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Beyond the Garden: On the Erotic in the Vision of the Middle English *Pearl*

ABSTRACT

The Middle English *Pearl* is known for its mixture of genres, moods and various discourses. The textual journey the readers of the poem embark on is a long and demanding one, leading from elegiac lamentations and the erotic outbursts of courtly love to theological debates and apocalyptic visions. The heterogeneity of the poem has often prompted critics to overlook the continuity of the erotic mode in *Pearl* which emerges already in the poem's first stanza. While it is true that throughout the dream vision the language of the text never eroticizes the relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl Maiden to the extent that it does in the opening lines, the article argues that eroticism actually underlies the entire structure of the vision proper. Taking recourse to Roland Barthes's distinction between the erotic and the sexual to explain the exact nature of the bond which connects the two characters, the argument posits eroticism as an expression of somatic longing; a careful analysis of *Pearl* through this prism provides a number of ironic insights into the mutual interactions between the Dreamer and the Maiden and highlights the poignancy of their inability to understand each other. Further conclusions are also drawn from comparing *Pearl* with a number of Chaucerian dream visions. Tracing the erotic in both its overt and covert forms and following its transformations in the course of the narrative, the article outlines the poet's creative use of the mechanics of the dream vision, an increasingly popular genre in the period when the poem was written.

ABSTRACT

One of the most contentious issues enlivening the critical debate about the Middle English *Pearl* is the problem of its internal divisions. The dream vision defies most critical attempts to pinpoint the exact character of its narrative structure, and while some scholars see the poem as a diptych, the twofold structure reflecting its Gothic character (Harwood 61–65), others discern a distinctly tripartite structure in the text. The latter view, endorsed by the majority of critics (Chance 31–32), arises quite naturally out of the framing which the scenes in the garden, where the narrator falls asleep, provide for the dream he relates. Whatever their view on the exact number of the text’s internal sections, however, most critics acknowledge that a substantial shift in mood and tone occurs in stanza five as the narrator swoons with grief and the vision begins.¹ What sets the first five stanzas of the poem apart from the rest is their distinctly secular character, which is most ostensibly seen in stanza one, the first twelve lines of *Pearl* hinting at nothing of the complexity of the theological debate to follow. Conley notes that “[u]nless we interpret the introduction postpositively, according to data transposed from the vision, we surely must acknowledge that the imagery of this crucial stanza has neither an ethical nor a theological tinge and is, in fact, markedly secular” (57–58). This distinctly secular quality of the poem’s opening is mostly achieved by the text through eroticizing the imagery of the pearl and thus engaging the medieval tradition of love allegory, perhaps even specifically alluding to the *Roman de la Rose* (cf. Pilch 168–69). What is difficult to explain in the context of what the readers learn later is that the language of this key stanza seems to imply that the woman the narrator lost was for him not so much a daughter as a lover. While some critics dismiss “the dreamer’s lack of explicitness” in making clear who exactly he is talking about as a symptom of his confusion and grief (Anderson 21), others prefer to see the eroticism of stanza one as a by-product of the linguistic contrast between the earthly discourse of the dreamer and the heavenly-inspired words of the Pearl Maiden (cf. Gross). Attempting to re-evaluate and underline the role of eroticism in the poem, this article takes issue with the common assumption that the erotic can only be found in *Pearl* in the initial garden setting or that its nature is predominantly verbal; by following the narrator from the garden into the vision he experiences, the argument aims to expose the transformation of

¹ The one obvious set of divisions that cannot be dismissed is the formal pattern of stanza sets, twenty altogether, produced through concatenation, which allows for the thematic shift in question to be built into the poem’s formal structure.

the erotic as the narrative proceeds and posits eroticism as a foundational principle which, intertwined with the oneiric quality of the vision, provides much of the tension which informs the Dreamer's encounter with the Pearl Maiden.

To outline the secular quality of the poem's first stanza, it is necessary to quote it in its entirety:

Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye
 To clanly clos in gold so clere:
 Oute of orient, I hardlyly saye,
 Ne proved I never her precios pere.
 So rounde, so reken in uche araye,
 So small, so smothe her sydes were,
 Quere-so-ever I jugged gemmes gaye,
 I sette hyr sengeley in synglere.
 Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere;
 Thurgh gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.
 I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere
 Of that privy perle wythouten spot. (ll. 1–12)

The narrator's relationship with the pearl is immediately established as physical and intimate: the stanza focuses on the way the pearl feels to the touch, and the readers follow the speaker in relating how his hands move around her perfect roundness in a gesture reminiscent of bodily caress. The erotic tension produced by the sense of somatic familiarity and closeness is also heightened by the reference to the Orient, a place which functioned in the medieval imagination as a realm of forbidden pleasures and carnal delights (cf. Heng 242–46). Andrew and Waldron rightly note that in employing the imagery of lines five and six, "the Poet draws on stock epithets used in courtly literature to describe beautiful women" (53), and it is, indeed, difficult to see the pearl in this stanza as a metaphor for anything other than the female body. The act of losing the pearl, which, as the readers later learn, has an elegiac overtone to it, can also easily be subordinated to this reading and seen as an expression of erotic dejection on the part of the abandoned, or rejected, lover. Though the following stanzas quickly subvert the mood and tone of the poem's opening, the first twelve lines of *Pearl* quite consistently orient the narrative in the direction of the traditional love allegory; the impression is strengthened by the vocabulary of line 11, which, in showing the speaker pining for love ("I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere"), clearly engages the discourse of *amour courtois*. Pilch, who translates the line as "I languish, grievously wounded by the love-dominion," finds in the language used by the poet a direct reference to the character of Daunger from the French *Roman de la Rose* (167–68).

Whatever the true nature of this particular allusion may be, there is little in stanza one that would provide clues to the way in which the poem later develops.

Though with each stanza the elegiac mode becomes stronger and stronger, the garden setting of the opening section of *Pearl* makes it impossible for the reader to abandon the association with love allegory altogether. The place where the narrator finds himself is, after all, a version of the traditional *locus amoenus*. The text indicates that he enters the garden “In Augoste in a high seysoun” (l. 39), presumably August 15th (Stern 76), which marks the feast of the Assumption. Providing a degree of specificity about the date of the dream experience is common among medieval dream visions,² but the choice of August, the time of harvest and the dwindling of summer, signifies a substantial departure from the mood of the opening stanza and heralds the fact that this is more of a garden of sorrow than of love. Far from being literally enclosed, the place nonetheless functions as a *hortus conclusus* of a sort, for the numbing grief of the narrator forcefully binds him to the flowery mound where he falls to the ground and makes it impossible for him to abandon the presumed grave of his pearl, locking him within the desolate inner landscape of his sorrow. Challenging the genre with its interplay of the narrator’s erotic longings and dirge-like lamentations, *Pearl* seems to be a good example of “reinventing the dream vision,” a process which Brown sees operating in England in the second half of the fourteenth century, when “the long-existing and familiar literary currents expressed through the dream vision became revitalized, charged with new possibilities, and the stimulus to original compositions” (23).

To outline the originality of the way in which *Pearl* uses eroticism to structure its narrative, one needs, however, to clarify the nature of the concept. More than any other understanding of eroticism, it is the conceptualization of the erotic as a form of absence and longing that seems to capture the spirit of the poem. In her study of eroticism on the Renaissance stage, Daileader points to two possible ways of seeing absence as the epitome of the erotic (28–29). On the one hand, there is the psychological experience investigated by Jacques Derrida in his analysis of Rousseau’s *Confessions*,

² The *Roman de la Rose* begins in May, the “tyme of love and jollity” in Chaucer’s translation (l. 52), thus establishing May as the season of love, a convention that other dream visions would follow. Among dream visions that begin in May one finds the Middle English *The Book of Cupid* (cf. Olson 572), as well as, for instance, the Middle Scots “Quhen Merche wes with variand windis past” by William Dunbar, where the dreamer “is summoned from his bed by a personified month of May as if he were a lover who has failed to do her honour” (Burrow 136). One of the most notable exceptions to invoking May in this manner is Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, which begins on December 10th.

wherein “the absence of the beloved stimulates the . . . imagination, with the result that peripheral objects become central, are endowed with signification based on their past contact with the desired body” (Daileader 29):

How often have I kissed my bed, since she had slept in it; my curtains, all the furniture of my room, since they belonged to her, and her beautiful hand had touched them; even the floor, on which I had prostrated myself, since she had walked upon it! (Rousseau qtd. in Derrida 152)

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The sense of the erotic not only arises thus from the absence of the object of desire but is also heightened by the vestiges of its former presence, by the various paraphernalia of the object’s prior proximity which remain and animate the longing. This is clearly the case in *Pearl*, for it was precisely the narrator’s almost fetish-like preoccupation with the flowery mound at which the readers find him in the garden that prompted the critics to suggest that the place could actually be the Pearl Maiden’s grave, even though the text never overtly suggested so.

On the other hand, absence endows the notion of the erotic with its key distinctive features which differentiate it from the sexual. Daileader’s reference to Roland Barthes’s treatise on the nature of photography neatly illustrates this point, for trying to distinguish between eroticism and pornography, Barthes observes that pornography, which represents the sexual principle,

ordinarily represents the sexual organs. . . . The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame[.] (57–59)

The contrast between the sexual and the erotic, which holds for photography, also holds for the Middle English *Pearl* and can help explain the enigma of the narrator’s relationship to the deceased girl. There is little critical disagreement among scholars about the Pearl Maiden being the Dreamer’s daughter, for not only does the text indicate that she died before she reached the age of two³ and was “nerre [to him] then aunt or nece” (l. 233), but the form of the blessing in the final stanza has also been identified as typical of a parental benediction (Davis 325–44). In this context the erotic language of the first stanza may seem an aberration difficult to reconcile with the filial nature of their connection. Yet, as Barthes makes clear, the erotic operates by engaging the imagination to go beyond what is immediately available to the senses and need not involve the sexual at all,

³ “Thou lyfed not two yer in oure thede” (l. 483).

being only vaguely suggestive of it. As a form of longing predicated upon a vacuum that the narrator desperately wants to fill (cf. Daileader 29), the erotic mode can successfully be applied in *Pearl* to convey the father's feelings for his little daughter without implying any kind of improper relationship, for the true ground of his grief and sorrow is precisely his desire to be reunited with the girl.

Indeed, what emerges from the first five stanzas of the poem is exactly this kind of possessiveness on the part of the narrator, betraying both his pain at the separation which took place and his craving that this estrangement be undone. The metaphor of the pearl slipping away from the narrator's hands (l. 10: "Thurgh gresse to grounde hit fro me yot") would thus justify the language of stanza one with its focus on the smoothness of the pearl's sides described as if the Dreamer had the experience of holding her in his palm or caressing her body with his hands. The text may trigger associations of a sexual nature, but what it really communicates is a sense of somatic memory, the feeling of a painful vacuum, and that is what ultimately makes the passage erotic. The emptiness of the palm, the burning absence of what was once readily available to the Dreamer's touch, is what structures his every word and thought. Hence the haunting repetition of the possessive pronoun throughout the first stanza set, which reveals the narrator's obsessive longing for "my privy perle" (cf. ll. 24, 48, 53). Hence also the irony of juxtaposing the metaphor of the pearl with that of the jeweller. Unlike precious gems, pearls are not made by jewellers, who can only trade rather than fashion or shape them. Presenting the narrator as a jeweller by introducing the metaphor of the pearl and having the Maiden address him in these terms, the narrative not only reveals his ignorance of the fact that the girl he lost belongs to her true Maker and Jeweller, i.e. God, but also reinforces the sense of tactile privation, for as a jeweller he had the privilege of handling the pearl's body, an experience he now sorely misses.

Within the framework of seeing absence as a paradigm for the erotic, the moment in which the narrator swoons and the dream begins does not appear to have any particular significance other than that of transforming the way in which the Dreamer's longing is expressed in the text. This transformation, however, has nothing to do with lessening the pain, which remains as strong as ever. Admittedly, the very moment the Dreamer finds himself in the crystalline landscape he is so overwhelmed that he forgets for a moment about his tragic loss:

The dubbement dere of doun and dales,
 Of wod and water and wlonk playnes,
 Bylde in me blys, abated my bales,
 Forbidden my stresses, dystryed my paynes. (ll. 121–24)

This sense of relief does not last long, however, for when he sees the Pearl Maiden it returns to him with even greater force. This effect is the result of a number of factors. First of all, the girl quickly undermines his initial elation by pronouncing firmly that there is no way he could join her and live with her in this otherworldly landscape. Secondly, there is the river, which successfully conveys their sense of separation, for throughout the debate they engage in the Dreamer and the Maiden remain on its opposite banks. Thirdly, the language the girl uses establishes a powerful new barrier, for whereas the Dreamer's words desperately try to re-establish the familial connection he and the Maiden once shared, her discourse is markedly impersonal and distanced:

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'O perle,' quod I, 'in perles pyght,
 Art thou my perle that I haf playned,
 Regretted by myn one on nyghte?
 Much longeyng haf I for the layned,
 Sythen into gresse thou me aglyghte.
 Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned,
 And thou in a lyf of lykyng lyghte,
 In Paradys erde, of stryf unstrayned.
 What wyrde has hyder my juel vayned,
 And don me in thys del and gret daunger?
 Fro we in twynne wern townen and twayned,
 I haf ben a joyless juelere.'

'Sir, ye haf your tale mysetente,
 To say your perle is al awaye,
 That is in cofer so comly clente
 As in this gardyn gracios gaye,
 Hereinne to lenge for ever and play,
 Ther mys nee morning com never nere.
 Her were a forser for the, in faye,
 If thou were a gentyl jueler. (ll. 241–52, 257–64)

While he tries to appeal to the girl's emotions and pity by mentioning long plaintive nights and addressing her with the familial "thou," she only calls him "Sir" and, instead of responding to his pleas, delivers an overtly metaphorical explanation of why he is wrong to see her the way he does. There are thus two barriers separating the Dreamer from the Maiden, one topographical and the other linguistic, and the Dreamer finds himself in a situation even more painful than the one he experienced in the earthly garden, for his beloved is so close, and yet there is no way for him to reach her.

Doomed to failure, he nonetheless keeps trying to reunite with his lost pearl, and this is where the erotic manifests itself most openly within

the dream vision, tying in with its oneiric character. Its nature is no longer linguistic in the way it functioned in the initial stanza set, for nowhere except the poem's opening stanzas do the readers find any passages that may suggest they should see the girl as the man's lover. Instead, the erotic emerges from the uneasy interactions of the narrator and the Maiden, where, though obliquely, it underlies the whole of the conversation. This is very well exemplified by the way the presence of the water barrier affects the mood and behaviour of the Dreamer. In an obvious sense, the barrier provides the foundation for the expression of the erotic, for despite the girl's appearance before the eyes of her father, he still finds himself at a distance from her. Yet the true tenor of eroticism emerges only if one looks closely at the sequence of events in the vision. The moment the Dreamer sees the river he wishes to cross to the other side. As he walks by the bank, this longing increasingly challenges his mental stability, for he can find no safe place to wade across, and, what is important, with each step it seems to him more and more unlikely that a suitable ford could actually be found at all: "Bot wothes mo iwysse ther ware / The fyrrre I stalked by the stronde" (ll. 151–52). Though this never emerges clearly on the verbal level of their interactions, one can easily appreciate that noticing his beloved pearl on the other side of the river immediately after realizing that there is virtually no way to reach the place must be shattering for the Dreamer. His only hope is that the girl can safely get him across. His expectations must be running high at this point: her radiant clothes and figure make her seem one with the crystalline landscape to the eye of the beholder, which may suggest a fair degree of familiarity with it on her part, thus heralding a promise of imminent reunion. Yet all the girl does is reiterate in various paraphrases the simple message of "Sir, you cannot." All this heightens the sense of erotic longing and conjoins absence and the vestiges of presence in a single extended scene, with the girl simultaneously being so close to the Dreamer and yet in a sense still absent from his world.

Equally dramatic is the sense of paralysis the Dreamer experiences upon seeing the Maiden for the first time. When he notices her on the other bank he is so overwhelmed with both fear and joy that he can neither speak nor even beckon to the girl: "I stod ful style and dorste not calle; / Wyth yyen open and mouth ful clos" (ll. 182–83). His inability to move resembles the typical dreamlike experience of being paralyzed in the face of great danger and desire. The use of actual dream mechanics or imagery within the medieval visions is not unusual (cf. Russell 117–18), and the anguish felt by the Dreamer, who is unable to move towards what is most precious for him, further intensifies the sense of erotic longing. This longing, it is worth reiterating, is predicated upon an absence which captivates the Dreamer with the semblance of the immediacy of presence, with the

Maiden being both by his side and, in a way, in an altogether different and unreachable realm, beyond the river. The implication of erotic desire is also suggested by another factor: the Dreamer's quasi-bodily presence in the crystalline land. Admittedly, this is a vision of the spirit, and the narrator himself, immediately prior to launching himself into the description of his dream, states that while "Fro spot my spyryt ther sprang in space; / My body on balke ther bod in sweven" (ll. 61–62). Yet though his body remains at the spot where he mourned his pearl in the earthly garden, he clearly behaves as if he were by the river in more than just his spirit, as the realistic detail of his search for a suitable ford to wade across proves. The fact that he fears for his life looking at the waters of the river, or that he actually attempts to swim across it, imply his physical presence there. So does his enquiry about the Maiden's lodgings: in what is perhaps the most ironic moment within their debate, proving how earth-bound in his thoughts the Dreamer still is, he asks her if she has any shelter nearby (ll. 929–36), genuinely alarmed at her being at the mercy of the elements (ll. 929–31: "So cumly a pake of joly juele / Were evel don schulde lyy theroute"). This question may also betray his desire to join her there, and it is likely that by raising this issue he is actually attempting to make her change her mind and let him join her on the other bank. The entire middle part of the poem, consisting of the first part of the dream, may thus be seen as a dramatic expression of erotic longing.

The dream, however, also consists of the miraculous "syght" of New Jerusalem (cf. ll. 965–72), and a comparison of the structure of the poem with other medieval dream visions once again points to a high level of suggestive eroticism at work in *Pearl*. On the one hand, this section of the poem may be seen as a form of a vision within a vision, similar to the technique of embedding minor dreams within the major one that was used in *Piers Plowman*. On the other hand, it is preferable for several reasons to see the New Jerusalem as the second part of the dream rather than something nested in it in the manner of a Chinese box. Juxtaposing the structure of *Pearl* with contemporaneous Chaucerian dream visions reveals a number of striking parallels. In both *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame* one finds a similar twofold division within the dream. The former work introduces a scheme that the latter follows: the narrator falls asleep and finds himself in a beautiful chamber with exquisite stained glass windows, sculptures or paintings. In *The Book of the Duchess* this is the poet's own room, though transformed, while in *The House of Fame* the narrator realizes he is in some sort of a temple in the midst of a desert. Chaucer, who can be identified with both narrators, leaves these chambers and with the help of guides, a little dog in the former case and an eagle in the latter, finds his way to a different stage of events where the vision proper begins.

Not much different in this respect, *The Parliament of Fowls* also shows two distinct places, both of which could be classified as a form of the classical *locus amoenus*: before he reaches the place where the birds are to hold their parliament, Geoffrey the narrator moves through the court of Venus, described in such detail that the place acquires substantial significance in the text even though nothing that would directly involve Geoffrey actually happens there. With *Pearl*, it is not immediately obvious how it relates to the structure of Chaucer's poems, for it is unclear whether one should see the earthly garden as the equivalent of the first stage of the Chaucerian visions, or whether that function is performed by the crystalline landscape, with the New Jerusalem functioning as the vision proper. However, the latter definitely seems more likely if one considers the role of guides. A brief recourse to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* can illustrate this point.

One can quite easily discern three parts in Dante's masterpiece, concomitant with the narrator's journeys through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. This division is not so obvious, however, if one considers the narrator's guides, for while Virgil leads Dante through the first two realms, Beatrice is his guide in the heavens. One may find a similar, asymmetrical model of introducing two guide figures in Chaucer. First of all, there are the dog and the Man in Black in *The Book of the Duchess*, with the former appearing only for a brief moment in order to lead Geoffrey to the latter's forest glade. Then, in *The House of Fame*, there is the eagle, developed in great detail, as well as the mysterious man who takes Geoffrey from the Hall of Fame to the House of Fame, with the eagle making a final cameo appearance towards the very end of the poem. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, in turn, there is only one guide, Scipio Africanus, who shoves Geoffrey through the gate which leads to the paradisiacal landscape where the vision unfolds, and at that point disappears from the text. Regardless of the exact structure of each particular vision, they can all be divided into two parts, with the guide either changing at some point or altogether disappearing, just as the Pearl Maiden vanishes from the Dreamer's sight the moment the vision of the city begins. That is why the passages about the New Jerusalem in *Pearl* are more likely to be the vision's continuation than another dream embedded in it.

For a guide figure, the Maiden has quite peculiar interactions with the Dreamer. She does not lead him anywhere physically, and the only interaction they have is verbal. This is particularly conspicuous in the fact that she does not take him to the New Jerusalem, nor does he go there on his own. In fact, he remains motionless on the river bank while God sends him the vision, at which point the girl seems to abandon him, just like Scipio Africanus abandons Chaucer in *The Parliament of Fowls*: though she probably

remains on the opposite bank, she disappears from his sight as his eyes begin to focus on the distant heavenly city. The comparison of the Maiden and Scipio yields yet another insight, strongly suggestive of intertextual irony. The role of the guide is to lead the Dreamer onwards, which is not an easy task given the sort of wonders, as well as dangers, the character usually encounters and becomes captivated by, and in *The Parliament of Fowls* Scipio literally needs to give Chaucer a shove to help him find the courage to pass the gate they find on their way: “Affrycan, my gide, / Me hente and shof in at the gates wide” (ll. 153–54). He even holds his hand for a moment to comfort him, which is exactly the sort of detail missing from the text of *Pearl*, where, ironically, the guide figure cannot even stand within arm’s length of the Dreamer, let alone touch him. Furthermore, the sort of paralysis Chaucer encounters in front of the gate and the Pearl Dreamer’s motionless posture when he sees the girl appear to occupy analogous positions in the respective structures of the two texts. Where a push to the other side would be most welcome, all the Dreamer receives is the Maiden’s castigations. The poet seems to be engaging here the mechanics of dream visions and reshaping them creatively to stress the immensity of erotic longing and the unbridgeable gulf that separates the spiritual existence of the girl from the bodily preoccupations of her father.

Another ironic element in the way the story of *Pearl* is constructed is the fact that although it draws on traditional love allegories and even refers to the French *Roman de la Rose* directly, it allows the Dreamer no sense of consummation whatsoever, for he never gets anywhere or reaches any place other than that where he spotted his daughter. The two parts of the vision, one taking place by the river bank, and the other in the New Jerusalem, actually happen at the exact same place, and the sense of movement is only illusory. Whereas in most other dream visions, ranging from the *Roman* and the *Divine Comedy* to Chaucer’s works, the Dreamer embarks on some sort of adventure that takes him somewhere, the Pearl Dreamer stays right where he was from the very beginning. This fundamental denial not only of consummation but also of any opportunity for attaining it is yet another factor that intensifies the sense of the eroticized insatiability of the Dreamer’s desire. The fact that the Maiden is the only person the narrator encounters in his dream may also be seen as quite ironic, for it naturally focuses his attention on her even more than the sheer fact of seeing his dead daughter would.

At the very end of the vision the Dreamer’s language once again begins to hint at him being overwhelmed with erotic longing, just as in the first stanza set, though by no means implying that the two were lovers as suggestively as the poem’s opening does. The narrator admits that he attempted to cross the river “For luf-longyng in gret delyt” (l. 1152), and

this reappearance of the vocabulary of courtly love and the Dreamer's sudden awakening has often been taken by critics as a sure sign that the Dreamer failed to understand the lesson of the Maiden and woke up just as earthly-minded and ignorant of spiritual reality as he was when he lost consciousness in the first place.⁴ Indeed, the readers may be tempted to see the narrator mentioning "luf-longyng" as evidence for the re-emergence of erotic desire within the Dreamer, for on the verbal level the sense of the erotic was clearly subdued during the debate between the two characters. One ought to realize, nonetheless, that throughout the vision the erotic is always present, but, instead of being communicated by verbal means, it finds its expression in the way the vision is structured: it is by intensifying the Dreamer's longing and ironically underscoring how close and yet how distant the Maiden and her father really are that the text of *Pearl* introduces the element of the erotic into the story with far greater force than any suggestive vocabulary could. That there can be no talk of any sudden re-emergence of the erotic at the point when the Dreamer tries to cross the stream is evident given the immediate reason for this attempt. It is when the Dreamer sees his little girl once again among the throng of virgins in the New Jerusalem that he can withhold himself no more and dashes into the water. Clearly what happens is that seeing the girl even farther away than he did during their conversation, he begins to feel that he is losing her again and that there is no chance of reuniting with her whatsoever, and this is what prompts him to make this last desperate attempt.

One may conclude that the beginning of the vision changes little with respect to the presence of the erotic in the poem. It obviously alters its form of expression, which is no longer verbal within the dream, but as for its intensity, the confrontation of the Dreamer's desire and the Maiden's endeavour to edify her father, or the topography of the crystalline landscape and the structure of the vision itself, only heighten the sense of the Dreamer's longing. The way the erotic mode functions in the poem substantiates Brown's observation that in some medieval dream visions the dream barrier is lacking altogether with little effect on the nature of the vision, which is still dream-like and operates as if the barrier were there (39): *Pearl* would in this context occupy the middle ground, with the dream threshold still there but not as consequential for the narrative, at least with regard to the erotic, as it may initially appear to be. One may say that, while the convention of a dream allows the Pearl-Poet to justify the otherworldly character of the Dreamer's adventure and to explore the

⁴ For a detailed exposition of this point of view, see Prior 40–44. Cf. Hoffman, who claims that at the end of the poem "the narrator still laments his loss, the same loss, in the same tone" (90).

differences between the material and the spiritual world, it does not signal a fundamental change, or rift, in the poem's consistently erotic presentation of the Dreamer's longing. Recognizing the role of the dream threshold in eroticising the Dreamer's relationship with his Pearl, one may call for a re-evaluation of the current notions of the poem's internal divisions, for while the moment the narrator swoons and falls to the ground clearly changes a lot, the investigation of the exact nature of this change may still yield fruitful insights into the way the poet fashioned his masterpiece.

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