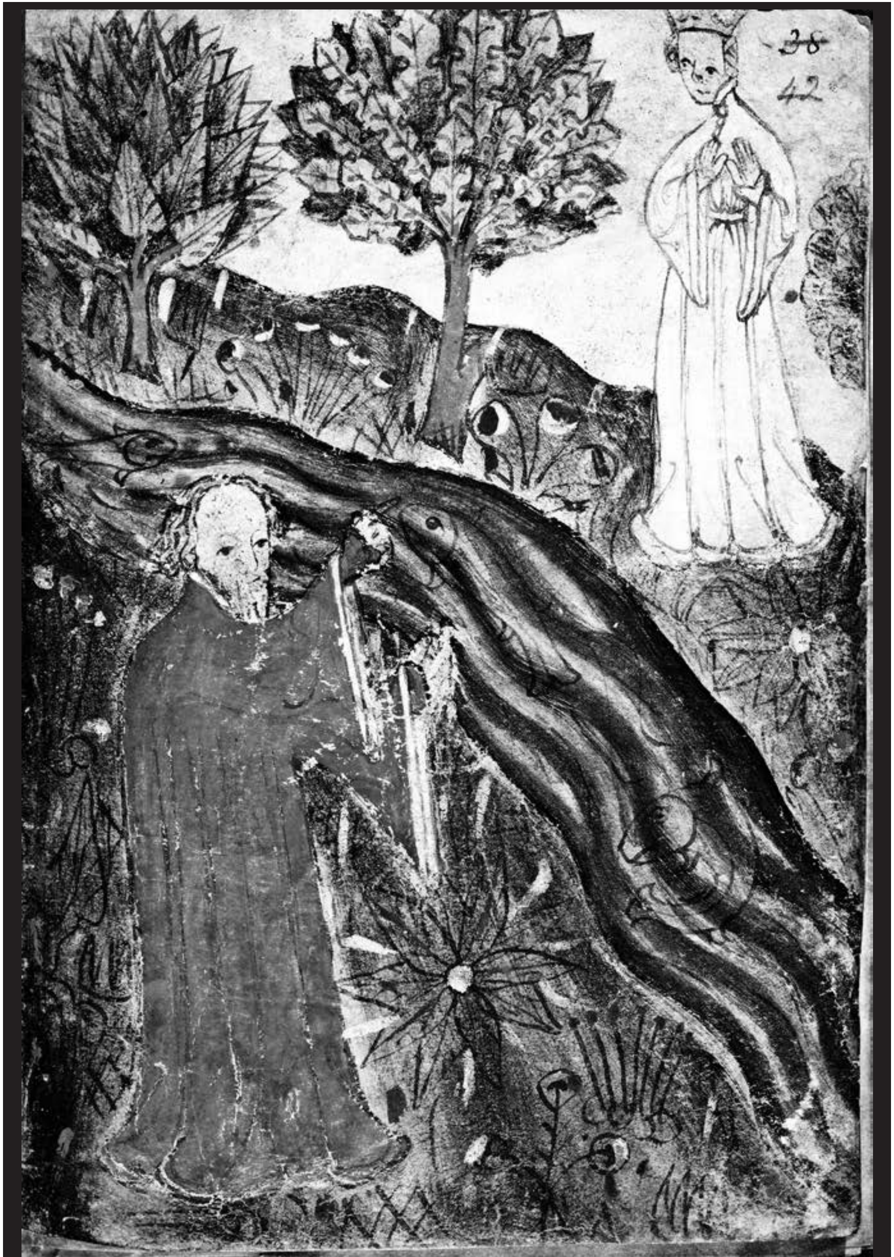
Pearl



"The Dreamer and His Pearl"
(from the original fourteenth-century manuscript illustration)

PEARL

Translated from the Middle English poem
by the anonymous author of
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,
fourteenth century,
from the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript book
in the British Library

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION IN MODERN ENGLISH
WITH A PREFACE BY

John Ridland

AND AN INTRODUCTION BY

Maryann Corbett

ABLE MUSE PRESS

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Introduction by Maryann Corbett

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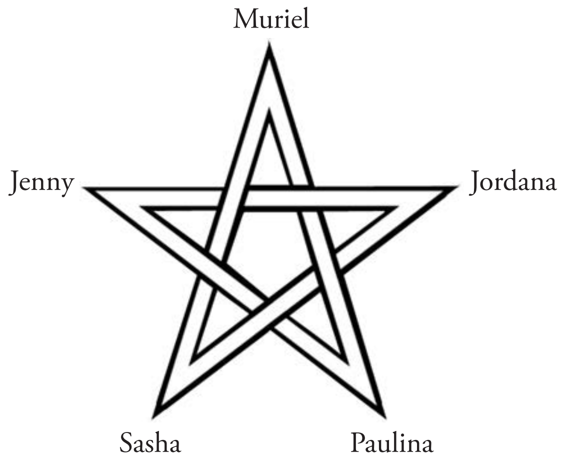
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Setting a Jewel:
An Introduction to the Historical Background of Pearl

Dazzling: It's the single word fixed firmly in my mind as a characterization of the Middle English *Pearl.* The poem and the word have been linked in my head ever since a fellow student pulled an adjective out of the glittering party-conversation air in my graduate school days. The word fits because the poem is a marvel: structurally complete and complex in mathematical design; multiple in its symmetries as a faceted gem; never flagging in the sonic satisfactions of its meter and rhyme; and compelling narratively, emotionally, and—for the right readers—in the turns and twists of its arguments.

It is not at all surprising that John Ridland, after having translated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* would decide to translate another work by (as scholars generally agree) the same poet. Having grappled with *Gawain*'s Northwest Midland dialect, he wanted, I'm sure, to put that experience to further use. As I wrote in my foreword to *Gawain,* that poem manifestly needed a translator willing to use a novel approach to its meter, namely the heptameter or ballad meter that Ridland uses. Heptameter leaves the translator enough room in each line for all of that poem's extravagant and very long-lined detail.

Pearl shares every bit of that extravagance, but its meter is quite different. It fits its flashiness into lines that the modern ear understands as accentual tetrameter, and it adds to that the most intricate rhyme scheme of its day. The challenge for the translator is to convey all the aspects of this dazzle in an English that stays contemporary and unstrained. That means finding terms in modern English that maintain the intricate ballade-like rhyme scheme without distorting the meanings of Northwest Midland words that have no heirs in present-day speech. That's a puzzle with all the fascination of the Rubik's cube and the Sudoku book. The fairly tight meter is another puzzle piece, backing translators into corners of archaism and awkwardness. The problems of rhyme, meter, alliteration, and repetition combined explain why new renderings of *Pearl* are always appearing, with poets constantly disagreeing about which of the original elements can or should be maintained.[1]

In his preface, Ridland explains the complexities of handling that rhyme scheme, the shortcomings of other translators' attempts, and his choice of the Shakespearean sonnet pattern as a compromise. I approve of his choice, because the sonnet has affinities to French and Italian fourteenth-century poems that were gaining influence in the late fourteenth century, just as the *Pearl*'s stanza form does. I also approve of it because it gives all the satisfying chimes of a rhyme scheme without the usual straining of idiom. Such a compromise is just one of the many weighings and balancings that translation demands.

For *Pearl* there are challenges of translation beyond these. As the editors of *Modern Poetry in Translation* say on the magazine's web site, "The past is a foreign country as much as anywhere else beyond our frontiers now." Both the immediate world of the poet and the larger England of the fourteenth century are more foreign than we probably realize.

1. For a recent list of the many translations, see https://medievalpearl.wordpress.com/pearls-editionstranslations/.

The first foreignness is that we cannot say for certain who the poet is or what audience he had in mind. Nothing written in the poem tells us explicitly where it comes from; no author or scribe is named. The poem survives in a single copy, along with three other poems, in a small manuscript that can be dated to the late fourteenth century and assigned by linguistic research to the Northwest Midlands, most probably Cheshire. Between the time of its creation and the seventeenth century, the book's whereabouts are unknown; we have no idea who owned it, or why. It turns up in Yorkshire in "a list of manuscripts made before 1614," and in 1621 it was cataloged in the library of Sir Robert Cotton. (Cotton's system of identifying bookcases with busts of Roman emperors, and lettering and numbering their shelves, is the source of the name we still give to that book—Cotton Nero A.x—as well as one of the names of the famous manuscript that preserves *Beowulf,* Cotton Vitellius A.xv.) After surviving that library's 1731 fire, it was moved to the British Library in 1753. It received little attention until the nineteenth century, when Sir Frederick Madden translated one of its four poems, now the best known, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

So the poem's origin and its early history have gone unrecorded. We have no clear information about who the poet was, or why he wrote. Without knowing those things, we cannot be entirely sure what he means by what he says—which ideas in the air of his time he is supporting, which he is contradicting.

On its glittering surface, the poem looks straightforward and appealing. Its emotions seem authentically like those of a father who has lost his young child. It is cast in the common medieval form of a dream vision, in which a person troubled by grief or confusion converses in a dream with someone who guides him to peace of mind, and it is also cast as an allegory, in which a being described as a pearl clearly represents something, or someone, other. It takes materials that are well known to

its audience—the matter of Christian theology and scripture, visual symbolism, and the language of courtly love—and weaves them into something new, in an intricate and pleasing structure.

But in doing so, it betrays almost nothing about its author. This is not typical of poets of the time; Chaucer, Gower, and Langland all gave us information about themselves; so did contemporary French poets like Christine de Pizan. Charles Muscatine has noted that in all four poems collected in Cotton Nero A.x, the author is evasive about the details of his life to a degree that seems like a form of escapism, a retreat from life (37, 40). Was it merely that? Was he vague for a reason? What sort of person wrote *Pearl?* While it is fruitless to try to assign *Pearl* to a specific author (though a number of scholars have tried), I think it is fruitful for the readers of this translation to think about what status the poet may have held and what ideas were swirling around him.

Modern readers will probably prefer to see the poem as autobiographical. It is reasonable and emotionally compelling to assume that the poet *is* his narrator, the Dreamer, and that he actually is the bereaved father of a dead two-year-old daughter. Critics have taken many other positions, though. The conclusion that "the pearl" is the Dreamer's infant daughter is based on only two clear statements of his: that she is "nearer to me than aunt or niece" and that she was with him for less than two years. A number of interpreters have gone in other directions. For some the pearl is a symbol of virginity. Others have seen the poem as an allegory of the progress of the Dreamer's own soul. For a useful and up-to-date rundown of the scholarship, see the introduction to Sarah Stanbury's edition of the poem, available both in print and online.

But even scholars who accept that the poem is an elegy and the pearl a child sometimes argue that the author and the bereaved narrator might not be the same person. The way texts were produced in fourteenth-century England, within a patronage system, makes it much more likely (they contend) that the poem was a commissioned work. Perhaps it was written to

mark an anniversary of a death, probably a death of the daughter of a noble family (Stanbury 10–11). The grieving father could have been the poet's patron, much in the same way that John of Gaunt was the patron who commissioned Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* to honor Blanche, Gaunt's late wife.

This is an image of the poet, the occasion, and the audience that I find believable. (For fuller arguments and citations, see the introductions to the Stanbury and Vantuono editions, cited below.) This picture fits, too, with the notion that the same poet wrote *Gawain* and *Pearl,* as well as the manuscript's other poems, *Cleanness* and *Patience.* The high polish and intricate design of *Pearl,* its use of the material of courtly love as well as of learned theology, and its extravagant descriptions of costly objects all suggest that it was made by and for people of wealth and status, not only the patron himself but the aristocratic set in which he moved. The poem succeeds as elegy, but it is elegy as art object. It is, it seems to me, a court-oriented poem, just as *Gawain* is.

But there is a problem here: none of the court-oriented poems in Cotton Nero A.x found a continuing fan base among the English court's readers and book collectors. The book was not copied and recopied, as popular fourteenth-century books commonly were. The poems apparently lost their audience and disappeared for centuries. If they had the support of a patron, especially a court patron, what accounts for that disappearance? The work of John M. Bowers suggests some answers, and I summarize them here. Bowers operates on the theory that the Dreamer and the poet are one and the same, and he explains what sort of person that was, what his circumstances were, and what ideas concerned him.

Much depends on the notion that the *Pearl* poet was connected to the court of Richard II. The manuscript and its language can be dated to the time of his reign, and it is known that Richard had close connections to Cheshire, involving a large number of Cheshiremen in the workings of his household and his private army. So we need first to imagine that the poet was

close to that court, and not in a regional outpost in Cheshire, but in London. To get a quick image of the opulence of the court, and of Richard's idea of the absolute and sacred role of a king—and to be reminded of his sad end—the reader cannot do better than to watch an online production of Shakespeare's *Richard II.*

What was the nature of the poet's connection to the court? *Pearl* makes clear that its author had a clerical education: he spends many lines in theological argument and is familiar with scripture and patristics. We can reasonably picture him as a cleric of some kind. Holy orders were a requirement for many administrative positions, so he probably held a post of that type. And his clerical status may be the reason he says so little about his relationship to the dead child. If he was a subdeacon, deacon, or priest, it would have been scandalous for him to have fathered a child, although there is plenty of evidence that such scandals were frequent. Of course, he may have been in one of the minor orders, those below subdeacon, and so allowed to marry. But clerics who remained in minor orders to preserve their right to marry were often criticized for doing so. So, that too might explain the *Pearl* poet's reticence about having a daughter.

But clerical status alone does not explain why he spends so much time on certain points of catechism and scripture. That baptism effectively washes away all sin is a standard point of Christian thinking; why does the poet elaborate it for ten stanzas? The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) is also a commonplace, yet the poem draws out the standard interpretation for another tenth of its length. Why?

One clue is the swirling social unrest caused by the views of the Lollards, the followers of the heretic John Wycliff. (Readers who recall their Chaucer may remember that the Host accuses the Parson of being one of these.) Lollardy unsettled not only the church but the entire social order, from the king down, particularly after John Ball, the leader of the Peasants' Revolt, had preached its heretical tenets. In the latter part of Richard's

reign, Lollard opinions were spreading widely, and the same court that had tolerated them early on was now taking strenuous measures to oppose them.

What were the Lollards saying about baptism that might have moved the *Pearl* poet? Some were arguing that infant baptism was void since the child could not consent, others that it was needless if both parents were baptized, and still others that a bastard child could not in any case be saved. The air was roiling with unorthodox opinions, and the *Pearl* poet, voicing the conservative position of the court, and probably his own theology and his own feelings, would have been intent on opposing them. He even allows his Dreamer to ask dull-witted questions so that he can lay out his arguments in full.

His court-centered outlook also explains the many lines he spends on the Parable of the Vineyard. He is doing more than justifying a full heavenly reward for a child; he is also siding with the king and the aristocracy and against the march of economic history in the most pressing class dispute of the time: laborers against landowners. The Black Death had greatly reduced the number of peasants available to work the land, and peasants who realized how badly landowners needed them had begun to bargain with their lords for better terms. Some even left the lands they were bound to and looked to different masters for pay that was higher, and in cash. Landowners needing to get their crops harvested had little recourse but to hire for a short term and increased pay, even though they complained bitterly, and Parliament tried time and again to legislate against the practice. When the *Pearl* poet stresses the right of the lord to pay exactly what he chooses, without regard to what the workers think is fair, and when he stresses the covenanted rate, he is alluding pointedly to a political argument, not just a theological one.

Finally, why did this poet's work pass out of memory? The reputations of other poets connected with Richard's court, like Chaucer and Gower, only continued to grow, in spite of Richard's fate, and West Midland dialect did not interfere with the popularity of *Piers Plowman.* The most reasonable

explanation is that on Richard's deposition and death, the Cheshire contingent that had enjoyed his preferment was cut off by his successor, Henry IV. It is known that at his accession Henry failed to renew the annuities of most of Richard's Cheshiremen. That could well have meant the end of support for the *Pearl* poet, and for his local patron if he had one, as well as the end of the opulence and generous patronage of art that Richard had favored.

This particular past—as I have laid it out, following Bowers—is indeed a foreign country. I hope that by translating that past for John Ridland's readers I have made it easier to enjoy *Pearl*'s dazzling surface, to appreciate its narrative and emotional heft, and to see a little beneath all that, to the complicated mind that set such a jewel.

Maryann Corbett

★★★

Works Consulted

Bowers, John M. *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II.* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001.

Muscatine, Charles. "The *Pearl* Poet: Style as Defense." In *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972. Pp. 37–69.

Pearl, ed. Sarah Stanbury. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001. Also http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/stanbury-pearl

Pearl: An Edition with Verse Translation. Trans. William Vantuono. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.

Translator's Preface

Gawain is rightly classified as an Arthurian Romance, and *Pearl* as a dream vision elegy, like Chaucer's early poem, "The Book of the Duchess." The difference from Chaucer is that the narrator of *Pearl* says he is mourning the death of his own little girl, less than two years old, while Chaucer is writing on commission for his patron John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, whose wife Blanche had died. *The Book of the Duchess* is spoken by a third person who observes the grief of the widowed "Man in Black," but the narrator of *Pearl* speaks as the grieving father himself. However fanciful and conventional some aspects of the vision may be, and thus less likely to have been elements of a real dream, the speaker's emotions feel quite authentic, and in thinking about the poem, a reader should not be discouraged from considering it, as many scholars have done, as based on the poet's experience of losing a young child.

Turning to the form of the poem, it is mathematically ordered as well as verbally. There are 101 stanzas, exactly the same number as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* a coincidence which is taken as evidence that the same person wrote both poems, since there weren't any others around at that time with that number. (Which was written first is uncertain.) Trying to decide a question of authorship with such slender evidence, however, is fruitless. It seems best to accept that the probabilities are high these two masterpieces were written by the one unknown poet. (Incidentally, none of the titles the four poems are known by appears in the manuscript.)

The Roman numeral part numbers are traditionally provided by editors to mark the "quintets" of stanzas with similarly worded last lines (and the single exception, number XV, with six stanzas). I have followed other translators in assigning Arabic numerals to each stanza for ease of reference.

More than with most of the translations I have made, I have had to accept, in *Pearl,* a limitation that I am loath to adopt, by not replicating the rhyme scheme exactly. The original is described by Maryann Corbett as "the most intricate of its age." Laid out in the usual alphabetical scheme, its twelve lines rhyme like a babbling brook: *ababababbcbc.* Thus, in the original the first stanza reads:

Perle, pleasaunt to princes *pay*
To clanly close in gold so *clere*–
Out of orient, I hardily *say,*
Ne proved I never her precious *pere:*
5 So rounde, so reken in uch *aray,*
So small, so smothe her sides *were,*
Wheresoever I jugged gemmes *gay,*
I set her sengeley in *synglere.*
Alas, I lest her in an *erbere:*
10 Thurgh gresse to grounde hit fro me *yot.*
I dewyne, fordolked of luf-*daungere*
Of that privy perle withouten *spot.*

(Incidentally, though this was not my purpose, this stanza like almost every other answers the question of why the poem needs to be translated for a general reader of modern English, if not for a graduate student.)

A literal prose translation, missing some of the wordplay, [and with some explanatory extensions in brackets] could read:[2]

2. I have followed the spelling of the recent Penguin Classics edition of *The Works of the Gawain Poet,* edited by Ad Putter and Myra Stokes (Penguin Books, 2014).

> Pearl, pleasant for a prince's pleasure to enclose cleanly in bright gold—I boldly assert that I never met with [or *assayed,* as a jeweler would do] her peer in value even among Oriental pearls [which were the most valued]: so round, so splendid in any setting, so small, so smooth were her sides [scholars note that the same terms were used by the male poets in romantic love poetry to describe the women] that wherever I judged beautiful gems, I set her apart, alone in her singularity. Alas, I lost her in a (herb) garden: she went (fell) from me through the grass into the earth. I languish, badly wounded by my frustrated separation in love [again, this sounds like a romantic lover's talk] for that hidden spotless pearl.

Poetry is most assuredly what is lost in translation when the translator merely turns it into prose like this. The notorious difficulty of rhyming in modern English is brought into relief by the comparative ease of Middle English. Professor Marie Boroff deserves an ovation for her truly valiant attempt to follow the rhyme scheme all the way, as she declares:

> I have reproduced the schemes of rhyme, repetition, and concatenation . . . : whatever difficulties these present, the poem could scarcely retain its identity without them.[3]

The language in her translation of this stanza form is more natural than not—an extraordinary accomplishment, but even she is forced by the end-rhyming pattern into syntactical distortions, anachronisms, and inversions of word order that don't sound quite like good contemporary English, for instance, those underlined in the first stanza:

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3. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, and Pearl: Verse Translations* by Marie Boroff (W. W. Norton, New York and London, 2001). Ms. Borroff also footnotes every reference to the Bible, of which the poem makes well over one hundred, and helpfully reprints (on pages 163–165) the most relevant passages from Apocalypse or the Book of Revelations.

Pearl, that a prince is well content
To give a circle of gold to wear,
Boldly I say, all orient
Brought forth <u>none precious like to </u>her;
5 <u>So comely every ornament</u>,
So slender her sides, so smooth they were,
<u>Ever my mind was bound and bent</u>
To set her apart without a peer.
In a garden of herbs I lost my dear;
10 <u>Through grass to ground away it shot</u>;
Now, lovesick, the heavy loss I bear
Of that secret pearl without a spot.

Simon Armitage takes the road most traveled by contemporary translators, intending

> to allow rhymes to occur as naturally as possible within sentences, internally or at the end of lines, and to let half-rhymes and syllabic [?] rhymes play their part, and for the poem's musical orchestration to be performed by pronounced alliteration, looping repetition, and the quartet of beats in each line. So formalists and technicians scanning for a ladder of rhyme words down the right-hand margin of this translation will be frustrated, though hopefully my solution will appeal to the ear and the voice.[4]

So his first stanza reads:

Beautiful pearl that would please a prince,
fit to be mounted in finest gold,
I say for certain that in all the East
her precious equal I never found.

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4. *Pearl: A New Verse Translation* by Simon Armitage (Liveright, New York and London, 2016).

5 So radiant and round, however revealed,
so small, her skin so very smooth,
of all the gems I judged and prized
I set her apart, unparalleled.
But I lost my pearl in a garden of herbs;
10 she slipped from me through grass to ground,
and I mourn now, with a broken heart
for that priceless pearl without a spot.

Lacking the "ladder of rhymes," however, it is only the approximation of meter that enables a translation to climb above the ground level of a prose paraphrase.

My own version is a more restrictive approximation of the original, maintaining its loose iambic/anapestic tetrameter and its rhyme, though not reproducing the four-fold repetitious pattern of the original. The manuscript is unpunctuated, and therefore the editors of the text must choose where to put the commas, periods, colons, and semicolons. After I noticed that most of those twelve-line stanzas divide syntactically into three quatrains, as the punctuation of texts and translations by various editors shows, it struck me that a compromise between rigid fidelity and casual infidelity could be found in the familiar rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, the old reliable *abab cdcd efef.* As for the rhyming itself, I have been laxer than in some previous translations (for example, the Hungarian Sándor Petöfi's *John the Valiant*). When I could find no true rhyme that wouldn't sound merely clever, I let the sounds go slant. This is not an excuse for laziness but a reluctant admission that modern English word order makes end-rhyming harder than the syntactical flexibility of Middle English. Further, wherever the original wording could be carried over into modern English without losing its meaning, which is surprisingly often, I have done that. And in my final revision I relied heavily on the Penguin Classics edition of *The Works of the* Gawain *Poet,* already noted, which means that

many of the phrasings are identical with theirs, except for the rhyme and meter into which I have poured them.

Thus my first stanza reads:

Pearl that would please a prince's eyes
In a bright gold setting, radiant,
I never met such a precious prize
Among all those out of the Orient.
5 So round, so bright in any display,
So smooth, so slender her sides, in my mind,
Wherever I judge fair gems, I say,
I set her off as one of a kind.
In a garden of herbs I lost her and mourn.
10 She dropped from me through the grass to that plot.
By Love's power I'm stricken and grief-torn
For my hidden pearl without a spot.

I will leave it to readers to compare these versions minutely if they wish, but let me note what I thought the poem needed: the feeling of continuous forward movement, of momentum, that meter in its nature provides, and with the places in that movement where one can pause for breath signaled by the end rhymes. And these are marked more quietly, I would argue, by not following the virtuoso juggling of three rhymes per stanza in the original: only two for lines 1–10 and 11, and the third interrupting at 10 and closing the stanza off at 12, a little like the Shakespearean couplet.

The *Pearl* poet outdoes all of us, not only in the relative ease with which he persists in that elaborate scheme, but in the extras he throws in, like an Olympic platform diver adding a couple of twists to a three-and-a-half somersault. Every five stanzas carry something like a refrain line linking them together as a group. I can picture the poet, once he had set himself this pattern, keeping it in mind as he climbed down

the ladder of his rhyme scheme, adjusting the meaning so that it fits the form. When the first of five stanzas has ended, for example in line 12:

> Of that privy perle withouten spot.

he leads into something very close to it (and in some groups often identical) at the ends of the next four stanzas:

> My privy perle withouten spot. (24)
> Of that precious perle withouten spot. (36)
> My precious perle withouten spot. (48)
> On that precious perle withouten spot. (60)

And then, as if thinking, *That was too easy,* he tosses a key word from the first stanza's concatenation up into the first line of the next stanza, though with less exact repetition (in this case, as in many, by punning: *spot* moves from its sense of "stain" to its other meaning of "a particular place"):

> Syn in that *spot* hit fro me sprang, (13)
> That *spot* of spices mot nedes sprede, (25)
> To that *spot* that I in speche expound (37)
> Before that *spot* my hande I spenned (49)

And finally (massive spoiler alert!), the last line of the whole poem circles around to echo the first, as the wording shifts from

> Perle, plesaunt to princes pay (1)

to

> And precious perles unto His pay. (1212)

The capital letter on “His” (in three of the six editions I have consulted) has transformed the ordinary, jewel-collecting, secular prince of line one into the Prince of the New Jerusalem Himself, to whom the Dreamer’s Pearl (along with 143,999 other virgins) is married. But that is getting ahead of the story, which begins with a narrator, a man, in the green herbal garden where the pearl he dropped on the grass has been buried in the ground—a simple allegory for the death and burial of his two-year-old daughter. And so the elegy begins.

John Ridland

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71 58. "The righteous man most certainly"
72 59. "Of righteous men, one man implored"
73 60. "Let him who can read without frustration"

74 XIII
75 61. "Jesus called to Him all the gentle and mild"
76 62. "This spotless pearl that he bought was so dear"
77 63. "O spotless Pearl, clad with pearls so pure"
78 64. "My spotless Lamb mends all for all men"
79 65. "Why, spotless bride who shines like flame"

80 XIV
81 66. "'Spotless,' replied that lovely queen"
82 67. "In my speech I will tell of Jerusalem"
83 68. "In Jerusalem my sweet Love was slain"
84 69. "In Jerusalem, Jordan, and Galilee"
85 70. "To Jerusalem, then, my Belovèd, my own"

86 XV
87 71. "This Jerusalem Lamb had never a patch"
88 72. "No one may lessen the bliss for us"
89 73. "Lest you think my wondrous tale is false"
90 74. "Nevertheless, through the uproar around"
91 75. "Nonetheless, no one's skill was so strong"
92 76. "Let my thanks be never the less for it"

94 XVI
95 77. “Nonetheless, dear one, I beg you now”
96 78. “This spotless troop you are speaking about”
97 79. “That spot you mean in Judea’s land”
98 80. “Now let me explain these cities—the two”
99 81. “Spotless maiden, so meek and mild”

100 XVII
101 82. “For me to unfold this spot to you”
102 83. “As John the Apostle saw with his eyes”
103 84. “In writing, John named every stone”
104 85. “Furthermore, John adds chrysolite”
105 86. “As John described it, I saw it there”

106 XVIII
107 87. “I saw even more of what John wrote down”
108 88. “The sun and moon they could do without”
109 89. “Neither sun nor moon ever shone so sweet”
110 90. “The moon may never steal light from them”
111 91. “So great a marvel under the moon”

112 XIX
113 92. “Just as the powerful Moon can rise”
114 93. “With great delight they glided together”
115 94. “The delight His coming brought would be”
116 95. “My delight in seeing the Lamb had raised”
117 96. “The Lamb did not wish to diminish delight”

118 XX
119 97. “Delight poured into my eye and ear”
120 98. “It did not please Him I’d made a dash”
121 99. “I was very displeased to be cast out”
122 100. “If I had yielded to that Prince’s pleasure”
123 101. “To please the Prince with what is right”

124 About the Translator

PEARL

I

1.

Pearl that would please a prince's eyes
In a bright gold setting, radiant,
I never met such a precious prize
Among all those out of the Orient.
So round, so right in any display,
So smooth, so slender her sides, in my mind,
Wherever I judge fair gems, I say,
I set her off as one of a kind.
In a garden of herbs I lost her and mourn.
10 She dropped from me through the grass to that plot.
By Love's loss I'm stricken and grief-torn
For my hidden pearl without a spot.

2.

Since in that spot it sprang from me,
I've often watched, and wished for its wealth,
That used to keep me sorrow-free
And raise my spirits and mend my health;
It wrings my heart with such great force
My breast both swells and seethes with grief,
Yet I thought I'd never, from any source,
20 Heard song so sweet steal to my relief,
And many hushed songs have stolen my way.
To think of her color so clad in a clod!
You spoil a splendid jewel in your clay,
Oh earth, my own pearl without a spot.

3.

That spot of spice is bound to spread
Where such rich rotting has begun.
Blossoms of white and blue and red
Shine sheerly bright beneath the sun.
Flower and fruit won't be denied
30 Where the pearl drove down into that dark loam.
For each plant sprouts from seeds that have died
Or wheat won't flourish for harvest home.
Each good begins from another good thing;
Such a lovely seed fulfills its lot
So the burgeoning spices too should spring
From that precious pearl without a spot.

4.

In that spot I speak of, as you may hear,
I entered into the herbal green,
In August at that high time of year
40 When corn is cut with scythes made keen.
Where the pearl had gone rolling down the mound,
These bright and beautiful plants cast shadows.
There gillyflower, ginger, and gromwell abound,
And peonies powdered as in a meadow.
If it was beautiful to perceive,
Yet a fairer fragrance came floating out.
For there that priceless one lives, I believe,
My precious pearl without a spot.