

“THER IS NO DATE”: THE MIDDLE ENGLISH  
*PEARL* AND ITS WORK

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The Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 20: 1-16) tells us that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. As narrated by the maiden in the Middle English *Pearl*, the parable has an obvious application. The maiden, an infant who “lyfed not two yer” (483), is “last” in the sense that she worked for the least amount of time in the vineyard of the world, and so she gets paid first in the coin of heavenly bliss. Indeed, she is the queen of heaven, however much the Dreamer may object. The maiden’s high station in this way constitutes a challenge to conventional ideals of social order, one that draws implicitly upon the radical social vision of the Book of Matthew from which the parable is drawn. Just as the meek shall inherit the Earth, the lowest will be the most exalted in heaven. *Pearl* as a whole dramatizes this upending of the social order indirectly but forcefully in its picture of a daughter who confidently instructs her own father in Christian doctrine. The Parable of the Vineyard is central to the maiden’s argument that human categories for determining authority and worth do not apply in heaven, and her narration quite explicitly yokes this claim to a vision of social justice in which “pore men her part ay pykes / Thagh thay com late and lyttel wore” [poor men always get their share / though they come late and work little] (573-74). Yet if the parable in one sense challenges medieval ideas about social order, it seems at the same time to reaffirm those ideas in ways that mirror other aspects of the poem. A lord, identified in the parable with God, pays peasants a wage that he determines, and when some are dissatisfied he dismisses their objections. Stated so baldly, it would be hard to imagine a story more expressive of the “quiet hierarchies” that (on one view) emerged out of the medieval

synthesis of feudalism and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> What then can we make of a parable that seems to function so ambiguously in the story for which it provides a structural and thematic center?<sup>2</sup> Can we see a politics—conservative or otherwise—at work in the parable at *Pearl*'s core?

Another way of putting this would be to ask whether we can use the Parable of the Vineyard to place *Pearl* in its historical context—to “date” the poem. For it is no coincidence that “date” is the linkword of the section that marks the parable’s opening in *Pearl*. The parable is, after all, about the measurement of time and, by extension, the question of what time might be worth in both material and spiritual terms. The workers who “threte” (561) or complain about the payment of a full day’s wage to those who have worked for only a few hours are in effect claiming that time has not been measured properly. The lord’s reply in effect makes a claim for a different way of measuring time. Yet “date” is also relevant to Fitt IX in its potential identification with historical time since it is precisely here—in the picture of the discontented workers—that *Pearl* comes closest to articulating the urgent concerns of the tumultuous decades in which the poem’s writer lived and worked. Given that Fitt IX is explicitly about work—depicting the lives of those who “wrythen and worchen and don gret pyne” (511)—we might well ask whether the parable can tell us anything about how the poem itself works as an aesthetic reimagining of historical tensions. For many readers, *Pearl* is a poem that seeks an escape from history, so that the poem’s attitude is essentially “defensive.”<sup>3</sup> Yet Fitt IX, in its insistence on “date,” complicates such a view, suggesting rather that

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<sup>1</sup> This famous phrase is from Robertson, *Preface*, 51. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl*, also makes use of the phrase in arguing that a world of such hierarchies “could only perhaps be realized in an official literary dream such as *Pearl*” (136). Yet Bowers’s own reading suggests that the poem is in fact intensely engaged with the historical tensions that Robertson sees the medieval world as being innocent of.

<sup>2</sup> On the Parable of the Vineyard as the structural and thematic heart of *Pearl*, see Wood, “*Pearl*-Dreamer and the *Hynne*,” Marti, *Body, Heart, and Text*, 83-99, Putter, *Introduction*, 168-77, and Andrew and Waldron, *Pearl*, 34-5.

<sup>3</sup> Muscatine, “Style as Defense,” argues that *Pearl* expresses “allegiance to high-medieval feudalism” (37). See also Bowers, “*Pearl* in Its Royal Setting,” for an argument that the poem is specifically royalist, even perhaps a product of the Ricardian court.

the poem needs history even as it offers us a vision of the apocalyptic end of that history. In this respect, the poem harbors surprising resemblances to the more explicitly topical literature of the last decades of fourteenth century, such as *Piers Plowman*.<sup>4</sup>

We can already catch a glimmer of the tensions that will motivate Fitt IX in the first line: “That cortaysé is to fre of dede / Yf hyt be soth that thou cones saye” (481-82). The maiden, the Dreamer asserts, has been given too great a gift in being made heaven’s queen. The economy of heaven, like that of feudalism, depends upon gift-giving, but gifts can be problematic, either too much or not enough. The heavenly economy is, moreover, a competitive sphere in which, as the maiden admits, “fele here porchases and fonges pray” (439) [many here ask for and receive possessions]. While “porchases” may be things given, they are preeminently things possessed, and even in Middle English a “porchase” carries associations with the world of effortful and acquisitive self-interest that the Parable of the Vineyard will realize more fully.<sup>5</sup> Even as the maiden banishes the specter of discord in heaven with her assertion that there are “soplantores none” (440) to be found there, the possibility of conflict is inscribed in its very negation.

The question of economic justice will be posed in terms of the maiden’s age—her own personal “date”—yet the drama that unfolds from that immediate question speaks to some of the most pressing social conflicts that made up the poem’s historical context, as we will see. It is thus important that the Dreamer’s objection to the maiden’s rank in heaven is based on his sense of the unfairness of such a situation: “Thou lyfed not two yer in oure thede; / Thou cowthes never God nauther plese ne pray / Ne never nawther Pater ne Crede” (483-85). These lines are of course the textual basis of the traditional identification of the pearl-maiden as the poet’s (or a patron’s) two-year-old daughter, who is either dead or perhaps a novitiate (and thus dead to the world).<sup>6</sup> What is clear is that “two

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<sup>4</sup> Bowers, “Politics of *Pearl*,” was among the first to make this claim in a sustained way. Other notable explorations of the poem’s interest in late-medieval social realities, particularly with reference to the narrator’s use of the Parable of the Vineyard, include Helen Barr, “Pearl—Or the Jeweler’s Tale,” and Watkins, “‘Sengeley in Synglere’.”

<sup>5</sup> See *MED*, s. v. *purchās(e)* (n.) (1a).

<sup>6</sup> The phrase “in oure thede” inspired Carson to imagine the pearl-maiden as a foreigner in whom the poet might have been romantically interested (“Aspects of Elegy”), but Vantuono notes that such a reading is rendered

yer” is an insufficient period, in the Dreamer’s view, for the maiden to have merited the exalted rank of a queen: “I may not traw, so God me spede, / That God wolde wrythe so wrange away” (487-8). Such a rank is “to dere a date” (492), a pronouncement that marks the section’s first use of its linkword. “Date” as the Dreamer here uses the word, variously glossed by readers as “limit,” “rank,” and “fixed position,” carries a meaning that has to do with boundedness, as the maiden’s reply—“ther is no date of Hys godnesse” (493)—will confirm in the next line. But the notion of God’s mercy as having “no date” is also, significantly, a claim for a God who operates outside of history.<sup>7</sup> Such a claim is far from innocent, I am suggesting, in a set of stanzas that seek an escape from the very historical tensions to which they also point.

Because there is “no date” to God’s goodness—no temporal context as well as no measurable limit—it also follows (as the maiden now asserts) that God can do no wrong: “For al is trawthe that He con dresse / And He may do nothynk bot ryght” (495-6). Such a statement seems on its face a most conventional theological sentiment, perfectly in line with the conservative politics of *Pearl* as a whole. In fact, even at the level of theology, the poet is struggling to reconcile competing ideas, so the maiden’s claim here evokes without fully addressing a familiar problem in medieval theology: Are God’s actions good because He chooses to do only good, or is a given act good simply because He wills it?<sup>8</sup> The question is relevant

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doubtful by the maiden’s own earlier remark that she was “ful yong and tender of age” (412) when the Dreamer lost her (*Pearl*, 129).

<sup>7</sup> Set against this background of the urgency of human time, the maiden’s assertion that God’s mercy has “no date” is more than just a claim that God’s mercy escapes all limit. It is also, as several readers have noted, a pun on the timeless nature of the divine realm to which the maiden belongs, an eternal present that (as Boethius asserts) transcends time. For Mitchell, the juxtaposition here of human “date” and divine timelessness undercuts “the *historicizing impulse* of figural interpretation” (“Figuring the Unfigurable,” 99), radically calling into question the poem’s ability to provide adequate analogies for the divine by drawing from the realm of human experience.

<sup>8</sup> The latter position—voluntarism—had strong support in the late-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, notably from Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Recent research, moreover, has suggested that the *Pearl*-poet was likely aware of the work of Ockham and his Oxford contemporaries. If so, we might read the maiden’s remark here as a masterpiece of equivocation. On the one hand, we could plausibly interpret her assertion as falling into the voluntarist camp: all is “trawthe” that God ordains simply *because* He

not just because it informs Pearl’s surprisingly precarious sense of what constitutes just authority, but also because God’s authority looks a great deal like the more tangible economic power of the “lorde” whose vineyard will be the site of the poem’s most explicitly realized conflict. We might even say that the poem’s inability to answer a complex theological question—to what extent does God obey a recognizable moral law?—helps motivate its turn toward parabolic discourse as a site of useful if fraught analogies:

“As Mathew meles in your Messe,  
In sothfol gospel of God almyght,  
In sample He can ful graythely gesse  
And lyknes hit to heven lyghte.  
‘My regne,’ He says, ‘is lyk on hyght  
To a lorde that hade a vyne, I wate.”  
(497-502)

As Mary Raschko points out, the analogy here is not to the vineyard as heaven, but more specifically to God as the source of authority. In Raschko’s words, “the idea that heaven is like a man and something he owns, rather than something he does, concentrates the comparison with heaven in the vineyard owner himself, enhancing his moral authority and preparing the reader to blame those who question or contradict him.”<sup>9</sup> That authority is allied both to Matthew—who tells the parable—and to God Himself, presumably the “He” who begins speaking at line 499. Yet if the “He” is meant to express a timeless truth, the stanza that begins by insisting on the atemporality of the divine ends by making God Himself speak like a late-medieval Englishman, a stylistic choice highlighted by the colloquial interjection “I wat” and even by the strangely offhand word—“gesse”—that the maiden uses to describe God’s presumably

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ordains it. But this statement is carefully balanced with a reassuring sense of God’s conformity to moral law: “He may do nothynk bot ryght.” The second assertion—which might seem merely to restate the first—in fact differs in its subtle implication that God’s power is limited to the extent that it cannot deviate from the good, which is in turn potentially if not automatically accessible to human knowledge. Read thusly, the maiden’s remark encapsulates the tension in *Pearl* between consolation and divine unknowability. For a recent discussion of *Pearl* as a drama of the will, see Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know*, 122-151.

<sup>9</sup> Raschko, *Rendering the Word*, 101.

firm knowledge about the nature of heaven.<sup>10</sup> If the parable on the one hand promises to bring the authority of God, Matthew, and the unnamed “lorde” of the vineyard into a kind of overwhelming alignment, this alignment will at the same time prove vulnerable to the historical contingencies opened up by parabolic discourse. This is just to say that the kind of knowledge that the parable offers will be historically conditioned. This sense of history’s pressure is if anything bolstered by the lord’s claim in the parable that he is “goud” (568) and thus incapable of cheating anyone, a statement that at least potentially invites us to judge this lord by earthly standards, even as it evokes a world of historical struggle in which other lords can and do cheat their workers.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, we know already from its status as the linkword that “date” will be central to the argument of Fitt IX, though the maiden has begun by insisting upon the date-lessness of God’s beneficence. “Date” appears right away in the urgent guise of the swiftly passing seasons:

Of tyme of yere the terme was tight  
To labor vyne was dere the date”  
(503-4)

The “tyme of yere” alluded to is probably September, the traditional month for harvesting grapes. As Lynn Staley Johnson remarks, the date is significant for the poem’s Christian message in that

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<sup>10</sup> ME “gesse” can mean “considered opinion,” but only something that is “withouten gesse” is “beyond a doubt.” One might be wrong, for instance, to “gesse” that *Criseyde* is beyond all reproach, as the narrator of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* does (Book 1, lines 286-87). To “ful graythely gesse” is to guess very carefully, but the poem stops short of recommending its guesswork as a sure foundation for knowledge of the divine, even as it suggests the *suitability* of the parable it now introduces. See *MED*, s. v. *gesse* (n.) (a).

<sup>11</sup> One could certainly argue, alternatively, that the lord’s statement here is an expression of the total freedom of divine prerogative: in other words, that God never *could* cheat anyone simply because He is God. At the same time, the lord raises the possibility that he is bound by some form of law, asking rhetorically whether it is *louyly* (“lawful” 565) to pay as much as he wants. Much hinges on whether we choose to take these words at face value, and how far we are to go in identifying the lord in the parable with God. As in the maiden’s discussion of God’s inability to do wrong, the exact nature of the theodicy being proposed is unclear.

September sees the sun move into Libra, the sign of judgment and a stark reminder of the Last Judgment itself. Yet John Bowers reminds us that this “tyme of yere” is also when agricultural workers had the best chance of securing high wages from landowners; the time is “tight” in more ways than one for owners whose grapes might rot on the vine if they are not harvested.<sup>12</sup> Such a reading is strengthened by the immediately following line: “That date of yere wel knawe thys hyne” (505), where “hyne” can be translated roughly as “servants.”<sup>13</sup> What the “hyne” know, on this reading, is how to extract the highest wage possible from the “lorde” who needs their services. Indeed “hyne” will appear again by the poet near the poem’s end, when the Dreamer refers to the “homly hyne” (1211) who exist in what one editor calls a “harmonious hierarchical relationship” with God.<sup>14</sup> Yet the “hyne” of the parable are not nearly so securely feudal—not at all the things of the household that “homly” implies. Milling about the marketplace, they sell their services freely to the highest bidder. And like medieval merchants, they know how to make their time pay. They know well that, in the maiden’s words, “to labor vyne was dere the date,” and that their labor is accordingly valuable.

Yet the possibility of conflict is averted for now, with the workers agreeing to a wage that, as Bowers notes, would have been “outrageously low even before the arrival of the Black Death”:

The lorde ful erly up he ros  
 To hyre werkmen to hys vyne  
 And fyndes ther summe to hys porpos.

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<sup>12</sup> Johnson notes that the days of September are marked by shortening hours offering “diminished opportunity for human activity.” (“The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour,” 8). In that respect, the September date also recalls the movement toward harvest as a time of reckoning—an idea that has already been evoked by the poem’s opening “in Auguste in a hygh seysoun / quen corne is corven wyth crokes kene” (39). For the point that the vintage-time offered the best chance for workers to press their demand for higher wages, see Bower, “Politics of *Pearl*,” 425.

<sup>13</sup> Stanbury, in her TEAMS edition, gives “households” here on the argument that *hyne* “refer broadly to members of a household ... rather than to laborers” (note to line 505). Yet the *hyne* clearly occupy a subordinate role in this line, as also at lines 632 and 1211. Other editors, including Anderson and Andrew and Waldron, translate the word as “laborers.”

<sup>14</sup> Stanbury, *Pearl*, note to line 1211.

Into acorde thay con decline  
For a pené on a day, and forth thay gos.”  
(505-510)<sup>15</sup>

To consider the “pené on a day” as a real penny, as Bowers does here, is to complicate a tradition in *Pearl* criticism that would read the penny in purely allegorical terms. A direct translation of the Biblical *denarius*, the penny to which the workers agree also recalls variously the Eucharist, the mass-penny, and most richly of all, perhaps, the Pearl of Great Price itself, which the penny resembles in its circular shape.<sup>16</sup> But readings that stress the theological meaning of the penny may fail to appreciate the full complexity of its symbolic work—the way in which it signifies difference as well as similarity. A symbol of the Eucharist and thus, by extension, of the community of the faithful, the penny will ironically be the cause of discord as the parable develops. Where the pearl evokes a world of aristocratic luxury and limitless excess, the penny’s resolutely economic nature will be evident in the fact that it is not enough. If heaven is an aristocratic idyll where everyone is not only “fayn of otheres hafyng” (450) but wishes that others had *more*—five times as much, as the maiden asserts in the next line—the penny by contrast introduces us to an economy of scarcity in which competition is the rule. Or again, if the penny is what one reader calls a “two-dimensional” reminder of the “three-dimensional” pearl, it is worth noticing, too, what this suggests about how *Pearl* registers the loss of meaning inherent in the movement from one symbol to another to yet another.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the penny foregrounds the problematically mediated nature of the poem’s allegorical work. A symbol of a symbol, the penny measures the distance between what the poem wants to say about the nature of heaven and the everyday analogies to which it resorts in its vernacularizing of contemporary theological discourse. If the penny is salvation, it is also, in its inescapably material form, a thing of the world rather than of God, as the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel will remind the Pharisees shortly

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<sup>15</sup> Bowers, 426n20.

<sup>16</sup> See, respectively, Ackerman, “Pearl-Maiden and the Penny,” Gatta, “Transformation Symbolism,” and Wilcox, “Constructing Metaphoric Models.”

<sup>17</sup> Wilcox, “Constructing Metaphoric Models,” 14.

after reciting the Parable of the Vineyard.<sup>18</sup> The maiden’s narration of the parable works to heighten rather than occlude this historical register of meaning, as will shortly become clear.

Indeed, the possibility of historical conflict, temporarily forestalled when the workers—in an interesting and singular locution<sup>19</sup>—“declyne” (509) into an agreement with the lord, gets raised again in the lines that follow:

Aboute under the lorde to marked tos  
 And ydel men stande he fyndes therate.  
 ‘Why stande ye ydel?’ he sayde to thos,  
 ‘Ne knawe ye of this day no date?’  
 (513-16)

The mention of “under”—about 9 AM—begins a series of references to the specific time of day that contribute to the sense of urgency that underlies this parable. The possibility of idleness can of course be read against the approach of death—the end of day—as an indication of the need to repent. The lord’s pointed question to the idle workers in this sense carries a double meaning. “Ne knawe ye of this day no date” could mean “Don’t you know the time of day?” as well as “Don’t you know that this day has a limit (date)?” In that case, the lord’s question would amount to a reminder of the danger of spiritual idleness. Yet the problem of “ydel” laborers who will not work for less than their preferred wages will be familiar to any reader of *Piers Plowman*. A series of laws like the 1388 Statue of Laborers attempted to fix wages at pre-plague levels, but the charge of idleness echoes through the last half of the century.<sup>20</sup> The lord’s harsh

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 22:21.

<sup>19</sup> The *MED* lists only one instance in which “declyne” might mean “to come to an agreement.” See *MED* s. v. *dēclīnen* (v.) (3b). The sense is presumably one of “falling into an agreement,” perhaps with an intriguing glance at the primary literal meaning, “to turn, turn away, go away,” which hints that something is being deflected in this moment.

<sup>20</sup> One such idle worker memorably tells Piers Plowman to “go pissen with his plowgh” (6. 155). See Langland, *Vision of Piers Plowman*, 102. Bowers cites John Gower’s castigation of idle workers in his *Vox Clamantis*: “For the very little they do they demand the highest pay” (qtd. in *Politics of Pearl*, 44). Gower puts the point even more finely just after the passage cited by Bowers: “They are sluggish, they are scarce, and they are grasping” (*Major Latin Works*, 208-9).

reminder to the workers can thus simultaneously be read alongside contemporary struggles over the right of peasants to dispose of their labor as they saw fit. This struggle is in fact built into the basic situation of the parable, which imagines agricultural workers as free agents:

“Er date of daye hider arn we wonne,  
So was al samen her answar soght.  
‘We haf standen her syn ros the sunne  
And no mon byddes uus do ryght noght.’  
‘Gos into my vyne, dos that ye conne,’  
So sayde the lorde and made hit toght.  
‘What resonabele hyre be naght be runne,  
I yow pay in dede and thoghte.’  
(517-24)

The workers carefully defend themselves against the charge of idleness—understandably, since those who refused to work might be punished for their lack of employment as early as 1349.<sup>21</sup>

The lord’s reply, with its promise of “resonabele hyre” (523), resonates with contemporary debates over what might constitute a just wage. At least one manuscript of *Piers Plowman* uses the same phrase—“resonabile hire” (*Passus* 3, 256)—to describe the moderate wage “that laborers and lowfolk takeþ of hir maistres” (255), differentiating this wage from “mesurelees” (246) reward.<sup>22</sup> The *Pearl*-poet’s use of this term is yet another clue that he not only knows about but actively engages with the social and economic developments treated more explicitly by overtly topical writers such as Langland. Unlike Langland, the *Pearl*-poet does not engage directly with the labor-shortage in the second half of the fourteenth century as the primary cause of this conflict. If anything, the parable suggests “a situation of unemployment, in which surplus laborers wait eagerly for work and defend themselves from the charge of idleness.”<sup>23</sup> Certainly the picture of workers who have been standing

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the social causes and implications of the 1349 Ordinance of Laborers as well as the closely related 1351 Statute of Laborers, see, Palmer, *English Law in the Age of the Black Death*, 17-21.

<sup>22</sup> See Cambridge University Library MS Dd.1.17, available online at *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*.

<sup>23</sup> Raschko, *Rendering the Word*, 106.

in the market since before dawn would tend to support this view. The lord also has no trouble recruiting men or getting them to agree to his terms, however much they may quibble with the payment after the fact:

Thay wente into the vyne and wroghte  
And al day the lorde thus yede his gate  
And nw men to hys vyne he broghte  
Welnegh wyl day was passed date.  
(525-528)

Yet the problem of “idleness,” while it seems antithetical to a situation of labor-surplus, is implied by the simple fact that the lord, like his Biblical precursor, needs to return repeatedly to the marketplace in search of new laborers. The poet expands on Matthew, moreover, in staging the lord’s forays into the marketplace as opportunities for dialogue between the lord and the workers. The tone of these encounters gradually becomes more confrontational, until the last such encounter, at “evensonge,” the poet’s term for the “eleventh hour” of the Biblical parable:

“At the date of day of evensonge,  
On oure byfore the sonne go doun,  
He sey ther ydel men ful stronge  
And sade to hem, wyth sobre soun,  
‘Wy stonde ye ydel thise dayes longe?’  
Thay sayden her hyre was nawhere boun.  
‘Gos to my vyne, yemen yonge,  
And wyrkes and dos that at ye moun.’  
(529-536)

Even before the encounter begins, the stanza ratchets up the tension by describing the men as not only “ydel” but “ful stronge”—fully capable of the work they seem to be avoiding. This time the lord speaks aggressively, “wyth sobre soun,” in a way that makes his displeasure clear and repeats the charge of idleness at line 533. The workers’ reply is significant on several levels. By saying that “her hyre was nowhere boun,” they are asserting—as in previous encounters with the lord—that they are not idle by choice. This information would have been important for the lord to know, since one stipulation of contemporary labor laws was that workers could

not be hired away from a landowner with a previous claim on their services.<sup>24</sup>

The use of the word “boun” is charged here, evoking a world in which many peasants are in fact not securely bound to a single feudal lord in relationships of permanent dependence. More broadly, we might see the peasants’ claim that they are “nawhere boun” in relation to the poem’s well-known obsession with images of binding and enclosure.<sup>25</sup> Fitt IX is especially rich in these images. Binding is what the workers do to the vines when they “kerven and caggen and man hit clos” (512)—cut and tie and secure them. It is also what the lord does when he secures a contract with the workers—“made it toght” (522)—and then makes it firm by his promise of ready payment. The poem’s efforts to imagine the Dreamer’s pearl itself as securely fastened in its “setting”—the New Jerusalem—arguably has a defensive subtext, one in which objects (and people) are bound and stationary rather than mobile. Peasants who are “nawhere boun” and must be made secure offer perhaps the most politically charged instance of this interest in stasis.

Here it is also intriguing to consider the potential status of the “yemen yonge” (535) whom the lord commands to go and work. That the men are “yonge” is significant because labor legislation stipulated that all able-bodied men under the age of 60 and without independent means must work.<sup>26</sup> The term “yemen” is more difficult, in part because at least one editor emends it to “ye men.” Yet assuming the dominant reading in which “yemen” is written as one word, the lord’s mode of address may speak indirectly to late-medieval anxieties about social hierarchy that underlie so much of

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bowers, *Politics of Pearl*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> The narrator famously begins by wishing he could enclose his pearl in a proper setting: “Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye / To clanly clos in golde so clere” (2). The garden or *hortus conclusus* images that follow continue this theme, and later heaven itself will be described as a “cloystor” (969). Harwood remarks that in particular “stanza-groups V and XVI are unified by the topos of enclosures” (*Pearl as Diptych*, 68). Staley, “Pearl and the Contingencies of Love,” concludes from the poem’s repeated emphasis on enclosure that the pearl-maiden is an oblate, possibly Isabel, the third daughter of Thomas of Woodstock, who entered the House of Minoreesses when she was only a small child.

<sup>26</sup> The text of the law, including the stipulation that all “within the age of threescore years” must work, can be found in Baker, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, 161-62.

this poem. A yeoman might be a hired laborer, and the term could be used contemptuously of an inferior. Increasingly by the late fourteenth century, however, a yeoman could also be a fairly substantial figure, ranking directly below a squire and holding land in his own right. The narrator of *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, for instance, begins his legend by proudly asserting that his hero was “a gode yeman” (3), and the action opens on a scene in which Robin comically but ably mimics the manners of the aristocracy.<sup>27</sup> We know, moreover, that it was precisely such figures—those peasants who had seen their fortunes rise in the aftermath of the Black Death, rather than the poorest of the agricultural labor force—who were the main impetus for the Rising of 1381.<sup>28</sup> In calling the workers yeomen, the lord is acknowledging indirectly what is so threatening about them: their social indeterminacy.

This last confrontation between the lord and the idle workers marks the high-point of the section’s tense drama—a drama that will continue to unfold in the next fitt when the workers prove dissatisfied with the lord’s payment. Yet at the end of Fitt IX, the “date” of the poem is already clear. We are at the Biblical eleventh hour, what the poet calls “the date of day of evensonge, / On oure byfore the sonne go dou” (529-30). Scriptural commentary on the parable identifies this time of day with the last of the five ages of man, the time stretching from Christ to the present in which medieval Christians lived.<sup>29</sup> The ages-of-the-world model thus assumes that medieval people were living in a time near the end of the world, in which calamities like the Black Death were a sign of the impending Apocalypse. *Pearl* is not alone in providing late-medieval readers with an image of the End of Days though its image of the New Jerusalem is among the most startling of such representations. Even before the Dreamer sees the splendors of God’s eternal city, however, we get a hint of what is to come as Fitt IX winds to a close:

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<sup>27</sup> See *MED* s. v. *yēman* (n.) (1d) and (1e) but also (2) “a member of the landholding class below the rank of squire.” In the last sense, the term could be used as an honorific coming after a name, a fact which suggests the rising status of yeomen in the course of the later Middle Ages. For *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, see Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, 80-168.

<sup>28</sup> Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 13-66, makes the case that the rebels of 1381 were as a group surprisingly literate and upwardly mobile.

<sup>29</sup> Raschko, *Rendering the Word*, 81-2.

Sone the worlde bycom wel broun,  
The sunne was doun and hit wex late.  
To take her hyre he mad sumoun;  
The day was al apassed date.  
(537-40)

The summoning to which the lord calls his workers is the starkest reminder yet in this poem of the inevitability of judgment and has been read as a message for the Dreamer (who may himself be in his “eleventh hour”).<sup>30</sup> On the level of Christian history, the coming of night marks a final escape from history, as “date” and its problems are finally left behind in a vision of the Day of Judgment.

Are we to conclude, then, that “the parable that keeps on harping on the importance of ‘date’ ends up by shrugging off its relevance”?<sup>31</sup> It is true that there is something circular about the logic of the maiden’s argument. After beginning by asserting that God’s mercy has “no date,” the maiden introduces us in Fitt IX to a world seemingly alive with the texture of historical life and the urgency of swiftly passing time, only to revert at the end of the fitt to a reminder of what lies beyond history, when the world itself will be “al apassed date.” On such evidence, we might conclude that the poem raises the possibility of history—of “date”—only to turn our gaze from it, directing our view instead to the heavenly city that lies outside of time. Something like this process is indeed well underway by the time the maiden has finished with the parable. The laborers, after complaining of the unfairness of being paid the same amount regardless of how long they have worked (549-56), simply disappear from the parable after their complaint has been made, at which point the unnamed “lorde” becomes, inexplicably, “Kryste” at line 569. Even the possibility of distinguishing the parable from its exegesis seems to have disappeared in this moment, and with it the possibility of historical reading. A similar turning-away from history is enacted in the maiden’s comparison of herself, at lines 577-84, to the “pore men” (573) whom Christ promises will always have their reward. It is as though the specter of those “that swange and swat for longe

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<sup>30</sup> For the argument that “the poet’s emphasis upon time implies that the dreamer himself is in his eleventh hour,” see Johnson, “The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour,” 10.

<sup>31</sup> Putter, *Introduction*, 171-72.

yore” (586)—of those who toil in the vineyard of the world—is raised only to be disregarded as irrelevant.

The parable is after all, we are now reminded, not about history and its work but a specific response to the Dreamer’s objections regarding a young girl’s rank in heaven. The space for historical experience that had seemed to be opened up by the parable is reduced once more to a quibble over the pearl-maiden’s biological age. “Evensonge,” so easy to read in terms of the medieval belief that we are living near the end of the world—that “evensonge” is now—turns out to be not a direct reflection of our own historical experience but a highly personal metaphor that the maiden applies to her own situation: those who come to the vineyard at this late hour are those who died young. Even the accounting of time provided by the maiden’s interpretation—in its refutation of the more traditional association of “evensonge” with those at the end of life—muddles chronology in a way that violates our sense of proper temporality.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the poem is not, perhaps, quite done with “date.” As we approach heaven near the poem’s close, we notice that its walls are adorned not only with pearls and other gems but also with “dates,” specifically, the birth-dates of “Israel barnes” (1040). Heaven itself may be a timeless realm—a city basking in the light of a sun that never sets (1069-71)—but just outside, indeed on the very walls of heaven, the history of the Exodus is written. It would be easy, of course, to read this as a trivial slip on the part of the poet, who after all is merely following Biblical tradition.<sup>33</sup> Yet it is symptomatic of a poem that ends with a fall back into history. For we know of course that the “date” or limit of the Dreamer’s experience will assert itself as a boundary that cannot be crossed—the river or “strem” (1162) that the Dreamer tries and fails to traverse at the poem’s end, only

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<sup>32</sup> Robertson defends the maiden’s interpretation as orthodox, averring that her reading is “consistent with Medieval exegetical tradition” (“‘Heresy’ of *The Pearl*,” 155), yet Putter, 174, follows Bogdanos’s suggestion that we have here “an illogical syllogism, which in its absurd dialectic incarnates another inscrutable principle governing God’s mercy: his view of time” (*Image of the Ineffable*, 96).

<sup>33</sup> As Stanbury notes in her edition, the account of the names on heaven’s gates is from Revelation 21: 12, but the detail that their birthdays are also written there derives from Exodus 28 (note to line 1041). Since his account mostly follows that of Revelation closely, the addition arguably marks a deliberate and self-conscious choice on the poet’s part.

to awaken back into historical time. Having experienced the bliss of “Goddes present” (1193)—both God’s presence and his *present*—the Dreamer will be “kast of kythes that lastes aye” (1198)—cast out of the land that endures beyond time, in a movement that repeats the first exile from the garden, the moment of humanity’s fall into history.<sup>34</sup> And the reason for his exile is not just disobedience but specifically the crime of (like the workers in the parable) wanting more than he has: “Bot ay wolde man of happe more hente / Then moghten by ryght upon hem clyven” (1195-6). Still of the world, the Dreamer cannot escape the desire for more of divinity than will actually cleave to him, and it is this very desire that plunges him back into the historical time of the fallen world, where the only “always” is ironically the reality of unfulfilled desire.

So history will return, after all, even if it does so now in the reassuringly static guise of ritual. This is of course the Mass to which the maiden refers when she introduces the Parable of the Vineyard: “as Mathew meles in your Messe” (497). It is this ritual enacted in and through history, even more than the Word itself, that provides access to the divine in the poem’s Eucharistic theology.<sup>35</sup> Yet when the narrator, no longer the Dreamer, ends by reassuring us that we encounter Christ in the form of bread and wine “uch a daye” (1210), his formulation cannot help but evoke that other day so central to the poem’s drama: the day of the parable in which human history, with all its toils and travails, messily unfolds. The poem that gestures towards God’s eternal present—a place beyond all date—simultaneously dramatizes history as inescapable.

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<sup>34</sup> The meaning of “present” as “the present time” is attested in *MED*, meaning 3(a). The entry cites Chaucer’s translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* for the notion of “present” as “God’s eternal present (without past or future).”

<sup>35</sup> We do not need to read the poem as a Eucharistic vision to recognize the importance of the poem’s final return to the ritual act that achieves timelessness from within time itself. Cf. Philips, “Eucharistic Allusions,” and especially Marti, *Body, Heart, and Text*.

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