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Mysticism and Materiality: *Pearl* and the Theology of Metaphor

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Drawing on Elliot Wolfson’s recent analysis of dreams and language, this essay demonstrates that metaphor is the linguistic site of the phenomenon that we call “mysticism.” Through repeated deployments of its central metaphor, the Middle English poem *Pearl* highlights the paradox that lies at the heart of every metaphor: the simultaneous and irreducible coexistence of similarity and difference. Focusing on metaphor in the poem also demonstrates the importance of thoroughgoing materiality, both to metaphor and to mysticism. The intense materiality of *Pearl*’s language produces its mysticism; it is through the interplay of immanence and transcendence in the poem that we can identify its mystical effect.

**KEYWORDS:** *Pearl*, mysticism, metaphor, materiality, transcendence, puns, Wolfson.

The dream, as metaphor, is a transference that presupposes a gap continuously crossed but never collapsed, an opening that begets the merger of dissimilar entities without resolution of their difference. Rendered metaphorically, the metaphor is the bridge that spans the breach between literal and figurative, truth and fiction, the verbal leap that propels one across the space of an irreducible reducibility. Metaphor, on this score, is a form of language that materializes in the fissure that connects by keeping apart.

Elliot Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream*  
Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laȝte,  
For pyty of my perle enclyin…  
*On this mound this vision I received,*  
*Lying prostrate for sorrow over my pearl…*  
*Pearl, XX.1205–06*

In his theorization of the dream, the scholar of Jewish mysticism Elliot Wolfson argues that dreams function like metaphors. Indeed, they are a form of metaphor. As the epigraph that opens this essay shows, Wolfson’s own linguistic strategies suggest the
difficulty in talking about the twinned phenomena of metaphor and dream, and the kind of knowing realized in them (200). He “metaphorizes” metaphor as both a bridge and a leap, suggesting that the very word begets more metaphors. One metaphor can only be elucidated in terms of another, which in turn will require another metaphor for explanation, and on and on. Furthermore, metaphor is the best linguistic example we have of “reality.” This is the case, according to Wolfson, because metaphor is a form of language that adequately expresses what is “really real”; even more, metaphor itself constitutes this reality. One of the two modes of consciousness in which we most closely and clearly encounter this, he argues, is the dream.

The other mode is, unsurprisingly, mysticism. A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream explicitly evokes the connection between dreams and mysticism. Both dreams and mysticism communicate truth in the form of paradox, yielding a higher knowledge that is nevertheless also a kind of unknowing. We see this in the way that dreams dispense with the law of noncontradiction; we see it as well in the way that mystical visions simultaneously disclose and conceal, and in the way that metaphors move between the literal and the figurative. In this paradoxical mode, Wolfson resituates the material, immanent world in relation to the transcendent by arguing that there is “nothing beyond nature that is not already part of nature.” Transcendence, then, should be relocated on the “pure plane of immanence” as a form of “absolute immanence” (Gasché, quoted in Wolfson 25). For Wolfson the immanent and the transcendent cohere in one another. Crucially, dreams and metaphors are spaces where this coincidence emerges most clearly.

In this essay, I will argue that Wolfson’s account of the proximity of dream, metaphor, and mysticism sheds considerable light on the poetic strategies of the Middle English poem, Pearl. Wolfson’s work allows us to reread the poem’s persistent metaphoricity as serving a materialist as well as mystical purpose. Scholars of Pearl have already examined the poem’s rich reliance on figurative language to gesture towards the infinite. Such work, like Wolfson’s, emphasizes metaphor’s ability to hold together similarity and difference, singularity and multiplicity. Yet Wolfson’s work also explicitly recasts this paradox as crucial to materiality, to a particularly sharp understanding of the particular kind of “reality” that metaphor elucidates. As such, his work can help connect the poem’s use of metaphor with its deep investment in materiality. To this end, I will be paying attention to the pearls of the poem, literal as well as figurative. Rather than looking only for the concomitant metaphorical meanings for the singular pearl that is the focus of this poem, I hope to suggest instead how the multiplicity of pearls, the diversity of referents, is crucial to the poem’s materiality. These various pearls establish the poem’s linguistic and historical immanence; they are the means, to borrow Wolfson’s formulation, by which the poem brings forth its transcendence.

**Metaphor’s Multiplicity**

*Pearl* is a dream vision that opens with a self-identified jeweler in a garden mourning the loss of his prize pearl. As he lays down on the ground, he falls asleep and wakes up in a dreamscape, to find a young woman dressed magnificently in pearls standing on the
other side of a river. She instructs him regarding the true nature of his loss and his need to reorient his notions of earthly merit and divine reward. In the poem’s later sections, she shows him a vision of the New Jerusalem, where she, along with hundreds of other maidens just like her, make up Christ’s retinue. Although she has instructed him to accept God’s will patiently, the narrator, on seeing this final vision, plunges across the river in an attempt to reach both the maiden and the New Jerusalem. He awakens suddenly, but praises Christ and commits his pearl to him, suggesting that all Christians are “precious perles unto his pay” (precious pearls for his pleasure) (1212).

Pearl’s repeated deployments of its eponymous metaphor create an aesthetically powerful, if interpretively confusing, surfeit of meaning. As Sarah Stanbury eloquently points out, the poem highlights an “economy of metaphor, or rather [a] hyper-economy … [an] uncanny ability to express both equivalence and multiplicity; ostensibly an equation of identity, marked by an equal sign, metaphor also adds up to the sum of its parts” (para. 7) (emphasis added). The hyper-economy that Stanbury identifies is not, as I will argue, only located on the side of the pearl’s ever-increasing metaphorical meanings. The pearl as literal thing, as material object, also multiplies wildly throughout the text. There are many pearls.

The tension between the pearl’s multiple appearances in the poem, the confusion of its status as a singular object, on one hand, and multiple things, on the other, frustrate a reader’s attempt to assign the metaphor a single meaning. Instead readers continually shuttle between the pearl’s many referents and meanings, a sort of constant mental movement, redolent of Wolfson’s definition of metaphor as “gap continuously crossed but never collapsed” (202). Take, for example, the closing lines of the poem, quoted as my second epigraph. Here the text circles back on its own beginning, as the last line echoes the first. But the “pearl” referenced in this final stanza is not exactly the same “pearl” we encountered in the first. Indeed, the image of the pearl has gone through so many transformations over the poem’s 1212 lines that it is difficult to know what, at this point, the eponymous object signifies.

Attending to this metaphorical multiplicity — which occurs both in particular stanzas and across the range of the poem as a whole — can help us to parse the paradoxes to which this poetic language alludes. At the start, the pearl seems to be an actual jewel, and the narrator a jeweler who mourns its loss. As this narrator, a few lines later, enters his dream vision in Section II of the poem, pearls make up the gravel that crunches (“con grynde,” 80) underfoot as he walks through the dream landscape. We next see pearls in Section III when the speaker catches a glimpse across the river of the young girl who will be his guide. She is dressed in a myriad of pearls (“perlez pyȝte” [adorned with pearls] is the concatenating expression the poet will use in Section IV); they cover her dress (197–204, 217–20), adorn her crown (205–8), and her necklace is a “wonder perle withouten wemme” (an amazing pearl without blemish; 221–22). The speaker certainly appreciates the significance of her royal attire. We know from the poem’s opening lines that he is a jeweler who clearly understands jewels as an outward sign of class and status — they are “to prynces paye” (for the pleasure of princes / due to princes; 1).
At the start of Section V, however, and after spending Section IV detailing the pearls that cover this maiden’s clothing, the narrator addresses the girl herself as a pearl:

‘O perle,’ quoþ I, ‘in perles pyt,
Art þou my perle þat I haf playned,
Regrettet by myn one on nyȝte?
Much longeyng haf I for þe layned,
Syþen into gresse þou me aglyȝte.’ (241–45)

‘O pearl,’ said I, ‘adorned in pearls,
Are you my pearl which I have mourned,
And grieved for by myself at night?
I have concealed much longing for you,
Since you slipped away from me into the grass.’

This is a notable shift. From many pearls, we move to the pearl now recognized as a dead and much beloved girl. She is widely accepted as the narrator’s daughter, and he is a grief-stricken parent as well as a forlorn craftsman. And yet, the narrator continues to muddle the distinction between the lost jewel and the dead girl. Here, he describes her as having “slipped away into the grass,” echoing the poem’s opening stanza where the jewel was lost: “I leste hyr in on erbere; / Þurȝ gresse to grounde hit fro me yot” (I lost her in a garden; it fell from me through the grass to the ground; 9–10). Yet we are also being prepared from the start for metaphoric slippages still to come. From the poem’s first stanza, well before readers encounter any clues to the fact that the pearl is more than a lost jewel, the gem is gendered female, described as “she.” Just at the time the word “pearl” comes to refer to a girl, we are reminded of its earlier referent, the lost gem. While it is easy to read this as a replacement — the reader comes to recognize that the speaker has substituted the pearl for his dead daughter — for the reader it actually constitutes a multiplication. First we see the pearl lost in the grass, then we meet the girl who is, somehow, also a pearl wearing pearls.

In these ways, the pearl as figure for something else vacillates between singularity (the jewel of Section I, the girl of Section IV) and multiplicity (the pearls that pave the path and cover the maiden’s attire; the jewel and girl at the same time). Such an oscillation is discomfiting, because the value of the pearl throughout the poem, whether cast via the unique identity of the jewel or the girl, seems tied to the pearl’s singularity. This pearl figures the one special jewel treasured above all the others; it refers to a beloved daughter who cannot be replaced. And yet the countless pearls that appear at other moments in the poem crowd out images of individual identity or distinction. This seems especially true of the pearls that make up the gravel on which the dreamer walks — an image of banality if ever there was one. Yet for all their banality as gravel on the ground, the sheer number of pearls also imparts something of the magnificence of the dream world (they pave the ground with pearls here!). This apparent contradiction between the pearl’s apparent uniqueness and its ordinariness, its singularity alongside its multiplicity, constitutes the paradox emerging from the poem’s central image.

The oscillation between the pearl’s singularity and its multiplicity repeats as the poem turns explicitly to spiritual themes. In the description of the New Jerusalem (Sections
XVIII and XIX), the pearl’s multiplicity and abundance reemerge: multiple pearls sit atop each of the gates to the city, and there is a great procession of virgins, all of whom are dressed like the pearl-maiden, “depaynt in perlez and wedez qwyte” (adorned in pearls and white clothing; 1101). The multiplicity of pearls that we saw earlier proliferates again, particularly as the pearl maidens of this host are indistinguishable from one another, as they are from the one, unique pearl-maiden, the dead daughter. They are “in þe same gyse þat watz my blysful anvnder croun” (in the same fashion as was my blissful one beneath her crown; 1098–99), and “alle in sute her liuréz wasse / Tor to knaw þe gladdest chere” (their garments matched; it was difficult to know which was the happiest face; 1108–9). These sections, which inaugurate the poem’s concluding stanzas, enact a proliferation of a proliferation — a multiplication of the multiplicity witnessed in descriptions of the gravel and the maiden’s dress.

Yet critics have tended to emphasize the spiritual singularity of the Pearl as metaphor, taking their cues from the singular title of the poem, and tracing out the metaphoric meanings of the pearl, while ignoring the tension inherent in its multiplications.8 I wish, instead, to draw our attention to the power of the pearl in all its many forms. Wolfson can help us to understand the stakes of this observation. Claiming that, “metaphor […] is a form of language that materializes in the fissure that connects by keeping apart,” (202) he reminds us that metaphor does not clarify meaning. At least not in the conventional sense of pinning it down — if it did, one metaphoric deployment of the pearl would be sufficient. In Pearl each incarnation of the metaphor becomes a point of connection, of explanation; but in the context of Pearl’s metaphoric multiplicity, each instance also constitutes an acknowledgment of the insufficiency of metaphor, of language in the face of the ineffable, unexplainable nature of what is being communicated. In this way, each particular instance of the metaphor discloses while it also conceals. When the metaphor of the pearl proliferates, it “connects by keeping apart,” holding a diversity of metaphorical pearls together precisely by distinguishing them across the range of the poem. For Wolfson, this feature of metaphor doesn’t conceptualize reality so much as materialize it, and all across the page. In proliferating the metaphor of the pearl, the poem Pearl shows us reality through this fissure, a kind of reality that Wolfson localizes in the dream as well as in mysticism.

If the metaphor of the pearl in Pearl is inherently unstable, as other scholars have noted, it is the pearl’s metaphorical vacillation between singularity and multiplicity that constitutes the key to the poem’s materializing logics.9 The relation between this metaphorical singularity and its multiplicity is worth describing in detail, particularly as it often goes unremarked by critics. On the one hand, “pearl” as literal referent, or the “vehicle,” in I. A. Richards’ formulation, seems to be the gemstone referenced in the poem’s opening sections. This gemstone plays a significant role in the poem’s representation of value, reward, and distinction, all thematically central to the text. The gemstone, in other words, has a certain material and interpretive importance. But the metaphoric referent, or “tenor,” of “pearl” dizzyingly proliferates, and the precise relationship of these metaphoric deployments to the literal referent is difficult to discern. How shall we understand the pearls used for adornment, or those that make up the gravel on which
the dreamer walks? Metaphor itself always comes to exist in the tension between literal
and figurative referents, between the similarity and difference that coexist in the meta-
phoric relationship. (The girl is the pearl, but she also is not. She has qualities of purity,
wholeness, exceeding value; she is beloved of the narrator, but she also is not an actual
gemstone; she is not round, or white; she did not come from an oyster.)

This tension between similarity and difference, between literal and metaphoric refer-
ents, marks Wolfson’s “irreducible reducibility,” the “fissure that connects by keeping
apart.” Pearl’s proliferation of metaphors (the pearl is the gem, the girl, the kingdom
of heaven, the obedient Christian) highlights this aspect of the workings of metaphor,
since it reproduces again and again the metaphoric movement “across a gap continu-
ously crossed but never collapsed.” Wolfson’s account of the hermeneutic of dream and
metaphor, then, can help us to see how Pearl employs its own rhetorical devices, poetic
form, and literary genre to embody the infinity it wants to materialize. In the poem, the
multiplication of both metaphoric and literal pearls continues to the point of excess.
This is one way that Pearl achieves a “merger of dissimilar entities without resolution
of their difference.” I have just explored briefly the way in which the pearl (as object,
metaphor, and poem) creates an interpretive excess capable of signifying its paradoxical
and infinite truth. Yet the poem has several strategies it employs to this end. As I will
go on to suggest, such excess is also evident in other aspects of the poem — its reliance
on puns, for example, and its twinned concerns with computation and compensation.
Pearl is, in fact, a highly material poem on several levels, and its reliance on materiality
contributes to the centrality of metaphor in the poem, precisely because the poetry reveals
the persistent materiality of its mystical, metaphorical language.

**Pearl’s Linguistic Materiality**

Through its repeated deployments of a single metaphor, Pearl also draws our attention
to metaphor’s capacity to embody transcendence — through its simultaneous reliance
on similarity and difference and through the enduring presence of the material referent.
Other linguistic strategies draw similar attention to language’s palpability. Insofar as Pearl
is a “freakishly formal” poem, it is a poem engaged with the materiality of language.
Often described as a jewel itself, the poem features an incredibly complicated yet elegant
structure. The poet divides the work into twenty sections relatively equal in length, and
containing five stanzas of twelve lines each. Each section utilizes a concatenating “link,”
a repeated word or words that appear in the first and last line of each stanza. The first
stanza of a new section uses the link word from the previous section, tying the two adja-
cent sections together tightly. As I have already noted, such connectivity begins and ends
the poem as a whole: the first line of the poem deploys a link word from the poem’s final
section, while the last line repeats the first section’s link word. The structural effect pulls
together the first and last stanzas, creating the impression that the poem itself is a circle,
a linguistic “pearl.” Finally, the poem also both alliterates and uses a consistent rhyme
scheme throughout (abababbbcbcc). All of these poetic devices (concatenation, alliter-
ation, rhyme) emphasize the materiality of the language as it is seen, heard, or spoken.
Concatenation is crucial to the poem’s famous use of puns and homonyms. Five of the twenty concatenating words used to link stanzas together are in fact homonyms. Spot, date, ryste, mote, and paye repeat at crucial moments, and the repetitions within each section, like the repetitions between sections, make the most of the widest range of semantic meanings available. Section IX, whose link word is date, provides a particularly good example. In Middle English, date has a wide range of meanings some of which are contradictory; they include beginning, end, limit, point of time, date, season, and rank. Almost all of these meanings are employed in this section, where the word itself is repeated ten times. At times the word’s use is productively ambiguous, as in line 493 where “þer is no date of Hys godnesse” (there is no date of His goodness) deploys date in ways that could mean end, or limit, but also season, or perhaps even rank or time. To say that date is used as a pun in this line does not quite capture the multiplicity of meaning at play. Even a reader initially attuned to two or three possible definitions could, upon reflection discover even more meaning. The negative construction (“no date”) also contributes to this fullness of meaning — it avoids the definitional precision of stating what is (there is an end to God’s goodness, and here it is), in favor of defining God’s goodness against any such limits. In the other nine uses of the word in this section, it regularly refers to a specific instance — the “season” of harvest, the “beginning” or “end” of the day, the “rank” of queen. It is only in the formulation at line 493 that date refers to this kind of divine plenitude of meaning.

As the concatenating word in Section IX, this usage of date enacts the very shift that the poem tries to instill in both its narrator and its reader: a movement from the specific and always limiting understanding, to a recognition of the ceaseless and eternal nature of God’s goodness and reward. There is no limit, no end, no date to God’s goodness. Furthermore, any attempt to describe God’s date in the affirmative would be doomed to failure. This is because the very nature of such an affirmation would be itself limiting in an attempt to apply earthly categories to God. The negation, on the other hand, denies any such correspondence between the earthly and the heavenly. Yet as it does so, it relies on and resignifies those very earthly categories. Thus, and somewhat paradoxically, the poem opens upon a more infinite mode of signification. Section IX is one place, then, where we can see the poem’s firm investments in transcendence, in the insufficiency of earthly, human ways of knowing or modes of computation. If, in fact, Section IX were to end the poem, the gesture towards transcendence and unknowability would seem to be the real point. But the poem goes on, maintaining its interest in materiality through a startling imbrication with mysticism.

Consider, for example, Section XVI where diverse meanings of mote (spot, blemish, city, or castle) erupt:

‘That mote þou menez in Judy londe,‘
 þat speyal spyce þen to me spakk,
‘þat is þe cyte þat þe Lombe con fonde
To soffer inne sor for manez sake,
þe olde Jerusalem to vnderstonde,
For þere þe olde gulte watz don to slake.
Bot þe nwe, þat lyȝt of Godez sonde,'
De apostel in Apocalyppce in theme con take.
De Lompe þer withouten spottez blake
Hatz feryed þyder Hys fayre flote;
And as Hys flok is withouten flake,
So is Hys mote withouten moote.’ (937–48)

That special one then said to me, “That spot you mean, in Judea, it is the city that the Lamb of
God visited and suffered in sorrowfully for humanity’s sake — I mean the old Jerusalem where
the old guilt was satisfied. But the apostle speaks in his Apocalypse of the new Jerusalem,
which was sent down from God. There the spotless light/lamp of the world has taken his fair
host; and as his flock is without blemish, so is his city without blemish.”

The puns pile up so quickly in this stanza, especially in the last few lines, that it becomes
difficult to register any meaning at all. Mote has a range of meanings in Middle English.
The two that seem most relevant here are noted by all modern editions of the poem:
“blemish, spot, stain, flaw” and “castle or city.” The homonym is particularly confusing
in the stanza quoted above — in the first line, does mote reference the spot / stain in
Judea, or does it refer to the city in Judea? Synonyms for both meanings are used — city
in line 939, and spottez in line 945, thus reinforcing the ambiguity of the first line. This
ambiguity reflects the problem the stanza seeks to resolve. The city, as the old Jerusalem,
is spotted and stained. Furthermore, the homonym emphasizes Christ’s creative and
redemptive work — the mote as a physical place is “þe cyté þat þe Lombe con fonde” (the
city that the Lamb visited). It exists through Christ’s creative agency. And it is precisely
the Lamb’s suffering, also described in this stanza, that brings about the city’s salvation
(figured here as purification). The stanza culminates in an apparent resolution as the
two meanings come together in the final line — the “mote [city] without moote [spot].”
The distinctive spellings (mote and moote) reflect the particularly intense reading expe-
rience produced by this repetition of puns; throughout the rest of the section, the word
is consistently spelled as mote, leaving it to function as all puns do. But here, in line 948,
it appears that the poet, or perhaps a scribe, felt compelled to help readers out with two
different spellings, emphasizing the two meanings at play.

It is typical of Pearl’s virtuosic poetry that this intense linguistic complexity will be
accompanied by yet more puns. In this stanza there is also a pun on Lombe and Lompe,
words which, given standard Middle English pronunciation, would be nearly indistin-
guishable from one another when read aloud. Both clearly refer to Christ, drawing on
multiple Scriptural images for him (the sacrificial lamb, the light of the world). Meanwhile
another pun, flok (flock) and flote (host), refers to those who are saved. (The elect as a
flock also sets up an implicit contrast between the collective identity of the saved, iden-
tified together as a single flock of sheep, and the unique identity of the Lamb, Christ).
In both cases, the identity (of Christ or of Christians) is destabilized by the use of puns
and the resulting excess, rather lack, of meaning. Christ is both Lombe and Lompe,
Christians are both the fayre flote and the flok withouten flake. These puns, like the
metaphor of the pearl, proliferate meaning as a means to communicate singularity and
multiplicity at the same time.
Puns foreground the materiality of language in part because they depend on the play of similarities and differences between words as they are heard, spoken, or read. There is a dizzying array of alliterative and poetic repetitions in this stanza; the rhymes in the stanza, for example, are complex, drawing our attention to language at its most material. This feature increases when rhyme combines with alliteration, in the repetition of labile, sibilant, or fricative consonants. The first three \( b \) rhymes alliterate, all beginning with \( s- \) (\( \text{spake}, \text{sake}, \text{slake} \)), while the third, fifth, and sixth \( b \) rhymes all end in \(-\text{lake} \) (\( \text{slake}, \text{blake}, \text{flake} \)). Within the penultimate line, \( \text{flok} \) and \( \text{flake} \) alliterate and rhyme via consonance, while the puns \( \text{flok} \) and \( \text{flote} \) (in the line above) are also connected via alliteration. (And don’t forget that the \( \text{flok} \) is \text{withouten flake}, and the host is in fact \text{a fayre flote}!)

Each line, moreover, repeats crucial words: \( \text{hys} \) (which falls on the same poetic foot in various lines), the verb \( \text{is} \), and \( \text{withouten} \), which juxtaposes the punned upon words (and also appears two lines earlier). All of these repetitions combine in a stanza so tightly woven that it can be difficult to unravel any meaning. This feature of the poem even makes possible an avoidance of meaning on the part of any reader, particularly insofar as comprehension might require the reader to forgo the pleasure of the language itself.

Another notable concatenating pun appears in Section XIII, which contains a re-telling of the biblical parable of the pearl of greatest price. There the link word is also a homophone: “\( \text{mascellez / maskellez [spotless] perle} \)”\(^{15} \) and “\( \text{makellez [matchless] perle}. \)” On the one hand, the homophone (\( \text{maskellez / makellez; spotless / matchless} \)) emphasizes the uniqueness of the gem and, concomitantly, its absolute value. \textit{Because} the pearl is spotless it is matchless; because it is spotless and matchless it is priceless.\(^{16} \) Used as a link word, the homophone doubles on itself, creating multiplicity at the level of the word. In fact, the poem makes no distinction between the words \( \text{mascellez} \) (spotless) and \( \text{makellez} \) (matchless). When reading the section, it is easy to lose track of which adjective is intended in any given instance. Only one letter distinguishes them, and the eye can easily skip over the added “\( s \)” after all. It is easier to tell the two words apart if the section is read aloud, because the ear can more clearly distinguish the difference made by the internal consonant. Hearing the poetry does not solve the problem of doubleness, however. Instead, it only highlights the pleasurable pun of the section’s closing line: “\( \text{Al only \( y \)self so stout and styf, / A \( m \)akelez may and \( m \)askellez} \)” (Only you are so strong and so firm/ A matchless maiden without blemish; 779–80, emphasis added). Used interchangeably in Section XIII, \( \text{makelez} \) and \( \text{maskellez} \) converge upon each other, thus condensing both meanings into either form. When we see one word, we are immediately aware of the other. We see how puns, especially when used as concatenating words in this highly structured poem, condense meaning.\(^{17} \) The same condensation is at work in the puns in Section XIV, especially when a single letter separates them — \( \text{Lombe and Lompe, flok and flote, mote and moote} \).

It is thus at the poem’s most basic level, the level of the words themselves, that its hermeneutic agenda becomes clearer. In its poetic form and its reliance on puns, the poetry makes meaning that is also its unmaking; it manages to say more than one thing at a time, or, perhaps, we could say that the verses say and unsay simultaneously. \textit{Pearl}, in its formal reliance on the materiality of language, in its operation at the level of the word,
pursues knowledge as paradox. Like the work of pun or metaphor, like the hermeneutic of the dream, *Pearl* stretches language beyond more than a single utterance. This is what constitutes *Pearl* as a mystical text.

In my claim, following Wolfson, that *Pearl* “makes meaning that is also its unmaking,” I suggest precisely how the poem’s reliance on metaphoric condensation marks it for the tradition of Christian mysticism known as negative theology. Negative theology takes as its starting point the assertion that human language always falls entirely short of the divine reality, and human comprehension can in no way conceive of what is infinite. But these are only the starting points — we do try to find ways to talk or think about the divine, ways that try to escape the normal traps of predication and assertion. These sometimes counter-intuitive forms of language or thought, as they have been articulated in the Christian tradition, are akin to Wolfson’s “merger of dissimilar entities without resolution of their difference,” or “form of language that materializes in the fissure that connects by keeping apart.” *Pearl’s* poetic reliance on alliteration and puns requires certain types of repetition (such as homonyms and puns), often resulting in an excess of meaning; but it also results in excesses in what is seen or heard (the repeated sounds or graphemes).

This is to say that the materiality, the concreteness, of the language is precisely what provokes *Pearl’s* mysticism. The transcendent is achieved in the poem only because the immanent is so thoroughly embraced. And just as, in other mystical texts, cataphatic and apophatic language are dependent on one another — there is seldom any “pure” cataphatic discourse, and certainly no language that is only apophatic — it is the coexistence of both the transcendent and the immanent that moves the poem into the realm of the mystical. If mystical language is not so much a discrete moment, but rather the effect of a complex interaction between the cataphatic and apophatic, then this particular poem is mystical because of the imbrication of immanence and transcendence — only where these two work together can we find the mystical, the place where more than one thing can be said, or where something can be simultaneously said and denied, or said and unsaid.

**Pearl’s Descriptive Materiality**

*Pearl* is in fact a material poem on multiple levels. But one of the most remarkable things about the poem is its binding together of multiple types of materiality in its embodiment of transcendence. I would like to turn my attention briefly to another facet of the poem’s intense materiality: its descriptions of places and landscapes. Descriptions of the forest, in Section II of the poem, and of the Heavenly Jerusalem, in Sections XVII and XVIII, disorient and frustrate readerly expectations. These descriptions parallel one another, for both landscapes of forest and city are rendered entirely “inorganic”; the narrator describes them almost solely in terms of gemstones and precious metals. In the forest, as I have already noted, the gravel is made up of pearls. But there are also “crystal klyffez” (crystal cliffs; 74), the stones in the bottom of the river are “stonez stepe, / As glente þurȝlas þat glowed and glyȝt—/ As stremande sternez, quen stroþe-men slepe, / Staren in
welkyn in wynter nyȝt” (brilliant stones that glowed and glimmered like light through glass, like stars stream with light in the winter-night sky while earth men sleep; 113–15). While these are, in one sense, completely familiar features of a landscape, the description is otherworldly. The stones, like the pearls on the paths, are gemstones in their own right, even as they stand in the place of an utterly commonplace object. And although this is a forest with trees, these trees are fantastical:

Holtewodez bryȝt aboute hem bydez
Of bollez as blwe as ble of Ynde;
As bornyst syluer þe lef on slyeþez,
þat þike con trylle on vch a tynde;
Quen glem of glodez agaynz hem glydez,
Wyþ schymeryng schene ful schrylle þay schynde. (75–80)

The woods were bright around the cliffs, with trunks as blue as blue of India; the leaves, which quivered thickly on every branch, slid over one another like burnished sliver. When the gleam from the sky hit them, they shone brightly with a lovely shimmering.

There is, in fact, a decided lack of green in this forest. The gem tones are unnatural, glaring, hard, even inhospitable. The forest is almost unrecognizable, but not because its portrayal is abstract; this description, in its use of gemstones and metals, feels “hyper-material.” These descriptions thus evoke the extremes of the familiar and the foreign, recasting the most recognizable objects as beyond their normal aspect.

Pearl’s heavenly Jerusalem is similarly shiny (in a description obviously inspired by images from the biblical apocalypse). The city itself appears to be made all of gold (989–90), and its base is adorned with twelve layers of precious gems (991–92): “þe stretez of golde as glasse al bare, / þe wal of jasper þat glent as glayre. / þe wonez withinne enurned ware / Wyth alle kynnez perré þat moȝt repayre” (the streets of gold were as clear as glass, the jasper walls shone like egg whites. The walls within were adorned with every kind of precious stone that could be there; 1025–28). The poet also adds to the twelve gates of the biblical text “a margyrye, / A parfyt perle þat neuer fatez” (a pearl, a perfect pearl that never fades; 1037–38). As with the forest, all points of reference disappear as soon as they are introduced; instead, we’re left with an image that is concrete in its material detail, even as it pushes the limits of human imagination. “Imagine a city, but do not imagine it has the features that characterize the city you imagine,” A. C. Spearing writes (“Language and Its Limits” 68). Spearing’s account of the reader’s experience highlights the dynamics of similarity and difference at play in these descriptions — the same dynamics that we’ve seen at work in metaphor. The forest and the city require the reader to see both the foreign and the familiar, reinforcing the need to maintain two dynamics — identity and distinction. It is in shuttling between these two, while holding them in tension, that the poem becomes mystical. Both in these dynamics of similarity and difference, and in the difference itself, which is achieved by way of highly material descriptions, these landscapes become another place where a particular deployment of materiality becomes the space of transcendence.
Multiplication, Computation, and Satisfaction

In my final section, I consider Pearl’s re-telling of the biblical Parable of the Vineyard. As the pearl-maiden recounts the parable, we see the narrator’s response to the poem’s ongoing multiplication of meanings — his extreme discomfort with interpretive ambiguity — and the maiden’s response. Both resonate with contemporary concerns. And both outline the interpretive pleasures of such frustrating multiplications. The parable and the narrator’s response to it take up the heart of the poem — Sections IX–XI. And these stanzas display a very real concern with computation — with evaluating or appraising the relative worth of certain actions. The maiden re-tells the biblical Parable of the Vineyard in order to replace the jeweler’s misperceptions about the value of human effort with the extravagance of divine reward. In the Gospel of Matthew, a vineyard owner hires men at the start of the day for a set wage (entirely fair for a day’s labor), then goes back every three hours, picking up more men to work in his vineyard and promising them, in the poem’s words, “resonabele hyre” (524) (“whatever is right” in the gospel). At the end of the day, the vineyard owner has his foreman (his “reeve” in the poem, 542) pay the workers, starting with those who came last and ending with those who were hired at the start of the day.

The retelling of the parable spans Sections IX and X. Section IX, as we have seen, features the link word date. Section X uses the link word more. After the workers are all paid, the laborers who worked all day are forced to watch those who worked only an hour or two receive the same pay (a scene heightened in the poem, where the vineyard owner instructs his reeve to line them all up). Those laborers who worked the longest of course begin to complain “‘Vus þynk vus oȝe to take more. / More haf we serued, vus þynk so, / þat suffred han þe dayez hete, / þenn þyse þat wroȝt not hourez two’” (We think we ought to get more, since we have worked more. We have suffered through the day’s heat while these men have not even worked two hours; 552–55). In the mouths of the laborers, more suggests entitlement, reward, fair payment. They have worked more, so they deserve more — more here is a word that represents notions of compensation. More equals more, and less equals less; these terms have a significance that can be calculated and correlated. But as the maiden begins to gloss this parable, she uses more not to imply calculation or correlation, but instead to signify abundance: “þus pore men her part ay pykez, / þaȝ þay com late and lyttel wore, / And þaȝ her sweng wyth lyttel atslykez, / þe merci of God is much þe more” (Thus poor men always get their part, though they come late and work but little, and though they put forth little effort, the mercy of God is in fact “much more.” Perhaps we could say, then, that we have an inverse correlation here — this is what the narrator seems to suggest at the section’s close when he says, “Now he þat stod þe long day stable, / And þou to payment com hym byfore, / þenne þe lasse in werke to take more able, / And euer þe lenger þe lasse þe more” (Now he who stood firm all day long, and you come to payment before him — then the one who worked less is able to take more, and the longer this goes on, less will be getting more; 597–600). The last line
descends into confusion; it is “more emphatic than logical,” to quote editors Andrew and Waldron (81). The narrator is almost sputtering. He is completely appalled by this notion of repayment, one that does not depend on merit or effort. But the last line also suggests that the narrator recognizes the threat of an inverse correlation: the longer this goes on, the more those working less will get.

Oddly enough, in the mouths of the laborers in the parable and of our jeweler-narrator, more implies lack and finitude. Theirs is a restricted economy where only so much is available. According to this logic, we must make sure that limited resources are parcelled out fairly.

We can read the narrator’s indignant tone in the line that ends Section X: “And euer þe lenger þe lesse þe more.” Meaning shifts, however, in the maiden’s use of more in the first line of Section XI: “Of more and lasse in Godez ryche … lys no joparde” (God’s riches/liberality does not lie in jeopardy; it is not subject to “more” or “less”; 601–2).

In the maiden’s usage, more is the opposite of limit. It is a sign of abundance, even excess. God’s wealth is so large, so unimaginably beyond comprehension, that it cannot be subject to terms like “more” and “less.” God’s riches cannot be added to, and when taken away from, they still remain the same. God’s mercy is not only plentiful but also excessive, a point that seems almost indecent to the narrator, caught up as he is in an economy of repayment and earning. Furthermore, this poetic amplification of more, as the link between Sections X and XI, sits at the poem’s literal center. In its heart, then, Pearl offers the shift from a limited and reductive understanding of God to an understanding that is infinite and unbounded. This movement, again, is structured at the level of the word — in the retelling of the Parable of the Vineyard, the repetition of the link words (date, then more) become the sight of this movement across and between the poles of these competing meanings.

Furthermore, through the repetition of these words meaning is not only transformed, it is multiplied. The multiplication of meaning takes a new valence for meaning in Section X, where the jeweler is discomfited (terrified, even) by a proliferation of God’s excess. Like the workers in the parable, he aims to fix certain meanings (the meaning of a “day’s hire,” for example). More meanings are exactly what he does not want; fixed meanings, defined (and thus computable) are what he desires. In this way, the poet links a spiritual concern with computation, with more and less, to a question of poetic meaning. The proliferation of poetic meaning and the payment of laborers in the parable are mutually constitutive. They comment on one another. Material concerns (how much does one get paid?) converge on interpretive ones (what does more mean?). And these interpretive concerns are amplified at the level of the word, through the repetition of the same word in different lines, in the mouths of different speakers.

In Section XI, the link word is in fact a concatenating phrase (one of only two sections to do so): “For þe grace of God is gret innoʒe” (For the grace of God is great enough; #). Innoʒe is a word whose definition also multiplies, if now in a new way. Both functionally precise and theoretically indefinite, the meaning of “enough” is entirely dependent on context. When someone claims to have “enough,” an exact amount is implied, but it cannot be known whether that exact measurement exhausts the supply. (When I claim, for example, to have “enough flour to bake the cake,” I do mean that I have the precise
amount that the recipe calls for — five cups, say. But my claim about enough also does not measure the total amount of flour; enough implies a sufficient amount plus the possibility of an unknown quantity beyond the measurement. If I have “enough flour” I have at least five cups, with the possibility of an infinitely greater amount that is not calculated in my statement.) Innože is sufficient, but it is also plenitudinous; it meets specific needs or requirements but, in this usage, it is not exhausted by them, and in fact leaves us without any knowledge of “how much” is really there.30

Discussing the significance of the word “enough” in fourteenth-century English literature more generally, Jill Mann shows how it is closely connected with the concepts of satisfaction and payment. Mann links innože to the workers’ payment in the parable. The pearl-maiden’s assertion that all are “payed inlyche” makes sense precisely because all are satisfied. Equal payment, in the heavenly economy, doesn’t mean equal pay — it means equal satisfaction (25). Mann’s thematic connection of innože and paye in Pearl reveals another aspect of the word (and the concept) of paye in the poem. Paye is another pun, most often glossed as “satisfaction” and “pleasure” in the poem (it is also the link word of the final Section XX). Certain types of satisfaction suggest pleasure — “satisfaction at a job well done,” for example, or satisfaction of one’s hunger with good food. But you can also satisfy your hunger with cheap fast food and potato chips, and the satisfaction of a debt or a legal requirement says only that the obligation has been met, nothing about the means by which it was met, or whether any of the parties involved took pleasure in the fulfillment. In light of Mann’s illuminating treatment of innože, then, we can see paye take on a new significance in the poem. Innože in the poem is connected to concepts of payment — the payment of the workers in the parable, the satisfaction of the debt humanity owes because of its sin, the payment of craftsmen for their labor — but it is more than that. In the face of innože, “the idea of ‘more’ becomes an absurdity” (25); to have innože is to be satisfied, to be pleased.

In the center of the poem, concerns over labor and remuneration and concerns about interpretation become twinned. While the jeweler is frustrated by the maiden’s refusal to abide by fixed formulas for computing compensation, the poem suggests that there is satisfaction, even pleasure, in these multiplications, and thus in the productivity of the language itself. This point is quite different from readings of the poem that emphasize a link between language and transformation. Scholars have pointed out the way the poem’s puns “transform” the reader’s (and the narrator’s) understanding, or how the poem moves from the finite and limited to the infinite and unbounded.31 According to these readings, the poem achieves transcendence through transformation; by demonstrating the insufficiency of human comprehension, by making the familiar strange, it can then use its own poetry and images to point towards altered understanding. I wish to stress, instead, the ways that the poem’s repeated deployments of words (metaphors, puns, link words) multiply meanings. Transformation may come, for the reader as for the jeweler, when the terrestrial and limited understandings are surrendered. But these initial understandings are not simply replaced by, or “transformed” into, more sufficient “heavenly” ones.

Instead, we are pointed to the infinite capacity of language itself. Language, in its heavenly dimension, emerges as ceaselessly, multiply productive. This hyper-production
of meaning is discomfiting at times, but always stunningly beautiful. Furthermore, the multiplication of meanings we see in *Pearl*’s language is rooted firmly in that language’s materiality — its most literal, physical, and palpably aesthetic qualities. Transcendence in the poem thus always remains material and linguistic, even as it unfolds the infinities present within these immanent spheres. We never escape the poem’s language into something (or somewhere) else; we never leave behind our earthly frame of reference even as we take on new understandings.

We only need to consider the poem’s first and last line to see how this is the case. The last line repeats the first (“perle plesant to pynces paye”), tying Section I with Section XX by way of concatenation, and closing the circle of the poem. We are returned to where we began — and most importantly, to the language with which we began. This repetition may seem (yet again) to be a transformation of our notion of the pearl and the prince — we have a better grasp of these words than we did at first. But along the way the pearl has gone through a series of dizzying multiplications, as object and as metaphor; it has vacillated between a set-apart, singular identity and a multiplicity that suggests opulence by way of excess. The return to the first line at the poem’s end also suggests that we can never escape its language and its central metaphor, and that transcendence is to be found within the repetitions of that language. The jeweler’s trajectory, his sights focused on the heaven he longs to reach by leaving earth behind, seems concerned with “crossing over.” Yet for the reader, transcendence is to be found not in a crossing over but with a return, one brought about by the poem’s form. The poem does not ask us to exit its world for the next; it does not substitute the heavenly for the earthly, or supplant the literal with the figurative. It, instead, returns us to the very fact of its existence as language. It is there, in the material form of metaphorical language, that we discern transcendence. What marks this poem as “mystical” is, then, this complex interaction between immanence and transcendence.

**Conclusion**

Elliot Wolfson’s analysis of dreams and language demonstrates that metaphor is the linguistic site of the phenomenon that we call “mysticism.” He demonstrates, furthermore, that this same paradox is found clearly in the most common experience of dreams. Through repeated deployments of its central metaphor, *Pearl* highlights this paradox, the simultaneous and irreducible coexistence of similarity and difference that lies at the heart of every metaphor. Throughout the poem, a consubstantiality of similarity with difference emerges by way of persistent attention to materiality. *Pearl* in fact relies on multiple forms of materiality (linguistic, poetic, descriptive) to transcend the “merely” material. The enduring material referent of its metaphors, the thick descriptions, and the breathtaking poetic form — all keep the poem grounded in immanence even as their excesses spill into the transcendent. The narrator’s discomfort with the multiplications of meaning that metaphor and pun propel in the poem seems a feature of his commitment to singularity: to status, definition, or singularity of truth. While the poem’s ending does not seem to reveal the jeweler’s acceptance or understanding of this plenitudinous and
paradoxical reality, the poem itself demonstrates how inseparable transcendence and immanence are, and how the former emerges only when it is given form by the latter.

Notes

1 In A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream, Chapter 4, “Coincidentia Oppositorum and the Mythologic of the Dream,” Wolfson most thoroughly connects the rabbinc treatment of dreams with that of mysticism.

2 Most scholars do tend to assume that metaphor is central to Pearl. Some important qualifying voices are equally important to my analysis. Edmonson and Fletcher each argue that metonymy, not metaphor, is crucial in making the pearl into the girl. Fletcher’s analysis of the poem as fundamentally metonymic leads him to identify a carefully maintained tension at the center of the poem (between private, singular identity and communal, multiplicitous identity) (“Reading Radical Metonymy” 53–54).

3 See, for example, Stanbury’s eloquent formulation about how the poem highlights the relationship between metaphor and transcendence in her 2001 introduction: “The economy of metaphor, or rather its hyper-economy, lies in its uncanny ability to express both equivalence and multiplicity; ostensibly an equation of identity, marked by an equal sign, metaphor also adds up to the sum of its parts” (para. 7, emphasis added). But the hyper-economy Stanbury identifies is not only located on the side of the pearl’s ever-increasing metaphoric referents. The literal referent, the material object (the other side of Stanbury’s equal sign) also multiplies wildly throughout the text.

4 Medieval authors often focus on figurative language more generally as a type of “other speech.” The “otherness” of metaphor is another way of describing its ability to create paradox, to equate or identify disparate elements within a single linguistic formulation. Isidore of Seville gives the following definition: “metaphora est verbi alicuius usurpata translatio” (“metaphor’s transfer of meaning usurps the place of another word”), while Bede defines metaphor as simply “rerum verborumque translatio” (“a translation of words and things”). (This tendency is probably partly due to the influence of Cicero, who, in De Oratore, offers this definition: “Similitudinis est … verbum in alieno loco tamquam in suo postium si agnoscitur, delectate ...”). (“A metaphor is an imitation of another word by a word put into the place of another word as if it belonged there, and if the meaning is recognized, it gives pleasure.”) The oft-cited etymology of metaphor, whose Greek root means “to transfer,” adds to the sense of metaphor as “other speech,” since the metaphoric meaning is removed from the literal referent (Bede’s res) and transferred to the metaphoric referent (which the verbum now signifies).

The author of The Cloud of Unknowing, tries, on the one hand, to deny the importance of the bodily referent of his metaphors, but nevertheless maintains the necessary value of figurative language’s material element. Throughout late antique and medieval biblical exegesis there runs a similar sort of grudging respect for the role that the literal or material referent plays in figuration. Augustine’s use of the language of the sign still requires him to hold together the two sides of the metaphor, to acknowledge the necessity of both, and his influence was felt throughout the Middle Ages. While at times downplayed, then, the role of the literal/material referent in metaphor is continually acknowledged by Christian exegetes. The differences between medieval and modern theories of metaphor (such as Wolfson’s, which is itself grounded in medieval rabbinc sources) is thus one of emphasis.

5 While the scholarly opinion regarding the identity of the pearl-maiden favors her role as the narrator’s daughter, some scholars continue to argue that the narrator’s desire for her is romantic, pointing to the poem’s use of the language and tropes of courtly literature, as well as the narrator’s fixation on the body of the maiden. For more recent versions of this argument, see Jane Gilbert, Charlotte Gross, Jane Beal, and Claude Willan.

6 The maiden also refers to herself as a pearl, as the jeweler’s pearl: “Sir, ye haf your tale mysetente, / To say your perle is al awaye” (Sir, you have mistold your story, to say that your pearl is forever gone; 257–58).

7 The multiplication of the pearl is mirrored in the later multiplication of heavenly queens. The pearl-maiden describes herself as a queen, and the narrator protests that Mary is the Queen of Heaven, so her assertion must be illogical. The narrator’s perspective at this point in the poem thus reveals a similar confounding tension between singularity (there can only ever be one queen) and multiplicity (there are thousands of maidens who are queens in heaven).

8 The title, of course, is a convention of modern editing. The first word of the poem is the singular “perle,” but that pearl, the one in the first line, is the object which is so rapidly multiplied, both literally and metaphorically. The title, while fitting, encourages readers to identify the pearl in the singular.

9 See Bogdanos 4–12; Thorpe 45–51; Vance 131–47. Scholars treating the poem as primarily an allegory, a prominent view in the early and mid-twentieth century, also take the pearl’s meanings to be multiple. D. W. Robertson is perhaps the best example of those critics who read the poem allegorically — he explicates
the metaphor of the pearl via the fourfold exegetical method. His reading thus both acknowledges, in one sense, the metaphor’s instability, while still trying to pin down its meaning.  

Though Wolfson does not quote him, Ricoeur himself makes this point in Study 7 of *The Rule of Metaphor*, explicating the work of resemblance in metaphorical meaning (“resemblance” is itself another term that implies both similarity and difference) (193 – 215). In discussing the tension inherent in metaphor, he writes that “the literal is not accompanies the metaphorical is” (214). Ricoeur, furthermore, identifies metaphor as a “planned category mistake” (197, emphasis in original); a phrase which seems particularly apt to describe the transmutation of the eponymous pearl, and which Stanbury cites in her introduction to the poem (para. 5).  

Cervone uses the term “superfiable” to refer to language’s “intellectually challenging fullness,” which “may provide a means to approaching the inefable (11). Although she does not discuss *Pearl*, she provides compelling readings of the “fullness” of figurative language in other fourteenth-century English writers.  

Lisa Kiser used this phrase when teaching the poem. For a differing analysis of *Pearl’s* “freakishness” in regards to form, see Condren’s argument about the meticulous mathematical precision in the poems of Cotton Nero A.X. Willan provides a fascinating, if implicit rejoinder to Condren, arguing that the “flaws” of *Pearl’s* seemingly perfect form are in fact deliberate (the poem has an extra stanza, a missing line (472) that has typically been ascribed to scribal error, and is missing concatenation between sections XII and XIII). Willan suggests that these failures reveal the miraculous (and paradoxical) mediation of grace in the midst of human fallibility (58–63).  

Tomasch’s cleverly titled “*A Pearl Punnology*” argues for a unity of form and content in the poem, though she argues that the use of puns is meant to reveal the “interconnectedness of all things” (1). She identifies over 140 homonyms in the poem (2) and pays careful attention to how the sound of the homonyms (one sort of linguistic materiality) binds the poem together (3).  

See the Middle English Dictionary entries of “mot (n.(1))” and “mote” (n.(1)).  

This word is spelled four different ways (mascellez, maskellez, maskelez, maskellez) in its eight usages in this section. Middle English spelling varies radically even within a single manuscript, so it would be hard to make an argument about the significance of this inconsistency. But for the reader, this variety certainly adds to a sense of the instability of signification that the pun also marks. “Makellez” has only one, very close, variant: “makelez.”  

Matthew 13.45–46. The pearl maiden recounts the parable, in which a merchant is “looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” (In the Vulgate: “iterum simile est regnum caelorum homini negotiatori quaerenti bonas margaritas. Inventa autem una pretiosa margarita abit et vendidit omnia quae habuit et emit eam.”) The scriptural source utilizes figurative language; the pearl is like the “kingdom of heaven” (*simile est regnum caelorum*). The *Pearl-poet* attends carefully to this feature of biblical language, reproducing the simile directly, subtly suggesting both the similarity and difference inherent in the figurative language: “This makellez perle þat bo þere/…../ Is lyke þe reme of heuenesse cler” (733, 735, emphasis added).  

Donner demonstrates how thoroughgoing this condensation of meanings is and explores how the *Pearl-poet* uses certain features of Middle English grammar to achieve this condensation.  

Coley has made a similar point recently, but by way of attending to a different sort of materiality, pointing instead to the unnotice connection between the poem’s thematic content and on the waves of plague that swept across England in the second half of the fourteenth century. For Coley, “transcendence in *Pearl* — linguistic, poetic, and spiritual — is always anchored to the material, to the ‘fylke oper galle’ (1060) of the earth, to the spotty human body itself. This investment in the unfailing materiality of metaphor is precisely what allows *Pearl* to invoke the plague through its rich language” (219).  

When, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius, the first systematic negative theologian, writes that “God is a luminous darkness,” he invokes both the affirmation “God is light” and its negation “God is darkness.” It is only when this metaphoric affirmation and metaphoric negation are taken together that their true inadequacy becomes apparent, and they give way to the paradox that is *beyond* affirmation or negation, which signals the collapse of those modes of speech and the categories those modes represent.  

Petroff comments that, in the landscapes of *Pearl*, “[w]hite and brilliance are the dominating images, not color. In the entire poem, green is used only three times: once for the *erber*, once for jasper, once for emerald” (185).  

Spear’s identification of the dynamics of estrangement are more conducive to a mystical reading of the text, though other scholars have examined how the poem’s defamiliarizing descriptions can gesture at transcendence. Mitchell, for example, compares *Pearl* to the genre of parable in its ability to take familiar language and make it “strange” — using the ordinary to point to the extraordinary (102–5), while Fletcher writes that, while the poem “relies upon its audience’s acquaintance with things culturally and historically familiar, it renders some of them richer than hitherto and strange; if still recognizable, they are nevertheless not quite as they were before” (Presence 92).
In articulating concerns about the fair evaluation and compensation of agricultural labor, of course, the poem raises a pressing concern in the late fourteenth century. Scholars have examined how contemporary concerns about labor inform Pearl. Helen Barr considers how the valuation of labor was moving from an emphasis on social obligation to an emphasis on the work itself (and thus to a system of remuneration linked to productivity, to hours worked). Bowers and Riddy both examine the significance of gems and jewelry to the aristocracy and reflect on Pearl’s concerns with labor, status, and worth by examining how such luxury items were tied up in the performance of rank.

Several scholars examine the poem’s engagement with fourteenth-century debates about the role of human works in achieving salvation. See Aers, Beaston, and Rhodes, who each map out slightly different positions on how they see the poet intervening in this conversation.

Concerns about the fair compensation of labor were, of course, widespread in late fourteenth-century England. Helen Barr parses the shift to value labor itself, rather than to the thing produced (i.e. “the harvest”). Once labor has a value put to it, laborers, whether they be merchants or peasants, can complain about unjust compensation; they can claim that their efforts are not being fairly reimbursed.

Mann notes the same movement in the pearl’s proliferation over the course of the first few sections of the poem. The dreamer starts out mourning the loss of his pearl, and as he enters the dreamscape and encounters the pearl-maiden, he is sees pearls too numerous to count (20). The pearl thus moves from the object that represents the narrator’s loss and lack to an object that signifies abundance.

Gordon shares this reading in the introduction to his edited volume (66).

Harper contextualizes this shift in terms of medieval gift-giving culture. “[T]he whole language of gift-giving neatly shifts this discussion out of the realm of strict calculative/mercantile negotiation, in which money serves as an equalizer by allowing exact calculation of the worth of one’s labor, and into the realm of service, where lords reward faithfulness and service appropriately, but not calculatively ...” (436).

See also the maiden’s use of the word les, which is the link word in Section XV. She explains how it is that those in heaven all have such great rank and such happiness (regardless of earthly merit): “Lasse of blysse may non vus bring ...” [No one can cause us to have any less bliss ...] (853). Like more, the maiden uses the quantifier in a negative construction to gesture towards the fullness of the divine economy. The maidens cannot have any less bliss; the happiness they have cannot be reduced at all.

The jeweler’s concern with “fixing” meaning is in fact the very thing that provokes the retelling of the Parable of the Vineyard. When the pearl-maiden begins to speak of her heavenly estate, she describes herself as a queen, as the bride of Christ (and her clothing, adorned in countless pearls, certainly backs up her claims). The narrator protests that Mary is the Queen of Heaven — there can, by his definition, be only one queen, any others would be usurping the title. The narrator strives rather vehemently to preserve his understanding of the word, but the maiden simultaneously praises Mary as the worthiest woman in heaven and yet continues to insist that she, along with several thousand other maidens, are all queens.

She tells him this “The court of Je kyndom of God alyue / Hatz a property in hyself beyng: / Alle þat may þerinne aryue / Of all þe reme is quen oþer kyng” (The court of the kingdom of the living God has a property in and of itself: all who arrive there, from any realm, is a queen or a king: 445–48). The kingdom of God has a “property” in itself — we might call this the property of abundance or even multiplication (which is still not the same as equality). Unlike in terrestrial hierarchies, the office of royalty is open to all, and yet the title is not reduced by its increased use or application. So a category that is defined in an earthly logic by its very exclusivity, its value and appeal based almost entirely on its singularity (only one woman gets to be queen), is in a heavenly logic opened up ad infinitum.

The MED gives both “abundance” and “sufficiency” as the first two definitions for inough, supporting my reading here.

Prior and Thorpe each examine how the concatenations and puns work to “transform” the reader’s understanding (Prior 174–86; Thorpe 32–51). Other studies have emphasized the narrator’s transformation. Jessica Barr argues that the narrator’s worldly attachment to his daughter prevents him from achieving the state of detachment necessary for union with Christ (122–31). Spearing reads the final vision of the New Jerusalem as “a pointer towards the potential culmination of the visionary experience. But a perception of that kind would belong to a level of mystical experience of which the Dreamer is incapable” (Medieval Dream Poetry 128).

Astell compares the poem to Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermon on the death of his brother, locating a tripartite movement of ascent, descent, and reascent in the poem (119–34), and Blenkner compares Pearl’s itinerary with those laid out by medieval mystical theologians. Lagerholm situates the poem in the context of other fourteenth-century contemplative writing examining how such texts struggle to convey in the contemplative goal of transcendent experience.
Works cited


Note on contributor

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