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The Signifying Power of *Pearl*

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The spiritual language, Ovidian love stories, and use of liturgical time in Pearl all invite allegorical interpretations of the poem. While there is clearly a literal, elegiac sense to the poem, there are also allegorical meanings. This makes perfect sense in light of the tradition of four-fold scriptural and literary interpretation in the Middle Ages, which the Pearl-Poet clearly used to understand biblical parables and compose his poetic masterpiece. The poet's use of metaphoric language, memory of the legends of Orpheus and Eurydice and Pygmalion and Galatea, and astute interweaving of parables from the church liturgy alongside invocations of the Lenten and Paschal liturgical seasons within his dream vision all invite readers into a deeper understanding of the signifying power of Pearl.

There is a growing consensus in *Pearl* scholarship that the early literary criticism of the poem, debating whether it is elegiac or allegorical, really presented readers with a false generic dichotomy. The poem need not be limited to one genre or interpretation when it clearly invites multiple understandings. Various scholars have argued that the Pearl-Poet deliberately crafted a poem that could be interpreted literally, allegorically, morally or anagogically as scripture was in the Middle Ages.¹ Taking this reading a step further, it seems that, in terms of its genre, *Pearl* is a dream vision that operates at four levels of meaning and in four corresponding genres: the literal sense makes it an elegy; the allegorical meaning, an allegory; the moral purpose, a consolation; and the anagogical unveiling, a revelation.² In this essay, I wish to particularly examine the allegorical

1 For one articulation of this view, see Lawrence Clopper, "Pearl and the Consolation of Scripture," *Viator* 25 (1992), 231-246.

2 For literal interpretations, see Jane Beal, "The Pearl-Maiden's Two Lovers," *Studies in Philology* 100 (2003), 1-21, John Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2001), and Lynn Staley Johnson, "Pearl and the Contingencies of Love and Piety," in *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 83-112. For allegorical readings, see Jane Chance, "Allegory and Structure in *Pearl*: The Four Senses of the *Ars praedicandi* and Fourteenth-Century Homiletic Poetry," in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing, 1991), 31-59, Sister Madeleva, *Pearl: A Study in Spiritual Dryness* (New York, NY: D. Appleton, 1925), D.W. Robertson, "The Pearl as Symbol," *Modern Language Notes* 65 (1950), 44-61, and W.H. Schofield,

senses of *Pearl*, which have been neglected in recent scholarship.

Specifically, the language of *Pearl*, which so often has a double sense, invites allegorical interpretation. The Pearl-Poet's memory of two classical myths, that of Orpheus and Eurydice (implied) and that of Pygmalion and Galatea (overt), invoke not only the Virgilian and Ovidian sources but the tradition of allegorical interpretation associated with them. For the strategies used in scriptural interpretation were also used to "moralize" these classical myths and relate them to Christian faith in the Pearl-Poet's day. Furthermore, the poem invokes the larger spiritual (*sic* allegorical) universe because it is structured in relation to liturgical time.

Liturgical readings, with their typological pairing of Old and New Testament texts, were selected to honor seasons and feasts throughout the year that recurred cyclically and highlighted not simply a literal, chronological unfolding of earthly history but also a spiritual, eternal unfolding of heavenly reality.³ In *Pearl*, these two ways of understanding time intersect when heaven and earth meet in a dream: the Dreamer falls asleep in a garden in August remembering the loss of his beloved Pearl-Maiden, and then in his vision, sees a vision of her in Paradise before witnessing a Paschal vision of the New Jerusalem complete with the bleeding Lamb in procession, and finally awakens once more with the image of the Eucharistic bread and wine from the Mass in mind. The poem's triptych structure, with the central drama (the journey toward the resurrection hope of Easter) set in one time and the two "outside panels" (both set in Ordinary Time) framing it, corresponds to one of the major ways medieval interpreters of scripture sought represent in art eter-

"Symbolism, Allegory, and Autobiography in *The Pearl*," *PMLA* 24 (1909), 585-675. Ian Bishop's *The Pearl in its Setting* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) is usually considered an allegorical reading of the poem. Note that Bishop also sees *Pearl* as a *consolatio*, but W.A. Davenport sees it as a *contra-consolatio* in "Desolation, not Consolation: *Pearl* 19-22," *Review of English Studies* (1974), 421-23; both views are a kind of examination of the moral sense. For interpretation of the poem as revelation, see Cynthia Kraman, "Body and Soul: *Pearl* and Apocalyptic Literature," in *Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse*, eds. Gerhard Jaritz and Gerson Moreno-Riaño (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 355-362 and Ann R. Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

3 The liturgical seasons of the Church were and are, of course, Advent, Christmas/Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time.

nal truths unfolding for time-bound human beings. Understanding the liturgical contexts of *Pearl*—seasons, two important dates, and the lessons read during the Mass on those dates—can broaden our understanding of the potential allegorical significance of the Pearl-Maiden herself. Before examining the allegorical use of spiritual language, Ovidian love stories, and liturgical time in the poem, this study will consider the larger world of medieval allegorical tradition that provides the context for the Pearl-Poet’s creativity.

The World of Medieval Allegory

During the Middle Ages, commentators often interpreted the Bible either literally or allegorically. The Bible itself provided the impetus for allegorical reading in the epistle to the Galatians, in which the apostle Paul considered Hagar and Sarah to represent two covenants, with Hagar corresponding conceptually to slavery and the Mosaic law given at Mount Sinai (which Paul further equates with 1st century Jerusalem) while Sarah stands for freedom and life through the Spirit in the heavenly Jerusalem.⁴ Following Paul’s exegetical example, medieval biblical commentators began to interpret the whole Bible in allegorical terms. While there was a general distinction between the literal (historical) and the allegorical (spiritual) senses of scripture, the understanding of allegory gradually developed to include the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses.⁵ A saying developed to explain the four senses of scripture: *littera gesta docet, quod credas allegoria, moralia quod agas, quo tendas anagogia* (“the literal teaches deeds, the allegorical what you should believe, the moral what you should do, and the anagogical where you are going.”) Thus the allegorical sense could include or be distinguished from the moral and anagogical senses.

The typological understanding of scripture developed as another form of allegorical interpretation in which specific places,

⁴ See Galatians 4:21-31.

⁵ See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. I, tr. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) and Vol. II, trans. E.M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) and Vol. III, trans. E.M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

persons, and events (“types”) in the Old Testament were linked to specific people, places, and events in the New Testament that somehow corresponded to or fulfilled their antecedents (“antitypes”). In John’s gospel, Jesus himself makes this kind of connection when he foretells his own crucifixion by saying:

Et sicut Moses exaltavit serpentem in deserto, ita exaltari oportet
Filium hominis ut omnis qui credit in ipso non pereat sed habeat
vitam aeternam. (John 3:14)

[“For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so
must the Son of Man be lifted up in order that all who believe
in him may not perish but have eternal life.”]⁶

From this origin, typological exegesis proliferated; the apotheosis of medieval typology is, perhaps, the 1400s block-book known as *Biblia pauperum* with its elaborate triptych-structured pages featuring forty scenes from the life of Christ in the center with two side panels depicting corresponding events from the Hebrew Bible.⁷

In universities and monasteries, educated medieval readers familiar with the tradition of allegorical and typological exegesis of the Bible began to apply their interpretive skills not only to the scriptures but to classical literature as well. While, as Charles Singleton first pointed out years ago writing about Dante’s *Convivio*, the “allegory of the theologians” commenting on the Bible was recognized for its correspondence to divine truth, the “allegory of the poets” commenting on Greco-Roman mythology was typically regarded as delightful fiction.⁸ In practice, the process of discovering Christian allegorical possibilities in classical literature essentially redeemed Greco-Roman mythology for medieval readers, making it possible

6 The verse here is quoted and translated from the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* (Stuttgart, 1969, rpt. 1994). See also Matthew 12:40, in which Jesus compares his death and burial to the three days Jonah spent in the belly of the whale, and 1 Corinthians 15:45, in which Paul compares Adam and Christ, the new Adam.

7 For Paul’s typological view of Adam and Christ, see 1 Corinthians 15:45; for an edition of the *Biblia pauperum*, see Albert C. Labriola and John W. Smeltz, eds., *The Bible of the Poor: A Facsimile and Edition of BL Blockbook C.9 d.2* (Dusquesne UP, 1990).

8 Charles Singleton, “Appendix: Two Kinds of Allegory,” in *Commedia: Dante Studies I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1965) and further discussed in *Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977).

to integrate it into the university curricula and intellectual culture of the late Middle Ages.⁹ This can be seen in three examples: Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Guillaume de Lorris' *Romance of the Rose*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, each of which develops an allegorical sense from an elegiac moment, richly integrates classical and Christian love stories, and, in Dante's case, specifically uses liturgical time to shape the narrative of his journey through the spiritual realms of hell, purgatory and heaven.

For Boethius, the elegiac moment occurs with his loss of freedom for he most likely wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy* either while in exile under house arrest or in prison awaiting execution. His dialogue represents himself speaking to Philosophy, who is personified as a woman, an allegorical figure. Boethius was a devout Christian, but the Christianity he expresses in the *Consolation* is limited, and instead he integrates a great deal of classical knowledge (including the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice) in order to make his point that there is a God and everything is secondary to that divine providence.¹⁰ For Lorris, the elegiac moment is bound to his experience of *fin amour*, which may be unrequited but is certainly unfulfilled.¹¹ This inspires him to write a complete and elaborate allegory about the Lover pursuing the Rose, who proves unattainable because of multiple allegorical obstacles and despite multiple allegorical helpers. The medieval French text is dense with allusion to both classical and Christian material. For Dante, the elegiac moment is the death of his beloved Beatrice.¹² Throughout his *Divine Comedy*, he interweaves classical and Christian stories as he encounters countless souls on his journey through the other world. Famously, his journey takes place during Holy Week of the year 1300, so that

9 See Jane Chance, *Medieval Mythography: From Roman North Africa to the School of Chartres, A.D. 433-1177* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994.)

10 Boethius' retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice legend occurs in Book III, Meter 12 of his *Consolation of Philosophy*.

11 This contrasts with Jean de Meun's later, lengthy addition to the *Romance of the Rose*, which includes the rape of the rose near the end of the poem.

12 Dante's grief over Beatrice is made very clear in his *Vita Nuova*, a prelude to the *Divine Comedy*.

like Christ and medieval Christians celebrating in memorial, he goes through hell during Good Friday, Purgatory during Holy Saturday, and heaven during Resurrection Sunday.

Many scholars have drawn comparisons between the *Pearl* and all three of these great works.¹³ Though it cannot be proved that the Pearl-Poet knew these works or their authors directly, nevertheless he was an educated medieval Christian in a cultural milieu that would empower him to use the same strategies as Boethius, Lorris, and Dante: to experience a literal, elegiac moment of loss as an opportunity for meditation that would lead him to compose in an allegorical manner, to interweave classical and Christian knowledge to make a moral point, and to set the narrative of his journey in the context of a liturgical (that is, spiritual and cyclical rather than calendric and chronological) time-frame. As this study shows, the Pearl-Poet carefully crafted his poem using each of these strategies, and he begins with language that can be dually interpreted on a literal and allegorical level – using this as an invitation to the readers who can then ponder his Christian use of classical love stories as well as of liturgical time.

The Spiritual Language of Pearl

As readers of *Pearl* have recognized for decades, the poem is one that defies a strictly literal interpretation. It does possess a literal sense, which is certainly the foundation and inspiration of *Pearl*. But *Pearl* is no prose memoir in which a man patiently remembers his grief over the death of his beloved. It is far more complicated than that. The Pearl-Poet invites allegorical interpretation of his poem by purposefully ambiguating the literal or historical sense, by direct allusion and paraphrasing of biblical matter that has an allegorical or

13 For a brief overview, see Marie Borroff's comments on "The Literary Background" in her introduction to her translation of the poem in *The Gawain Poet: Complete Works* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2011), 118-119. For more specific detail, see Michael Cherniss, *Boethian Apocalypse: Studies in Middle English Vision Poetry* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1987), 151-68; Herbert Pilch, "The Middle English *Pearl*: Its Relation to the *Roman de la Rose*," trans. Heide Hyprath in *The Middle English 'Pearl': Critical Essays*, ed. John Conley (University of Notre Dame, 1970), 163-84; Warren Ginsberg, "Place and Dialectic in *Pearl* and Dante's *Paradiso*," *ELH* 55:4 (Winter, 1988), 731-753.

spiritual meaning, and by word-play and double-entendre.

Consider just two of the most obvious examples from the beginning of the poem. First, the lost pearl is clearly not just a literal pearl that was fished out of an oyster, but rather a rich symbol, the vehicle of a metaphor with more than one tenor. Second, the landscape of the dreamer's vision—with sands of orient pearls, cliffs of crystal, and trees of blue and silver—is clearly not meant to recall any specific earthly geography but is instead an allegorical landscape with closest connections to the mysteries of the east, to India and to Paradise. The poet is constantly at play with his pearl and his increasingly fabulous geography. He refuses to reduce either his central symbol, the pearl, or his exquisitely bejeweled landscape to one tenor, to one literal or historical sense. This is part of the power of his poetry, one of the strategies for inviting readers to understand his poem allegorically.

A second invitation is evident in his allusions and paraphrases of biblical material that have an allegorical or spiritual sense. Again, the two most obvious examples from the poem include the Pearl-Maiden's re-telling of the Parable of the Vineyard and the dreamer's vision of the New Jerusalem.¹⁴ Readers familiar with the biblical sources of these passages know that the penny in question in the parable represents salvation, and the New Jerusalem, from John's Apocalypse, is a picture of God's heavenly kingdom.¹⁵ The penny and Jerusalem, though they have a literal sense and historical incarnation, simultaneously have a spiritual meaning. In *Pearl*, they act as "vehicles" of the metaphor, the allegory, with a "tenor" hidden precisely so it can be revealed. These biblical precedents and their re-tellings in *Pearl* act as a second invitation to the reader to search

14 On the representation of the New Jerusalem in *Pearl*, see Rosalind Field, "The Heavenly Jerusalem in *Pearl*," *Modern Language Review* 81 (1986), 7-17, Sarah Stanbury, "The Body and the City in *Pearl*," *Representations* 47 (1994), 271-85, and Ann R. Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

15 For the parable of the vineyard, see Matthew 20:1-16. For the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, see Revelation 21: 9-27, 22:1-5.

for the allegorical meaning of the poem.

A third invitation is issued repeatedly throughout the poem in the form of word-play and double-entendre. It is interesting, for example, to consider how the reality of what the dreamer is seeing in his vision is undermined by the Pearl-Maiden when she says:

Pou says þou trawez me in this dene

Bycawse þou may with eʒen me se;

Another, þou says in þys countré

Pyself schal won with me ry3t here;

Ðe þrydde, to passe þys water fre:

Pat may no joyful jueler (ll.295-300, my emphases).¹⁶

When the Pearl-Maiden says, “You say that you believe me to be here in this valley / Because you see me with your eyes,” her statement implies that the dreamer’s vision of the Pearl-Maiden does not correspond to her real presence.¹⁷ This idea is further intensified in the poet’s description of the Pearl-Maiden as one type of *figura*, a figure representing not what is seen, but something that is unseen.

When the dreamer first sees the Pearl-Maiden, after his spirit has sprung from the garden spot into the space of his dream, he studies her face:

The more I frayste hyr fayre face,

Her *fygure* fyn quen I had fonte,

16 All quotations from the Middle English *Pearl* are taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978). Translations are my own.

17 I use the phrase “real presence” as an allusion to Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. In medieval Catholic theology, Christ is really present in the sacrifice of the Eucharist upon the altar by a priest. Yet here, the Pearl-Maiden implies she is not really present in that way nor is she really present corporally. Everything is being shown to the Dreamer in a way he can understand *figuratively* (the vehicle) but not as it really is *spiritually* (the tenor) because he can’t grasp spiritual reality with his five senses—no time-bound, earth-bound person can—even in a dream. The Pearl-Maiden’s presence in the dream is perhaps “more real” than the things of earth—but still not as fully real as she is in heaven. Thus we see the ineffable reality of heaven comes down to the Dreamer in his vision but his experience of it is still only partial, an intimation of what will be, which fills his heart with longing and anticipation.

Suche gladande glory con to me glace

As lyttel byfore þerto watz wonte (ll. 169-72).

Here, the dreamer studies the Pearl-Maiden's face and "figure," and her figure seems at first to correspond literally to her body. In fact, the Middle English Dictionary glosses the word "fygure" as "appearance" or "representation." But the Middle English "fygure" is a loanword from the Latin, *figura*, that appears to include its original denotation. Meditation on the medieval understanding of the Latin *figura* suggests a broader range of possible meaning.

Erich Auerbach has written meaningfully about *figura* in his seminal work, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within a stream of historical life. Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but the spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions; these are quite secondary, since promise and fulfillment are real historical events, which would have either happened in the incarnation of the Word or will happen in the second coming.¹⁸

Hence medieval theological understandings of relationships between the Old Testament and the New Testament – wherein, for example, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is related to the Cross, the first Adam is related to the second Adam, that is Christ; and Eve is related to Mary and so on – become the basis for typological interpretation not only of scripture, but of the classical mythology and history that medieval readers inherited. In *Pearl*, and other medieval literature, figural interpretation also became a mode of generating poetry and meaning within that poetry. Within the framework of the poem, the Pearl-Maiden herself can be seen as a figure that corresponds allegorically to something else.

18 Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), 53. See discussion in J. Allan Mitchell, "The Middle English *Pearl*: Figuring the Unfigurable," *The Chaucer Review* 35:1 (2000), 86-109.

Of course, the Pearl-Maiden might not be only a strictly allegorical figure, but an anagogical one – possessed, in fact and by the poet’s intention, of a future sense. As Henri de Lubac writes, definitions of allegory by Quintilian and St. Ambrose were both popular in the Middle Ages: Quintilian said allegory “points to something in words but something else in sense” while Ambrose asserted “there is allegory when one thing is being done, another is being figured.”¹⁹ In Christian allegory, that “something else,” as Quintilian named it, often concerns what is to come, especially the person of Jesus. Thus allegorical figures are *futura mysteria*.²⁰ At the simple level of comparison, just as a woman in the Proverbs represents wisdom, and a lady in Boethius’ *Consolatio* represents philosophy, and Beatrice in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* represents Christ, divine love, and blessedness, so the Pearl-Maiden represents some essential quality of the divine being revealed in this poem. What might that be?

The dreamer considers the Pearl-Maiden as a figure a second time in the poem, after her lengthy homily on the Parable of the Vineyard.

O maskelez perle in perlez pure,

Pat berez, quoþ I, þe perle of prys,

Quo formed þe þy fayre *fygure*? (ll. 745-47, my emphasis)

This question is followed by allusions to Pygmalion, who shaped Galatea from ivory and then fell in love with her, as well as to Aristotle. It appears that the dreamer has been gazing at the Pearl-Maiden’s body while she has been preaching to him about his soul. And it may be literally true that the dreamer’s gaze is focused on the Pearl-Maiden’s embodied person. But typologically and allegorically, there are deeper implications.

The question, “Who formed thy fair figure?,” deserves consideration. It is an invitation to interpret the Pearl-Maiden as an

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Volume 2: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E.M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 89-90.

²⁰ de Lubac, 94.

allegorical figure. The question prompts multiple answers. On one level, in the world of medieval England, it is certainly the poet who formed this figure of the Pearl-Maiden for consideration. On another level, however, in the world imagined in the poem and according to the world-view of the poet's anticipated audience, it is clearly God, the "Fasor"—the Creator—who made her. How might the poet in England, or the God in the poem, intend this figure to be understood? The meaning is hidden, as allegorical meaning often is, at a deeper, allusive level: in the Pearl-Poet's memory of the love stories of Orpheus and Eurydice and Pygmalion and Galatea that undergird the poem called *Pearl*.

The Memory of Ovidian Love Stories in *Pearl*

The Bible was not the only medieval text interpreted at four levels of meaning in the Middle Ages. Secular literature and legends, particularly the Greco-Roman classics, were also searched by medieval readers to discover both a literal and allegorical sense. In this period, Christian allegorical commentaries on classical stories began to circulate among the learned, and, as is the case with Boethius, Lorrin, Dante, and the Pearl-Poet, began to be used not only to interpret Latin texts but also to compose poetry.

This is particularly true of the Orpheus legend. As Sarah Stanbury has noted, "Like Orpheus, a bereaved lover who sings stories of lovers, the *Pearl* narrator comes to his garden to mourn the death of a girl, and there attempts to resolve his loss through repeated encounters with her transformed body."²¹ Yet the connections between the Orpheus legend and *Pearl* go beyond the elegiac connections of mourning, a man's meditation on a woman's body,

21 Sarah Stanbury, "Feminist Masterplots: The Gaze on the Body of the *Pearl*'s Dead Girl," in eadem and Linda Lomperis, ed., *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 99. Note that Christopher Tolkien made comparison inevitable when he published his father J.R.R. Tolkien's modernized English versions of *Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Sir Orfeo* (New York, NY: Random House, 1979). J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in the essay prefacing his translation of *Pearl* that if the Dreamer had not been consoled at the poem's end, "he would have awakened by the mound again, not in the gentle and serene resignation of the last stanza, but still as he is first seen, *looking only backwards*, his mind filled with the horror of decay ..." (19, emphasis added). This phrase may suggest that Orpheus' backward glance was in Tolkien's mind when he wrote this essay. That the Dreamer is consoled shows how his Christian faith redeems his Orphic journey.

and the feminist masterplots that Stanbury analyzes from the viewpoint of modern psychoanalytic and cinematic theory; they concern the fundamental literary context of allegorical interpretation in the medieval period. Understanding this requires readers to remember the story of Orpheus and learn about medieval allegorical interpretations of it in order to see the relation to *Pearl*.

Orpheus was born in Thrace, the son of a muse, and he had the gift of music. When he played the lyre, all of nature responded by listening, as if captivated by a spell. Animals that were usually enemies, like predatory lions who seized upon lambs for prey, would make peace with one another at the sound of Orpheus' lyre. It so happened that this Orpheus fell in love and sought to marry his beloved Eurydice. On the day of their wedding, however, she stepped on an adder that bit her ankle, and from the poison of the snake-bite, she died. Orpheus, grieving from this loss, went nearly mad. He went throughout the world until he found an entrance into Hades. He descended to the underworld, and there, playing his lyre, he made his way—a living being—into the realms of the dead. He won an audience with Hades himself and his queen, Persephone, whose hearts were somehow softened by his music. They agreed to give Eurydice back to Orpheus on the condition that he not look back at her until both of them had emerged from hell. But at a certain point, Orpheus did look back, and lost his love a second time.

Thereafter, Orpheus did not love women, but boys, and wandered the world unhappy. Some legends say he was one of the Argonauts who sailed with Jason in search of the Golden Fleece; others say that he had a son, Museaus, who was gifted as he was. But Orpheus' life ended when Maenads, ecstatic worshippers of Bacchus, tore his body apart in one of their fits of religious madness. The head of Orpheus drifted in the Mediterranean until it came to Lesbos, where it was enshrined. But the soul of Orpheus descended into Hades and was reunited with Eurydice in Elyseum.

This, at least, is the legend as Ovid recollects it in the *Metamorphoses* (X.1-111 and XI.1-84).²² Virgil also recalls the story in the fourth book of the *Georgics*. The Virgilian tale is slightly different, however, as it includes the shepherd Aristeas, a man who is rapaciously chasing Eurydice on the day of her wedding. It is because of Aristeas that she runs, treads on the snake, and is consequently bit and poisoned to death. The motivations for Orpheus' backward glance are different in Ovid and Virgil as well. In Ovid, Orpheus looks back because of his love for Eurydice and his concern that she may stumble. In contrast, in Virgil, the *incautum amantem* ("incautious lover") Orpheus looks back because a sudden madness (*dementia*) seizes him.²³ Furthermore, in Ovid, Eurydice's response to Orpheus is a barely audible farewell, given with the suggestion that she knows he loves her. In Virgil, Eurydice verbally chastises Orpheus for his moral failure before her spirit returns to Hades. These differences reflect Ovid's emphasis on passionate love and Virgil's on Stoic morality.

A third version of the Orpheus story can be found in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. In it, Boethius presents the first allegorical reading of the story. Commenting on Orpheus' backward glance toward Eurydice, he writes:

Nam qui Tartareum in specus
Victus lumina flexerit,
Quidquid praecipuum trahit
Perdit dum videt inferos.
[The conquered one who has turned
the light of his eyes toward the cave of Tartarus
loses the precious things he brought forth
when he sees the things below.]²⁴

22 For a facing-page edition of the Latin and translation into English, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library Vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916, rpt. 1939) or for a fine English translation, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, IL: Indiana UP, 1955, rpt. 1983).

23 Virgil, *Georgics*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library Vol. 63 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 252.

24 Boethius, *Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library Vol. 74 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1973). The translation

The Ovidian, Virgilian, and Boethian versions of the Orpheus story were transmitted to medieval readers as school texts that were read, paraphrased, and commented upon in Latin. They were also translated into the vernacular languages of western Europe. The significant body of commentary on the Orpheus story has been considered by John Block Friedman in his book, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*.²⁵ It is clear, for instance, that allegorical commentary on Orpheus divided into two basic schools. The first, in the field of morality, viewed Orpheus as an allegorical figure of “reason” and Eurydice as a figure of “sensuality.”

This reading begins with Remigius of Auxerre (ca. 904) in his commentary on Boethius and is evident in the late-thirteenth or early fourteenth century French commentary *Ovide moralisee*.²⁶ The other, in the field of music or rhetoric, viewed Orpheus as a representative of the “best voice” and Eurydice as that of “profound judgment.” This reading also originates with Remigius of Auxerre in his commentary on the *De Nuptiis* of Martianus Capella and is evident in Dante’s *Convivio*.²⁷ By the eleventh century, as C. Stephen Jaeger has shown, the authors of the “The Marriage of Mercury and Philology,” “Quid suum virtutis,” and the Liège Songs were all using the Orpheus story as an allegory for the individual’s educational progress: “Orphic poetry has a civilizing mission like that of rhetoric as the educator of warriors and temperer of royal judgment ... Orpheus and Eurydice becomes a defining myth for the mission of the educated man.”²⁸ This theme that Jaeger identifies in the commentaries adds a third dimension to understanding the treatment of Orpheus in the commentaries and thus in *Pearl*.

given here is my own.

25 John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2000). See also a collection of essays on the subject, *Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the Consolatio Philosophiae*, eds. Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen and Lodi Nauta (Leiden: Brill, 1997) and Gerard O’Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

26 Friedman, 98 and 124.

27 Friedman, 87-88.

28 C. Stephen Jaeger, “Orpheus in the Eleventh Century,” *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 27 (1992), 148.

While many medieval Christian commentaries on the legend of Orpheus echo the stoicism of Virgil or the moralizing of Boethius, some pay particular attention to the Ovidian emphasis on love between Orpheus and Eurydice in the *Metamorphoses*. Because of the wide-spread Christian belief in the miracle of resurrection, translations, paraphrases, and commentaries on the Orpheus story began to imagine that Orpheus' love had the power to bring Eurydice back from the dead. In Middle English vernacular literature, the notable example is, of course, the romance *Sir Orfeo*.²⁹ In these retellings, Eurydice no longer languishes in hell but is instead set free from the bonds of death (or, in the case of *Sir Orfeo*, the nether-world of the King of Faery) and then restored to her husband. This new ending to the legend seems to have been made possible because of allegorical interpretations of the story that viewed Orpheus as a type of Christ and Eurydice a type of the human soul.³⁰

Perhaps the most apt allegorical interpretation of Orpheus in this vein, insofar as it relates to *Pearl*, comes from Pierre Bersuire in the fourteenth century:

Dic allegorice quod Orpheus, filius solius, est Christus, filius dei patris, qui a principio Euridicem .i. animam humanam per caritatem & amorem duxit ipsamque per specialem prerogativam a principio sibi coniunxit. Verumtamen serpens, diabolus, ipsam novam nuptam .i. de novo creatam, dum flores colligeret .i. de pomo vetito appeteret, per temptationem momordit, & per peccatum occidit, & finaliter ad infernum transmisit. Quod videns Orpheus Christus in infernum personaliter voluit descendere & sic uxorem suam .i. humanam naturam rehabuit, ipsamque de regno tenebrarum ereptam ad superos secum duxit, dicens illud Canticorum .ii. "Surge, propera amica mea & veni."

29 Henryson's fifteenth-century Scottish version of the Orpheus and Eurydice legend is Boethian in character and reads the backward glance negatively, not allowing Eurydice to come back to life from death. However, in Walter Map's twelfth-century Latin *De Nugis Curialium*, there is a Celtic story with an Orphic plot, wherein a knight rescues his dead lady from a band of faery dancers, and the original folk-tale may have influenced *Sir Orfeo*. See Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. and trans. M.R. James, C.N.L. Brooke, and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

30 Jaeger, "Orpheus in the Eleventh Century," 141-68.

[Let us speak allegorically and say that Orpheus, the child of the sun, is *Christ the son of God the Father*, who from the beginning led Eurydice, that is, *the human soul*, to himself. And from the beginning, Christ joined her to himself through his special prerogative. But the devil, a serpent, drew near *the new bride*, that is, created *de novo*, while she collected flowers, that is, while she seized the forbidden apple, an bit by her temptation and killed by her sin, and finally she went to the world below. Seeing this, *Christ-Orpheus wished to descend to the lower world and thus he retook his wife*, that is, human nature, ripping her from the hands of the ruler of Hell himself; and he led her with him to the upper world, saying this verse from Canticles 2:10: “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.”]³¹

Here, Orpheus is interpreted as a figure of Christ, and Eurydice is a figure of the human soul, the bride of Christ. The serpent Eurydice stepped on is the devil, and Orpheus descent into hell is Christ’s harrowing of hell.³² In Bersuire’s commentary, no longer is Orpheus’ backward glance a moral failing; now it is a moral imperative because it represents Christ’s desire to seek and save the lost.

The Pearl-Poet was apparently well-aware of the medieval commentary tradition on scripture and secular literature that interpreted texts in terms of their literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses. He was familiar with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and there are intriguing literal parallels between the elegiac plot of *Pearl* and the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice: the love of a man for a woman who dies before that love can be consummated in marriage, the man’s grief over her loss, and the man’s pursuit of her in the other world.³³ The Dreamer appears in the poem as an Ovidian Orphic figure, looking back in love and fear. He seems to view himself as reasonable and the Pearl-Maiden as sensual, along the Remigian allegorical interpretive lines laid down in the *Ovide moralisee*, but the Pearl-Maiden seems to view his voice and hers in Dantesque terms: a “best voice” whose questions evoke her “profound judgment.” Yet there is another Orphic figure in the poem, one who corresponds not to the literal one in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* but rather corresponds to

31 Quoted in Friedman, 127 (my emphases).

32 Interestingly, Eurydice is also identified here with Persephone from Greco-Roman mythology, when she was gathering flowers before she was kidnapped by Hades, and with the beloved from the Song of Solomon.

33 See Jane Beal, “The Pearl-Maiden’s Two Lovers,” *Studies in Philology* 100 (2003), 1-21.

the allegorical one exemplified in Bersuire's commentary: Christ.

When the Dreamer asks, "Who formed your fair figure?," the Pearl-Maiden's answer takes the reader farther away from the literal sense and deeper into the allegorical meaning, for it emphasizes the Pearl-Maiden's marriage to her matchless Lamb.

My makelez Lambe þat al may bete,
quop scho, my dere Destyné,
Me ches to Hys make, altha3; vnmete
Sumtyme semed that assemblé.
When I wente fro yor worlde wete
He calde me to Hys bonerté:
Cum hyder to Me, My lemman swete,
For mote ne spot is non is þee (ll. 757-64).

The answer itself is allegorical, a spiritual picture, because no literal girl dressed in pearls ever married a white lamb, of course, but the soul of a virgin girl who died young and entered into heaven could certainly be understood by medieval Christians as married to Christ Jesus, who is called the Lamb because He was sacrificed.³⁴ It is Christ in the poem who draws near "the new bride," who descends to the "lower world" to retake his wife, and who says, "Come hither to me" and "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away." So there are clearly parallels between the Ovidian Orpheus story and the literal, elegiac experience of the Dreamer in *Pearl*, and at the same time, there is a parallel between Bersuire's Orpheus and the spiritual, allegorical sense of Christ's actions in *Pearl*. Thus, both the Dreamer in the first case and Christ in the second case can be Orphic figures.

34 See Santha Bhattacharji, "Pearl and the Liturgical 'Commons of Virgins,'" *Medium Aevum* 64:1(1995), 37-51. Also note that as lambs were sacrificed in Jewish atonement practices, so Jesus was sacrificed on the Cross and thus, in medieval Christian belief, he was the Lamb who made possible the salvation of human souls. For evocative discussion of this and its influence on western culture, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977).

Clear parallels to the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice emerge in *Pearl* when examined in the light of the commentary tradition on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Yet the two mythological figures are not mentioned directly in the poem; instead, their presence in the Pearl-Poet's memory, creating parallels in his poem, remains implied rather than overt.³⁵ The Pearl-Poet does name Pygmalion and alludes to Galatea, two figures from another Ovidian love story. These two lovers had a rich tradition of allegorical interpretation associated with them in the Middle Ages as well.

The reference to Pygmalion comes immediately after the dreamer's question, "Who formed your fair figure?":

O maskelez perle in perlez pure,
Pat berez," quoth I, "þe perle of prys,
Quo formed þe þy fayre fygure?
Pat wrogt þy wede he watz ful wys;
Py beauté com neuer of nature—
Pymalyon paynted neuer þy vys,
Ne Arystotel nawþer by hys lettrure
Of carped þe kynde þese propertéz;
Py colour passez þe flour-de-lys,
Pyn angel-hauyng so clene cortez (ll. 745-54).

In this passage, the poet's reference to Pygmalion in the Dreamer's voice invokes a complex array of interpretive possibilities. Because Pygmalion and Galatea were lovers, at one level, this moment invokes romantic love, associating Pygmalion with

³⁵ There can be no doubt that the Pearl-Poet was familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which includes the love stories of both Orpheus and Eurydice and Pygmalion and Galatea. While the poet names Pygmalion directly, thus making a connection to Pygmalion that is critically indisputable, the Orphic connection is perhaps even more essential to the poem in the parallels in supplies and the deeper meanings it implies—hence the consideration given to it in this study.

the Dreamer and Galatea with the Pearl-Maiden. At another level, Pygmalion corresponds to the poet himself. In the context of these lines, his allusion is not only to the Ovidian lover but the Ovidian sculptor-artist who had the power to imitate and create life. For that is what Pygmalion did when he formed Galatea from ivory (artistic imitation), prayed for Venus to breathe life into her, and once she awakened to his kisses, made love to her so that she gave birth to their daughter, Paphos (natural pro-creation).³⁶ The poet even dares to venture into the debate over which force had the greater power, art or nature, when he makes the Dreamer assert: “Your beauty never came from nature – Pygmalion never painted your face!” An odd claim, since, if her beauty comes neither from the Pearl-Maiden’s earthly nature nor from the poet’s art, readers are left to wonder where it does come from. Does the poet seek to imply, through the Dreamer’s astonishment, that heavenly grace is the source of the Pearl-Maiden’s beauty? An answer, once again, can be found in the commentary tradition.

Like Orpheus and Eurydice, Pygmalion and Galatea appear in the *Metamorphoses* but take on a larger life in the medieval commentary traditions. On the one hand, Pygmalion stood for the literary debate over the value of art versus nature, as exemplified in Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* in the twelfth-century,³⁷ Chaucer’s “Physician’s Tale” in the fourteenth-century, and the Jean Molinet’s *Roman de la Rose Moralisé* in the fifteenth-century. It is interesting to consider a Chaucerian view since he, the Pearl-Poet’s contemporary, allows Nature to assert to her pride of place over Art – in a way that specifies why and gives insight about the origin of the Pearl-Maiden’s beauty:

36 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1983), 241-43.

37 E.V. Gordon thought it likely the poet echoes the *Roman de la Rose* when that French allegory argues that neither Plato nor Aristotle “nor the artist, not even Pygmalion, can imitate successfully the works of Nature” (ed. Langlois 16013f). In contrast to Gordon, Herbert Pilch argued that Jean de Meun’s point was that both Nature and Art are inferior to God. See Herbert Pilch, “The Middle English *Pearl*: Its Relation to the *Roman de la Rose*,” *NM* 65 (1964), 427-46 or as translated by Heide Hyprath in John Conley, *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays* (Notre Dame UP, 1970), 163-84. Pygmalion’s story was also used to warn against the seductions of art and the dangers of idolatry. See Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge UP, 1991), 316-38 and D.W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton UP, 1969), 99-103, 157-58.

... Lo, I, Nature,
Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature,
Whan that me liste: who kan me contrefete?
Pigmalion noght, though he ay forge and bête,
Or grave or peynte ...
For He that is the formere principal
Hath maked me his vicaire general,
To forme and peynten erthely creaturis
Right as me list ...
My lord and I been ful of oon accord.
I made hire to the worshipe of my lord;
So do I alle myne other creatures,
What colour that they han or what figures (PhysT, ll. 11-15, 19-22, 25-28).³⁸

In this case, Nature is supreme over Art, and especially Art as represented by Pygmalion, specifically because she is the vicar of the “formere principal,” the first shaper, God. By comparing the Pygmalion reference here in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to the one in the Pearl-Poet’s poem, we see the clear implication that the Pearl-Maiden’s beauty does ultimately come, not from Art (Pygmalion) or Nature, but from God.

But the correspondence between Pygmalion and Art is not always consistent. In addition to his allegorical meaning, he also has a typological significance. In the *Ovide moralisee* and Molinet’s *Roman de la Rose Moralisé*, he comes to stand for the divine. Claire

38 *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry Benson (Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 190. For discussion of Chaucer’s deployment of Pygmalion, see the final chapter of Jane Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer: The Fabulation of Sexual Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). She also notes that Bersuire, commenting on Pygmalion as well as Orpheus, sees him as representative of preachers since they “know how to sculpt and paint a soul with corrections and virtues” (quoted in Chance, 268).

M. Croft has aptly stated how in her comparison of the treatment of Pygmalion in both works:

The author [of the *Ovide moralisee*] first claims that Pygmalion and his statue represents a great lord taking in a poor girl, who is beautiful, but knows nothing of the world around her. After educating her, the Lord falls in love with her and takes her as his wife. The author of the *Ovide moralisee* continues that “autre sentence i puet avoir” (X, v. 3586) and presents a second interpretation of the account. It is the second interpretation of the Pygmalion account which is a specifically Christian one, equating Pygmalion with God, and the statue with God’s creation, mankind. This is analogous to Molinet’s interpretation, reading into the Pygmalion myth the story of the Creator and his chosen people. However, where Molinet chooses to see Pygmalion as representing Christ, the author of the *Ovide moralisee* interprets him as God. Molinet equates the statue with the Church, whereas in the *Ovide moralisee* the statue is interpreted as the less specific notion of mankind.³⁹

Thus, Pygmalion can stand for Art in opposition to God and his vicar, Nature, or in a startling reversal made possible by the complex nature of medieval allegory, he can stand for God the Father rescuing humanity from sin, or Christ wedding the Church, His bride.⁴⁰

When *Pearl* is read in light of the medieval commentary tradition on Pygmalion and Galatea, the Pearl-Maiden is confirmed in her typological role as the Bride of Christ,⁴¹ and Christ emerges as not only the true Orpheus but the true Pygmalion as well. As we have already seen in the cases of Orpheus and Pygmalion, however, *figura* often correspond to more than one meaning, and this is true of the Pearl-Maiden, too.

39 Claire M. Croft, “Pygmalion and the Metamorphosis of Meaning in Jean Molinet’s *Roman de la Rose Moralisé*,” *French Studies* 59:4 (2005): 453-66. There is no modern edition of Molinet’s work, though there is one from the early-sixteenth century: Jean Molinet, *La Roman de la Rose Moralisé* (Lyons: Guillaume Balsarin, 1503).

40 It is worth noting here that the entire story of Pygmalion in the *Ovide moralisee* is narrated by none other than Orpheus. See Book X in *Ovide moralisé: poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, ed. C. de Boer, 5 vols. (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915-38).

41 Similarly, Hamilton sees the Pearl-Maiden as an allegorical representation of the human soul. See Marie Padgett Hamilton, “The Meaning of the Middle English *Pearl*,” in *Middle English Survey: Critical Essays*, ed. Edward Vasta (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 117-145. For further insight on the Pearl-Maiden’s allegorical signification, see James Wimsatt, *Allegory and Mirror: Tradition and Structure in Middle English Literature* (New York, NY: Pegasus, 1970) and James Earl, “Saint Margaret and the Pearl-Maiden,” *Modern Philology* 70 (1972), 1-8.

Implications of the Use of Liturgical Time in Pearl

The Pearl-Maiden's marriage to the Lamb, like the Parable of the Vineyard and the Parable of the Merchant retold in the poem—like the penny and the pearl and the New Jerusalem—are all allegorical pictures signifying salvation. Yet it appears to be the salvation of the dreamer's soul that is at issue in the poem, for the Pearl-Maiden clearly counsels him to forsake the world and purchase the pearl that is matchless (ll.743-44). This poem, whatever else it may be about, is certainly about salvation.⁴² The pearl on the Pearl-Maiden's breast, drawn from the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price by the poet into the allegorical world of the poem, symbolizes the possibility of winning the kingdom of heaven—that is, salvation—through the miraculous grace of an unexpected discovery; allegorically, the Pearl-Maiden herself may stand for joy in that salvation.⁴³

Because, for medieval Catholics, the drama of salvation was built into structures of remembrance—specifically the sacraments and the holy days of the liturgical year—it is no surprise that the Pearl-Poet uses these structures to shape his poem. In exploring the use of liturgical time in *Pearl*, readers can venture to interpret another dimension of the Pearl-Maiden's allegorical significance: the relationship of joy to salvation.

The poet is vividly aware of the importance of liturgical time and the way that it communicates heavenly reality—eternity—to people living in earthly realms bound by time. To emphasize how heaven and earth meet in the garden of the Dreamer's mind, he uses key dates and parables from the church's liturgy to structure his poem.⁴⁴ The poem is structured like a triptych, one that begins with

42 For a relevant discussion (with diverging viewpoint), see Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as Vernacular Theologian," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, eds., Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 293-313.

43 See Matthew 13:45-46. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure, which directly precedes the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price and is conflated with it in *Pearl*, specifies that the man who obtained the treasure experienced great "joy" upon discovering the treasure and, as a result, sells all he has to buy the field in which the treasure resides.

44 For another view of the poet's use of time, grounded in the calendrical year rather than the liturgical one, see Lynn Staley Johnson, "The Pearl Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour,"

the image of a garden in August and ends with the image of the bread and the wine of the Eucharist from the mass (the outer panels), but focuses the reader's attention inward toward the dream and the Dreamer's spiritual progress on his Orphic journey toward the resurrection hope of Easter (the central panel).⁴⁵

Although some scholars have previously associated *Pearl* with the feast of the Holy Innocents that takes place during the Christmas season,⁴⁶ closer examination suggests that two key liturgical dates more relevant to the poem. They are the feast of Mary's Assumption that takes place on August 15th and celebration of the eve of Septuagesima Sunday that takes place three weeks before Lent. Once these liturgical contexts are noticed, deeper understanding of the Pearl-Maiden's signifying power becomes possible.

The first liturgical season in the poem is worth examining closely because this is when the Dreamer is grieving and remembering the losses he experienced in earlier seasons of the year. In August (Ordinary Time), in the first panel of the triptych as it were, he looks back and remembers his Lenten and Paschal experiences.

To þat spot that I in speche expoun

I entred in þat erber grene,

In Augoste in a hy3 seysoun,

Quen corne is coruen wyth crokez kene (ll. 37-40, my emphasis).

in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, edited by Robert Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing, 1991), 3-15.

45 For another interpretation of the poem's structure, see Britton J. Harwood, "Pearl as Diptych," in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing, 1991), 61-78.

46 Ian Bishop made the case for a Christmas liturgical context for *Pearl* forty years ago in *The Pearl in its Setting* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) when he noted the Mass of the Holy Innocents contains a passage from Revelation that is paraphrased in *Pearl*. However, the same passage from Revelation also is read as part of the Divine Office in the three weeks following Easter. In fact, all the paraphrased passages from Revelation in *Pearl* are read three weeks after Easter because entire last book of the Bible is read at this time. Furthermore, unlike the companion poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, it is clearly Paschal, not Christmas, imagery that predominates in *Pearl*.

Scholars have suggested two church holidays might be meant by this reference to a “high season”: Lammas on August 1st and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on August 15th. Andrew and Waldron find Lammas to be the more probable date alluded to because it is the festival of the first wheat harvest of the year and the very next line of the poem concerns harvest.⁴⁷ Harvesting imagery, in Christian tradition, is clearly associated with resurrection. Yet August 15th may be the more likely date because the line about the sickle being taken to the corn is a direct paraphrase of the Parable of the Growing Seed that is read as the gospel lesson in the liturgy of August 15th, Mary’s Assumption Day.

Sic est regnum Dei quemadmodum si homo iaciat sementem in terram et dormiat et exurgat nocte ac die et semen germinet et increscat dum nescit ille ultro enim terra fructificat primum herbam deinde spicam deinde plenum frumentum in spica et cum se produxerit fructus statim mittit falcem quoniam adest messis.

[So the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not know how. Moreover, the earth produces first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.]⁴⁸

Within the poem, it seems that this is the day when the dreamer remembers the loss of his beloved that occurred earlier in the year. Furthermore, it is more likely that the poet is alluding to Mary’s Assumption Day than to the feast of Lammas, given the importance of Mary to the poet, who recognizes her as the Queen of Heaven and then closely associates the Pearl-Maiden with her in his poem.⁴⁹ This also fits better with the poet’s tendency to create biblical paraphrases, especially of parables, from the lessons of the Mass in his

47 Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 56n.

48 Mark 4:26-29.

49 For a detailed exploration of correspondences, see Teresa Reed, “Mary, the Maiden, and Metonymy in *Pearl*,” *South Atlantic Review* 65:2 (2000), 134-162. However, since the poet refers to the “high season,” perhaps he refers to the two-week period beginning with Lammas and ending with the feast of the Assumption of Mary.

poem.⁵⁰ He uses parables in this way in order to place events in his poem in the context of liturgical time.

The central parable of *Pearl* is, of course, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, which the Pearl-Maiden discourses upon in her sermon to the Dreamer as they stand separated from one another by the stream. In the Sarum Rite that was used in England in the fourteenth century (though not the Roman one that is used today), that parable was read on Septuagesima Sunday three weeks before Lent began. Thus, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard was usually read in January or February, since Lent is forty days before Easter, and Easter is a movable feast. The repetition of the word “date,” the concatenation word in the section of *Pearl* that retells the Parable of the Laborers, draws attention to the idea—as earlier with August 15th—that Septuagesima Sunday is the liturgical date on which the parable is read.

This prompts a reconsideration of the implications of liturgical time in the poem. Such reconsideration can lead to the conclusion that the Dreamer’s vision unfolds, in a spiritual sense, between Septuagesima Sunday (when the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is read) and three weeks after Easter (when Revelation is read). The possibility that Septuagesima Sunday is the day that the Pearl-Maiden died is given by the Pearl-Maiden herself, who speaks of her death in metaphorical terms in this section of the poem,⁵¹ and by an investigation of what happened on Septuagesima Sunday in medieval churches: the burial of the alleluia.

In the Sarum Rite, three weeks before Lent begins and throughout the season of Lent itself, the alleluia is neither said nor

50 For analysis of parables in *Pearl*, see Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl-Poet* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 1996) and Douglas Thorpe, *A New Earth: The Labor of Language in Pearl, Herbert’s Temple, and Blake’s Jerusalem* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic UP, 1991).

51 How the Pearl-Maiden actually died is never actually specified in the poem, though Jean-Paul Freidl and Ian J. Kirby have argued that the *Pearl-Maiden* died as a result of one of the fourteenth-century outbreaks of the plague. See “The Life, Death, and Life of the Pearl-Maiden” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 103 (2002), 395-98.

sung. To recognize this significant change in the liturgy—the silencing of the alleluia—on the Saturday evening before Septuagesima Sunday, a procession, including the priest and the choirboys of the congregation, buries the alleluia, written on parchment, underground. A description of this can be found in the 15th century statute book of the Church of Toul in France:

On Saturday before Septuagesima Sunday, all the choir-boys gather in the sacristy during the prayer of the None to prepare for the burial of the Alleluia. After the last *Benedicamus*, they march in procession, with crosses, tapers, holy water, and censers, and they carry a coffin, as in a funeral. Thus they proceed through the aisle, moaning and mourning, until they reach the cloister. There they bury the coffin; they sprinkle it with holy water and incense it; whereupon, they return to the sacristy by the same way.⁵²

The farewell to the alleluia is thus ceremonialized as if it were the burial of a beloved person.

The fact that the dreamer bewails his pearl which has been closed in a “forser” (l. 263)—a casket—together with the emphasis on the word “date” in the section dealing with the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, which is read on Septuagesima Sunday, prompts two questions: is the poet trying to tell us, literally and historically, that the Pearl-Maiden died on the evening before Septuagesima Sunday? Is the Pearl-Maiden, allegorically, a figure who stands for the alleluia?

In keeping with this latter possibility, it is noteworthy that the word *alleluia* never occurs in *Pearl*, but the Dreamer directly addresses the Pearl-Maiden as if she stands for a single word when he says:

O perle, quop I, of rygh renoun
so watz hit me dere þat þou con deme
In þys veray avysyoun!
If hit be ueray and soth sermoun

52 Cited in Francis Weiser, *Easter Book* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1954) and online at <http://www.fisheaters.com/septuagesima.html> (accessed 18 May 2010).

þat þou so strykez in garlande gay,
so wel is me in þys doel-doungeoun
þat þou art to þat Prynsez paye. (1182-88, emphasis added)

The word “sermoun” is glossed by Andrew and Waldron to mean “speech” or “account” in this line, but like “fygure” (*figura*), it is a Middle English rendering of a Latin word, in this case, *sermo/sermonis*, which can mean “talk, conversation, discourse” or more simply “a word.”⁵³ Marie Borroff, in her elegant modern English version of the poem, translates “sermoun” as “word” in this line.⁵⁴ The fact the Pearl-Maiden “strykez” (“strikes, pierces,” or by connotative extension, “stands for, represents”) this “sermoun” is evocative diction indeed.⁵⁵ It suggests that, allegorically interpreted, the Pearl-Maiden could be a figure of the Dreamer’s *alleluia*: the “sermoun” (l. 1185), the one word, that represents his joy: “my blysse” (l. 372).⁵⁶

Conclusions

The spiritual language, Ovidian love stories, and use of liturgical time in *Pearl* all invite allegorical interpretations of the poem. While there is clearly a literal, elegiac sense to the poem, there are also allegorical meanings. This makes perfect sense in light of the tradition of four-fold scriptural and literary interpretation in the Middle Ages, which the Pearl-Poet clearly used to understand biblical parables and compose his poetic masterpiece.

53 “Sermo” and “verbum” could be used interchangeably. Years after *Pearl* was written, Erasmus rendered the opening of John’s Gospel “in principio erat sermo,” instead of giving Jerome’s traditional translation “erat verbum,” and he created a defense of his choice by arguing quite lucidly that the Church Fathers often used “sermo” and “verbum” interchangeably. See C. A. L. Jarrott, “Erasmus’ ‘In Principio Erat Sermo’: A Controversial Translation” *Studies in Philology* 61:1 (1964), 35-40.

54 Marie Borroff, trans., *Pearl: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).

55 Reading the lines this way eliminates the need to emend “strykez” to “stykez” (“go”) as Sir Israel Gollancz (1921) did in his edition of the poem, and which first E.V. Gordon (1953) and then Sister Mary Hillman (1961, rpt. 1967) retained in theirs, or to suppose that “garlande gaye” stands metaphorically for the heavenly procession when it simply refers to the crown of pearls the Pearl-Maiden is wearing as she speaks to the Dreamer just as Andrew and Waldron agree (see their note on lines 1185-87 in their 1978 edition).

56 The Dreamer repeatedly refers to the Pearl-Maiden as his joy, calling her “my blysfol beste” (l. 279), “my blysse” (l. 372), “Blysfol” (l. 421), and so on.

The poet's use of metaphoric language, memory of the legends of Orpheus and Eurydice and Pygmalion and Galatea, and astute interweaving of parables from the church liturgy alongside invocations of the Lenten and Paschal liturgical seasons within his dream vision all invite readers into a deeper understanding of the allegorical sense of *Pearl*. If we accept the invitation, we pass through an open door that, afterwards, no one can shut.⁵⁷ For once the possibilities of allegorical interpretation are re-captured, readers gain a richer sense not only of the elegiac meaning of the poem but also of the greater signifying power of *Pearl*.

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57 See Revelation 3:8. As the Pearl-Maiden herself remarks, "Rygtwysly quo con rede / He loke on bok and be awayed" (ll. 709-10).

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Illumination from Pearl Manuscript, Cotton Nero A.x