, on “bonke3 brade” (138), at the foot of what must be a huge “crystal clyffe” (159), rearticulates the whole landscape.

**193-204:**

Perle3 pyzte of ryal prys  
þere mo3t mon by grace haf sene,  
Quen þat frech as flor-de-lys  
Doun þe bonke con bo3e bydene.  
Al blysande whyt wat3 hir beau biys,  
Vpon at syde3, and bounden bene  
Wyth þe myryeste margarys, at my deuyse,  
þat euer I se3 zet with myn ene;  
Wyth lappe3 large, I wot and wene,  
Dubbed with double perle and dy3te;  
Her cortel of self sute schene,  
Wyth precios perle3 al vmbepyzt.

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<sup>37</sup> See Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-poet*, 182: “The ‘pearl’ metaphors admit to the [dreamer’s] loss, but deny that the lost object is human.”

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Spearing, “Symbolic and Dramatic Development,” 133.

It is striking that the first sentence of this stanza depicts the full appearance of the maiden in her movement down the bank via a metonymy which figures the supposedly singular pearl-maiden in terms of the multiplicity of pearls that she wears. If we read the metonymy literally before understanding its reference to the maiden, it offers a narrative of pricey and well-placed pearls moving along the bank, seemingly of their own accord, as if clustered together by nothing but their cumulative gravity. Relying on an inverted syntax (by no means uncommon) that makes the (object) noun-phrase of the sentence the entire first line, the stanza *first* places front and center, not the singular maiden, but the pearls.

Arguing that Fitt IV corresponds with Fitt XVII in a chiasmic diptych structure, and in accordance with a preoccupation with gems on the part of both stanza-groups, Britton J. Harwood argues that the instance of *pyzte* in line 193 should probably be read as “chosen”—linked to the occurrence of *pyked* in line 1036 (“þe portalez pyked of ryche plate3”), and so as marking the pearl-maiden as one of a special few chosen for a particular status in heaven.<sup>39</sup> But we cannot discount the *set/adorned* semantic field here either.<sup>40</sup> These pearls of line 193 then should be understood as pearls that have been selected from royal wealth, but also as pearls of royal wealth that are set/emplaced as mutually adorning. They constitute, for at least three lines, the center of the scene. Even when the maiden appears in the subordinate clause in line 195, this is only by virtue of a substantive usage of the adjective “frech” to mean something still relatively ambiguous, such as *the bright and pleasant one* (or, *new*,

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<sup>39</sup> Britton J. Harwood, “Pearl as Diptych,” in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives on the Pearl-Poet*, eds. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing Company, 1991), 68-69.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew and Waldron do include a separate glossary entry for *pike*, *pyke* (v.), meaning “gather” or “peck,” but list this occurrence of *pyked* at 1036 as meaning “adorned” (*The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, sv. *pike*, *pyke*). And Gordon similarly does include a separate entry for a verb meaning “pick, gather, get,” but lists its occurrence in 1036 as meaning “adorned.” Especially at 1036, it would make less sense to read the “portalez” [gates] of the vision of the New Jerusalem to be *pyked*—as in *selected*—from “ryche plate3” [precious panels], than to read *pyked* here as either a variant spelling of *pyzt*, or, as the adjective for which this occurrence provides a citation for the MED, *þiked*—which can be used “of a gateway” to mean “furnished with pinnacles or finials.” See MED, sv. *þiked* (adj.), a.

*renewed, fresh, cheerful, youthful, etc*)<sup>41</sup>—which could, without too much stretching, refer to the adornment and not to a person at all. In this stanza, the person arrives only as accessory to her ornaments.<sup>42</sup>

The maiden's gleaming white "beau biys" is the first element of the maiden's outfit that the succeeding stanzas also address. As Gordon notes at length, the maiden's clothing, especially the "abundance of pearls," constitutes a fashionable aristocratic dress from the second half of the fourteenth century.<sup>43</sup> We can guess that the "blysande whyt" *beau biys* [fine linen] is a synecdoche for the "[b]lysnande whyt" *bleaunt* described earlier (163), that is, a sort of loose topcoat reaching nearly to the ground with side-openings up to the waist, elbow-length sleeves, and long sharply tapered "lappes" (detached strips, or hanging sleeves).<sup>44</sup> Through the side openings—which, as Gordon notes, are not depicted in the manuscript drawings of the maiden—the maiden's *cortel* is visible; "a closer-fitting garment than the *bleaunt*; it reached from neck to feet, and had close-fitting sleeves to the wrists."<sup>45</sup> Cut from the "self sute schene" [same bright raiment], the *cortel* is part of a matching outfit, distinguished from the outer garment by depth perception and the subtle shadows of the side-openings alone, producing an effect of elaborate ornamentation out of only the folds and layers of the same stuff—and, along with the *lappes*, yielding the effect of indefinite depths of differently angled cuts of fabric overlapping as they flow around this walking young body. The result in the dreamer's field of perception is twofold: in part giving the sense that it is no woman at all, but a body built up from elaborate folds and cuts of matching fabric; in part offering mimetic flashes of a pearl, with strips and panels of white fabric swirling about and catching shades of the brightly colored ornamental landscape of the dream-world like nacre. For at least this stanza, the person disappears entirely behind the adornment of the person, who is now transformed into an ornament (what does she decorate?) that is itself ornamented in turn. The *bleaunt* is adorned with "myryeste margarys at my deuyse" (199), the

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<sup>41</sup> See Gordon, *Pearl*, sv. *frech*; cf. MED, sv. *frēsh* (adj.).

<sup>42</sup> For a version of this argument less sympathetic to the dreamer, see Edward L. Condren, *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet: Beyond Phi* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 51.

<sup>43</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, n. 228.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, see also sv. *lappes*; MED, sv. *lappes*.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, n. 228.

large loose sleeves are decorated on down with a double row of pearls (202), and the cortel (recalling us to the refrain) is “[w]yth precios perle3 al vmbep3te” (204).

Attempts to construe exactly how to picture the “myryste margarys” on the *bleaunt* have yielded divergent critical readings. Gordon reads the apparently idiomatic expression *at my dewyse* by taking *dewyse* as meaning something between “opinion” (offered by previous glossers) and “desire”—giving us “as many (or as fine) as one (I) would (want to) think of.”<sup>46</sup> Stanbury offers a marginal gloss for the phrase as “in my opinion,” but also proposes that *dewyse* may refer to a heraldic emblem, citing several later medieval literary and visual art examples in which “an unmarried daughter could be represented as bearing the paternal arms.”<sup>47</sup> The options are to read the line as meaning that the *bleaunt* is adorned with “the merriest pearls by my devising” [as in, pearls that are as fine as I could want], or, with “the merriest pearls, in the shape of my heraldic device.” This latter possibility is an attractive one for readers invested in identifying the maiden as having been the daughter of the dreamer in life, and could also explain why these are the “myryste margarys.” While Gordon and Stanbury both gloss *myryste* as a superlative modifier for visual beauty (ie. fairest, loveliest), Andrew and Waldron, as well as the MED, suggest a much more general sense more closely linked with the Modern English reflex *merry* than students of ME might come to expect (students of ME being so-often wisely well-conditioned by C. S. Lewis’s wariness of the “dangerous sense”)—glossing the word as a modifier for lighthearted cheerfulness or the cause of such light pleasure and happiness.<sup>48</sup> That is, the pearls here bring a light smile to the face of the dreamer. This is notable, because, as we see above, beauty itself in *Pearl* is often too intense of a stimulus to bring simple pleasure without overwhelming the perceiver (see my note to line 181).

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 199.

<sup>47</sup> Stanbury, *Pearl*, marginal gloss on line 199, n. 199.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, sv. *myryste*; Stanbury, *Pearl*, marginal gloss, line 199; MED, sv. *mirī(e)* (adj.); Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, sv. *myr*. The MED lists “mirthful, blithe,” among the senses of the word, while Andrew and Waldron even include “bonny.” See also, C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 12-14.

Even if *deuyse* cannot be read following Stanbury, the affect that the pearl-dress produces in the dreamer seems distinct from his preceding “dred.” Although the white outfit of this stanza can be read as symbolic of the bridal garment of the spouse of Christ in the Revelation, or as reminiscent of a baptismal robe,<sup>49</sup> these pearls here seem less apocalyptic. Here, the ornamentation makes the dreamer happy, blithe, mirthful, and cheery. In contrast to the poem’s earlier depiction of the river as a prohibitive *deuyse* that partitions the landscape into separate sites and provokes the dreamer’s anxiety (line 139), the devising of these merry pearls extends the site of the pearl/maiden’s array so as to happily enfold the dreamer within it.

The pearls on the maiden’s clothing are said to be *ymbepyzt*: they are themselves set and fixed in place as much as they, in turn, place the viewer and articulate the affective space of the dreamer. [*Y*mbepyzt is a truly remarkable word in this context, bearing a prefix with specifically spatial significance and suggesting the extent to which *pyzt* already names a phenomenon of placement within in a set of certain spatial relationships. These pearls on the dress are, in fact, decorative to the extent that they are paradoxically *selected, set, or placed* in dynamic mutually decorative relationship. Folds and pearls flash in the sun and produce a site of cheer. Ornament defines the space, transforming the shifting and flowing folds of decorated garment from a roving sign of “dred” into a physically articulated and perceptible site.

**205-216:**

A pyzt coroune zet wer þat gyrl  
Of mariorys and non oþer ston,  
Hiȝe pynakled of cler quyt perle,  
Wyth flurted flowreȝ perfet vpon.  
To hed hade ho non oþer werle;  
Her here leke, al hyr vmbegon,  
Her semblaunt sade for doc oþer erle,  
Her ble more blaȝt þen whaleȝ bon.  
As schorne gold shyȝ her fax þenne schon,  
On schyldereȝ þat leghe vnlapped lyȝte.  
Her depe colour zet wonted non  
Of precios perle in porfyl pyȝte.

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<sup>49</sup> E.g. Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 28; Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 69.

Continuing with a description of the maiden’s attire and finally turning to her hair, this third stanza confirms Spearing’s sense that the appearance of the maiden and her attire “follows the normal medieval descriptive method, of accumulation of detail rather than selection”—directed here, unlike elsewhere in the *Pearl*-poet’s corpus, “to a single end, the intensification of pearl qualities.”<sup>50</sup>

The crown itself has been taken figuratively as a sign of the maiden’s residency in heaven,<sup>51</sup> as a more general crown of virginity, and, in combination with gold hair and white clothes, as a sign of the pearl-maiden’s association with the Virgin herself.<sup>52</sup> But the crown, “such as a queen might wear,”<sup>53</sup> also registers as a marker of temporal royalty in a fitt that, as Spearing observes, offers “recurring ideas of royalty.”<sup>54</sup> In his efforts to historicize the *Pearl*-poet’s corpus precisely within the court of Richard II, John M. Bowers’s argues (somewhat controversially)<sup>55</sup> that the maiden can be associated with Queen Anne (who died at 27, suddenly, and was highly beloved of the king) even as the poem praises the virginity of the succeeding child-bride Isabelle.<sup>56</sup> In the course of his argument, Bowers furnishes the example of a crown from Queen Anne’s dowry, which he describes as “an elaborate twelve-part circlet with twelve golden lilies.”<sup>57</sup> That crown is itself *py3t* with 132 pearls as well as other various gems, and bears up well to Bowers’s

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<sup>50</sup> Spearing, *The Gawain-poet*, 145; cf. Spearing, “Symbolic and Dramatic Development,” 133.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 28; Robert J. Blanch, “Precious Metal and Gem Symbolism in *Pearl*,” in *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 90.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 69; cf. Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet*, 54; John M. Bowers, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 117-120.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, n. 228.

<sup>54</sup> Spearing, “Symbolic and Dramatic Development,” 133.

<sup>55</sup> See, Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object,” 29-31: Edmondson offers a compelling set of reservations about Bowers’ attempt “to rehabilitate *Pearl* along historicist lines” that, according to Edmondson, “retreats from what is arguably most affecting about *Pearl*: the fact that its work of mourning, whether understood as personal or impersonal, factual or allegorical, exceeds its immediate object.” Edmondson refers to Bowers, *The Politics of “Pearl”*: *Court Poetry in the Ages of Richard II* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> Bowers, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet*, 115-119.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

comparison of it to the description of the pearl-maiden's crown at 205-8: both are "highly pinnaced, flowerlike in design, and encrusted with pearls."<sup>58</sup> The look, as Bowers's notes, is indeed that of high royalty, "sade for doc oþer erle" [dignified (enough) for a duke or a earl] (211).<sup>59</sup>

Whether or not Bowers is entirely correct in associating the maiden with Queen Anne, the crown certainly lends a royal aura to the maiden (and marks a significant departure from the Revelation 14 source-text).<sup>60</sup> While the crown surely does thus associate the maiden with Mary, Queen of Heaven, its imbrication within royal fashion contemporary to the poem also serves to locate the *pyzt* pearl/maiden firmly within worldly horizons of space and time—with two salient effects. 1) The specifically royal tenor of the maiden's courtly attire coupled with the prohibition of the *deuyse* of the river (139) reinforces her position within the logic of the text as the Lady of courtly Love within a frame of both the Provençal love-lyric and the love-dream (ie. of Dante). This figure is, for Sandra Pierson Prior, that which should act as a catalyst for conversion (*pace* Beatrice), but fails to do so in *Pearl*.<sup>61</sup> Following Edmondson (following Žižek following Lacan), the crown would contribute to the development of the maiden as a figure for the inaccessible and desire-perpetuating Lady Object within the "formalities of courtly love literature" in *Pearl*.<sup>62</sup> 2) The royalty of the maiden's crown also imbues a sense of royalty to the whole scene, transforming again the space between the dreamer and the pearl/maiden (including, or despite, the *deuyse*/barrier of the river), such that are all in view of the crowned maiden—placed in the array of the crown as elements of a courtly,

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet*, 170, 174, 179.

<sup>62</sup> See Edmondson, "*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object," 49, and 52: "[T]he lover 'fodolked of luf-dangere' (line 11); the elaborate code of conduct designed to contain and perpetuate desire; the merciless, vaguely mechanical Lady who assigns to her would-be lover a series of senseless ordeals—were a means of covering over the void at the heart of the symbolic order, of deflecting a traumatic encounter with *jouissance* while at the same time maintaining the illusion that such an encounter might actually take place."

and thus worldly, integral site.<sup>63</sup> The boundary of the river notwithstanding, the dreamer is within the site/sight of a crown, and so framed—at least for all social purposes—as within the same site as the pearl-maiden.

The description of the crown also further elaborates the poem’s assumptions about the interrelation of concepts of place, space, and ornament. The enjambed alliteration between *py3t* (205), *pynakled*, and *perle* (207), underscores that the *Pearl*-poet is throughout exploiting a pun that relates adjectives for decorativeness with an adjective for shape that also happens to describe a likely morphology of actual plastic decoration (ie. decorated/peaked). Such space would at once dazzle and frighten with polyfocal and polytangible perceptual hooks.<sup>64</sup>

The crown’s radial and perhaps threatening pinnacles of “cler quyt perle” presumably alternate with more receptively shaped “flurtd flowre3,” whose concave openings must contrast rhythmically with the terminal-pointing pearls, creating a discrete series (207-08). In turn, this discrete series is simultaneously interlinked as a “werle,” (209)—a noun with an uncertain sense, sometimes glossed as “garland,” but more convincingly as “circlet” (on comparison with OE *hwerfel*, “whirlpool,” *hwirfling*, “orb, something round,” and *hwerfan*, “to revolve”).<sup>65</sup> And in addition to its symbolic and aesthetic implications, this *werle*, which recalls as well the dreamer’s characterization of the pearl/maiden who “styke3 in garlande gay” (1186), also serves as a figure for the structure of a poem with interlinking groups of linked stanzas. Ian Bishop’s seminal argument that *Pearl* is more like a necklace of linked units than a single round pearl (a figure still often-invoked in descriptions of the poem’s form) settles on the term *corona* in order to describe

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<sup>63</sup> As Bogdanos similarly indicates, “the Maiden’s courtly attributes also tie her to the world and rob her of her pure transcendentality” (Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 69).

<sup>64</sup> On the function of rhetorical ornamentation as “hooks,” see Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

<sup>65</sup> See Gordon, *Pearl*, n. 209; Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, n. 209. Gordon cites vague “etymological associations of the word,” and records an alternate suggestion that *werle* derives from the stem of the verb “wear,” citing Holthausen’s proposal of OE *\*werels*. But Andrew and Waldron provide the attested OE words listed in the main text Babove, which render the gloss of “circlet” as relatively sufficient.

the poem's formal structure.<sup>66</sup> As Bishop explains, the term was used by sixteenth-century English and Italian poets to refer to a crown or garland of sonnets linked by *concatenatio*, but it can also refer to a particular type of ecclesiastical chandelier consisting of a "gilded circle set with gems of pearls" (in which the circle symbolized the New Jerusalem and the pearls its inhabitants).<sup>67</sup> *Werle* offers us a nice vernacular term for the form Bishop describes. Aside from offering an alternative to Bishop's symbolically and religiously loaded term, *werle* felicitously suggests a revolving or "whirling" *motion* (rather than links locked in a circle) that captures a sense of the poem's thematic and prosodic movement. This functionality of the *werle* as a self-reflexive figure for the form of *Pearl* not only offers insight into the aesthetic world of the poem, but also offers an important counterexample to Lynn Staley Johnson's claim that the language of *Pearl* is concerned only with matters of faith and not with "the life of poetry."<sup>68</sup>

Another hitherto unnoticed implication of Bishop's figuration lies in the paradoxical simultaneity *and* discontinuity of the series that arises from the alternating flowery flutes and pearly pinnacles of the *werle*. As a figure of the poem's structure, the *werle* thus also formalizes the problem of *spacing* as fundamental to its implicit phenomenology and aesthetics.<sup>69</sup> To be *pyzt* or even *umbepyzt* in an array or a continuous crown is to be fixed and set within certain ontological and perceptual limitations determined by one's spatial relationships and placement. There is here a relationship between pearls, but it cannot be articulated as wholly continuous or in any

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<sup>66</sup> Ian Bishop, *The Pearl in Its Setting: A Critical Study of the Structure and Meaning of the Middle English Poem* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 30. For depictions of the poem as a pearl or a pearl in its setting, see Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet*, 162; Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 48; Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 19; Bowers, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet*, 104-06; Condren, *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet*, 63; Renée Wellek, "The Pearl: An Interpretation of the Middle English Poem," in *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1966), 4; Gordon, *Pearl*, xl. Stanbury stands out as an exception in seeming to take Bishop seriously (*Pearl*, Introduction, 6).

<sup>67</sup> Bishop, *The Pearl in Its Setting*, 30-31.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet*, 209.

<sup>69</sup> When I write *spacing*, I do very much mean to invoke the work of Jacques Derrida on the grapheme, viz. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edn., trans. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 68.

way unmediated. The relationship is, instead, *decorative*—a quality that emerges here as an alternative or by-pass to the ineluctable problem of continuity and discontinuity in understanding spatial relationships.

The Maiden’s hair (following Gordon’s emendation of MS *lere* to *here*) crowns her face,<sup>70</sup> enclosing it, in “gold so clere,” just as a gold setting encloses the pearl from the opening of the poem (1-2).<sup>71</sup> The loose hair, “vnlappez,” is apposite the loose *lappez* of the *biys* which encloses the pearl/maiden’s whole body (197). At this moment the pearl-maiden is, of course, on the whole, a pearl, but also a pearl whose face appears as a separate pearl—and this on top of her appearance as a pearl wearing pearls on clothes and crown.

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<sup>70</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, n. 210; cf. Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 210 and n. 210; Stanbury, *Pearl*, line 210. Andrew and Waldron object to Gordon’s emendation on the grounds that the emendation to *here* (hair) would ruin the “logical development of the poet’s description,” and would require reading *leke* awkwardly as past tense. Instead, reading *leke* as a form of ME *lake*, meaning a type of fine linen, they take *lere-lake* as a compound for “face-linen,” which they translate as “wimple” (rendering the entire line as an adverbial clause: “her wimple entirely encompassing her”). There is, however, no way in which such a wimple could be thought to enclose *all* of the maiden at this point. First of all, it seems clear that that the maiden’s face *is* visible to the dreamer. Second, there is no need to assume that the poet would follow a single linear progression of describing crown, face, and hair in strict order without ever mixing the subjects. In fact, given the poem’s preoccupation with enclosing circlets, a description of the maiden’s head might be expected to follow the circular path of the maiden’s crown—first noting the golden hair enclosing the white face (as a pearl in a golden enclosure), then mentioning the face, then returning to the hair to fully enclose the pearl/face. *Louken* can certainly be used to discuss not only “surrounding,” but also “enclosing” (see MED, sv., *louken* v. 1). In either case, the poet breaks up this supposed logic at line 213, doubling back and returning the hair again. So we cannot assume that *lere* cannot be *here* because a discussion of hair at line 210 would disrupt the style of the stanza. Third, by line 213, when the poet returns to the hair, we learn that unlike a face-linen, which could not enclose all of the maiden, the hair hangs “vnlapped” [unbound] lightly on the shoulders, and possibly further down. So the hair very much could be said to enclose much of the maiden’s body, if not all. One might yet object to the awkwardness of reading *leke* in the past tense, yet, it seems much more likely to me that we can follow Gordon’s emendation, read *leke* as simply a present tense form, and assume that the poet slipped up in maintaining consistency of tense.

<sup>71</sup> See Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 27.

With her complexion “more blaȝt þan whalleȝ bon,” [more flashing-white than whale’s bone] (212), the maiden’s face indeed lends her a quality of overall “ossification,”<sup>72</sup> for she has out-calcified even the pearls on her own gown and crown. But while critics tend to characterize the maiden’s complexion, along with her other dazzling qualities of “death polished into plastic perfection,”<sup>73</sup> as signs of the pearl/maiden’s entry into an Ideal order incommensurate with the scope of human language,<sup>74</sup> these qualities also suggest with some concreteness what the pearl/maiden has become other than merely one or another abstraction beyond human language. As multiple critics notice, the maiden’s hair and face are here described with the same diction used previously to describe the ornamental landscape of the earthly garden and the dream world.<sup>75</sup> The hair is *schyr* like the shinning of the sun and the sharply shinning plants in the garden (28, 42). *Schyr* also recalls the bank of the river in the dream world “þat schereȝ,” and the sharply shinning sun in the dream world “[q]uen glem of glodeȝ agaynȝ hem glydeȝ/ Wyth shymerȝng schene ful schrylle þay schynde” (79-70). The hair shines as “shorne golde,” recalling the sharply angular “crystal klyffeȝ” and “bornyste syluer” foliage of the dream-world’s *adubement* (74, 77). This is not merely the maiden slipping into the Ideal at the cost of her humanity, but a becoming-landscape. Furthermore, the maiden is not merely one ornament among other ornaments *pyȝt* in the decorated landscape. Rather, she is both a *porfyl* [embroidered border] herself in the scene of the poem and one element among others set within a *porfyl*. As a kind of beatific lawn-ornament, she is become (an element of) place.

**217-228:**

Pyȝt watȝ poyned and vche a hemme  
 At honed, at sydeȝ, at ouerture,  
 Wyth whyte perle and non oþer gemme,  
 And bornyste quyte watȝ hyr uesture.  
 Bot a wonder perle wythouten wemme

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<sup>72</sup> Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 70.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>74</sup> Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object,” 51; Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 27; and Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet*, 151, 185.

<sup>75</sup> E.g. Spearing, “Symbolic and Dramatic Development,” 134; Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 73.

Immyddeȝ hyr breste watȝ sette so sure;  
 A manneȝ dom moȝt dryȝly demme,  
 Er mynde moȝt malte in hit mesure.  
 I hope no tong moȝt endure  
 No sauerly saghe say of þat syȝt,  
 So watȝ hit clene and cler and pure,  
 Þat precios perle þer hit watȝ pyȝt.

Moving on from the pearl-maiden’s *werle* and face, the description proceeds to focus on another, smaller circular enclosure, the *poyned* [wristband, ornamental cuff]. However, rather than turning out wheels within wheels, a game of “connect the dots” begins to play out between the pearls peaking the crown, those forming a design on the *biȝs*, and those encircling the *cortel*—now also running up and down each hem or seam of the garments. These ornaments parcel out the remainder of the divisions of the maiden’s body, “[a]t honed, at sydeȝ, at ouerture” (218), while making a show of the ostensible homogeneity and purity of the ornamentation as of “whyte perle and non oþer gemme” (219). This pearl/maiden has a vaguely human morphology, but we glimpse here only the shape of non-integrated parts—a hand, sides, etc.

That the garments of the maiden are also described as “bornyst quyte” is of course a redundancy, but not as a symptom of defective poetizing. The burnishable quality of the clothes suggests their aesthetic and material homogeneity with the lithified or ossified face of the maiden—as if the maiden and her clothes are all carved of one undifferentiated block of *whalleȝ bon* (212). The cut gold of the maiden’s hair and the nacre of the pearls with which she is *pyȝt* constitute the only differentiation in her coloring. Now the pearl/maiden has accrued great density and weight: “[t]he opulence of her vestment thickens and draws down to matter her spiritual identity—much like van Eyck’s heavily draped and bejeweled angels.”<sup>76</sup>

*Bot*—and much rests on this conjunction that opens line 221, as I will note below—all these qualities are overshadowed by the “[w]onder perle wythouten wemme/ Immyddeȝ hyr breste” (221-22). Why is the wonder-pearl wondrous and what is its relationship to the other pearls; and, how is the wonder-pearl *pyȝt*?

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<sup>76</sup> Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 69.

Critics tend to myopically emphasize the significance of the *wonder perle* to the extent of losing sight of the ekphrasis of the maiden's appearance that constitutes the rest of this fitt.<sup>77</sup> This pearl has thus been assigned allegorical and/or symbolic significance worked out as distinct from that of the maiden or the larger lost pearl/maiden of the poem—often by taking the maiden's auto-exegesis at her word (733-44), and reading the wonder-pearl in relation to the biblical figure of the "pearl of great price."<sup>78</sup>

But Spearing was right, I think, to follow René Wellek's breakthrough claim that the symbolism of *Pearl* "is not simple and cannot be solved by a one-to-one identification with some abstract virtue."<sup>79</sup> Spearing's dramatization theory, which influentially explores the pearl as a constantly shifting symbol, accordingly maintains that, "to attempt to distinguish the symbolic significance of this one pearl from that of the pearl-maiden herself would be to misunderstand, indeed to resist, the poet's methods."<sup>80</sup> On its own, however, the "wonder perle" does function, with some degree of certainty, as the poster child *par excellence* for the so-called "inexpressibility topos" of *Pearl*.<sup>81</sup> J. Allan Mitchell provides perhaps the best account of this particular pearl in this regard: "...the pearl's otherworldly aspect is essentially non-cognitive and unrepresentable—though it is experienced, since the dreamer certainly encounters *something*."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> E.g. Britton J. Harwood, "Pearl as Diptych," 68-69; Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> E.g. Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 28. See also, Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Meaning of the Middle English *Pearl*," in *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 38-9. Cf. Bishop, *Pearl in Its Setting*, 92-3.

<sup>79</sup> Wellek, "The *Pearl*: An Interpretation," 34.

<sup>80</sup> Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 145.

<sup>81</sup> In addition to Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, see J. Allan Mitchell, "The Middle English *Pearl*: Figuring the Unfigurable," *Chaucer Review* 35.1 (2000): 86-111; Anne Howland Schotter, "Vernacular Style and the Word of God: The Incarnational Art of *Pearl*," in *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Anne Howland Schotter (New York, 1984), 23-34; Ann Chalmers Watts, "Pearl, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss," *PMLA* 99 (1984): 26-40.

<sup>82</sup> Mitchell, "Figuring the Unfigurable," 92. Mitchell argues, in fact, that the incommensurability between temporal and figural logic is at the heart of the poem (88, 108).

Key to understanding the dreamer’s specific expression of the pearl’s ineffability is his insistence that “a manne3 dom mo3t dry3ly demme,/ Er mynde mo3t malte in hit mesure” (223-24). The word *malte* here preserves an early/dialectical infinitive form, which primarily means “to melt” (with reference to ice, snow, wax, metal, food, etc.—a range strikingly similar to that of PDE *melt*), and comes to mean, figuratively, “to comprehend” (as Gordon as well as Andrew and Waldron gloss the word)—the implicit metaphor figuring the act of understanding as an action of the (hard) mind or heart *softening* or *growing tender* (ie. *melting*—and so being overcome by the prevailing argument, or, alternately, able to conform to its (metaphorical) shape).<sup>83</sup> So when the dreamer claims that one’s judgment (*dom*) might incessantly consider (*demme*) the wonder-pearl before the mind might “malte in hit mesure” [soften to its measure] (224), his diction implies that comprehension of the wonder-pearl could only occur after a long effort—not an effort of disembodied cognition of the symbolic, but of felt physical perception (as softening/melting), an *aesthetic* activity.

The dreamer’s declaration of the insufficiency of language as a mode of relation to the pearl (225-26), thus does not necessarily locate all of the unspeakable qualities of the pearl on the side of significance, even if the interpretation of the maiden herself (as noted above) seems to authorize the general trend of modern exegetes. Both Lynn Staley Johnson and Sandra Pierson Prior call attention to the importance of the knotty status of the pearl(s) of the poem understood in terms of the Augustinian distinction between things and/or signs.<sup>84</sup> Now, the wonder-pearl is a *res* used as a *signum*, while the other smaller pearls of the maiden’s attire are things that may or may not also function as signs. Most criticism that focuses on the ineffability of the wonder-pearl implicitly assumes that its unendurable quality results from its singular status as a *signum*—specifically, from the incommensurability (with creaturely experience) of that *for which it is a sign*. But nothing in the reaction of the dreamer suggests that we entirely neglect the status of this pearl as also a *res* that must be apprehended first by the senses, a thing whose unspeakability may very well in fact result from its thingly qualities.

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<sup>83</sup> MED, sv. *melten* (v.), 1a, 1b, 2a.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain Poet*, 169-70; Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited*, 45-6.

One would expect the sign concerned with the absolute spiritual status of the maiden to be itself, in the first case, sufficient and absolute. The wonder-pearl marks the space where “pearl” as a perfect sign of the maiden indistinguishably meets the maiden’s thingly pearls. But—and now we return to the *bot* I mention above—the wonder-pearl appears amidst a multiplicity of pearls. It is introduced with the conjunction “bot” (221), contrasting it, as an exception, to all the other pearls of the attire. This pearl cannot be spoken of, it would seem, because it is “clene and cler and pure” (228), its concrete physicality sublimated into unrepeatably ideality. This pearl is perfect—it is, “wythouten wemme” (221), incomprehensibly sufficient. One might expect the singular and ideal wonder-pearl to be like the “precious perle wythouten spot” (e.g. 48), whose pun (as both “imperfection, mark, sin,” and as “place, location”) suggests that to be without imperfection (or to be so rendered by divine grace) also means that one no longer has earthly, physically spatial parameters or coordinates.<sup>85</sup>

But the *bot* that introduces the wonder-pearl establishes that the pearl is *pyzt* only in negative relation to all the pearls coating the maiden’s attire, with at least two important consequences. 1) The wonder-pearl is not self-sufficient, even if *by degrees* it is *more* than the other non-wonder-pearls. Its wonder emerges, at least in part, only by contrast with the numerous other pearls against which it appears as the mark of surplus or excess decoration. Its function is thus not independent of the multitude of smaller pearls. Even the signifiatory function of the wonder-pearl only emerges as signifiatory in its difference from the minor pearls. 2) For the same reasons, the wonder-pearl need not be *wondrous* because of its ostensible unendurable signified or because it is “liberated from the spatial constrictions of earthly grave-yards,”<sup>86</sup> but precisely because of its inherence within the problems of space to the extent that it functions as a site-articulating decoration. The iteration of the refrain

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain Poet*, 168-69. In a significant divergence from Johnson, who argues that the dreamer is unable to read “spot” figuratively, I suggest here that he gets the pun, but does not find in it a consolation. For the most forceful precedent to Johnson’s reading of the poem as highly orthodox *consolatio*, See Conley, “*Pearl* and a Lost Tradition,” in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, 50-72. My reading here thus takes *Pearl* as much more of a poem of mourning and loss; see Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object”.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *Voice of the Gawain Poet*, 170.

in this stanza, “þat precios perle þer it watȝ pyȝt” (228), constitutes the delayed subject of the sentence beginning at line 225, and so refers specifically to the wonder-pearl. The same sentence that asserts the ineffability of this pearl simultaneously and implicitly asserts that the wonder-pearl appears within the constraints of a pitched site in finite space, “sette so sure” (222). The wonder-pearl, too, is *pyȝt*. And, it is as a *pyȝt* thing that it constitutes a sight/site that “no tong moȝt endure” (225).

The wonder-pearl, it seems, raises the very question of the relation of finitude to spatiality and to place. It is overwhelming because it is the vector or node by which the dreamer is interpolated into the site-defining array. Representational speech will not suffice as a response because such representational speech cannot function factually as a spatial or locative relationship. And, this is productive of such dread (181) because the dreamer could only possibly respond to the wonder-pearl in its facticity (as the horizon/node interpolating him into a decorative site) by decorating in turn—by the frightening prospect of becoming *pyȝt* himself, merely another pearl in the “araye ryalle” (191). As Johnson explains of the dreamer, “the source of his problem is death.”<sup>87</sup>

**229-240:**

Pyȝt in perle, þat precios pyce  
 On wyþer half water com doune þe schore.  
 No gladder gome heþen into Grece  
 Þen I, quen ho on brymme wore.  
 Ho watȝ me nerre þen aunte or nece;  
 My joy forþy watȝ much þe more.  
 Ho profered me speche, þat special spece,  
 Enclynande lowe in wommon lore,  
 Caȝt of her coroun of grete tresore  
 And haylsed me wyth a lote lyȝte.  
 Wel watȝ me þat euer I watȝ bore  
 To sware þat swete in perlez pyȝt!

The scope of the scene in the final stanza of the fitt widens out again to that of the landscape, but now with the maiden doubly situated, locating her as both “[p]yȝt in perle” (229), and moving down to the shore “[o]n wyþer half water” [on the other side of the water] (230).

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 145.

That the maiden is again called a *pyece* here (a word that can refer to a human individual but carries a primary sense and an overwhelming connotation of a fragment or partial *object*),<sup>88</sup> echoing the form of the refrain in the first stanza of this fitt (cf. 192), reinforces the sense in which she is placed in the landscape as an ornament or as fragment of a larger decoration. In that first stanza of Fitt IV this *pyece* is described in terms that recall the description of the jeweler's lost pearl from the first stanza of the poem as "[s]o smope, so smal, so seme slyzt" (190), and the refrain of *pyece* here calls up again that jewelry-ification of the maiden. While in the first stanza, the maiden, appearing, "[r]lysez up in hir araye ryalle" (191), here, she moves "down the schore," as if completing the swing of a pearl pendant. In this way, too, the happiness of the dreamer, "quen ho on brymme wore" (232), is linked explicitly with the maiden's appearance as situated within that landscape.

The dreamer himself articulates his intimacy with the maiden in familial terms, as, "me nerre þen aunte or nece" (233). A critical debate about the nature of this relationship was once intimately linked with a debate about whether to read *Pearl* as an allegory or as an elegy, with early adherents to the elegy-approach heavily invested in speculation about the biography of the poet and the historical death of an actual person.<sup>89</sup> For a while, Gordon seemed to have partly settled the debate, arguing that the dreamer's relation to the maiden must be that of a parent<sup>90</sup>—and arguing that, although it is probable that the poet drew on genuine experiences of sorrow, "to the particular criticism of the poem, this decision is not of the first importance."<sup>91</sup> Two relatively more recent critical efforts have both upset this consensus despite their widely divergent approaches—Bowers' historicizing effort to identify the maiden with

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<sup>88</sup> MED, sv. *pece* (n.), 1, 7.

<sup>89</sup> The most prominent points of biographical speculation included those of Sir Israel Gollancz, in his edition of the *Pearl* (London: Nutt, 1891), and those of Ten Brink, Charles Osgood, and Mother Angela Carson. The best accounts of these early debates are those of Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet* 127-37; Wellek, "The *Pearl*: An Interpretation," 3-20; and Bowers, *An Introduction*, 117-121.

<sup>90</sup> Gordon, *Pearl*, xiii.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi. Wellek continued to disagree with this, arguing that only personal loss and consolation could have generated the poem, ("The *Pearl*: An Interpretation," 23).

Queen Anne,<sup>92</sup> and Edmondson’s psychoanalytic exploitation of the ambiguity implied by the phrase “nerre þen aunte or nece” to argue that the maiden, “(mis)recognized” from afar, emerges as, if not “the dreamer’s exact double,” then, “in the manner of object *a*, as an uncanny paradox.”<sup>93</sup>

It is, in any case, as a very intimate relation that the maiden is thus able to solicit speech from the dreamer who, one stanza before, claimed an inability to speak before the wonder-pearl. The nature of this intimacy may not be unrelated to the maiden’s total transformation, at this point, into a kind of high-status lawn ornament. If not the double of the dreamer, the maiden constitutes an integral element of the landscape and so—and in spite of the *deuys* of the river—contributes to the array of wonder that environs the dreamer (an array that includes the pearl-gravel over which the dreamer has walked (81-82) as much as it does the pearly attire of the maiden that he cannot directly touch). The maiden is here all decoration when she provokes him to speak.

The localizable qualities produced here by decoration are all the more localizable in that this final stanza of Fitt IV echoes the refrain of Fitt III (*more*) yet another time as the narrator explains that “[m]y joy forþy wat3 much þe more.” Here, *more* takes the position of the third repetition of this stanza’s *b*-rhyme, resonating most immediately with line 232: *quen ho on brymme wore*. Most directly, this rhyme prosodically links an adjective describing *excess* (*more*) with a finite form of a being-verb (*wore*, pa. subj. sg. of *ben*), thus yoking together excess and *substantial being*. Additionally the rhyme directs us back more generally to the line describing the maiden’s location, on the bank, where she takes her position in/as an array of adornment within the ornamental landscape. Despite the narrator’s assertion of familial intimacy with the maiden, the prosody draws a perhaps stronger affective link between the narrator’s joy, the substantiality of excess, and the maiden’s position within an ornamentally configured spatiality. Here, recalling the herbal *huy*l and the flowers whose scent lures the dreamer to sleep in the first fitt of the poem (41, 57-60), the dreamer refers to the maiden as a *special spece* (a precious spice/herb)—a sort of olfactory ornament. So, even when separated from the maiden by the *deuys* of the stream, the

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<sup>92</sup> Bowers, *An Introduction*, 110-126. See also Bowers, *The Politics of “Pearl”*: *Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).

<sup>93</sup> Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object,” 50.

dreamer is not by any means cut off from being set within this array where even the *atmosphere* is apparently ornamental in force.

Yet, for all these “artificial” elements that coalesce in and as this topos, the scene is not, it should be noted, *unnatural*. Nor is the modern *nature/artifice* opposition taken on, rationalized, debunked, or re-inscribed. It is simply side-stepped. The maiden is “enclyndande” (236)—a term that describes her posture of courtly greeting, but that also functions as a basic concept of medieval natural philosophy, referring to the *natural inclination* of beings in terms of both moral propensity and physical position within the cosmos.<sup>94</sup> For all the narrator’s attempt to record the intensity of his response to the appearance of the maiden with a very slowed-down, incremental set of expanding visual and temporal frames, it is in the end very little that snags and entangles the narrator in the linguistic relations to the maiden that will occupy the central fits of the poem. Here, decoration transforms affect into space and relative position, and the logic of the site drives the materiality of desire.

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<sup>94</sup> See C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, reprint 2005), 141: “[w]hat we call gravitation—for the medieval, kindly enclining.” See also, MED, sv. *enclinen* (v.), 1., 2a., 2b., 6., 8a., 8b. Play between these senses is particularly visible in Chaucer. Viz. Chaucer, “Boece,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3.m.2.3, 4.m.6.9, 5.pr.3.190; “House of Fame,” 734; “Monk’s Tale,” B. 3092.