

FITT 7: BLYSSE / (ENVY)

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Introduction

While medievals were unfamiliar with the term “emotional intelligence,”¹ they nevertheless were acutely invested in the ethical project of helping themselves and others cultivate a “healthy” emotional disposition through willful acts—a project that undergirds the modern “emotional intelligence movement.”² Of course, any standard of “emotional intelligence,” whether tacit or explicit, is a cultural construct and therefore biased towards the ideals of those with the privilege to construct culture. Indeed, medieval scholastic theologians (not unlike modern theorists of emotional intelligence) jealously guarded their privilege, not only to imply when and where their audience ought to experience a given emotion, but also to define emotion itself, as well as its role in the *psychomachia* of everyday life.³ In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, scholastic

¹ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 3–12. According to Goleman’s mixed model, “emotional intelligence” is a complex network of competencies involving self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy and motivation. Although it has gained considerable popularity in both academic and popular circles, the concept of emotional intelligence has met with substantial criticism. See, for example, Edwin A. Locke, “Why Emotional Intelligence is an Invalid Concept,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 26.4 (2005), 425–31.

² See Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1–31; Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); 119–206 and Fiona Somerset, “Excitative Speech: Theories of Emotive Response from Richard Fitzralph to Margery Kempe,” in *The Vernacular Spirit*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld Kosinski, Duncan Robertson and Nancy Warren (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 59–79.

³ Simo Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 177–255.

theologians such as John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham increasingly espoused a voluntarist theology according to which emotions are indirectly controllable and, consequently, “one can learn to feel them in a proper manner by forming habits which change the conditions of the passions.”⁴ For voluntarists, acts of volition are capable not only of managing involuntary emotional reactions, but also of changing the subject’s emotional disposition and, resultantly, her subsequent emotions. In this regard, their ideas live on to this day. Modern psychologists, for example, often treat phobia by prompting patients to willfully confront feared objects in order to gradually reduce their emotional aversion thereto.⁵

In medieval England, of course, explorations of the relationship between the will and emotion were certainly not the sole province of lofty, Latinate scholastics. With the skyrocketing of literacy rates in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a new brand of devotional literature—Nicholas Watson’s “vernacular theology”—flourished throughout England, much of which directly assesses the extent to which willful acts can dictate one’s emotional disposition.⁶ Given the prominence of voluntarist ideas in late medieval England, I understand Cotton Nero A.x—containing *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*)—as a series of exemplary narratives designed to help their audience willfully construct an ethical emotional disposition. Yet these narratives tend to portray, not characters who un-problematically emote ethically, but ones who struggle to emote well: *Pearl*’s dreamer erratically swings from melancholia, to bliss, to dread, to envy and back to melancholia; characters in *Cleanness* are violently punished for their “unlawful” enjoyment; Jonah learns that patience amounts to willfully enduring anger at God; and Gawain is compelled by a love of his own life, and concomitant fear of losing it, to withhold the green girdle from

⁴ Knuuttila, *Emotions*, 256–86.

⁵ Thomas D. Parsons and Albert A. Rizzo, “Affective Outcomes of Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy for Anxiety and Specific Phobias: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Behavioral Therapy and Experimental Psychology* 39.3 (2008), 250–61.

⁶ See Nicholas Watson, “Introduction: King Solomon’s Tablets,” in *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity*, eds. Nicholas Watson and Fiona Somerset (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 1–14; and Vincent Gillespie, “Vernacular Theology,” in *Middle English: Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 401–20.

Bertilak on the third and final day of their “exchange of winnings game,” though he eventually re-ingratiates himself both to Bertilak and denizens of his own homo-social habitus, Arthur’s court, through two public displays of shame.⁷ According to these narratives neither positive feelings (bliss, mirth and love), nor uncomfortable feelings (envy, fear, anger and shame) are extraneous bodily conditions to be avoided, obfuscated or repressed. Instead, they are valuable—if potentially dangerous—ecstasies and adversities to be worked through in order to achieve a more finely tuned emotional disposition. In compiling these narratives, Cotton Nero A.x vies to teach us, not only how (not) to willfully craft emotional relationships with terrestrial and celestial others, but also that the capacity to emote ethically is not an innate character-trait, but an art-form that we must deliberately cultivate through a lifelong process of trial-and-error. The pedagogical character of these narratives, therefore, accords well with scholastic and voluntarist devotional programs that hold willful acts capable of habituating the passions.⁸

The process of trial-and-error through which Cotton Nero A.x’s characters struggle to emote well is nowhere more pronounced than in *Pearl*, much of which is spent detailing either the dreamer’s mercurial emotional state or the pearl-maiden’s critique thereof. Some critics argue that the dreamer successfully accomplishes the work of mourning over the course of *Pearl*.⁹ Others read him as obstinately refusing, right up until the end of the poem, to auto-affect an identificatory shift from a melancholic, courtly lover of the pearl-maiden to a universalist, Christian lover of the corporate church.¹⁰ While in some ways opposed, these two critical strains both presuppose that the pearl-maiden’s didactic agenda is to coax the dreamer from a melancholic obsession with his lost love-object to an

⁷ For in-depth analyses of the political uses of misogyny in *SGGK*, see Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 107–36; and Randy P. Schiff, *Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and Nationalist Literary History* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011), 72–99.

⁸ For Thomas Aquinas’ scholastic account of the relation between passions and habit, see *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 59. a. 1–5.

⁹ Ann W. Astell, “Mourning and Marriage in Saint Bernard’s *Sermones* and in *Pearl*,” in *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 121, 134–35.

¹⁰ David Aers, “The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*,” *Speculum* 68.1 (1993): 54–73.

acceptance of his loss. To the contrary, I argue below that the dreamer evinces exactly this brand of acceptance in the poem's seventh fitt and that the pearl-maiden subsequently does everything in her power to render the dreamer desirous, even envious, of her existence in a celestial world characterized, ironically enough, by a complete lack of envy. Envy, according to medieval preaching manuals, consists of "sadness about someone else's happiness and glee about someone else's ruin or adversity."¹¹ Of course, the pearl-maiden neither explicitly tells the dreamer to be sad at her happiness, nor implies that he ought to be. On the other hand, she neither tells him to be happy for her happiness, nor implies that worldly subjects are capable of such a sympathetic identification with heavenly bliss. Instead, she implies that terrestrial subjects ought to endure, or work through, their inevitable envy of the endless, communal bliss enjoyed by celestial subjects in order to comprehend, rather than transcend, the ontological gap between a worldly life replete with envious desires and a heavenly afterlife entirely bereft thereof.

Where jealousy involves "the sense that someone else is receiving more attention and affection from one's love object,"¹² envy entails discomfort with another's good fortune and is therefore a sort of anti-love. Unlike preaching manuals which unequivocally condemn envy, *Pearl* does not outlaw this anti-love and even encourages it insofar as it fuels a desire to perform the requisite good behavior in order to get to heaven. Rather than castigating envy as a necessarily sinful hatred of the good, *Pearl* proposes a point of identity between discomfort with another's good and the ethical project of eschewing sin. In *Pearl*, envy can be ethical. Envy, from the Latin *in-videre*, signifies a negative form of vision. Hence, the eyes of Dante's envious are sewed shut with iron wire.¹³ Since *Pearl* characterizes the envy felt by a terrestrial, Christian devotee towards those already enshrined in heaven as potentially productive, we might therefore read the overt and complex visual aesthetics of *Pearl's* depiction of the New Jerusalem as designed to overcome the

¹¹ *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. and trans. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 149.

¹² Salman Akhtar, *The Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books Ltd, 2009), 155.

¹³ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Everyman's Library, 1995), Canto XIII, ll. 67–72.

logistical difficulties of envying celestial and therefore invisible others.¹⁴

Commentary, Part I: The Dreamer Speaks

By the beginning of *Pearl's* seventh fitt, the dreamer has already been twice rebuked by his interlocutor, the pearl-maiden: first for presuming to be permanently, rather than temporarily, united with his lost object (257–76), and again for his melancholic reaction to her first rebuke, which she condemns as blasphemous (289 – 324). Fittingly, then, the sixth fitt's concatenation word is “deme,” which can alternately mean judge, consider, ordain or condemn.¹⁵ As with the poem's other fitts, the seventh begins by echoing the previous fitt's concatenation word:

Thenne demed I to þat damyselle:
“Ne worþe no wrabe vnto my Lorde,
If rapely I raue, spornande in spelle.”
(361–63)¹⁶

Although the pearl-maiden assigns the right to make judgments exclusively to God in the final line of the sixth fitt—“Al lys in Hym to dyzt and deme” (360)—, in the first line of the seventh fitt the dreamer adopts the position of the judge (“demed I”). Of course, his somewhat presumptuous judgment could certainly be taken as an example of the dreamer's continual misapprehension of the pearl-maiden's lessons, which A. C. Spearing and his followers find comic.¹⁷ On the other hand, it can just as easily be read as an assertion of the categorical difference between the ontological position of the pearl-maiden, who openly speaks as God's proxy and can therefore easily respect his rightful place as universal judge, and the dreamer, whose distance from divinity forces him to constantly

¹⁴ I am deeply indebted to Nicola Masciandaro for many of the points in this paragraph.

¹⁵ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “demen.”

¹⁶ All quotes from the poems of Cotton Nero A.x are taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 5th ed., eds. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

¹⁷ A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 149–52.

engage in a speculative, if not blasphemous, evaluations of God's will.

The dreamer's judgment is often translated into the jussive mood: "Let the Lord not be wrathful / If I hastily speak foolishly, stumbling in speech."¹⁸ Such constructions are frequent enough in Middle English to amply justify this translation. It is possible, however, to read the statement in the deductive mood, signifying something like: "It is not worth my Lord's wrath . . ." According to the former translation the dreamer meekly beseeches God not to be angry with him; according to the latter he confidently declares that God will not. This ambivalence is emblematic of the dreamer's terrestrial predicament. God monopolizes the right "to dryȝt and deme," but often opts against making either the grounds or results of his judgments readily apparent to terrestrial subjects, leaving the dreamer to simultaneously speculate that God would not be angry with him for speculating and enjoin God not to be angry with him for speculating. The wrath of God, of course, is a recurring theme throughout Cotton Nero A.x, especially in *Cleanness* and *Patience*. Eric J. Johnson brilliantly argues that *Cleanness* and *Patience* equip their audience with a *modus timendi* (mode of fearing) according to which worldly subjects ought to perpetually dread God's judgment without presuming to know exactly what that judgment entails.¹⁹ Likewise, Lawrence Clopper, David Wallace and David K. Coley all argue that the God of Cotton Nero A.x, for all his apparent anthropomorphism, is utterly foreign to the humans whose fate he controls entirely.²⁰ Clopper, for example, argues that Cotton Nero

¹⁸ See, for example Casey Finch's translation in *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, 3rd ed., eds. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 361, ll. 367–69.

¹⁹ Eric J. Johnson, "In dryȝt dred and daunger': The Tradition and Rhetoric of Fear in *Cleanness* and *Patience*," Ph.D. Dissertation, 2000, University of York, 65–90 (on *modus timendi*), 91–206 (on *Cleanness* and *Patience*).

²⁰ Lawrence M. Clopper, "The God of the *Gawain*-Poet," *Modern Philology* 94.1 (1996): 1–18; David Wallace, "*Cleanness* and the Terms of Terror," in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives on the Pearl-Poet*, eds. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1991), 93–104; David K. Coley, "Remembering Lot's Wife/Lot's Wife Remembering: Trauma, Witness, and Representation in *Cleanness*," *Exemplaria* 24.2 (2012): 342–63; and David K. Coley, "*Pearl* and the Narrative of Pestilence," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35 (2013): 209–62.

A.x deliberately mis-anthropomorphizes God in order to demonstrate “that those who imagine God to be an irrational or arbitrary being suffer from a profound misconception of the absoluteness and otherness of God at the same time that they fail to recognize God’s merciful, covenantal relationship with mankind.”²¹ Whether or not Cotton Nero A.x as a whole inspires hope that it is possible to either understand or predict God’s oscillation between wrath and mercy, it certainly depicts terrestrial existence as a continual and dangerous effort to do just that, an effort in which the dreamer partakes through his speculative judgment.

The dreamer excuses himself for his potentially unwise speech by describing the emotional condition from which it arose:

“My herte watz al wyth mysse remorse,
As wallande water gotz out of welle.
I do me ay in Hys myserecorde.”
(364–66)

When read in tandem, the first two above-quoted lines constitute a simile through which the dreamer accounts for his melancholic disposition: Emptiness (“mysse”) afflicted his heart with remorse (“remorde”), which flowed out uncontrollably through his speech, just as rushing water flows out of a well. Interestingly, however, the second two above-quoted lines make a very different simile: Just as rushing flows out of a well, the dreamer throws himself at God’s mercy. Once again, the ambivalence of these lines expresses the maddening indeterminacy of all the dreamer’s worldly actions. His emotional state compels him to simultaneously revel in sadness at worldly loss and to abandon himself to God’s mercy. For the dreamer, however, this coincidence is by no means paradoxical—as long as his expressions of grief end in an appeal for God’s mercy they cannot be sinful, since, according to his understanding of Christian soteriology at this point in the poem, it’s better to have sinned and repented than to have never sinned at all.²²

Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron posit that these lines allude to Ps. 21:15: “I am poured out like water; and all my bones are scattered. My heart is become like wax melting in the midst of

²¹ Clopper, “The God of the Gawain Poet,” 1.

²² The pearl-maiden thoroughly refutes this view in Fitt 12.

my bowels.”²³ Just as *Pearl’s* dreamer alternately complains of his internal emptiness and entreats God to mercifully forgive the hasty speech his suffering engenders, the narrator of Ps. 21 oscillates between desperate complaints that God has forsaken him and dogged faith that the same God will deliver him from peril. Both narrators dramatize a worldly wavering between sinful despair at God’s incomprehensibility and penitential faith in God’s mercy. Indeed, Middle English devotional writings frequently associate both sinful and penitential emotions with effusive wells. The author of *Jacob’s Well*, for example, likens the pre-penitential subject’s body to “a schelde pytt” (a shallow pit), filled with “þe dedly watyr” of sin, and proposes to render it, through “long labour,” a “deepe welle,” flowing with the waters of God’s grace.²⁴ According to *Jacob’s Well*, therefore, the heart-well can either gush penitential desires or deadly sins. The dreamer’s problem in *Pearl* is that he has no way of being certain exactly what gushes out of him when he emotes.

After throwing himself at God’s mercy, the dreamer segues somewhat abruptly from his declarative, perhaps even performative, display (“I do me ay in Hys myserecorde”), to an imperative address directly to the pearl-maiden, enjoining her to stop rebuking him, comfort him and pitifully reflect on her culpability for his melancholic state:

“Rebuke me neuer wyth wordez felle
Pa3 I forloyne, my dere endorde,
Bot kypez me kyndely your coumforde,
Pytosly þenkande vpon þysse:
Of care and me 3e made acorde,
Pat er watz grounde of alle my blysse.”
(367–72)

According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), the dreamer’s use of the adjective “felle” marks the pearl-maiden’s “wordez” as violent, angry or cruel.²⁵ Under the same sub-definition (5b), the *MED* lists a line of *Cleanness* in which Daniel refers to the damning figures written on Belshazzar’s wall as “felle sa3es” (1737), which suggests

²³ All Biblical quotation are from the Douay-Rheims edition.

²⁴ *Jacob’s Well: An English Treatise on the Cleansing of Man’s Conscience*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS o.s. 115 (London: Trubner, 1900), 1–3.

²⁵ *MED*, s.v. “felle.”

that the dreamer—like Daniel and unlike Belshazzar—has a sense of the damning nature of the celestial message that he receives, though he—unlike Daniel and like Belshazzar—seems to have no desire to heed it. Instead, he rearticulates his melancholic grief by defending his right to “forloyne,” or wander astray. To exemplify its entry on “forloinen,” the *MED* can only muster the above-quoted usage and two from *Cleanness*: The first describes God’s knowledge that the antediluvian humans “forloyned fro þe ryzt wayez” (282), which causes him to flood the world; and the second describes God’s wrath at the Jews of Jerusalem who “forloyn her fayth and folw3ed oþer goddes” (1165), which causes him to allow Belshazzar’s father, Nebuchadnezzar, to ransack Solomon’s temple.²⁶ For the *Pearl*-poet, it seems, “forloyn”-ing can and often does mark an unforgivable crime worthy of God’s wrath. Despite this ominous valance, *Pearl*’s dreamer tries to have his cake and eat it too, so to speak, when he asks to “forloyn” without being rebuked by “wordez felle.” If these lines, once again, can be taken to signify the dreamer’s aloof misapprehension of his relation to celestial others, they can also be read as a tacit admission of his grief’s illegality and a not un-humble request that the pearl-maiden allow him to work through his grief, rather than eschew or repress it for fear of divine retribution.

The dreamer asks-demands for the pearl-maiden to comfort him “kyndely.” The semantic valance of the Middle English “kynde,” of course, is much wider than that of its modern counterpart, “kind.” In addition to benevolence, it also signifies nature and the natural order.²⁷ In fact, “kynde” can even be used, as it is in *Piers Plowman*, as a name for God.²⁸ The dreamer’s appeal to the pearl-maiden’s kindness, then, suggests that the natural, even God-like, thing for the pearl-maiden to do is to give him the comfort he feels he deserves. Extending his request-injunction, he asks her to meditate with pity (“[p]ytosly”) on the fact that she, who once was the “grounde” of all his bliss, has accorded him with “care,” which can mean, among other things, sorrow, pain, fear, grief or lovesickness. The dreamer’s ostensibly theological call for pity recalls the rhetoric of courtly love: If the male lover is tortured by lovesickness, it is only right that the female object show him pity by

²⁶ *MED*, s.v. “forloinen.”

²⁷ *MED*, s.v. “kynde.”

²⁸ See for example, *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, ed. George Kane (Berkeley: The Athlone Press, 1988), 10, 1–45; cf. B.9.1–60 and C.10.128–55.

reciprocating his love, be she willing or not, dead or alive. This is, of course, insidious logic. As David Aers points out, it is precisely through this courtly logic that Troilus at once ensnares Criseyde in the ethical responsibility to love him and eschews his own responsibility for his love-afflicted actions:

[J]ust as Troilus blamed the imprisoned Criseyde for his grief, telling her she remains responsible for his survival, or for his death, even so the narrator in *Pearl* blames the dead human being, the ground of all his bliss, for abandoning him to his lonely mourning In this familiar courtly language the lost object fulfills the traditional feminine role of nurturing life source; she is the man's essential physician without whom his life becomes a disease, a nightmare of emptiness and tormented dreams, the state which was explored by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* and in the *Book of the Duchess* and, in its more self-righteously violent outcomes, by Shakespeare in *Othello*.²⁹

The dreamer *tries* to force the pearl-maiden opposite himself in an uneven gender binary in which the lady is ethically obligated to auto-affect love for the male courtly lover, who is free to “forloyn” to his heart’s content, ethically responsible for neither his own actions, nor, even more alarmingly, their effect on the lady’s existence. But does he succeed in doing so?

Continuing his project of assigning the pearl-maiden culpability for his emotional state, the dreamer characterizes her as a source of intermittent and unpredictable pleasure and pain, not unlike the Boethian world:³⁰

“My blysse, my bale, 3e han ben boþe,
 Bot much þe bygger 3et watz my mon;
 Fro þou watz wroken fro vch a woþe,
 I wyste neuer quere my perle watz gon.
 Now I hit se, now lepez my loþe.”

(373–77)

²⁹ Aers, “The Self Mourning,” 57.

³⁰ Ancius Boethius, *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

The dreamer's "blysse"/"bale" dichotomy anticipates *SGGK*'s narrator's description of Britain's constant oscillation between "blysse and blunder" (18). Despite her heavenly status, the dreamer continues to conflate the pearl-maiden with *his* worldly emotions about her. Indeed, he calls her neither "the source of my bliss and bale," nor "the object of my bliss and bale," but simply "my bliss and bale." In so doing, the dreamer recalls *The Book Duchess's* equally melancholic black knight, who identifies his lost love as "my worldes blysse."³¹ Unlike Chaucer's black knight, however, the dreamer finds (temporary) happiness in being reunited with his lost love. While Aers reads the dreamer as obstinately clinging to a courtly worldview for his entire dream, the above-quoted lines hint at progress: "From the time you were delivered ('wroken') from each and every torment ('vch a woþe')," the dreamer says, "I was unaware where my pearl had gone." He initially did not know that the pearl-maiden had found such blissful relief, though he now does. When he expresses his own relief, then, the dreamer is not just reveling in being temporarily reunited with his lost love, but also in finally knowing something about where his lost pearl had gone. If he sometimes speaks as a courtly lover, utterly unconcerned with his lady's subjectivity beyond whether or not she assuages his discomfort, the dreamer struggles to establish a less self-centered, un-envious relation to the lady by expressing his happiness at hers.

Equipped with his newfound optimism, the dreamer tries to end his argument with the pearl-maiden. He does not exculpate her for her role in producing his worldly pain, but he reiterates his call for comfort in a manner simultaneously courtly and theologically astute:

"And quen we departed we wern at on;
God forbede we be now wroþe;
We meten so selden by stok oper ston.
Pa3 cortaysly 3e carpe con,
I am bot mol and manerez mysse;
Bot Crystes mersy and Mary and Jon,
Pise arn þe grounde of alle my blysse."
(378–84)

³¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 333, l. 209.

Although he begins by recalling the past, worldly love that he once shared with the pearl-maiden (“we wern at on”), the dreamer employs this recollection to justify his present desire for both parties to abandon their anger and accomplish something productive in the immediate future of their rare, even miraculous, meeting. As we’ve seen, in Cotton Nero A.x, wrath is a judgment of guilt, occurring when a subject—be it man or God—recognizes a transgression. When he calls for himself and the pearl-maiden to mitigate their anger, therefore, the dreamer expresses, at the least, his desire to stop blaming the pearl-maiden for the sadness her absence has caused. Despite this un-Troilus-like ambition, the dreamer does not abandon his courtly parlance. To the contrary, he acts most Gawain-like when he modestly declares himself deficient in both speech (“mol”) and manners. Just as Gawain repeatedly declares himself rhetorically inept to Bertilak’s lady (1241–47), the dreamer employs a hyperbolic self-deprecation in order to enjoin the pearl-maiden to expand his worldview by speaking her mind. If only Troilus, Palamon and Arcite did the same.

Having already opened himself up to his lady’s sovereign discourse, the dreamer strikingly designates Christ’s mercy, Mary, and John, rather than the pearl-maiden, as the ground of all his bliss. These lines (383–84) present a challenge both to critics who read the dreamer as comically doltish and theologically obtuse and to those who read him as progressing, over the course of *Pearl*, from a courtly lover to a corporate Christian. Falling somewhere in between these two views, Aers writes off the dreamer’s act of re-grounding his bliss in Christian icons as “a purely tactical concession, a formulaic compromise to facilitate both the continuation of the conversation and his own concerns within it. Nevertheless,” Aers concedes, “it does lead into a question that did not occur to Troilus, to Palamon and Arcite, to Othello, or to Leontes: a question about *her* life.”³² Although Aers pays too short shrift to the potential causal connection between the dreamer’s invocation of John and his later vision of the New Jerusalem (culled, as it is, directly from John’s account thereof in Revelation), he recognizes that, at this point in the poem, the dreamer makes a most un-Troilus-like acknowledgement of his lover’s interiority by asking her to recount her personal history. But does this make the dreamer less a courtly lover than Troilus, or simply a more ethical courtly lover than

³² Aers, “The Self Mourning,” 64.

Troilus, one capable of willfully forging a more egalitarian, inter-subjective love? As scholars of romance and hagiography often note, courtly discourse and Christian ideology are rarely, if ever, mutually exclusive in medieval texts.³³ While the dreamer's act of re-grounding his bliss in Christ, Mary and John can be read as a means to prolong his lavishly polite, almost flirtatious, conversation with the pearl-maiden, could not it also be understood as a sublime moment, albeit a rare one in *Pearl*, in which courtliness and holiness complement, rather than contradict, each other? Can we read the dreamer as neither clinging to a courtly ethos, nor transitioning to devotional one, but struggling to love the pearl-maiden in manner satisfactory to both? Do his efforts signify his desire (or the poet's) to un-problematically conflate these two distinct yet inextricably intertwined ideologies?³⁴

If the dreamer evinces progress by trying to reconcile his courtly leanings with Christian devotion, he cannot easily disregard the emotional dissonance between himself and the pearl-maiden:

“In blysse I se þee blyþely blent,
 And I a man al mornyf mate.
 Ȝe take þeron ful lyttel tente,
 Þaȝ I hente ofte harmez hate.”
 (385–88)

Here the dreamer back-peddles, even regresses, to a courtly complaint about the pearl-maiden's heavenly indifference to his worldly struggles. He cannot help but read within her over-determined happiness—she is blithely blended with bliss—a lack of compassion (“ful lyttel tente”) for his burning pains (“harmes hate”). Yet he goes on to soften his accusation by reiterating his desire to avoid quibbling with her and learn from her instead:

“Bot now I am here in your presente,
 I wolde bysech, wythouten debate,
 Ȝe wolde me say, in sobre asente
 What lyf Ȝe lede erly and late,

³³ Elizabeth Leigh Smith, *Middle English Hagiography and Romance in Fifteenth-Century England: From Competition to Critique* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 1–36.

³⁴ Charlotte Gross, “Courtly Language in *Pearl*,” in *Text and Matter*, 79–92.

For I am ful fayn þat your astate
Is worþen to worshyp and wele, iwysse;
Of alle my joy þe hyze gate,
Hit is in grounde of alle my blysse.”
(389–96)

Despite the pearl-maiden’s apparent inability or unwillingness to share his pain, the dreamer dramatically asserts his happiness (“I am ful fayn”) at her heavenly “astate.” Though he makes no explicit mention of envy, the spectral possibility that he might be sad at the pearl-maiden’s happiness lurks behind his assurances to the contrary. Indeed, his earlier distinction between his own mourning and the pearl-maiden’s un-compassionate bliss arguably provokes his later insistence that he is gladdened by her high estate. If the latter statement of shared bliss partially offsets the former statement of emotional dissonance, it does not completely negate the dreamer’s initial complaint. Indeed, the question remains: If he can be happy with her celestial happiness and sad at her terrestrial absence, why can’t she be happy with her celestial happiness and sad at his terrestrial sadness? This is the dreamer at his most volatile—he swings from utterly dejected and introverted (“mornyf mate”) to joyously blissful and extroverted in eleven lines flat (385–96). And yet his mood-swing is more willful than erratic. It is as though he insists on their shared happiness in a voluntarist effort to actualize it.

Commentary, Part II: The Maiden Speaks

Although he tends to eschew culpability for his grief, the dreamer nevertheless makes willful efforts to mitigate the pearl-maiden’s anger, as well as his own, through courtesy; efforts that she vocally appreciates:

“Now blysse, burne, mot þee bytyde,”
Pen sayde þat lufsum of lyth and lere,
“And welcum here to walk and byde,
For now þy speche is to me dere.”
(397–400)

The maiden begins by wishing for the dreamer to encounter bliss, or, more precisely, for bliss to encounter him. However ostensibly positive, her blessing (or blissing) is not the ringing endorsement it at first seems. First of all, it implies that the dreamer’s best, if not

only, hope for obtaining worldly bliss is pure luck—if bliss finds him. Second, it curiously trivializes, or at least temporalizes, the dreamer’s immediately prior declaration that his bliss is grounded in her heavenly status. Through her vocalized hope for his future happiness, the pearl-maiden gently reminds the dreamer that, as a terrestrial subject, he cannot simply ground his bliss in her celestial status to ensure its permanence. Likewise, in welcoming the dreamer based on her appreciation of his “speche,” she implies that his current bliss too is not only precarious, but also contingent upon her continued approval. Far from offended by the dreamer’s courtly rhetoric, the pearl-maiden mandates that he sustain it.

Extending her rather passive-aggressive acclamation of the dreamer’s apologetic proposal, the pearl-maiden praises his newfound meekness and retroactively diagnoses their previous antipathy as rooted in his pride:

“Maysterful mod and hyze pryde,
I hete pee arn heterly hated here.
My Lorde ne louez not for to chyde
For meke arn alle þat wonez Hym nere.”
(402–04)

The pearl-maiden’s warning that a tyrannical mindset (“[m]aysterful mod”) and high pride are hated in heaven all too clearly implies that the dreamer is in constant danger of evincing these attributes, even as it congratulates him for ceasing to do so. Through it, she recalls her previous scathing, even mean-spirited, tripartite rebuke of the dreamer’s desire to cross the water separating them and live with her happily ever after (289–324). Spearing justifies the pearl-maiden’s sharp retorts as characterized by “deliberate and necessary harshness,” holding that the dreamer “has no hope of gaining further understanding unless he can be shocked out of his fool’s paradise.”³⁵ Of course, such harsh didacticism is everywhere in Cotton Nero A.x. Even so, if we consider her primary rhetorical agenda to guide the dreamer to a state of meek acceptance, it is difficult to explain why, after he has painstakingly evinced just such an acceptance, the pearl-maiden continues to lecture him that God hates pride. After all, she does so in the process of ostensibly praising him for finally exiting his prideful “fool’s paradise.” It is equally difficult, moreover, to miss

³⁵ Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 150–51.

the blatant hypocrisy in her warning that God does not love those who “chyde,” which can mean criticize, complain or grumble, but also rebuke—an action quite integral to her own didactic *modus operandi*. Yet if we consider the pearl-maiden’s rhetorical aim to stoke the dreamer’s envy by repeatedly, if implicitly, highlighting the radical difference between the temporariness and contingency of his bliss with the permanence and certainty of her own, these rhetorical choices become much more explicable.

If the pearl-maiden’s reply contains plenty of scornful undertones, it also conveys a tantalizing promise that the dreamer will be rewarded with further revelations for his good behavior. Once again, however, she stresses that his mystical experience and perhaps even the state of his soul depends on his adopting the diminutive, passive and eerily blank emotional posture that is meekness:

“And when in Hys place þou schal apere,
Be dep deuote in hol mekenesse.
My Lorde þe Lamb loues ay such chere;
Pat is the grounde of alle my blysse.”
(405–08)

Of course, the pearl-maiden’s mandate that the dreamer adjust his emotional disposition (“chere”) to one of meekness is perfectly in line with Christian ideology, as is her opposition of meekness to pride: Following their Latin antecedents, Middle English preachers’ manuals frequently cast “mekenesse” as the affective antidote for pride.³⁶ While her theology is perfectly doctrinal, in recalling a pride/meekness binary reminiscent of those contained in manuals used by confessors to prescribe certain behaviors and proscribe others, the pearl-maiden is perhaps more authoritarian than consolatory. For George Edmondson, the cumulative effect of the pearl-maiden’s doctrine “is to underscore the radical incommensurability between the mediated, language-bound world of the dreamer and the realm of limitless *jouissance* beyond the river.”³⁷ Hence, her injunction that the dreamer must continually

³⁶ See, for example, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS o.s. 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 130–43.

³⁷ George Edmondson, “*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object, the Shape of the Law,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 29–64, at 55.

affect meekness and repress pride carries with it the implicit reminder that she, who has already achieved heavenly bliss, need not worry about such tricky cognitive and emotional adjustments. According to the vice/virtue system that opposes pride to meekness, the dreamer's relation to the pearl-maiden ought not be one of envy, but one of charity (*caritas*).³⁸ Yet how can he feel charitably towards an interlocutor who ceaselessly reminds him of that he is not even capable of comprehending her bliss and status?

For Edmondson, the pearl-maiden exemplifies Jacques Lacan's $S(\emptyset)$: the signifier of the Other's desire. The Lacanian subject desires nothing more than to fulfill the desire of some Other, be it God, Justice or, for the courtly lover, the Lady. $S(\emptyset)$, not unlike the related "objet *a*," signifies that unknown entity with which the subject could sate the Other's desire.³⁹ Hence, *Pearl* begins with a prince deriving pleasure from enclosing a pearl in gold.⁴⁰ The syntax of the pearl-maiden's description of her heavenly predicament exemplifies the primal fantasy of finding completion in completing the Other. Her bliss is grounded in the fact that her lord the lamb loves when his subjects evince devout and meek cheer. Her happiness is therefore based in God's reciprocal happiness with her meekness. Together, they form a closed circuit in which meekness motivates love, love motivates bliss, and bliss motivates meekness. Across the river, however, the dreamer remains in a world where meekness often leads to immense physical suffering and bliss often leads to gluttony or lust. By enjoining the dreamer to be meek when he enters the lamb's presence, however, the pearl-maiden hints that he will someday cross the river into the land of plentitude and *jouissance*. Of course, the game of evoking a sublime afterlife in order to mandate earthly meekness and passivity—so reviled by Friedrich Nietzsche—is fundamental to Christian ideology.⁴¹ The pearl-maiden's rhetoric is striking, not for its ingenuity, but for the uncompassionate coolness with which she juxtaposes her bliss to the dreamer's pain.

After laying down the law to the dreamer, the pearl-maiden begins to satisfy his request by recounting the details of her life after death:

³⁸ *Fasciculus Morum*, 175–99.

³⁹ Edmondson, "Pearl," 46–48.

⁴⁰ Edmondson, "Pearl," 40–43.

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967).

“A blyful lyf þou says I lede;
þou woldez know þerof þe stage.
þow wost wel when thy perle con schede
I waz ful 3ong and tender of age.”
(409–12)

The maiden begins her account firmly entrenched in a first person/second person dynamic with the dreamer, oscillating between “you” and “I.” In so doing, she recalls the closed identificatory circuit between father and daughter in worldly life, but also emphasizes the ontological split currently separating them. Curiously, however, at the moment when she most clearly identifies herself as the dreamer’s dead daughter, she names herself, not in the first person, but in the third (“thy perle”), suggesting both that she is currently a categorically different entity than that the dreamer mournfully remembers and that she is no longer *his* pearl. Used repeatedly throughout Cotton Nero A.x, “scheden” signifies splitting or sundering.⁴² While it is most frequently employed to denote the separation of rain or snow from clouds, it is also used to describe Gawain’s axe sundering the “schiere grece” between the skin and bone of the green knight’s neck (425). The sudden violence of the green knight’s decapitation recalls that which separated the infantile pearl-maiden from her father. Like the latter violence, moreover, the former proves to be temporary—what was “schede” will be made whole again.

Despite the opaque causality characterizing her initial description of the rupture that separated father from daughter (“thy perle con schede”), in the following lines we learn that the pearl-maiden is not severed by an unknown agency, but taken to marriage by the lamb:

“Bot my Lorde þe Lombe, þur3 Hys godhede,
He toke myself to Hys maryage,
Corounde me quene in blysse to brede
In lenghe of dayez þat ever schal wage.”
(413–16)

Here, the I/you dynamic of the previous lines gives way to a him/me dynamic that details the mystical marriage between the lamb and

⁴² *MED*, s.v. “scheden.”

pearl-maiden. Of course, images of crowned virgins married to Christ in heaven are fairly frequent in Middle English literature. The Early Middle English treatise on virginity, *Hali Meidhad*, for example, displays heavenly virgins forming a circle around the Godhead, surrounded by a larger circle of chaste widows and a still larger circle of faithful wives.⁴³ While the dreamer's account of his vision of the New Jerusalem (721–1153)—in which the pearl-maiden is one of 144,000 virgins surrounding the lamb—is certainly reminiscent of *Hali Meidhad*'s account of Christ's polygamous marriage to all the women of heaven, the pearl-maiden's earlier description of her mystical marriage to Christ is strikingly monogamous. Indeed, when she relates that the lamb crowned her queen “in blysse to brede / In lenghe of dayez that ever schal wage,” she might be saying, as the *MED* suggests, that she is to remain in a state of eternal, marital bliss, though she also might be saying that she and the lamb procreate (“brede”) in heaven for eternity.⁴⁴ While I don't want to suggest that the pearl-maiden copulates with the lamb of God in heaven, I do find her choice of words telling, especially given her familiarity with the literalist and materialist hermeneutic with which the dreamer has approached his vision thus far.

Having forced the dreamer into the margins of his own narrative, the pearl-maiden continues to describe her mystical union with the lamb, further blurring the ontological line between herself and God and emboldening that between herself and the dreamer:

“And sesed in alle Hys herytage
Hys lef is. I am holy Hysse.
Hys pyese, Hys prys; and Hys parage
Is rote and grounde of alle my blysse.”
(417–20)

Upon marrying the lamb, the pearl-maiden is put in possession (“sesed”) of his entire inheritance (“herytage”). Here, legal language is employed to describe the pearl-maiden's transformation into heaven's queen. Patricia Margaret Kean notes that the legality with which the innocent pearl-maiden is saved contrasts the surplus grace required to save those stained by sin, suggesting to both audience

⁴³ *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett, EETS o.s. 284 (London: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁴⁴ *MED*, s.v. “breden.”

and dreamer, once again, a categorical difference between the dreamer and herself.⁴⁵ Inverting her earlier, third-person self-identification as the dreamer's pearl, the pearl-maiden now refers to herself as the lamb's loved one ("[h]ys lef"). She then asserts that she is "holy Hysse," a punning phrase that implies both that she is entirely (wholly) in his possession and that she is sanctified (holy) as a result. The next line—in which she evokes the lamb's value ("pyese"), nobility ("prys") and inheritance ("parage")—can be read in apposition to the prior line, meaning that the pearl-maiden herself constitutes God's value, nobility and inheritance. On the other hand, it can also be read as the subject of the final line of her speech, meaning that the lamb's value, nobility and inheritance are the ground of all her bliss. Following Edmondson, I would argue that neither meaning is correct, but that, in evoking both together, the pearl-maiden once again enacts the potent fantasy in which the subject finds completion and bliss in providing the lacking Other that which he lacks. But the subject for whom this fantasy is realized is the pearl-maiden and, by explaining how the dreamer's worldly loss is tantamount to her heavenly marriage, she renders the dreamer's tragic narrative of which he is the protagonist a comedy of which she is the protagonist and he plays an inferior male lover that she casts off for a better man . . . or lamb. If the pearl-maiden's account of her death and mystical marriage does not explicitly enjoin the dreamer to envy her, it offers him no clear route to finding charitable happiness in her bliss. To the contrary, it brings him face-to-face with the fact that his bliss was sacrificed for hers and God's superior bliss—both incomprehensible and unavailable to him—even after he has already made vocal attempts to move on by grounding his bliss, first in Christ, Mary and John and then in her incomprehensible heavenly estate. To put the matter colloquially, the pearl-maiden, at least as I read her, deliberately rubs it in—"it" being her static, eternal bliss.

Conclusion

Whether or not she does so in an effort to rouse the dreamer out of a state of acceptance and into one of envy, her speech has exactly that effect on him. In the beginning of the eighth fitt—whose perhaps ironic concatenation word is "cortayse"—the dreamer

⁴⁵ Patricia Margaret Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1967), 187–88.

explicitly expresses his dissatisfaction, or at least disbelief, that the pearl-maiden has usurped Mary as the queen of heaven (421–32). This, in turn, inspires the pearl-maiden to launch into the parable of the vineyard in order to once again draw attention to the ontological chasm between earthly subjects, like the dreamer, who cannot help but experience envy and heavenly subjects, like herself, whose bliss multiplies with the recognition of the bliss of others (501–72). Indeed, the dreamer glimpses the pearl-maiden for the last time immersed in a huge crowd of pearl-laden virgins (1129–52). His vision of the New Jerusalem offers the dreamer, as Sarah Stanbury brilliantly argues, a fantasy of returning to the female body, which promptly evaporates the moment he tries to actualize it.⁴⁶ As Aers reminds us, the dreamer causes his vision to collapse around him by acting on a literalist interpretation thereof.⁴⁷ I am less eager than Aers and Spearing to blame the dreamer for his hermeneutic shortcomings and I think *Pearl* itself is too. The lesson that the pearl-maiden ultimately bestows on the dreamer is that life is an ever-fluctuating series of thoughts, experiences and emotions. The terrestrial subject cannot simply choose not to be envious because she “knows” envy is a sin, but she can practice, again and again, working through her sinful emotions and thoughts in an effort to produce more positive ones. There is no end to this struggle except in death and no skipping directly thereto. In the end, then, the pearl-maiden does not teach the dreamer how to feel, but forces him to develop the ability to willfully learn from his feelings and, in so doing, to take responsibility for them.

The difficulty of emotional life is omnipresent in Cotton Nero A.x, as is a profound appreciation of bliss, be it worldly or heavenly. Just as *Pearl*'s dreamer oscillates between “blysse and bale” and *SGGK*'s narrator describes Britain as a bastion of “blysse and blunder,” the narrator of *Patience* instructs us to “[b]e preue and be pacient in payne and in joye” (525), calling patience “a nobel poynt þaȝ it displese ofte” (531). Amidst all its graphic depictions of human suffering, there is even bliss in *Cleanness*, though the bulk of it is either prelapsarian (260) or paradisiacal (177–79). In Cotton Nero A.x, the project of living well is reducible to neither a pure pursuit of pleasure, nor a world-denying abstinence therefrom. Living well

⁴⁶ Sarah Stanbury, “The Body and the City in *Pearl*,” *Representations* 48 (1994): 30–47, see especially 33.

⁴⁷ Aers, “The Self Mourning,” 58.

involves working through emotions, negative or positive, strategically. Had *Pearl's* dreamer awoken immediately after grounding his bliss in Christian ideology and knowledge of his lost loved one's celestial bliss, it would be easy enough to read the poem as a sort of morality play in which the dreamer exemplifies how to grieve well. The pearl-maiden, however, is more interested in keeping the dreamer grieving, envious and altogether upset than alleviating his grief. Ironically enough, it is by vividly depicting a world beyond emotional fluctuation that the pearl-maiden keeps the dreamer's moods swinging.

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