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BARBARA JANINA KOWALIK

PERSONIFIED GEMSTONE: A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE *PEARL* MAIDEN

Abstract. This paper reinterprets the central character of the Middle English dream poem *Pearl*, the Pearl Maiden, observing that she is nearly as bewilderingly elusive and multifaceted a figure as the green challenger of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, another famous poem attributed to the same unknown fourteenth-century author. The paper's argument draws upon the pre-modern perception of gemstones as animate beings and on modern thing theory as developed by Bill Brown. I argue that, before the Maiden begins to speak in the dream-vision, correcting the Dreamer's errors and false assumptions and revealing her status of a heavenly queen, the poem underscores her identity as a precious stone, confronting the Dreamer, and the reader, with an intriguing gemstone persona, a marvel of the Terrestrial Paradise. The poem's allegory rests, therefore, not exactly on a jewel or a human child at the literal level of allegorical exegesis but, more precisely, on the fluid image of a half human, half lithic figure. The paper demonstrates that the modern conceptual network of binaries like human–nonhuman, human–lithic, or animate–vegetative might not be commensurable with the typically more labile pre-modern perception of things and objects.

Keywords: medieval; human; lithic; liquid; liminal

SZLACHETNY KAMIEŃ WE WŁASNEJ OSOBIE: NOWE ODCZYTANIE POSTACI PANNY W ŚREDNIOWIECZNEJ *PERLE*

Abstrakt. Artykuł proponuje reinterpretację Panny Perły, jednej z dwóch czołowych postaci w poemacie sennym *Perła*, zdecydowanie wymykającej się jednoznacznemu odczytaniu, podobnie jak Zielony Rycerz, który rzuca wyzwanie dworowi króla Artura w romansie *Pan Gawen i Zielony Rycerz*, innym słynnym utworze przypisywanym temu samemu anonimowemu poecie angielskiemu z drugiej połowy XIV wieku. Mój wywód opiera się na przednowoczesnej percepcji kamieni szlachetnych jako w pewnym stopniu istot żywych, sięgam również do współczesnej teorii rzeczy Billa Browna. Wskazuję, że Panna, zanim jeszcze przemawia w śnie narratora, korygując jego błędy i fałszywe przesłanki oraz ujawniając swą pozycję królowej w Niebie, ukazuje się śniącemu w pierwszej kolejności jako rodzaj niesamowitej, olśniewającej formacji

BARBARA JANINA KOWALIK, Prof., PhD, Dr. Litt., University of Warsaw; e-mail: b.j.kowalik@uw.edu.pl; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6479-2164.

skalnej. Jej postać jawi się jako intrygujące uosobienie szlachetnej perły – jeden z cudów krainy snu przypominającej Raj Ziemski. Zatem alegoria *Perły* opiera się, ściśle rzecz biorąc, nie na klejnocie bądź dziecku jako dosłownym filarze egzegezy alegorycznej, lecz na płynnym obrazie postaci na wpół ludzkiej, na wpół kamiennej. Artykuł pokazuje niewspółmierność nowoczesnego aparatu pojęciowego, składającego się z opozycji binarnych takich jak człowiek–nieczłowiek, człowiek–kamień, czy zwierzę–roślina, w stosunku do przednowoczesnego, z zasady bardziej labilnego pojmowania osób i rzeczy.

Kluczowe słowa: średniowieczny; ludzki; skalny; płynny; graniczny

The dream poem *Pearl* (ca. 1360–1400) has two main personae—critics typically refer to them as the Dreamer and the Maiden. The former is the poem's first-person narrator who recounts his dream vision, the latter is a pearl-adorned girl of his dream. Both are shadowy figures that have raised many questions and doubts throughout the poem's modern criticism. It has been uncertain, for instance, whether they are purely fictitious constructs or representations of real-life people, and whether the Maiden, in particular, represents a young person or is an allegory of a virtue or a spiritual state. Since E. V. Gordon's 1953 edition of *Pearl* there has been a wide critical consensus that the poem is an elegy on the death of a maid-child, written from the viewpoint of her grieving father or close relative who, by way of consolation, receives a vision of her happy afterlife in heaven. On this reading, which does not exclude additional and partial allegorical interpretations of the story, yet emphasizes the Maiden's human identity, the lost child reappears in her father's dream as "an apparition of a spirit, a soul not yet reunited with its body after the resurrection".[1]

The gemstone aspect of the Pearl Maiden has been somewhat underexplored by critics, despite being much emphasized in *Pearl* from the outset, but a number of recent materialist readings address the poem's jewel-jeweller theme and contexts.[2] The focus of this paper is likewise on the Pearl

[1] E. V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), xvii. See also Barbara J. Kowalik, "Artistry and Christianity in *Pearl*," *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*4 (1986): 1–34. On the question of the Pearl Maiden's gender, see Barbara Janina Kowalik, "Was She a Boy? The Queer Maiden of the Middle English *Pearl*," *English Studies* 101, no. 2 (2020): 112–33.

[2] Cf. Felicity Riddy, "Jewels in *Pearl*," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 143–55; Helen Barr, "*Pearl* – Or 'The Jeweller's Tale'," *Medium Ævum* 69, no. 1 (2000): 59–79; Wan-Chuan Kao, "Desiring White Object," *White Before Whiteness in the Late Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), 86–127.

as a material object, though primarily a thing of nature rather than a piece of jewellery, building upon the pre-modern belief that precious stones possessed a kind of vibrancy that aligned them with all living beings. The predominant conceptual scheme of the *scala naturae* would recognize a gradation of life within beings, approaching them by way of analogy and connectivity within a pattern of principal differences. Gervase of Tilbury (d. 1220), for instance, described humans as having "existence in common with stones, life in common with trees, sensation in common with animals, and intelligence in common with angels",[3] while the twelfth-century scholar Marius pointed to the following parallel between a human body and a stone: if "a man is lifted up, he will fall to earth like a mineral; and after death he can be counted among the minerals".[4] Metals, minerals, and gemstones occupied the lowest level in the *scala naturae* scheme as formulated by Thomas Aquinas, but he invested all beings with a soul, *anima*, each with a different kind of soul (Part I, Question 78, Article 1).

The pre-modern approach resonates with postmodern thing theory whose founder Bill Brown, while discussing Achilles's Shield in the *Iliad*, points out that Homer describes the Shield as "at once a static object and a living thing"; Brown attributes the Shield's "indeterminate ontology" to "the medium of metal" and the antiquity's perception of matter as "vitalized", and considers Homer's description to be "the ancient anticipation" of the postmodern "perceptions of material vitality"; in Brown's terms, the Shield's vitality resides in its *thingness* as opposed to its *objecthood*.[5] I would suggest that the medieval poem's eponymous Pearl both, to put it in Brown's terms, asserts itself as thing and is "not quite apprehended".[6] However, present-day readers, following the pattern of binary oppositions like animate-inanimate, organic-inorganic, or human-nonhuman which replaced the *scala naturae* at the threshold of modern thought, tend to objectify the Pearl stone, treating it as an inert object and a mere metaphor of the lost child, while downplaying its nature as a living thing of its own kind.

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[3] S. E. Banks and James W. Binns, eds., trans., *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor* by Gervase of Tilbury (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 27.

[4] Richard Dales, "Marius On the Elements and the Twelfth-Century Science of Matter," *Viator* 3 (1972): 216.

[5] Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2–5.

[6] Brown, 4–5.

In pre-modernity gemstones had their own gendered identities and biographies.[7] According to the sixteenth-century Italian humanist Girolamo Cardano, quoted by Lorraine Daston, they "suffer maladies, old age, and death".[8] For the scholastic natural philosopher Albertus Magnus (d. 1280), they are capable of agency. Precious stones were thought to be able to cure people, bringing them physical and mental health and comfort. The Middle Ages inherited from the Greco-Roman antiquity the idea that stones have sexual identities and can procreate.[9] The medieval myth of the Orphan gem, recounted by Brigitte Buettner, shows that gemstones had proper names and were treated like humans. The solitary, peerless, and exceptionally radiant oriental stone of that myth was called *al-Yatima* in Arabic, meaning "the Orphan", on account of its unique mineralogical identity which made it suitable only for royal crowns and most sanctified settings; the name was reserved for unique pearls in the Byzantine and Islamic world.[10] Whereas all gemstones were imbued with animate properties in medieval lapidaries, pearls, secreted as they are in the wombs of molluscs, belonged to a smaller group of minerals, those "incubated in the bodies of beasts, birds, fish, and reptiles",[11] and thus were even closer to animate life. The Orphan myth resonates with *Pearl*'s emphasis on the singularity of the lost Pearl—"Ne proved I never her precios pere" (4; equal), "I sette hyr sengeley in synglure" (8)[12]—and with the poem's underlying themes of parentage, separation of child from family, and dynastic anxiety. The narrator invokes his precious Pearl and uses the pronouns *she/her* with reference to the gemstone. Notably, in *Cleanness*, yet another poem attributed to the same author, "a perle" (1116) is a "ho" (1121, she) although there is no human reference in the immediate context.[13]

Medieval natural philosophy invited writers to test the borderlines between the levels of being and draw analogies even between remotest species.

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[7] Brigitte Buettner, *The Mineral and the Visual: Precious Stones in Medieval Secular Culture* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2022), 4–5.

[8] Lorraine Daston, "Nature by Design," in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (London: Routledge, 1998), 241.

[9] Robert Halleux, "Fécondité des mines et sexualité des pierres dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine." *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 48, no. 1 (1970); Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 237–45.

[10] Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 31–35.

[11] Buettner, 103.

[12] All quotations from *Pearl* follow Stanbury's electronic edition and are identified parenthetically by line numbers.

[13] The references to *Cleanness* follow Andrew and Waldron's edition.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has explored the pre-modern "limit-breaching" status of the lithic—simultaneously alien to and intimate with the human condition,[14] while Karl Steel points to the pre-modern "fascination with the oyster as the border creature" and the "surprising tendency of one strain of oyster-thinking to compare humans to them".[15] The way *Pearl* engages with an extraordinary pearl might be an offshoot of such thinking for pearls are, after all, the oyster's produce. I would argue that, before the Pearl Maiden begins to speak like an adept preacher and reappears suddenly in the company of the heavenly virgins in the poem's vision of New Jerusalem, what the Dreamer actually encounters in the first part of his vision, within the dreamland that recreates the half real, half fantastic geography of the Terrestrial Paradise, is the personification, or the embodied soul, of an exceptionally fine pearl. This gemstone persona mediates between the poem's memory of a dear child and its visionary projection of the child's resurrected life. Indeed, seen as a live mineral thing rather than a static object, the Pearl is better suited for the poem's consolatory strategy.

The dream transfers the narrator to a region in which pearls flourish like spice-bearing plants. Note that *gem*, derived from the Latin *gemma*, signified both precious stones and buds or sprouts in Middle English (*MED*, ğemme 1a, 2a, b). The borderline between gemstones and plants was fluid. For example, according to medieval lapidary lore coral was a plant that has morphed into a rock. The Dreamer situates the dreamland just across from "Paradyse" (137), meaning the Terrestrial Paradise that occupied the eastern parts of the earth in medieval *mappae mundi* like the Hereford Map. The medieval geographical imaginary located the Earthly Paradise close to India and the so-called Indies. Paradise shared the physical characteristics of those territories, particularly an abundance of spices, precious stones, and marvels of nature.[16] For instance, *Mandeville* states that the Ganges is a river with "many precious stones" and "much gold in the gravel".[17] The island of Taprobane (Sri Lanka) was presented as "a kind of antechamber to the Terrestrial Paradise", abundant with gold, silver, excellent pearls and other precious stones, and as literally a gem-bearing land, with people effortlessly

[14] Cohen, *Stone*, 2.

[15] Karl Steel, *How Not to Make a Human: Pets, Feral Children, Worms, Sky Burial, Oysters* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 139.

[16] Paul Freedman, *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 96–103; Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 157–58.

[17] C. W. R. D. Moseley, trans., *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 184.

gathering gemstones into their baskets off the beach and an enormous open oyster revealing a brood of shining white pearls.[18]

Similarly, the Dreamer's eyes rest on "ryche rokkes" (68) from which emanates extraordinarily bright "lyght" (69). He observes that the hillsides are made of crystal rock formations (74). The gravel under his feet consists of extraordinarily brilliant "precious perles of Oryente" (82)—they cover the ground, as if growing out of it naturally like plants. He notices multitudes of other gemstones: "beryl bryght" (110) in the sloping riverbanks, and "emerad, saffer" and other noble gems (118) at the riverbed. Rock incrusted with gemstones, crystals, and fossils replaces the muddy soil of the English garden of the proem.[19] Although the dreamland is "floty" (127, watery) and abounds in "rych reveres" (105) and their tributary streams and brooks (974, 981), they interweave through the country like fine golden thread, "fyldor" (106), without ever forming mire. At the bottom of the main river, steep precious stones stand like rocks, glinting like beams of light through glass, or like stars that shine in the sky on a winter night (113–16). The image echoes the medieval association of both gemstones and gold, each extracted from the depths of the earth or the sea, with the stars in the skies and their influences.[20] The resplendent "holtowodes" (75, woods) consist of trees whose trunks are "as blwe as ble of Ynde" (76, indigo) and whose thick foliage resembles "bornyst sylver" (77).

The dreamland's exotic trees recall the medieval myth of the artificial tree—a tree or vine made of gold or silver, bearing mineralized fruit and sheltering mechanical birds.[21] *Mandeville* locates the tree at the court of the Great Khan of Cathay, where it takes the form of "a great vine made of fine gold", with "many branches and grapes like the grapes of a growing vine" yet made of diverse precious stones, including rubies, crystal, beryl, and emeralds.[22] The account may have been inspired by the story of Boucher's automaton—the thirteenth-century Parisian goldsmith Guillaume Boucher was seized by the Mongols and constructed for their court a mechanical silver tree flowing with milk and wine, as reported by the Flemish missionary William of Rubruck. A mythical jewelled vine was also mentioned among the

[18] Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 171–75.

[19] See Barbara Janina Kowalik, "Oriental Spice-Plants in an English Garden: Explaining a Natural Impossibility in *Pearl*," *The Explicator* 83, no. 4 (2025), 354–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2025.2496240.

[20] Buettner, *Mineral and the Visual*, 136–38.

[21] Buettner, 167–72.

[22] Moseley, *Travels*, 143.

spoils won by Alexander the Great from Porus of India in medieval romances and redactions of Alexander's supposed letters. Gervase of Tilbury's depiction of a vine made of gold, with clusters of large and small pearls hanging on the golden vine-branches, growing within a temple in the abode of the sun, probably drew upon this tradition.[23] The dream trees in *Pearl* are likewise both natural and artificial, sprouting and petrified, familiar and exotic, hovering between plants and gemstones.

I would suggest that in this environment, where pearls, in particular, crop up like grass, the lost Pearl rematerializes before the Dreamer first as a magnificent outcrop. The gravel made of oriental pearls is an unmistakable signal that he is about to face his precious one. He spots her as he makes his way down beside a stream (125–27) and encounters a new "note" (155)—"matter", but possibly also "something made or built" (*MED* nōte n.(2), 3a, 2f). He calls it a greater marvel (157). A pearl-adorned figure emerges, as it were, out of the landscape. The Dreamer first espies beyond the "myry mere" (158, fair body of water) a "crystal clyffe ful relusaunt" (159), with many a royal ray (160) rising from it. Then he notices a "faunt" (161, child) sitting at the foot of the cliff. The description subtly merges the human figure with the crystal rock—both are equally resplendent. Initially, he refers to the figure simply as "that schene" (fair), shining like "glysnande golde" at the foot of the cliff (165–66). She is clothed in gleaming white linen garments that are richly adorned with pearls of royal excellence. She is wearing a crown adorned with pearls and has a wondrous, flawless pearl fixed in the middle of her breast. Commenting on the manner of introducing this figure into the dream narrative, Daniel C. Remein points out that, at a crucial point, the poem underscores "not the singular maiden, but the pearls" and refers "to the adornment and not to a person at all", the person arriving "only as accessory to her ornaments" (73–74).

The abundance of pearls suggests that an overall quality of pearliness is being emphasized which, in turn, might suggest that the mysterious royal "fygure" (170) is meant to represent, in the first place, an outstanding Pearl formation, a queen of pearls. She appears to be an emanation of the nature of a singular Pearl, or the soul of a fine Pearl in her natural surroundings—in short, a marvel of the Paradise-like dreamland. Remarkable is the transformation of the narrator's lost Pearl, "So smothe, so smal, so seme slyght" (190), into a "precios pyece in perles pyght" (192) that "Ryses up in hir

[23] Banks and Binns, *Otia Imperialia*, 707.

araye ryalle" (191) in the Dreamer's vision. Note the indeterminacy of *pyece*, potentially denoting both a "person, an individual, a being" and "an object, animal, a thing" (*MED* pēce n., 7a, b). Remein observes that the description of "the rising of the pearl" evokes "bright spheres of nacre", and that the rising figure "simultaneously occupies the space of a human body, of a bewilderingly vast landscape, and of a small round pearl", having at once "the shape" of a pearl and "of a human", and rearticulating "the whole landscape", all of which involves a "paradox of scale".[24]

Remein points out, too, that the Dreamer does not behold at this moment "a girl transformed into allegorical meaning", but "a girl calcified – transformed to pearliness", lithified or ossified.[25] While I appreciate these insights, I interpret the girl figure that the Dreamer initially encounters somewhat differently—not so much as a human child transformed into a gemstone, but as a gemstone personified. While the Dreamer is not certain what he actually beholds, his choice of words and the angle of his perception invites the possibility that he has come face to face with a wondrous gemstone persona. Even as he starts questioning the Pearl about her nature in the fifth group of stanzas—"Art thou my perle" that slipped from me into grass? (242–45)—the terms of his interrogation underscore the Pearl's identity as a gemstone: a "juel" (249) lost by a "jueler" (252). Notably, *juel*, *jueler*, and *gemme* are the recurrent words in this part of the poem.

An array of other precious materials in the Dreamer's description of the Pearl figure illustrates his attempt to account somehow for the nature of this unique piece of work, whose unfathomable nature and apparent solitude against the dream landscape resonate with the idea of the Orphan stone. Thus, the Dreamer compares the colour of the figure's face to that of smoothly polished ivory, "playn yvore" (178), evoking the rare material that was renowned for its aesthetically appealing off-white colour and used for making luxury articles and art objects. The most valuable ivory was obtained from the tusks of the Asian elephant, *Elephas maximus*, which inhabited India, the tropical Far East, and large parts of the Middle East. Alternatively, the Dreamer compares the Pearl figure's complexion to "whalles bon" (212), a cheaper kind of ivory, obtained from the whales or walrus inhabiting the seas of northern Europe and the British Isles. Furthermore, he likens the figure's shining hair to "schorne golde" (213), bright cut gold, and compares her to the "flor-de-lis" (195), both a kind of water lily and a stylized heraldic

[24] Remein, "'Pyȝt': Ornament, Place, and Site," 70–72.
[25] Remein, 72.

emblem, painted with gold leaf in medieval manuscripts. She is simultaneously a flower that bloomed and withered as nature allowed (269–70) and "a perle of prys" (272) enclosed in a chest. The poem brings together precious stones, metals, minerals, and plants to convey the nature of this elusive figure, which is reminiscent of the artificial trees in the Alexander romances and other medieval accounts of the East.

The Dreamer's initial reaction to the marvellous figure—he is "ful stray" and "atount" (179, bewildered, astounded), and remains transfixed by the sight for a long while—parallels the court's response to the Green Knight in *Gawain*. Piotr Spyra, calling for "fresh critical scrutiny" of the relationship between the two poems, has illuminated the "general indebtedness" of the dreamland in *Pearl* to the kind of fairy otherworld that features in *Gawain*.[26] The Green Man and the Pearl Maiden embody each in their own ways the nature of their surroundings—respectively, the wild ancient woodlands of northwest Britain, and the exotic dreamland bordering on the oriental Earthly Paradise. The Green Knight's greenness parallels the Pearl Maiden's pearliness, and they each embody the vitality of their specific environments. The two alien figures, each poised between the natural and the human, the civilised and the wild, the normal and the abnormal, are similar, too, by virtue of their liminality and incomprehensibility. The comparison of the Dreamer to a hawk, standing speechless in a hall, with his eyes fixed on the observed object (182–84), is strikingly reminiscent of the court of Camelot, silent and paralyzed by the Green Knight's appearance.

The Dreamer's vocal meditation on the nature of the strange figure, especially in the stanza in which he addresses her as at once a spotless Pearl and a being adorned in pure pearls, "O maskeles perle, in perles pure, / That beres … the perle of prys" (745–46), further underscores the figure's ontological indeterminacy. The Dreamer continues to interrogate her nature, "Quo formed thee thy fayre fygure?" (747), imagining her raiment to have been fashioned by some skilful designer: "That wroght thy wede, He was ful wys" (748). He thinks of two famous artificers, in particular, Pygmalion and Aristotle, and his references to the former's art and the latter's science (750–54) suggest that he may be viewing the Pearl figure through the prism of medieval automata. E. R. Truitt has demonstrated that they included talking statues and oracular heads, some of which were inspired by the story of Pygmalion's

[26] Piotr Spyra, "The Discourse of Fairyland in the Dream Vision of the Middle English Pearl," in *The Light of Life: Essays in Honour of Professor Barbara Kowalik*, ed. Maria Błaszkiewicz and Łukasz Neubauer (Kraków: Libron, 2017), 93.

ivory statue, read as "a parable about the power of mimetic creation, the ability of humans to confuse the artificial with the natural, and the potential for artificial objects to become naturalized", while some were constructed on the basis of Aristotelian natural philosophy that provided the foundation for scholastic scientific experimentation.[27] The Dreamer ultimately rejects, though, the idea that the Pearl figure might be a product of either human art or science.

Instead, he ends his contemplation with a question that links the Pearl to her natural origins, depicting her as offspring of an oyster species: "Breve me, bryght, quat kyn ostriys / Beres the perle so maskelles?" (755–66; Tell me, the fair one, what kind of oysters produce so spotless the pearl).[28] The verb *beres*, used twice in this pivotal stanza, both at the outset (746) and at the close (756), frames the Dreamer's ontological reflection and, notably, relates the Pearl to the reality of childbearing, evoking in particular the principal pearl-bearing oyster species, *Meleagrina margaritifera*. Also, the diction that the Dreamer uses to describe the Pearl figure, particularly the word "biys" (197) that refers to her mantle that is "bounden" at the sides with the "myryeste margarys" (199), recalls the key elements of the oyster's anatomy—a mantle and a byssus.[29] Is this a pure coincidence? I think that, on the contrary, considering the poet's great interest in pearls, his oyster references might be deliberate and meaningful. The poem now reconfigures the Pearl as a child of an oyster, born in an aquatic environment.[30] Oysters were placed on the borderline between fauna and flora in medieval thought. Higden's *Polychronicon* describes them as the lowest of beasts that resemble in their nature the highest plants and touch the perfection of life of trees and herbs,[31] underscoring the interspecies liminality of the kind that underlies, too, the portrayal of the Pearl Maiden. Ancient writers recycled all sorts of curious anecdotes about oysters. Pliny thought that they lived in communities like swarms of bees, while the Byzantine chronicler Procopius believed that they had social relations with sharks. For medieval Christian writers, on the other

[27] E. R. Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 101.

[28] Stanbury's well-supported reading differs from that of Gordon, who reads *offys*, not *ostriys* into this line.

[29] Both the anatomical byssus and the poem's *biys* derive from the Latin *byssus*.

[30] In the following brief account of pearls and oysters I draw upon, respectively, R. A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl Fishing: Origins to the Age of Discovery* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 1–22, 250–75, and Steel, *How Not to Make a Human*, 135–65.

[31] Steel, 139–40.

hand, the process of the formation of pearls within oysters figured the impregnation of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit.

The first scientific attempt to explain why pearls form in molluscs was made by Aristotle's disciple and successor, Theophrastus, in the fourth century BC. He observed that pearls were produced by small, fin-like shellfish as the soft content of their womblike bodies morphed into the solid state. *Sidrak and Bokhus*, a fifteenth-century book of science, describes the pearl's solidification as a sudden transformation taking place upon its contact with the air (*MED*, pērle (2) 1a). For thousands of years the exquisite brightness of pearls was attributed to a small amount of water or dew within them, essential to their structure and appearance and larger than in mineral stones. *Mandeville*, for instance, states that the "fyn perl congeleth and wexeth gret of the dew of hevene" (*MED*, pērle (2) 1a). The precarious nature of pearls, the liquidity into which they could revert, was well known too, as showcased by the anecdote related by Pliny, whereby Cleopatra dissolved in vinegar and drank a valuable pearl from her earring.

The pearl stone's liquidity brings pearls even closer to human infants for Aquinas viewed the latter in terms of the moistness of their bodies (Part I, Question 99, Article 1). *Pearl* envisages the unmaking of an infant in terms of further reversion of the infant body to a liquid state, and in reversal of a child's growth, which Aquinas viewed as solidification and drying up of the nerves and limbs. The poem, let us recall, figures the death of a child as a singular Pearl stone's going through grass "to grounde" (10) and disappearing among the dull brown clods. The verb *yot*, the past tense of *yette*, "pour", makes one visualize the Pearl's calcified, solid substance dissolving upon contact with the soil, in which pearls were known to deteriorate. For example, the pearls that were excavated in the fifteenth century at the burial site of the daughters of the fifth-century Roman commander Stilicho were found to be lustreless and as if completely dead, like withered flowers, whereas other jewel ornaments found on the same site were in fairly good condition. The fine qualities of pearls were believed to be restored in special liquid environments—*Cleanness* recommends washing in wine a pearl that has become dim in colour through neglect or improper care (11228), while the singular Pearl in *Pearl* is purified by the blood of Christ that washes humans of their sins, as symbolized by the Eucharistic "wyn" (1209).

On closer inspection, *Pearl* meaningfully underwrites its portrayal of the Maiden with the ontology of pearls as natural objects, as perceived generally in medieval thought and in lapidary lore in particular, which animated and

even personified gemstones. Accordingly, the poem's unique Pearl reappears at the initial stage of the dream vision as a magnificent outcrop that transforms into an impressive gemstone persona. The Dreamer tries to understand it/her in terms that bring to mind artificial trees and automata, and as the produce of an oyster species. Despite his claim that the Pearl's "beauté com never of nature" (749), the poem consistently attempts to make sense of the Pearl in natural material terms, before building upon them allegorical spiritual significance. But these terms go beyond any modern conceptual matrix. The Pearl eludes classification by way of neat binary oppositions between, say, the human and the lithic, the solid and the liquid, or the animal and the vegetative, remaining a liminal and elusive figure to the end.

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