THE PEARL DREAMER AND THE ELEVENTH HOUR

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In this essay I would like to examine the poet’s handling of time in Pearl. His awareness, not only of various ways of considering time, but of the potential artistic uses of a temporal cycle or cycles, is apparent throughout his works. In Sir Gawain, he juxtaposes Camelot with Cyclic, Degenerative, and Regenerative schemes of time, in each case to the concept of motion. His use of time in that poem points up Camelot’s genuine instability; the city is not capable of withstanding motion but only of tracing its own cycle of declension. In addition, the poet’s handling of the seasonal cycle at the beginning of the second section of Sir Gawain testifies to his awareness of the implications of judgment and warning inherent in medieval treatments of the period of time from spring to harvest. In Patience and Purity he dramatizes significant events of biblical history in such a way as to highlight those cycles of time that define and circumscribe human action and human choice. His handling of time in Pearl is equally purposeful, for, even as he specifies August as the month of the narrator’s experience, he provides for this experience a setting that locates the dreamer within an entirely different temporal framework.

That much-discussed reference to August comes early in the poem, in section 1, lines 37-40:

To that spot that I in speche expoun
I entred in that erber grene,
In Auguste in a hy3 seysoun,
Quen corne is coruen wyth croke3 kene.

There have been numerous suggestions about the exact date the poet intends us to associate with this “hy3 seysoun.” We can interpret the phrase as referring to Lammas (Gollancz, Gordon, and Andrew and Waldron), to the Feast of the Transfiguration (Madeleva, Knightley), or to the Feast of the Assumption (Hamilton, Osgood, Schofield). Or we can take Charles Moorman’s ingenious suggestion that “hy3” is an unlisted alternative spelling of “hi5” or “he5” (hay), the phrase then referring simply to the “hay season.”3 Despite the fact that I incline toward the Feast of the Assumption, especially since Pearl seems to reflect many of the lessons, themes, and figures identified with this day, I would like to explore the poet’s possible reasons for linking the dreamer’s experience to a date in late summer, for that experience seems rather to belong to a genre of visionary narrative traditionally connected to late spring or early summer. By shifting the seasonal
context of the dream, the poet offers an implied commentary upon the dreamer, the nature of his problem, and the Parable of the Vineyard, through which the maiden examines the proper use of time, a medium the dreamer seems initially to squander without regard for its limits. Ultimately, the reference to August early in the poem prepares us to apply the Parable of the Vineyard to the sorrowing dreamer as well as to the maiden, who describes herself as having begun vineyard labor at the eleventh hour.

The lines themselves describe two conventional but distinct scenes, whose separate elements the poet joins in a single sentence and a single pictorial frame. First, as several critics have pointed out, the description of August as the time when grain is scythed reflects the traditional occupation for August in both literary descriptions and pictorial sequences of the Labors of the Months.\(^4\) As Trevisa describes the month in his translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, "in his monē corn is igadred into bernes and pefore he is ypeyn wip a fielie proschong corn..."\(^5\) That the relatively uniform iconographic treatments of the month of August have their origin in the actual agricultural cycle is no doubt the case as Emile Mâle observed; when translated into art, however, man's labors also acquired meanings rooted in the medieval understanding of time. Put simply, time was conceived of as a medium for change or growth. Again I quote Trevisa:

\[
\text{Tyme is mesure of chaungeable ſpingis, as Aristotle seip de quainque substantiis ... Opir as Rabanus seip, tyme is dymen-
\text{nion of chaungeabil ſpingis, toucheinge meovinge and}
\text{abidinge, and durip in meovable ſpingis. As Austyn seip,}
\text{noſſing is more precious pan tyme ... Tyme is schort,}
\text{chaungeable, & vncurable ...}^{6}
\]

In each case, the attempt to define time depends upon a recognition of finitude, for—Aristotle, Rabanus Maurus, and St. Augustine agree—time is a medium for change, which can be measured just as a line that begins at one point and ends at another can be measured. However, medieval discussions of time are less abstract considerations of the nature of time than they are urgent preambles to exhortations regarding the use of time, since man can do little about time itself but can do much within his own time. As Rosemond Tuve noted, the urgency that informed references to the seasonal cycle and to the sequence of the Labors of the Months is characteristic of English verse, making "English seasons-descriptions from before Lydgate until after Spenser a contribution to that apology for poetry which sees in it the teaching of an active virtue."\(^7\)

The reference to August notwithstanding, the first 180 lines of *Pearl*, up to the dreamer's first sight of the maiden, suggest the outlines
of another convention, that of the love vision, linked not to late summer but to spring or early summer, the more timely season for dreams pertaining to or arising from frustrated desire. The opening sections of *Pearl* could, in fact, be described as an especially focused and intelligent transformation of the traditions of the French love vision as handed on to later writers by Guillaume de Lorris. Moreover, the author of *Pearl* seems to be conscious of the ties between the *Romance of the Rose* and the biblical imagery of desire, since he adapts certain key elements of Amant’s experience in ways that highlight the *Pearl* dreamer’s state of mind. Guillaume de Lorris’ account of the Garden of Deduit seems to provide the *Pearl*-Poet with the subtext for his description of the garden in which the dreamer goes to mourn the loss of his pearl.

On huyle per perle hit trendeled doun  
Schadowed þis wortes ful schyre and schene,  
Gilofre, gyngure and gromlyoun,  
And pyonys powdered ay bytwene. (41-44)

These lines, together with the first two lines of the preceding quatrain ("To þat spot þat I in speche expoun / I entred in þat erber grene") distill an entire tradition, thereby suggesting a series of *topoi* linked to the literature of love, search, vision.

With only a few brushstrokes, the poet conjures up a garden inextricably joined to the visionary experiences of late spring or early summer. Like the innermost sanctum of the Garden of Deduit, the spot of the pearl’s loss is doubly enclosed, first, in a garden, implied by the phrase “Tentred in,” and, second, by the plants that shade the spot, making of it a kind of bower. The plants themselves evoke earlier spice gardens of desire. For example, the more elaborate garden Guillaume de Lorris describes, which boasts its own complicated literary and biblical pedigree, contains many exotic spices—clove, licorice, fresh grains of paradise (or cardamom), zedoary (a ginger-like spice), anise, and cinnamon—a number of trees and animals, and an abundance of unnamed flowers—red, yellow, and white—in addition to violets and periwinkles. The Middle English translator of these lines, whom I will call Chaucer, is faithful to his original; following both the spirit and the letter of the French text, he ends his description of the garden’s lushness by saying of the ground that it is “poudred, as men had it peynt.” Both verbs imply art rather than nature, design rather than accident, thereby conveying the garden’s concealed artifice. The *Pearl*-Poet’s description of the dreamer’s garden focuses our attention upon those few details that establish the spot of loss as the setting for a certain type of experience. Like Chaucer, he translates Guillaume de Lorris’ cloves as gillyflowers or clove pinks; he includes ginger but adds “gromlyoun,” or gromwell,
a commonly grown medicinal herb, which fits nicely into the line's alliterative pattern. On the other hand, as Gollancz also noticed, the word might reflect the poet's assumption that the gromwell's white seed and the "greyn de parys" mentioned in the Middle English Romance of the Rose were identical. Although I would not want to dismiss this possibility, I do not care to make too much of it. The poet may also have expected his audience to remember that the gromwell's white, pearl-like seeds are the source of the herb's medicinal benefits, perhaps hinting at an elaborate metaphorical pun whereby the lost pearl had indeed been transformed through the natural process of seasonal decay and growth and had borne fruit, the curative potential of which the self-absorbed dreamer is oblivious. Finally, the Pearl-Poet uproots the violet and the periwinkle from the garden, replacing them with peonies, which, like the gromwell, were grown for medicinal purposes. He, too, indicates the garden's artfulness by describing the peonies as "powdered" between the other plants.

These comments may seem to represent undue attention to an ostensibly random group of plants, but the tightly woven description functions as a trope, placing us, not in a real garden where pinks, peonies, ginger, and gromwell are all blooming simultaneously, but in a garden setting where both culinary and curative herbs form a bower for a lover's dream. The first of the manuscript illustrations to the poem suggests a similar contemporary awareness of the almost mannerist character of the poet's description of this spot. Its depiction of a male figure sleeping in a highly stylized pastoral setting could serve to introduce any number of works that recount moments of revelation or vision. For example, on the stalls of Carlyle Cathedral is placed a sequence of paintings depicting scenes from a life of St. Augustine. The panels portraying Augustine's experience of conversion in the garden are particularly striking, especially when we compare them to the manuscript illustrations for Pearl; both sequences are indebted to the iconographic conventions of the literature of love or vision, or, as Courcelle puts it, of conversion. Thus, the panel tracing that central moment in Augustine's spiritual life shows him reclining near an open book in a garden whose mounds are powdered with flowers while an angel leans toward him and carries a banner on which is inscribed Tolle, lege. If we erased the angel's wings and removed the banner, the picture, which looks remarkably like a reverse image of the first of the illustrations for Pearl, could be used in an edition of The Legend of Good Women, The Romance of the Rose, or Pearl.13

The poet's description of this garden would be less significant, or more conventional, did not the poem itself take place in August. By joining in one sentence in lines 37-40 a reference to an August field and
to an enclosed garden, the poet seems to insist that we see the dreamer and his garden within a larger frame. In effect, he sketches for us a scene whose fundamental disunity underlines the spiritual conflict in the dreamer between himself and time. Thus the poet seems to mix metaphors on rather a large scale, dislocating the conventional protagonist of the literary dream vision and placing him and his garden of desire in the midst of a larger and equally significant frame—a calendar, open to August. There are at least two other instances in the poem where the poet hints at an association between a calendrical sequence and the dreamer’s experience, the first in the dreamer’s initial reaction to the landscape of his vision and the second in the maiden’s account of the Parable of the Vineyard.

When the dreamer first “awakens” in his vision, he finds himself in a realm whose characteristics identify it as a locus amoenus, an edenic landscape whose heightened clarity and sensual appeal serve as an accessus to the debate between the dreamer and his beloved guide. Here, the poet’s awareness of the connections between literary convention and biblical imagery is particularly apparent, for he recasts materials that Guillaume de Lorris and others had drawn from the Song of Songs and the Book of Apocalypse in their attempts to describe other efforts to regain paradise. For example, in Apocalypse 22:2, St. John describes the River of Life as flowing from the throne of God. That river was thought to flow here on earth in baptismal water, thereby creating at once a rite of passage and a passageway for the man seeking entry to paradise. Guillaume de Lorris employs this detail in his depiction of Amant’s gradual apprehension of another sort of paradise, for, when Amant first “awakens” in his dream landscape, he hears the sound of water. Drawn to the sound, he discovers a river whose cold water gushes from a nearby hill. While washing his face in the water—a social rite that ironically evokes the more fundamental cleansing of the baptismal fount—he notices the gravel that covers the stream-bed, a detail that adds to the richness and mystery of the landscape he inhabits. The Pearl-Poet restores this river to the landscape of the New Jerusalem; its force and majesty and the splendor of the stones along its bottom impel the dreamer towards revelation, not towards the outer reaches of fantasy. By drawing upon the details of such conventions, the poet not only indicates a relationship between his dreamer and other literary lovers and dreamers, but establishes his experience in a season appropriate for desire, when the year’s fruit is yet nascent in the flowers dotting these landscapes.

But if the outlines of the narrator’s visionary experience characterize him as a lover whose plaint is set in the beginnings of the annual cycle, the maiden insists that he recognize actual, not imaginary, time. She does so by recounting the Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-
16), a parable in which human activity is circumscribed by the period of time from sunrise to sunset. Labor in the vineyard begins with first light and continues until the sun goes down, “pe date of day of euensonge, / On oure before pe sonne go doun” (529-30). Those who commence work at the “eleventh hour” begin, not at one hour before midnight, but in late afternoon, probably around four o’clock.\(^{15}\)

In addition to recounting a parable whose message is bound up with the sun’s daily motion, the poet describes a scriptural labor associated with the sun’s annual movement through the zodiac, for the harvest of the grapes was linked to the month of September, or to the sign of Libra. As Trevisa describes September, “And pis monefl is ende of somyr and biginny[n]g of haruest. In pis monthe grapis be ripe and perfore he is ipeint in a vine3erd as a gardeynere gadringe grapis in a basket.”\(^{16}\) Trevisa here evokes both the pictorial and the philosophical traditions, describing, first, September as a particular labor, and, second, the symbol for that labor. The description could be turned around so that we perceive, as the maiden seems to expect the dreamer to understand, that the gardener gathering grapes in a basket is a sign of the end of summer, a sign of harvest. When Virgo gives way to Libra, the season changes from one of growth to one of reckoning. It is Libra, or the Scales, that hangs low in the horizon over Chaucer’s pilgrims as the Parson begins his tale of penance, a tale fittingly introduced by Harry Bailly with “Beeth fructuous, and that in little space.” Here, as so often in The Canterbury Tales, Harry Bailly speaks more wisely than he may know, for the subject of fruitfulness was inevitably raised in considerations of Libra. If we extend Chaucer’s allusion to Libra, with Libra in the sky, the Parson has but little space—or little daylight—left to urge spiritual fruitfulness upon the pilgrims, whose diverse loves the Tales recount, and who, in turn, have little time to repent.

The fact that September was frequently described as signifying the day of judgment makes the maiden’s use of the Parable of the Vineyard even more pointed. As the first month of autumn, September is the month of the equinox, signalling days of shorter length and thus of diminished opportunity for human activity.\(^{17}\) The maiden’s handling of this parable captures the urgency associated with September and the sign of Libra, thus calling attention to the brevity of time available for human labor. Not only does she stress the passing of each hour, but she uses “date,” connoting a specific period of time, as a link word in section IX, the section in which she describes the labor in the vineyard. Moreover, she uses “date” here in reference both to an annual and a diurnal measurement of time. First, she applies “date” to that time of year when the grapes are ready for harvest (lines 500-08); if we examine both the traditional associations between Septem-
ber and the gathering of grapes and the relationship between the parable and the theme of judgment, it seems likely that “date” in this case refers to September. However, she also uses the word to denote a time of day, as in “date of daye” (517), “welnew ywil daye wat3 passed date” (528); and “At the date of daye of euensonge” (529). Her use of the word underscores the relationship between the two ways of telling time in the poem, implying that sundown and September are, in fact, the same date, particularly since she refers to evensong as one hour before sundown or as the eleventh hour, when she herself entered the vineyard. Indeed, the theme of judgment that informs her narration of the parable is most evident in her description of sundown,

3e sunne wat3 doun and hit wex late.
To take her hyre he made sumoun;
3e day wat3 al apassed date. (538-40)

The end words for each line—“late,” “sumoun,” and “date” suggest that sundown, like that date when the sun moves into Libra, can be understood as the time of balance when the results of spring’s planting and summer’s growth are put to the scales. It is the note of finality struck by those words “late,” “sumoun,” and “date,” that ought to alert the dreamer to the time of year in which he exists—August, one hour before sundown.

The maiden’s account of the Parable of the Vineyard and the dreamer’s account of the landscape of vision, are cast in strikingly visual language that evokes not only the language of the dream vision and of the Bible, but pictures of Spring or early summer, and of August and September. Such pictures can only be understood as individual elements of a larger sequence, the sequence of the year, the scheme by which man measures time. If we consider these pictures in relation to the early portrayal of the dreamer in his garden in the midst of August, we can detect the outlines of a calendrical sequence within Pearl, a sequence that underlies both the poem’s patterns of language and imagery and its broader thematic concerns.

First, and most obviously, the references to time adumbrate a movement from spring to harvest that is directly relevant to the dreamer’s efforts to come to terms with the fact or effect of mutability. Ultimately, the vision of the New Jerusalem, the Tree of Life with its twelve fruits for the twelve months at its heart, provides the dreamer, as it provides the poem’s reader, with a visual token of permanence, offsetting the sense of time and transience that seems to dominate the poem. In the stanza describing the Tree of Life (1069-80), the narrator emphasizes the permanence and the clarity of the landscape of paradise. Those bodies by which we tell time here on earth, the moon, the planets, and the sun, are not only unnecessary in a realm without time,
but pale in relationship to the refulgence of heaven. The splendor of that transcendent sphere is mirrored in the River of Life, which also reflects the trees growing by its bank:

Aboute pat water arn tres ful schym,
pat twelue fryles of lyt con bere ful sone;
Twelue sype5 on yer pay beren ful frym,
And renowle5 nwe in vche a mon. (1077-80)

Whereas in the sun’s movement through the sky and in the rotation of the months we on earth find our symbols for earth’s impermanence, those twelve endlessly renewing fruits are visual symbols for eternity. The moon, our most persistent referent for change, not only has no power in heaven’s sky (“The mone may per of aproche no my3te” [1069]), but is subsumed into a greater motion, the cycle of endless renewal played out by the banks of the River of Life.

Second, the implied movement from August to September adds one more strand to the poem’s rich weave of allusions to cultivation and harvest. On the most basic level, “corn” is a generic term, referring to any grain. The dreamer’s use of it echoes his allusion to John 12:24 only a few lines previously, “For vch gresse mot grow of grayne5 dede; / No whete were elle5 to wone5 wonne” (31-32). From this early and rather arid reference to the natural cycle to his final description of the citizens of heaven as harvested pearls, his language sketches his growing recognition of a more fundamental process of cultivation and harvest. Thus his initial hopelessly literal reference to wheat is transformed—by a process as mysterious as transubstantiation itself—into the truly nourishing bread of the Mass mentioned in the poem’s closing lines, grain that has not only been cut but ground, bolted, and baked. From the rotting body of the lost pearl to the risen body of Christ, the poem traces a pattern of resurrection and transformation, of spiritual harvest. If we interpret the dreamer’s reference to corn in a more metaphoric sense, we should note that the word also was used to denote the end result of something, the desired product, associations that reverberate in the poem’s many allusions to spiritual fruitfulness and cultivation. If the dreamer’s early expressions of grief can be described as the barren harvest of his sorrow, then the poem that begins “Perle, plesaunte to prynce5 paye” surely can suggest true fruit, the bountiful harvest of love and labor.

Finally, and most importantly, the poet’s emphasis upon time implies that the dreamer himself is in his eleventh hour. If we take the “hy3 seysoun” as referring to the Feast of the Assumption, celebrated on August 15, the sun has indeed just entered the eleventh sign, Virgo, symbolized by a woman bearing sheaves of grain.18 It is not improbable that the poet intends an annual cycle organized around the period
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from spring to harvest or around the sun’s movement through the zodiac of human labor. First, medieval writers had many ways of organizing time, depending, in each case, upon the message they sought to illustrate. In his introductory remarks to The Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine uses a cycle that begins in winter with Advent and ends in fall; the poet’s description of autumn in Sir Gawain directly contrasts seasonal change and the idea of harvest with natural fruitfulness, or implicitly, with human activity. Moreover, the Parable of the Vineyard at the center of Pearl focuses upon the sun’s movement from dawn to evening or from first light to last. The poet’s choice of August as the month for the dreamer’s experience is particularly significant in relation to the picture outlined by the maiden’s parable; a man gathering grapes is a sign for September, for Libra, when the equinox occurs, thus signalling days of shorter duration. If September corresponds to sundown, then August, like evensong, occurs in the last hour of light.

The August date of the poem marks the dreamer as sorely in need of an eleventh-hour work permit. Whereas he is initially content to sleep (and, ironically enough, to inhabit a garden we associate with an earlier season of the year and other occupations) while all around him the fields are white with harvest, the maiden urges upon him timely labor. August’s spiritual work that must precede the balance scales of September. The maiden’s appearance is, however, timely in more ways than one, for, while the dreamer exists in a state of disharmony with the natural cycle, she verifies the essential orderliness of the natural cycle even as she bears witness to a realm whose cycles transcend our own. The dreamer’s description of himself as a laborer in the closing lines of the poem, therefore, highlights his own awareness of time, a recognition of its use. By stepping away from the artificial spring he at first inhabits and by leaving the love-garden of his self-involved grief, he steps into his true place, a field whose ripe grain awaits the worker. Furthermore, if the dreamer’s perception of the movement from August to September or his genuine comprehension of time serves as a catalyst for his spiritual transformation, the poem functions as such a reminder for its audience. Just as the maiden offers the dreamer the clemency figured in Virgo, the poem, like a true calendar, fulfills its end, rooting us in and reminding us of time and the uses of time, only to impel us beyond time to timeless harvests.
Notes


6. Trevisa, I, 517-518.


9. On literary influence, see Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), particularly the remarks on pp. 48-55. For a differently directed study from my own concerning the relationship between


12. For an understanding of the ways in which these plants appear in medieval writing, see the entries for each of them in the Middle English Dictionary, ed. Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press). Sir Israel Gollancz in his edition of Pearl (1891; rpt. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), p. 120, also makes this point about the grome. For a study of the details of this site, see C. A. Luttrell, "Pearl: Symbolism in a Garden Setting," in The Middle English Pearl, pp. 297-324. Luttrell (p. 311) also notes the harvest time opening in Le Dit de la Panthere. See also, Bogdanos, Ineffable, pp. 23-26.

13. See Pierre Courcelle, Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition litteraire (Paris, 1963). As Courcelle notes, the same cathedral has a life of Saint Cuthbert, for which (see B. Colgrave, "The Saint Cuthbert Paintings on the Carlisle Cathedral Stalls," Burlington Magazine 73 [1938]: 17) the artist copied the miniatures of a "Life" from the late tenth century. It is, as Courcelle remarks, probable that the same is the case for the life of St. Augustine: the conception of scenes, iconography, and form seem to evoke the illustrations of the "epoque romane." For any analysis of Pearl, especially the link between that poem and the motif of the Noli me tangere that I have suggested in The Voice of the Gawain Poet (pp. 148-78), the inscriptions for two of the scenes in this "Life" are particularly tantalizing. The inscription for a scene depicting Augustine and Alypius in the garden includes the following details: "Her sore wepyng for hys gret syn / He went to morne a garth wythin." For the "Tolle, lege," the inscription is noted: "Her wepyng and walyng as he lay / Sodenly a voice thus her he say: Tolle, lege, tolle lege." Both inscriptions emphasize the sorrow that precedes recognition and conversion, for Augustine is cast, like Mary Magdalen or the Pearl dreamer, as a mourner in a garden.

14. Just how purposeful are these lines is even more apparent if we compare them, not only to the opening stanzas of French love visions, but to the opening of Boccaccio's "Olympia," a poem whose similarity to Pearl suggests Pearl's elegiac form and purpose.

15. For a discussion of the poet's use of the "eleventh hour" to describe the maiden's status in the vineyard, see D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The 'Heresy' of The Pearl," in The Middle English Pearl, pp. 291-96. As Roberson notes, the maiden seems to follow Bruno Astensis' lead in associating the "eleventh hour" with those individuals baptized only shortly before death rather than with those who become
16. Trevisa, I, 533. In The Pearl: An Interpretation (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967) p. 52, P. M. Kean associates the labor of the parable with March or early Spring, especially since the maiden describes the workers as cutting and tying up the vines: "Wrypen and worschen and don gret pyne, / Keruen and caggen and man hit clos" (Pearl, 511-12). There are, however, several reasons for linking the labor of the parable to fall, despite the fact that pruning was assigned to March in the scheme of the Labors of the Months. (On March, see Trevisa, I, 530; Mâle, The Gothic Image, p. 71; Tuve, Seasons and Months, pp. 161-62.) First, the pruning ascribed to March could involve trees or vines whereas the more specific image of the vineyard was linked to September. Second, though it is unlikely the poet had any direct experience of viticulture, Virgil in the Georgics (Book II, 397ff.) recommends dressing the vines three or four times a year, contending that the soil should be broken up and the grove lightened of its foliage. He then notes that the vines should be cut and pruned into shape in the fall. On viniculture and pruning in the fall, see also William Robert Prince, Treatise on the Vine (New York, 1830), pp. 276-281. Furthermore, as Fernande Braudel points out in The Structure of Everyday Life (vol. 1 of Civilization and Capitalism, trans. and revised by Sian Reynolds [New York: Harper and Row, 1979], p. 487), fall was the season in which landowners most frequently hired day laborers, the season, in fact, when the scene described in the parable was likely to have been a common one in the agricultural districts of Europe. However tempting it is to speculate about the reality that may underlie the poet’s fiction, I think his account of the labors of the vineyard has more to do with commentaries on the Parable of the Vineyard than with medieval agricultural practices. Most obviously, his description of the labor is general enough to suggest how little he knew about such matters, particularly if we juxtapose this section of Pearl with certain passages of Sir Gawain, wherein he demonstrates a more intimate knowledge of the customs of late fourteenth-century aristocratic life. More importantly, if we turn to the commentaries on the Parable of the Vineyard, we find the labor in the vineyard depicted in general terms, emphasizing its strenuousness and focusing on the broader issues of cultivation and fruitfulness. By interpreting the vineyard as a figure for the Church or for the Kingdom of Heaven, the commentators stress the theme of harvest, directing our attention to our duties in the time left before the twelfth and final hour. Thus, the laborers’ complaint in the parable that those who have borne the day’s heat should receive the same wage as those who began work at the eleventh hour, together with the parable’s inherent urgency, evokes a scene near the end of the yearly agricultural cycle. For commentaries on the parable, see St. Augustine, Sermo LXXVII in Sermones de Scripturis, PL 38, cols. 530-39; Bede, In Matthaei Evangelium Expositio, PL 92, cols. 67-88; St. Gregory, Hom. XIX in XL Homiliarum in Evangelia, PL 76, cols. 1153-59; Rabanus Maurus, Comment. in Matthaeum, PL 107, cols. 1025-30. Finally, the poet may have taken a hint from St. Gregory in linking the parable to a particular month, near the end of his sermon, Gregory, in exhorting his hearers to penance, specifically relates his topic to his audience. He says: “Mense autem Julio nuper elapso, hujus quam nostis pestilentiae clade percussus est, qui, ad extremum veniens, urgeri coepit ut animam redderet” (col. 1158).

17. See Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars, pp. 272-97, for a discussion of Libra. In his massive encyclopedia, the Reructiorium Morale (Colona, 1730), Petrus
Berchorius says of September, "Iste mensis significat diem judicijii" V, p. 128). In discussing Libra (p. 108), Berchorius says: "Quando Sol est in libra, tunc facit noctes & dies aequos, & ideo dicitur libra, quia monstrat ponderum aequitatem. Sic vere quando Judex est in libra justitiae, tunc necessario facit aequinoctium, i.e. aequale judicium inter virum & proximum suum, alias non. Vel dic, quod quando Sol, i.e. Christus ascendet signum librae, i.e. thronum judicijii, ubi facta omnium librabit & ponderabit."

18. See Trevisa's remarks about the appropriate signs for both August and September (I, 1, 532-33). For remarks linking the Feast of the Assumption to this same issue of fruitfulness, see Bruno Astensis, "De Humilitate," in Sententiae, Lib. II, v, PL 165, col. 198.

19. The dreamer's idleness in the midst of an August harvest may also have been charged with more immediate ironies for the poem's first audience; as Georges Duby in Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West (trans. Cynthia Postan, Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, Book IV, "Change and Upheaval in the XVth Century") points out, harvest time was a period of real activity throughout rural England, a time when each potential laborer was pressed into service.