The Manifold Singularity of *Pearl*

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THE MANIFOLD SINGULARITY OF *PEARL*

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Can the material uniqueness of an imaginative text create literary value, and if so, how? The Middle English poem known as *Pearl* is such a materially unique object, since it survives in just one manuscript, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. Its eponymous pearl is introduced as comparably unique, "sette . . . sengeley in synglure" by the Dreamer, above all other gems that he ever judged.[1] Both poem and gem are beautiful, too, and beautiful in comparable ways, with the Dreamer's encomium of the pearl's perfect roundness and exquisite luster evoking the text's symmetrically and gorgeously wrought form. Like the pearl within it, the literary form of the poem also appears to be unique.[2] So if value inheres in the beautiful and the rare, and especially in that which is both, then we should not be surprised either by the depths of feeling that the Dreamer displays toward the pearl, or by the beauty and elegance of the poem's treatment by twentieth-century critics sensitive to its sophisticated interplay of word, image, and structure.[3] Following a period in which questions of beauty and aesthetics were somewhat sidelined, the "aesthetic turn" of the past decade has presented an ideal opportunity to reassess the literary value of *Pearl* from the perspective of a new, historically and materially grounded formalism.[4]

Essential to my reading of *Pearl* is what I call its manifold singularity, the way in which its unique physical survival (singularity) imbues the poem with wide-ranging (manifold) forms of interpretive potential it would not otherwise have. With no other copies of the poem to consult, the contemporary reader is faced with a text that blurs the traditionally sharp distinction between medieval scribe and author. Does a counterintuitive manuscript reading represent a copying error that simply needs to be emended, for example, or should we consider more closely how that word might participate in the poet's complex lexical world? Is a given exception to the poem's highly ornate and symmetrical structure accidental or authorial? *Pearl* is not unique in prompting such questions, but its status as a single-manuscript text means that both editors and critics have less hard data with which to support their preferred answers. By reminding us that we cannot always

clearly distinguish between authorial and scribal labor in the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages, *Pearl* foregrounds the literary-critical stakes of many questions that have traditionally been considered part of the textual editor's domain.[5] In addition to narrowing the distance between medieval scribe and author, the *Pearl* poems' uniqueness also complicates the boundary between codicological-editorial and literary-critical labor.

Furthermore, just as these various roles—authorial, scribal, editorial, and critical—cannot be neatly separated out from one another, so too the questions produced by these overlapping categories often cannot be answered conclusively. As such, they become sites for interpretation. This is significant because perceiving, analyzing, and debating such interpretive potentialities are key components both of the pleasure that literature affords and also, I contend, of the very quality of literariness. If we cease to perceive the potential energy (to borrow a metaphor from physics) of such multiple possibilities in and around a given text—either because it simply isn't complex or interesting enough to produce them (as is often the case with what might once have been called bad literature) or because we have allowed our interpretations to become calcified into conventional wisdom (which is sometimes the fate of so-called great texts)—then we are no longer reading literature.[6] *Pearl*'s unique survival blurs the various forms of labor that collectively enable literary criticism in ways that are analogous to, and prompt appreciation of, the kinds of lexical ambiguities and structural complexities that have long inspired beautiful close readings of the poem. By offering additional opportunities to stretch our interpretive muscles, and additional realms in which to do so, the manifold singularity of *Pearl* adds to its literary value.

This relationship between uniqueness and value is important for at least three reasons: first, because value and economics are so central to the narrative drama and poetic vocabulary of *Pearl* itself; second, because its exploration of the contrast between uniqueness and multiplicity informs the poem's broader interest in economics; and finally, because the poem's aesthetic uniqueness, the distinctiveness of its literary value, has rightly been located in its extraordinarily complex play of word and image. These three areas of interest overlap. Blurring the distinction between spiritual and earthly realms with its evocations of material economies, for example, constitutes part of the poem's broader fascination with semantic multivalence: a penny is both coin and salvation; a pearl is at once a valuable gem and a fading rose and a dead girl and a queen of heaven. By thus communicating a wealth of

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potential and actual significations with just a few words and images, the poem gets great literary bang for its lexical buck. In the next section of this essay, close readings of the poem's investment in economic images and of its complex lexicon of value will lay the groundwork for my broader argument that *Pearl*'s material uniqueness enhances its literary value today.

I. VALUE, UNIQUENESS, AND PEARL(S)

Pearl's engagement with economics centers on the challenge of correctly assessing value, as we see in its use of two parables from the Gospel of Matthew: that of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16, adapted at lines 501–76) and that of the Pearl of Price (Matt. 13:45–46, adapted at lines 729–39). In the first of these, the penny paid for a day's work in the vineyard becomes a metaphor for salvation, implying that even the humblest laborer can earn the ultimate reward. Like some of the laborers in the parable, however, the Dreamer insists that it is unfair that everyone receive the same payment, regardless of how long they have worked; such a poor assessment of value, he asserts, is unworthy of the Lord whom the Psalms praise as the "hyȝe Kyng ay pertermynable" who "quytez vchon as hys desserte" (595–96). The Pearl-Maiden responds to the Dreamer by shifting the concatenation word from one of relative degree—"more" (552), in the tenth section—to one of absolute sufficiency in the eleventh: "þe grace of God is gret inoghe" (612). I will consider the broader significance of this shift more fully in due course. Here we should simply note the sharply contrasting images that she uses in these lines: initially, free-flowing streams and watercourses characterize God's liberality (lines 607–8), but these natural images of unpaid-for plenitude are then juxtaposed with the man-made and monetary image of the penny from the parable (lines 612–16). The tension between these two kinds of images reinforces the challenge of depicting something—salvation—whose value is so absolute as to make it priceless.

The problem of pricelessness is highlighted even more explicitly by the poem's evocation of the Pearl of Price, for which the wise merchant of Matthew's parable sells all his worldly possessions. This pearl defies earthly understandings of economics. On the one hand, tangible goods ("boþe wolen and lynne" [731]) are sold to acquire it, yet the purchaser does not consequently own the pearl in the normal sense of the word; rather, it remains "commune to alle þat ryȝtwys were" (740). Nor does one's own stake in it diminish the value of

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anyone else's, as is suggested by its perfectly indivisible roundness. (It is significant here that pearls, unlike most gems, are not cut into numerable and therefore finite facets.) The pearl is thus an ideal model for the infinitely many and yet infinitely valuable king- and queenships of heaven described at lines 433–68.

As participants in secular and sacred economies alike, fitting adornments for both royal crowns and venerated reliquaries, gems offer an appropriately complex vehicle for exploring tensions between earthly and heavenly notions of value.[7] The value of coins was fixed by strict laws against counterfeiting, and coins in their turn could serve to fix dangerously slippery social relations.[8] Establishing the value of gems, by contrast, required specialized professional expertise, a point alluded to by the opening stanza's depiction of the narrator as a jeweler practiced in such appraisals (line 7).[9] The Dreamer's confidence in his evaluative faculties there, however, contrasts sharply with the bewilderment that he experiences when he meets his lost pearl, now transfigured and bearing what will ultimately be revealed to be the Pearl of Price:

> Bot a wonder perle withouten wemme
> Inmyddez hyr breste watz sette so sure;
> A mannez dom moȝt dryȝly demme
> Er mynde moȝt malte in hit mesure.
> I hope no tong moȝt endure
> No sauerly saghe say of þat syȝt,
> So watz hit clene and cler and pure,
> Þat precios perle þer hit watz pyȝt.
>   (221–28)

In its pleonasm and choice of alliterating letter, line 226 ("no sauerly *saghe say* of þat syȝt") subtly recalls the expression used in the first stanza to describe the Dreamer's confident assessment of his pearl's value: he "sette hyr *sengeley* in *synglure*" (8). Here, however, pleonasm emphasizes the ineffability of this distinct though related pearl.

By marking that shift with a second, closely parallel use of pleonasm (itself a rhetorical figure defined by repetition), this passage anticipates how the image of the pearl multiplies across the poem, acquiring a wide range of forms and significations as it does so. From a unique object securely in the Dreamer's possession, it slips away from him first physically ("hit fro me yot" [10]) and then metaphorically, by taking on a range of new forms in his dreamscape that he does not control or own: the gravel beneath his feet (lines 81–82), the many beautiful adornments of an elegant lady's gown (lines 193–220), the "wonder perle" described above, whose deeper, spiritual significance he cannot

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yet comprehend, and, most crucially, the Pearl-Maiden herself, no longer an inanimate object but rather a sharp-tongued interlocutor and honored queen in Heaven.

Ironically, the Dreamer's first words to her enact that very multiplication of (the) pearl(s) whose larger significance—that "his" pearl is now different from, and more than, it/she was in life—he spends much of the poem resisting:

> "O *perle*," quoþ I, "in *perlez* pyȝt,
> Art þou my *perle* þat I haf playned,
> Regretted by myn one on nyȝte?"
>   (241–43, emphasis added)

Here the Dreamer plaintively attempts to reassert the identity of the pearl he is addressing ("O perle") with the precious and private pearl whose loss he lamented in the first section of the poem ("my perle"). The two instances of "my(n)" in the lines above clearly recall the poem's early profusion of possessive pronouns, which insisted on the uniqueness of the pearl itself and on the Dreamer's comparably exclusive ownership of it. The fruitlessness of the Dreamer's effort here to reclaim his former, earthly relationship with the Pearl-Maiden is suggested by the contrast between these lines' multiplication of the word "perle," which intimates how many different functions that object-image serves in the poem, and the motif of singularity raised by the repetition of first-person singular pronouns (four in just three lines).

This tension between the singular and the plural presages the poem's attempts to move beyond earthly understandings of value. For the Dreamer, uniqueness (of the pearl) and exclusivity (of his relationship to it) create value, but the Pearl-Maiden famously proposes a perspective both more capacious and less intuitive, by which Heaven has many equally precious and mutually supportive monarchs, none of whose reigns threaten the true preeminence of the Virgin Mary:

> "Sir, fele here porchasez and fongez pray,
> Bot supplantorez none withinne þys place;
> Þat emperise al heuenz hatz—
> And vrþe and helle—in her bayly;
> Of erytage ȝet non wyl ho chace,
> For ho is quen of cortaysye."
>
> "The court of þe kyndom of God alyue
> Hatz a property in hytself being:
> Alle þat may þerinne aryue
> Of alle þe reme is quen oþer kyng,

And neuer oþer ȝet schal depryue,
Bot vchon fayn of oþerez hafyng,
And wolde her corounez wern worþe þo fyue,
If possible were her mendyng.
Bot my lady of quom Jesu con spryng,
Ho haldez þe empire ouer vus ful hyȝe,
And þat dysplesez non of oure gyng,
For ho is quene of cortaysye."

<div align="right">(439–56)</div>

Two aspects of this passage stand out: its emphasis on economic and feudal metaphors (purchase, worth, heritage, and empire), and its apparent eagerness to emphasize rather than minimize the paradoxes of Christian theology. It insists upon universality: "alle" those who arrive in Heaven are king or queen of "alle" the realm, even as Mary herself is empress of "al heuenz." The repetition of the word "all" highlights the impossibility, in earthly terms, of this proposition, and yet the Pearl-Maiden hints at an even greater hypothetical plenitude when she claims that each concurrently and equally reigning sovereign wishes that each of his or her fellows' crowns were worth five times as much (line 451). This ever-expanding and radically egalitarian model of spiritual value contrasts sharply not just with earthly understandings of economics but also with Dante's notion of Heaven as expressed in the *Paradiso*, where the Celestial Rose is a strictly hierarchical theater in which each soul's degree of remove from the Godhead reflects the nature and fullness of his or her sanctity.[10]

In fact, it is a Dante-like concern for degree as social and theological concept that informs the Dreamer's objections to the Pearl-Maiden's model:

"That Cortayse is to fre of dede,
ȝif hyt be soth þat þou conez saye.
Þou lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede.
Þou cowþez neuer God nauþer plese ne pray,
Ne neuer nawþer Pater ne Crede—
And quen mad on þe first day!
. . . .
Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,
Wer fayr in heuen to halde asstate,
Oþer ellez a lady of lasse aray;
Bot a quene!—hit is to dere a date."

"Þer is no date of Hys godnesse,"
Þen sayde to me þat worþy wyȝte,

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"For al is trawþe þat He con dresse,
And He may do noþynk bot ry3t."
(481–96)

The Dreamer's insistence upon precise degrees of difference dissolves in the face of the Pearl-Maiden's all-embracing absolutes: there is no limit; all is truth; nothing but right. Multiple monarchs of the same realm are a wholly logical consequence, in other words, of the category-smashing grace of Heaven. It is no coincidence that this exchange takes place in the context of the concatenation word "date," which as deployed by the poet shatters everyday expectations of what a single word can mean: in this section alone it means variously rank, degree, limit, date, moment, season, beginning, and end. The pressure that *Pearl*'s wordplay puts on traditional lexical categories is analogous to the poem's emphasis on the radicalism of Christianity's (or at any rate Jesus's) challenge to traditional social and economic categories.

In this sense, it is quite appropriate that we move from the linking word "date" in the ninth section to "more" in the tenth, since both the Pearl-Maiden and the poem are in fact arguing for more: more than one queen of heaven, a more generous understanding of value and justice, and ever more elaborate lexical, formal, and poetic play. Yet the word also has negative connotations in *Pearl*, evoking both the envy of the querulous laborers of the parable, who want to receive more payment than their fellows, and the possessiveness of the Dreamer, who wants more from his pearl and his vision than he is destined to receive. This last is of course the central drama of the poem, which was presaged by the use of "more and more" as the concatenation phrase of the third section (132). There, it is first the paradisal dreamscape, and then his initial glimpse of the Pearl-Maiden, that moves the Dreamer to ever greater desire for ever more delights: "and euer þe lenger, þe more and more," as the end of that section puts it (180). The tenth section concludes with the Dreamer precisely echoing that earlier line but adding an element of opposition: "and euer þe lenger þe lasse þe more" (600). As Malcolm Andrew and Robert Waldron drily note, this formulation is "more emphatic than logical," and it emphasizes not just the Dreamer's indignation at the Pearl-Maiden's exalted status but also, and more broadly, the concept that I will call "more-and-less"-ness, which is encapsulated by the key words of the third, tenth, eleventh, and fifteenth sections' concatenation phrases: "more and more" (132), "more" (552), "þe grace of god is gret inoghe" (612), and "neuer þe les" (852) respectively.

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These three concepts—more, less, and enough—are central to earthly understandings of judgment and value, and are also clearly related to the tension between uniqueness and multiplicity that I have already discussed. In that sense, their prominence as four of the poem's twenty concatenating phrases seems perfectly appropriate. Yet these words do not obviously lend themselves to the kind of wordplay for which the poem generally, and its concatenating elements especially, is famous: either the punning multivalence of words like "spot" in the first section, "date" in the ninth, or "mote" in the seventeenth; or others' ambivalent evocation of both sacred and secular worlds, as with "blysse" in the seventh section, "cortaysye" in the eighth, or "delyt" in the nineteenth. Compared to them, the "more-and-less"-oriented concatenation phrases seem rather unpoetically literal and denotative and, to that extent, surprising.[11] Yet as we have seen, the poet has chosen these words for the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh sections, which constitute the structurally crucial midpoint of his work; he even uses them to reenact the poem's chiastic structure in miniature, as the Pearl-Maiden responds to the Dreamer's "and euer þe lenger þe *lasse* þe *more*" with her own, "Of *more* and *lasse* in Godez ryche" (600–601, emphasis added).[12]

The structural prominence and sheer number of these "more-and-less"-themed concatenation phrases suggests their importance to the poem as a whole, and in the next section of this essay, I will argue that if we consider them in the context of *Pearl*'s material uniqueness, they do more than simply complement the poem's other explorations of value; they also draw attention to formal irregularities whose source, authorial or accidental, it is impossible to determine conclusively. In so doing, they attain a degree of polysemy that their denotative nature would seem to preclude. The significance of these phrases, that is, lies not just in their content but also in how that content—the ideas of more, less, and enough—intersects with the fact of *Pearl*'s unique survival, creating interpretive pressures and opportunities congruent with the concerns of the poem's narrative and structure. The uncanny nature of that congruence, the fact that it cannot have been consciously intended by any of *Pearl*'s medieval makers, produces aesthetic resonance that complements that of the poem itself.

This resonance emanates from what I have called the manifold singularity of *Pearl*, namely, the many ways in which the poem's material uniqueness creates multiple interpretive potentialities: not simply of the words on the page, but also of how those words are mediated by a range of agents (author, scribes, and editors), temporalities (medieval, modern, and contemporary), and media (manuscript, facsimiles, and editions). Time and again, this single-manuscript text reminds us that the uniquely surviving one (poetic words on medieval page) is inextricable from its manifold others (agents, temporalities, and media). In this section, I will argue that broadening our view of *Pearl* in this way helps us appreciate it as a still-evolving literary object whose value is actually enhanced by the historical uncertainties that surround it and by the variety of ways in which modern editors have grappled with those uncertainties.

This line of inquiry returns us to the concept of "more-and-less"-ness because it is the suggestive addition or subtraction of a single letter, line, or stanza—one "more or less" than we would expect—that produces some of *Pearl*'s most potent challenges to traditional intellectual and academic categories. Significantly, these challenges to conventional modes of thought parallel others within the poem: the Pearl-Maiden's proposition of a heavenly court with multiple, mutually supportive monarchs, for example, or the poet's use of a single word like "date" to embrace a dizzying range of distinct and even opposed meanings. Existing alongside the usual complement of straightforward and easily emendable scribal errors, the instances of "more-and-less"-ness that I take up in this section might likewise be nothing more than failed scribal labor, but they could also represent something more interesting and sophisticated; and it is the impossibility of knowing conclusively which we are dealing with, "error" or "art," that makes them powerful. The material uniqueness of this most self-consciously belletristic poem thus brilliantly undermines an essentialist understanding of the literary. I will ground this argument in three case studies: the subtraction of a letter from two instances of the thirteenth section's concatenation word; the absence of an expected line in the fortieth stanza (which editors have nevertheless numerated "line" 472); and the addition of an unexpected, sixth stanza to the poem's fifteenth section.

My first case study centers on the concatenation word of the poem's thirteenth section, "maskelez," or "spotless." At lines 733 and 757, the scribe has written "makelez," or "peerless," and this apparent violation

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of the poem's regular stanza-linking prompted early editors Israel Gollancz and Charles G. Osgood to emend those cases to "maskelez," thereby restoring the regularity of the concatenation.[13] Yet as Andrew and Waldron point out in a footnote to the beginning of the poem's thirteenth section (and thus before we reach the first such anomalous case in the poem itself, a point to which I will return), *Pearl* features "some play between the similar but distinct meanings" of the two words; they therefore retain the manuscript readings (page 87). What would appear at first glance to be simply a scribal error, then, is adjudged authorial "play."

This argument is attractive partly because it attributes to the poet here the kind of lexical sophistication that *Pearl* frequently demonstrates elsewhere, and to that extent, it is persuasive. More broadly, though, Andrew and Waldron's logic also helps the unknown, anonymous author of *Pearl* conform to most readers' intuitive sense (still, poststructuralists' best efforts notwithstanding) of what the ultimate source of literary pleasure should be: a singular human being with demonstrably and rewardingly belletristic intentions.[14] The power of this modern prejudice was amply demonstrated some decades ago by Siegfried Wenzel's argument that a supposed Middle English lyric that had been the subject of admiring close readings "*is not a lyrical 'poem' at all*, but the formal division of a Latin sermon put into English rhyming lines."[15] Wenzel's objection seems to lie in these lines' utilitarian purpose and apparently scribal rather than "authorial" source. His extended run of italics makes clear his indignation that such phenomena should be interpreted as literature, and thereby suggests that the distinction between scribe and author is important to maintain precisely because it is subject to blurring; the non-poem being discussed does consist, after all, of "English rhyming lines."

The prejudice that Wenzel's italics represent is significant because it must likewise inflect Andrew and Waldron's confidence that the "makelez"/"maskelez" distinction is the product of literary intent rather than scribal carelessness. But initially, at least, there is no reason to suppose that it is, for when the anomalous "makelez" appears at lines 733 and 757, it does not stand out for its substantively different or "playful" sense. If anything, the Pearl-Maiden appears to use the words synonymously, describing the Pearl of Price first as a "perle . . . *mascellez*" (732, emphasis added) and then as a "*makellez* perle" (733, emphasis added) just one line later. The "makelez Lambe" of line 757 is surely both peerless and spotless, so either word would fit equally well there, too. The lexical play (as distinct from mere orthographic

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variation) between these two words emerges only at the very end of the section, when the Dreamer juxtaposes them in addressing the Pearl-Maiden as a "makelez may and maskellez" (780)—only to be sharply corrected for suggesting that the two words are actually the synonyms that she herself has implied that they are:

> "Maskelles," quoþ þat myry queen,
> "Vnblemyst I am, wythouten blot,
> And þat may I with mensk menteene,
> Bot 'makelez quene' þenne sade I not."
> (781–84)

Unlike the Pearl of Price and the Lamb of God, the Pearl-Maiden is not peerless in the sense of unique: on earth, the Dreamer "ne proued . . . neuer her precios pere" (4), but she has emphasized that in heaven, she is just one of many concurrently and equally reigning monarchs. The distinction that she draws here therefore makes good theological sense, but that becomes clear only upon reading the passage quoted above. A first-time reader of the manuscript, who would come upon those occurrences of "makelez" without the benefit of the Pearl-Maiden's later explanation (or of Andrew and Waldron's clarifying footnote), is therefore in a position not unlike the Dreamer's: both must use limited data to determine whether the orthographic similarity between two given words reflects a more substantive correspondence.

    This distinction between substance and accident has informed editorial thinking at least since W. W. Greg's theory of copy-text (and western philosophical thinking since Aristotle).[16] The *Pearl*-manuscript, however, is not so much copy-text as only-text, which means that such questions are destined to remain even less fully resolvable, even more subject to idiosyncratic human perspective, than they typically are.[17] As a result, the interpretive potential of this textual crux remains lively. Furthermore, the impossibility of decisively determining whether the anomalous instances of "makelez" are substantive or accidental (or substantive in effect even if accidentally produced) may make the Dreamer's much-decried obtuseness in his debate with the Pearl-Maiden seem rather less obtuse, since we too are looking through a glass darkly as we try to make sense of the manuscript's literally incomparable words. This congruence between reader and Dreamer is appropriate to the poem's homiletic perspective; it is hubristic to suppose that we would be any more effective than he is at engaging incisively with a saved soul whose perspective is now fundamentally unearthly. The *Pearl*-manuscript and Pearl-Maiden also begin to

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resemble one another: beautiful survivors that we are fortunate to have found once more, they are tantalizingly proximate but leave us with more questions than answers, and the unslaked desire to know "more and more." If one measure of literary value lies in a text's capacity to press us to reread, and then to reconsider and reinterpret in light of the new forms of meaning that we discover, then this example demonstrates how the value of *Pearl* is enhanced by its material uniqueness, which creates such unexpected, uncanny parallels between manuscript and Maiden, Dreamer, and reader.

I suggested above that a first-time reader of the manuscript might well be unsure how to interpret the two anomalous instances of "makelez" at lines 733 and 757. Modern editorial interventions frequently reduce or eliminate such complexities, in this case either by using a footnote to pre-form our interpretation of the thought-provoking irregularity (Andrew and Waldron) or by emending that irregularity out of existence (Gollancz and Osgood).[18] This realization highlights the difference between reading a medieval manuscript, in all of its exasperating and exciting particularities, and reading a carefully prepared, mass-produced modern edition. In other ways and at other moments, however, editors of *Pearl* actually function more like scribes in the sense that, because they have no other copies with which to compare their lone exemplar, they cannot perform some of modern editing's most fundamental tasks: comparison and classification of the manuscripts, followed by construction of a stemma and/or selection of a copy-text. Instead, they must do what so many medieval scribes did, which is to make the best sense possible of the single copy from which they are working.

Moreover, just as medieval scribes varied widely in their treatment of troublesome words and passages, so too have modern editors of *Pearl*—and in ways that provocatively echo medieval scribal practice, as we will see. One useful case study, which has the added benefit of keeping our eye trained on the issue of "more-and-less"-ness, is how editors have responded to the fact that *Pearl*'s fortieth stanza has one fewer line than every other stanza; what the poem's highly elaborate and—to this point—regular form implies should be line 472 is not contained in the manuscript. All modern editors include this phantom line in their numeration, however, presumably on the assumption that, either here or earlier in the poem's transcription history, a scribe inadvertently omitted the genuine, authorial line 472. This is how Andrew and Waldron represent the situation:

> "Cortaysé," quoþ I, "I leue,
> And charyté grete, be yow among;
> Bot my speche þat yow ne greue,
> ❋   ❋   ❋   ❋   ❋
>
> Þyself in heuen ouer hyȝ þou heue,
> To make þe quen þat watz so ȝonge."
> <div align="right">(469–74)</div>

Andrew and Waldron are imagining line 472, in the sense both of "supposing to [have] exist[ed]" and (the word's medieval meaning) of "creating an image" with which to concretize their assertion that, as their textual notes put it, the "line [is] missing in manuscript" (page 76). One might equally well join David Carlson, however, in concluding that there never was such a line, that it is absent (not missing) from the poem itself, since the stanza as written makes perfectly good sense, and nowhere else in the manuscript does the scribe appear to have omitted an entire poetic line.[19]

This omission keeps *Pearl* just short of the total number of lines, 1212, that P. M. Kean first suggested constitutes an especially perfect number and one whose symbolism brilliantly suits the poem's subject.[20] In this context, Carlson argues eloquently that the absent line 472 should be read as a form of authorial humility, as the poet's recognition that, unlike the Heavenly Jerusalem depicted in the seventeenth and eighteenth sections, his own is "a formally magnificent edifice but still an earthly construction" that should therefore not presume to numerological perfection.[21] Whether scribal or authorial, this absence evokes the themes of sufficiency and value at issue in the "more-and-less"-themed concatenation phrases, lending them a degree of aesthetic resonance that their denotative content would seem to resist. Like the anomalous instances of "makelez" discussed above, this crux resists being settled definitively and so remains open to imaginative reinterpretation; as we have seen, Andrew and Waldron's representation of line 472 is imaginative in the medieval and modern senses of the word.

As noted above, editorial treatment of this missing line varies widely and evokes a comparably wide range of medieval scribal practice. Andrew and Waldron's extended run of raised asterisks, for example, suggests *puncti elevati* ("elevated points," which were a key component of medieval punctuation), and their representation of line 472 as a whole recalls the spaces that scribes sometimes left for decorated initials or other elements of the manuscript to which they did not have access or for which they were not responsible. Whereas absences like those anticipated completion in the future, however, this obtrusive

absence-made-present looks backward to something lost and irrecoverable. Two other editors, Gollancz and William Vantuono, attempt to recreate what they cannot recover, taking the lost line 472 as an invitation to play author by composing their own versions to incorporate into their editions: "Me thynk thou spekes now ful wronge," and "To speke of a new note I long."[22] If Andrew and Waldron's *mise-en-page* hinted at one kind of scribal practice, then Gollancz and Vantuono occupy the other extreme: the (over)enthusiastic adder-onto or reviser, the "scribe as critic," as B. A. Windeatt's seminal essay puts it.[23] Different as they are, however, these treatments of line 472 show how the unique survival of *Pearl* creates an especially deep interpenetration of authorial, scribal, and editorial labor.

Line 472's evocation of medieval scribal practice within modern editions also puts the present and the distant past in unusually intimate dialogue, reminding us that *Pearl* is perceptible only in and across time. This lesson is central to the poem itself, too, as we will see in my final case study of this section, which centers on another form of "more-and-less"-ness, this time the addition of an extra, sixth stanza to the fifteenth section of the poem. Like the anomalous "makelez" of lines 733 and 757, this violation of the poem's regular form made early editors grumble, with both Osgood and E. V. Gordon suggesting that one of the section's six stanzas might be spurious.[24] As we have seen, however, this extra stanza makes the poem either actually reach or tantalizingly approach a symbolically significant total of 1212 lines. It also brings *Pearl* to a total of 101 stanzas, the same number as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which Andrew and Waldron rightly deem "a parallel hard to credit as coincidence" (page 94).[25] It seems further significant that in *Pearl*, the extra stanza appears in a section of the poem that takes "neuer the les" as its concatenation phrase, evoking precisely this issue of addition and subtraction and perhaps even slyly instructing us "never" to make its six stanzas "the less" by one, despite the numerical anomaly.

All of this suggests that the "extra" stanza of *Pearl* is indeed authorial. It remains significant to my argument partly because Osgood and Gordon could not agree about which of the fifteenth section's stanzas was least poetically impressive and thus most likely to be inauthentic, a fact that highlights how basic questions of authorship relied upon subjective aesthetic judgment—and still do, as Andrew and Waldron's defense of the extra stanza makes clear. That is true to some degree of many other medieval texts, but the lack of comparative data from other manuscript witnesses makes it especially true of

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Pearl. Furthermore, because a usable facsimile of the manuscript was published quite early in the poem's modern critical history, readers have long been able to compare any printed edition to images of the sole surviving medieval text; the distance between editor and reader is even narrower now that an infinitely superior digital facsimile is freely available online.[26] (We might compare this democratization to God's radical egalitarianism as described by the Pearl-Maiden: just as every saved soul is king or queen of heaven, so too every reader of *Pearl*, unburdened by multiple physically distant manuscripts, can think about the poem like an editor.)[27] So, in addition to reinforcing that we will never know precisely where the poem's original author leaves off and other medieval textual agents take over, *Pearl*'s material uniqueness also encourages critics to grapple seriously with the literary ramifications of traditionally editorial aspects of the poem like scribal marks and disputed readings.[28]

By blurring these categories—author, scribe, editor, and critic—*Pearl* complicates our apprehension of time within and around the poem, since it upends a straightforwardly linear understanding of those roles' relationship across time (that is, from author to scribe to editor to critic, each non-authorial agent dependent upon the previous entity in the chain). This more complex appreciation of temporality, I believe, suggests a way of reading the poem's final stanza, which is a crux both formal (because the fifteenth section's six stanzas make it the "protruding" 101st) and thematic—since I am not alone in resisting the Dreamer's simplistic assertion that "it is very easy for the good Christian" (1202) to please God and embrace His will.[29] In fact, the action and diction of the poem's final section bely this blithely idealistic claim: the swoon that the Dreamer's longing precipitates at line 1180 recalls his fainting-fit from the beginning of the poem (lines 57–58); he then describes his earthly existence as a "*doel-doungoun*" (1187, emphasis added), evoking the courtly-love lexicon of his initial "*luf-daungere*" (11); and shortly before the bland moralizing of lines 1201–2, he uses the intensive word "*toriuen*" (reft away) to describe the loss of his joy (1197). These lines are also thick with the first- and second-person singular pronouns that characterized his early, theologically suspect exchanges with the Pearl-Maiden: nineteen total in the thirty lines from his awakening to the end of the penultimate stanza (lines 1171–1200). Moreover, he still refers possessively to "my perle" (1173) and three times rhetorically distances himself from God with the phrase "þat Prince" (1176, 1188, 1189). All of this makes the gnomic, universalizing statements of lines 1195–96 and 1199–1200

seem more like a refuge from the particulars of the Dreamer's own emotional drama than evidence of a truly altered perspective on "his" pearl and their relationship to God.

In the last stanza, however, something seems to have changed, for although the Dreamer recalls collapsing "for pyty of his perle," he puts this episode firmly in the past; only afterwards ("syþen") did he commend her to God and, he implies, actually make peace with his loss (1206–7). And yet the poem has not depicted this selfless commendation. On the contrary, the tone and content of his last reported address to the pearl suggest grudging acceptance at best, and at worst a kind of passive-aggressive self-pity:

> If hit be ueray and soth sermoun
> Þat þou so strykez in garlande gay,
> So wel is me in þys doel-doungoun
> Þat þou art to þat Prynsez paye.
> (1185–88)

His own perspective therefore seems to have changed significantly by the final stanza, and this fact makes line 1203 especially significant: after contending with God for 100 of the poem's 101 stanzas, the Dreamer claims that "I haf founden Hym . . . / a frende ful fyin" (1203–4). With its perfect-tense verb, the only one in the twentieth section, these lines assert as an already completed action the spiritual awakening that would make sense of the Dreamer's (now, avowedly) perfect submission to God. That perfect tense, together with the poem's occlusion of the Dreamer's actual commendation of the pearl, hints at a temporal fissure, an almost imperceptible passage of time between the penultimate and final stanzas.

I believe that, when interpreted in light of two other aspects of *Pearl* that I have emphasized thus far—its play with what adding and subtracting does to its elaborate formal symmetries (its deployment of "more-and-less"-ness) and its emphasis on the counterintuitive nature of Christianity as a social, economic, and ethical system—such hints of a temporal fissure enable understanding both the hundredth and the hundred-and-first stanzas as ends of the poem. (It is worth noting here that in the manuscript, *Pearl* concludes with two Amens, rather than just one as the following three poems do—a scribal invitation, perhaps, to think in terms of distinct yet complementary conclusions?) On this reading, the penultimate stanza would conclude the Dreamer's immediate experience of his vision and its aftermath, and those lines do indeed have a conclusive force that is emphasized, formally, by

their being the poem's hundredth stanza.[30] Only after some intervening period of time, however, can the Dreamer claim sincerely to "have found" (1203) God a fine friend—even as the lines that contain that claim alter a formal tidiness that might otherwise be too pat for our experience of either life or poem.[31]

Of course, consistent psychological plausibility is not a universal or even particularly common characteristic of medieval literature, but as the only mortal character in the poem, the Dreamer has at least occasionally been our stand-in—and that is what makes the simple-minded assertion of lines 1201–2 feel like a betrayal of our imperfect, shared humanity. Interpreted as I have here, however, the movement of the poem's final stanzas becomes more nuanced, for by refusing to show us the Dreamer's final surrender (of the pearl, to God), *Pearl* suggests that such moments of spiritual growth are necessarily internal, personal, and private. Put another way: at the beginning of the poem, the Dreamer insisted that the pearl was unique and "pryuy" (12); at its ultimate conclusion, by contrast, he has come to accept that she is just one of many "precious *perlez* vnto His pay" (1212, emphasis added), even as the poem occludes the exact moment and nature of this revelation, ensuring that we are not "privy" to it. That realization, and the analytic energy necessary to arrive at it, may in turn prompt deeper, more private, and more productive self-reflection in the reader.[32]

This interpretation of the poem's last two stanzas is speculative, but not in the negative sense to which that word has, unfortunately, generally been reduced in academic discourse.[33] Rather, it is debatable yet also grounded (observable, as the Latin root of *speculative* would suggest) in the poem's complex engagement with time: the inevitable progression of mortal time, which means that the Dreamer's pearl has died and that even in Heaven she will never again be "his"; and its contrast with divine timelessness, made gloriously visible "in þe Apokalypce . . . / as deuysez hit þe apostel John" (983–84).[34] We should recall here that time was central both to the Dreamer's resistance to the Pearl-Maiden's exaltation in Heaven—she "lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede" (483)—and to the Parable of the Vineyard told to explain and justify that exaltation. This play with temporal perspective is reinforced by the ambiguous verb form of the poem's final sentence: "He [God] *gef* vus to be His homly hyne / Ande precious perlez vnto His pay" (1211–12, emphasis added). As Andrew and Waldron note, "gef" can be both past (tense) and subjunctive (mood), which means that *Pearl* ends by looking both backward and forward in time, simultaneously recalling the moment in history when God became incarnate on earth,

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and over the course of His redemptive life "gave" humanity into His care, and also praying for a future in which "He may grant" that the whole Christian community become "precious perlez vnto His pay" (page 110). The *Pearl*-poet's lexical punning is famous; here grammatical ambiguity creates a temporal pun that reinforces the poem's theological sensitivity and formal complexity.

What unites the three case studies of this section is that in each, a formal irregularity—one letter, line, or stanza more or less than the poem's highly wrought structure would indicate—creates interpretive potential that remains vibrant partly because no other copies of *Pearl* exist by which we can determine whether that irregularity is authorial or scribal. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the phenomenon of addition and subtraction through which this interpretive vitality emerges, the "more-and-less"-themed concatenation phrases can be seen to operate at an extra-denotative and metaphorical level that their literal content would seem to resist. In the next and final section of this essay, I examine another contested letter in the manuscript by way of further confirming the manifold literariness of the literal.

III. OF PLURALISMS: LITERAL, LEXICAL, CRITICAL

My text for this section is a single letter in *Pearl* whose interpretive resonance has been multiplied by the range of modern editorial emendation it has received. Like my analysis of *Pearl*'s final stanza, this case study will highlight the poem's evolution across time, here not the speculative time of the Dreamer's occluded journey toward acceptance, or of a reader's unfolding engagement with that apparently abrupt shift, but rather the literal time across which real persons have made documented editorial decisions. My play on these two meanings of *literal*—"(f)actual" and "pertaining to a letter"—will afford an analysis of how *Pearl* embodies Derridean *différance* and even takes it a step further. Because the letter that interests me appears in the context of the Pearl-Maiden's treatment of the Parable of the Vineyard, it will also return us to the themes of value and labor with which I began.

Here I reproduce Andrew and Waldron's apparatus (textual note and footnote) as well as the relevant passage:

> "Bot now þou motez, me for to mate,
> Þat I my peny haf wrang tan here;
> Þou sayz þat I þat com to late
> Am not worþy so gret fere*."
>
> (613–16)

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* here (Gollancz and Osgood)] MS lere
616 *fere*: "dignity, reward." The MS reading *lere* is
incomprehensible; Gordon's emendation *fere* is more
convincing than that adopted by Gollancz and Osgood, *here*
"wages."

Manuscript *lere* can mean cheek, face, or flesh, so on this reading, the poet would be using the Pearl-Maiden's transfigured beauty (the Dreamer does not initially recognize her, we should recall) as a metaphor for the transformative spiritual grace that she has received.[35] The letter form "l" in the manuscript itself is not ambiguous, but the abruptness of a shift to physical appearance after the immediately preceding monetary metaphor has led editors to emend in one of the two ways Andrew and Waldron describe above. Such a decision is perfectly reasonable; what interests me here is the categorical way in which Andrew and Waldron frame it. Specifically, although they call their emendation to *fere*, which they adopt from Gordon, simply "more convincing" than the earlier one to *here*, that word's meaning of "payment" actually makes perfect sense given the Pearl-Maiden's concrete reference to the penny in line 614. As represented, therefore, Andrew and Waldron's emendation is more convincing only to the extent that the more genteel lexicon of "reward," or the more abstract register of "dignity," seems better suited to the refined Pearl-Maiden than the grubbiness of a contractual "payment."

Furthermore, while manuscript *lere* is clearly a less intuitive reading than either of the proposed emendations, it should not be branded "incomprehensible." One can in fact comprehend it along the metaphorical lines I outlined above, the more so since the same word *lere* has described the Pearl-Maiden twice up to this point in the poem, first in a compound that appears to mean wimple ("Her lere-leke al hyr vmbegon" [210]), then later when she is called "lufsom of lyth and lere" (398). And considering the widely embraced editorial maxim *lectio difficilior potior* (the more difficult reading is the stronger), the counterintuitive nature of the manuscript reading might actually be a point in favor of its legitimacy. Of course, that maxim is not an absolute rule; it cannot make sense out of nonsense, and Martin L. West argues further that it "should not be used in support of dubious syntax, or phrasing that it would not be natural for the author to use. There is an important difference between a more *difficult* reading and a more *unlikely* reading."[36] Editors who emend *lere* presumably believe that its sense is strained and in that sense unnatural, as West would have it. But this line of reasoning runs headlong into the fact

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that *Pearl* everywhere exceeds the natural: in its highly wrought formal and lexical artistry, in the extravagance of the Dreamer's paradisal landscape (gravel made of gems, crystal cliffs, and indigo trees), and in the counterintuitive (beyond-natural because celestial) notions of value and justice that the Pearl-Maiden propounds.

Beyond this brilliantly cultivated strangeness, other aspects of the form in which *Pearl* comes down to us combine to make "natural" usage a highly imperfect guide to textual cruces like *lere*. The poet's richly multilingual heritage (such that a given word might be argued to have any of several distinct sources), the poet's wordplay and the scribe's varied orthography (such that a single set of graphemes often has multiple meanings and a single meaning can be represented by multiple sets of graphemes), and our lack of comparative data from other manuscripts (which might help construct a fuller sense of either poet's or scribe's "natural" practice)—all of these frustrate efforts to pin *Pearl* down.[37]

Indeed, from a single contested letter that yields three potential readings of the word in which it appears—*lere*, *here*, and *fere*—each of these readings expands outward to a still wider set of potential meanings. To take only Andrew and Waldron's chosen reading, *fere*: in addition to the far from equivalent meanings of the word that Andrew and Waldron propose ("dignity" and "reward"), the *Middle English Dictionary* also lists "company," "power," and "appearance, manner" as contemporary meanings.[38] Line 616 may evoke all of these, for the Pearl-Maiden demonstrates both rhetorical and intercessory power, she will later be seen in the company of heavenly virgins ("among her ferez" [1150]) in the New Jerusalem, and her appearance and manner have also been lavishly described throughout the poem.[39] (That last meaning of *fere* would, incidentally, return us to the lexical world of manuscript *lere*.) Simply put: here, as so often in *Pearl*, we face not a clearly authorial set of graphemes with a single, stable signification, nor even a clearly delimited set of significations, but rather a dizzying range of potential meanings that ebb and flow and eddy around one another.[40] Not all of those meanings are equally apparent at all times or to all readers, and the *Pearl*-poet cannot have consciously intended them all—but that proves only that his poem has continued to gain depth and luster since its originary moment(s), in a process not unlike the gradual and accumulative one by which natural pearls are formed.

The *lere-here-fere* case thus highlights what I have called the manifold singularity of *Pearl*, namely how the poem's material unique-ness allows more and richer interpretations to emerge from its sole

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surviving manuscript. I have already suggested that all three of those words produce meanings that are true to the poem, both in themselves and in the capaciousness of their (sets of) significations, which evoke the poet's wordplay and multifaceted linguistic background. I would go further and argue that we can legitimately adopt all three readings into our understanding of *Pearl* as a still-evolving literary artifact. Doing so would mean expanding our notion of what a poem can be. Such an enterprise is less wholly anachronistic than it might at first appear, since the Pearl-Maiden's own paradox-loving logic consistently undermines categories and distinctions that seem just as stable and uncomplicated: between queens and lesser aristocrats, for example, or between those who have worked for a long time and those who haven't. The *Pearl*-poet is not the author, according to any traditional understanding of the word, of the rapidly expanding lexical potential of *lere-here-fere*, but he has written a poem that encourages us to broaden our understanding of precisely those sorts of traditional categories—and history has left us his poem in a form that offers this way, among many others, of doing so.

At this point two characterizations of the literal, in its etymological sense of "concerning letters," seem relevant: St. Paul's assertion that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6, NRSV), and Derrida's use "of the letter *a*, this initial letter which it apparently has been necessary to insinuate, here and there, into the writing of the word *difference*."[41] For Paul, literalism blinds the faithful to deeper truths that can be fully conveyed only metaphorically. Thus "real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal" (Rom. 2:29, NRSV), and the mothers of Abraham's two sons should be read as "an allegory: these women are two covenants" (Gal. 4:24, NRSV). Derrida takes aim at this valorization of metaphor as part of his broader challenge to western logocentrism, in which writing, as a set of "literal" signifiers, endlessly defers meaning to the originary truth-content of the spoken word. Yet rather than simply reverse the literal/metaphor binary, exalting the former at the expense of the latter, Derrida uses the pervasiveness of metaphors of writing in western religion and philosophy to argue that "the 'literal' meaning of writing [is] metaphoricity itself."[42] Paul's use of metaphor further supports this claim, for he introduces his condemnation of the literal by addressing the Corinthians as "our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; you show us that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:2–3, NRSV).[43]

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This nexus of words, ideas, and images is significant to *Pearl* in part because of the Dreamer's frequent literal-mindedness in his dialogue with the Pearl-Maiden, which Catherine S. Cox argues highlights the misdirected nature of his desire for "his privy" pearl, a literal and fleshly (and in that sense "carnal") body as it existed in life.[44] As she puts it, "the carnal (that is, literal) reader, too easily satisfied with too little and thus content to stop too soon, cuts short the potential of language before fully embracing the figurative (or spiritual) connotations that signification structures represent."[45] Derrida's value here lies in his use of "the letter *a*, this initial letter" to emphasize the literal's capacity to sharpen the kind of semantic multivalence that also animates *Pearl*'s homiletic and aesthetic action.[46] After discussing two meanings of *différer*, to differ and to defer, neither of which is satisfactorily conveyed by the existing French noun *différence*, he writes that "the word *différance* (with an *a*) is to compensate—economically—this loss of meaning, for *différance* can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings. It is immediately and irreducibly polysemic, which will not be indifferent to the economy of my discourse here."[47] We have seen that in *Pearl*, individual letters—the literal, in its most literal sense—can create deeply, almost overwhelmingly polysemous effects. Furthermore, just as Derrida's wordplay is essential to both his local meaning and his broader project, so too the elaborate punning of *Pearl* is vital: "because language signifies spiritually only when multiple senses obtain, the plural or polysemous character of language has theological and epistemological value."[48] That the poem continues to inspire such polysemy today, in ways unanticipated by its medieval maker(s), is one aspect of its continuing vitality.[49]

In fact, *Pearl* 616's *lere* works rather more radically than Derrida's *différance*, which he introduces as "a kind of gross spelling mistake, a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly."[50] *Lere* itself is a perfectly well-attested word, so it is not inherently such a "gross spelling mistake," but as it appears in line 616, modern editors (all of whom emend one way or the other) clearly regard it as precisely "a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly." By being (judged to be) *both* of these—not a spelling mistake, yet a lapse in the discipline that regulates writing—the word gains a double meaning even before we consider its later editorial manipulations; and those manipulations, far from straightforwardly restoring the supposedly violated sense, help to create the exuberant explosion of potential meanings that we saw above. This instance of polysemy, however, emerges only because of

the poem's material (literal) uniqueness, which prevents the meaning of this letter and the word in which it appears from being established as univocal, "literalized" in a spirit-killing way. The *lere-here-fere* case thus shows how material history can inspire deconstructive reading.

Derrida also insists upon the symbiotic relationship between polysemy and economy: the polysemy of *différance* is fundamental to the "economy" of his discourse, just as the neographism itself is desirable because it evokes that polysemy "economically."[51] This relationship is significant to my argument because the exquisitely tuned economy of *Pearl*'s word- and image-play is comparably essential to its literary value, and thus to its rightful place in the canon (a different kind of economy) of medieval English literature. The poem's verbal tautness is not universal, but its pleonasm is interpretively meaningful, as in the contrasting depictions of the Dreamer's evaluative faculties, which I considered in the first section of this essay. Similarly, the "more-and-less"-themed concatenation phrases that I discussed in the second section are not necessarily polysemous in themselves, but they acquire additional layers of meaning by highlighting the poem's play with what addition and subtraction does to its elaborate formal symmetries, and to the homiletic content that those symmetries frame. Such additions and subtractions—one line, letter, or stanza "more or less" than we would expect—remain interpretively vibrant in part because of *Pearl*'s material uniqueness, which prevents our determining conclusively, through comparison with other manuscript copies, whether they are authorial or scribal in origin. As a result, editorial decisions (whether and how to emend, how to depict phenomena like the missing or absent line 472, and so on) have both scribal and literary force: scribal because the modern editor, like so many medieval scribes, is forced to rely upon a single imperfect exemplar rather than compare and adjudicate among many; and literary because his decisions must be especially guided by aesthetic sensibility and so remain open to revision, counter-argument, and other forms of dialogic scholarly play.

Thus regarded, *Pearl* emerges not as an integral, coherent, authorially sanctioned textual form (the object of value for older formalist modes) but rather as a still-evolving object, collaboratively produced across time and with varying degrees and modes of intentionality. This fact is significant not just for our appreciation of the poem itself but also for the development of a truly *new* "new formalism" that might avoid the charge, implicitly leveled in some recent discussions, of being little more than warmed-over, theoretically naïve old formalism.[52] Manuscript studies has the potential to make renewed attention to form

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new indeed, by taking the material object, and not just its extracted or hypothetically reconstructed verbal icon, as the inspiration for traditionally formalist strategies of close reading for the full range of effects that Derek Pearsall rightly praises as characteristic of "poetic language" (ambiguity, allusiveness, resistance to paraphrase, and the like), for *Pearl* shows us that these effects can inhere as well in the relation between poetic language and material form.[53]

Engagement with material form in turn necessarily becomes an engagement with history—but a history more generously defined than merely the set of documentable social and political phenomena contemporaneous with the text in question. New Historicism proved that such contexts can be wonderfully illuminating and provocative, but they should not be allowed to be all that "history" takes in, any more than "form" should be reduced to the transcendent verbal icon of New Criticism. I have located *Pearl*'s literary value not just in its long-admired lexical play and elaborate structures but also in how those phenomena gain complexity and depth—literary value—from a range of historical forces and actors distinct from (or at least not necessarily identical to) the poem's "author," in the traditional sense of the word. Similar critical moves can of course be performed with other texts, but *Pearl* seems to invite them with particular urgency, since the unknowable historical contingencies that caused just one copy of the poem to survive create multiple sources of meaning and blur traditional literary roles in ways that parallel the Pearl-Maiden's own insistence on Heaven as a court that transcends earthly understandings of feudal, social, and economic systems.

That heavenly capaciousness has been a model for my own critical and theoretical practice here, and I would argue that this broader relevance represents yet another form of *Pearl*'s literary value. The Dreamer's initial theory of value was premised on scarcity and under-written by envy, as his indignant expostulations made clear. The Pearl-Maiden insists upon a more generous understanding, by which more (kings and queens of heaven) leads to ever more (celestial joy). We can, like the Dreamer, regard the material uniqueness and historical uncertainties of *Pearl* as evidence of loss, nostalgically attempting to restore its violated formal integrity or to divine the singular, so-called correct historical context that would become its principal and clearly delimited source of meaning. But "less" need not be read as loss (a literal and significant difference); we can choose instead to value how this instance of "less" ultimately produces more: not just more discrete interpretations of the text itself, but also more, and more

diverse, theoretical approaches to it (including, of course, the many that I have not employed here). *Pearl* asks us to reassess critical and theoretical hierarchies, even as it helps us see that literary meaning emerges from material activity. It is this invitation to keep such disparate perspectives—formalist, deconstructive, materialist—generously and productively suspended that constitutes *Pearl*'s challenge, its gift, and its inexhaustible source of value.

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<div align="center">NOTES</div>

[1] Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 5th ed. (Exeter: Univ. of Exeter Press, 2007), line 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically by line number unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Many poems both earlier and later than *Pearl* have stanza forms that are comparable in one or more ways, but none displays the same combination of stanza form, concatenation, and frequent alliteration. See Susanna Fein, "Twelve-Line Stanza Forms in Middle English and the Date of *Pearl*," *Speculum* 72 (1997): 367–98.

[3] Exemplary interpretations of *Pearl* along these lines include Marie Borroff, "*Pearl*'s 'Maynful Mone': Crux, Simile, and Structure," in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts, 700–1600*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982), 159–72; 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: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1991), 61–78; A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), 96–170; and Sylvia Tomasch, "A *Pearl* Punnology," *JEGP* 88 (1989): 1–20.

[4] For these terms and the debates surrounding them, see Maura Nolan, "Making the Aesthetic Turn: Adorno, the Medieval, and the Future of the Past," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34 (2004): 549–75; Jonathan Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics: Autonomy, Indifference, and Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005); and Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA* 122 (2007): 558–69. On attention to history as key to keeping new formalism new in practice as well as name, see Samuel Otter, "An Aesthetics In All Things," *Representations* 104 (2008): 116–25.

[5] On the subjective dimension of the judgments made by modern editors—of all texts, not just uniquely surviving ones like *Pearl*—see E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Psychology of the Editors of Middle English Texts," in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone

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Press, 1970), 102–118. On the necessary participation of such editors (and, indeed, of that particular editor) in their broader cultural and historical worlds, see Lee Patterson, "The Logic of Textual Criticism and the Way of Genius; The Kane-Donaldson *Piers Plowman* in Historical Perspective," in *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1985), 55–91; repr. in Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 77–113.

[6] Compare Wai Chee Dimock's assertion that "a text can remain literary only by not being the same text. It endures by being read differently" ("A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112 [1997]: 1064). I embrace Dimock's effort to ground a theory of literariness in a text's evolution across time, what she calls "diachronic historicism" (1061).

[7] For a reading of *Pearl* itself as just such a reliquary, see Seeta Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 95–129.

[8] John Bowers, for example, has argued that *Pearl*'s insistence that all laborers in Matthew's parable be paid the same wage reflects a conservative reaction to the contemporary problem of agricultural labor shortages in post-plague England, which threatened to enable unprecedented social and geographical mobility among workers theretofore tied to the land. See Bowers, "The Politics of Pearl," *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 419–41 and chapter two, "Economics," of *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 41–49.

[9] On this aspect of the poem see Helen Barr, "*Pearl*—or 'The Jeweller's Tale'," *Medium Ævum* 69 (2000): 59–79. It is worth noting that *Cleanness* explicitly contrasts pearls and pennies: "Perle praysed is prys þer perré is schewed, / Þaȝ hyt not derrest be demed to dele for penies" (1117–18).

[10] For studies of the relationship between Dante and the *Pearl*-poet, see Warren Ginsberg, "Place and Dialectic in *Pearl* and Dante's *Paradiso*," *ELH* 55 (1988): 731–53; Roberta L. Payne, *The Influence of Dante on Medieval English Dream-Visions* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 27–58; and R. A. Shoaf, "*Purgatorio* and *Pearl*: Transgression and Transcendence," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 31 (1990): 152–68.

[11] See Tomasch, 16, however, for the possibility that the word "les," in the concatenation phrase "neuer þe les," includes a pun on "lesyng" or "lie."

[12] On chiastic elements of *Pearl*'s structure, see Harwood.

[13] See *Pearl: An English Poem of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. and trans. Israel Gollancz (London: Nutt, 1891) and *The Pearl: A Middle English Poem*, ed. Charles G. Osgood (Boston: Heath, 1906).

[14] This desire to concretize the author function of the poems of Cotton Nero A.x can be seen in some early scholars' efforts to construct a (necessarily wholly suppositional) biography of the poet that would make sense of the subject matter of the manuscript's four poems. This same desire must underlie to some degree at least the near-unanimity with which contemporary scholars agree that a single person (the "*Pearl*-poet" or "*Gawain*-poet") composed all four poems.

[15] Siegfried Wenzel, "Poets, Preachers, and the Plight of Literary Critics," *Speculum* 60 (1985): 345, emphasis in original.

[16] W. W. Greg, "The Rationale of Copy-Text," *Studies in Bibliography* 3 (1950): 19–36.

[17] Andrew and Waldron's decision to emend another violation of the poem's regular pattern of concatenation in the same section of the poem reinforces this point. The first line of the thirteenth section, line 721, reads in the manuscript, "Jesus con calle to hym hys mylde," which Andrew and Waldron emend to "Ryȝt con calle to hym hys mylde"

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so that this section will begin, like every other, with a version of the previous section's concatenation word. They contend (page 88) that "MS *Jesus* is a scribal substitution for the sake of greater explicitness," but one could just as plausibly read this formal irregularity as a performance of Jesus's own uniquely powerful and category-smashing grace—especially in light of the section's other, "makelez"/"maskelez" asymmetry, which the editors do regard as authorial. One interpretation is more persuasive than the other only to the extent that one pledges greater allegiance to the concept of "literal-minded scribe" than to that of "sophisticated author" (and that is without even contemplating the possibility of "sophisticated scribe"). For an incisive argument that the manuscript reading at line 721 is in fact authorial, see David Carlson, "*Pearl*'s Imperfections," *Studia Neophilologica* 63 (1991): 57–67. I am indebted to Arnold Sanders and the excellent paper he gave at Kalamazoo in May 2013 for this reference.

[18] On the comparably flattening effects of another category of modern editorial intervention—punctuation—see Howell D. Chickering, "Unpunctuating Chaucer," *The Chaucer Review* 25 (1990): 96–109. The logic of such interventions is clear and reasonable, of course, since one important function of editions (and probably the primary one of those that hope to sell at all well) is to make the reader's engagement with the text smoother and easier. And yet smoothness and easiness are, if not inherently or directly at odds with literariness, certainly distinct from it.

[19] See Carlson, 57–60.

[20] See P. M. Kean, "Numerical Composition in *Pearl*," *Notes & Queries* 210 (1965): 49–51. This argument has since been widely endorsed, most elaborately by Edward I. Condren, *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet* (Gainesville, FL: Univ. of Florida Press, 2002), 49–73.

[21] Carlson, 59–60.

[22] These are, respectively, the suggestions of Gollancz, *Pearl*, and William Vantuono, *The "Pearl" Poems: an Omnibus Edition*, 2 vol. (New York: Garland, 1984).

[23] B. A. Windeatt, "The Scribes as Chaucer's Early Critics," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979): 120.

[24] See Osgood, xvi and E. V. Gordon, *Pearl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 88.

[25] This numerical parallel seems still more significant in light of the poems' other similarities: both concern a sympathetic but flawed protagonist interacting with, and ultimately judged by, a monochromatically dressed otherworldly figure. On this logic, the slight numerical imperfection created by the addition of a single extra stanza in each poem would be congruent with the slight moral imperfection that leads to Gawain's nicked neck and the Pearl-Dreamer's abrupt eviction from his glorious vision.

[26] This digital facsimile can be accessed at http://gawain.ucalgary.ca as part of "The Cotton Nero A.x Project" led by Murray McGillivray and sponsored by the University of Calgary, in partnership with the British Library. See also Israel Gollancz, *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923).

[27] I do not mean to imply by this that a digital facsimile, however vibrant or useful, should be regarded as sufficient in itself to produce a critical edition or to replicate engagement with the material original. Indeed, one problematic unintended consequence of the increasing digitization of medieval manuscripts is curators' increasing reluctance to grant access to the artifacts themselves. This trend may seriously affect the kinds of scholarly work that can be undertaken, since for many projects, digital facsimiles cannot in fact replicate study of originals. For a discussion of what is gained and lost through digital manuscript facsimiles, see Maura Nolan, "Medieval Habit, Modern Sensation: Reading Manuscripts in the Digital Age," *Chaucer Review* 47 (2013): 465–76.

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[28] For a recent example of this kind of analysis brought to another of the *Pearl* manuscript's poems, see Arthur Bahr, "Finding the Forms of *Cleanness*," *Studies in Philology* 110 (2013): 259–81.

[29] Thus Jennifer Garrison opens her recent appreciative reassessment of the final stanza, whose image of the elevated Host she considers in light of late-medieval Eucharistic devotion, by acknowledging that "[s]ome of the best recent readers of *Pearl* have ignored or resisted its final stanza. And there is no doubt that the stanza poses difficulties" ("Liturgy and Loss: *Pearl* and the Ritual Reform of the Aristocratic Subject," *The Chaucer Review* 44 [2010]: 294). David Aers, for example, argues that these lines are "theologically superficial and psychologically superficial. The reassuring invocation of 'þe god Krystyin' not only sets aside theological issues but also searching difficulties the poem itself has raised" ("The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*," *Speculum* 68 [1993]: 70), while Condren contends that "[h]ere the Dreamer sounds more like the Pharisee than the publican in the famous parable recounted by Luke (18:9–14)" (73). Even one homiletically minded critic, determined to read the poem as "one huge typological metaphor of orthodox Christian behavior," nevertheless considered the final stanza's expressions of "resolution and reconciliation . . . gratuitous and facile" (M. R. Stern, "An Approach to *The Pearl*," *JEGP* 54 [1955]: 689, 691n29; quoted in Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 129).

[30] Andrew and Waldron, page 110, also note the conclusiveness of these lines, pointing out that they summarize the moral presented at the beginning and end of *Patience*. A comparable view of the stanza's conclusiveness is implicit in Christopher Cannon's suggestion that it is this "penultimate stanza which (by virtue of the poem's circularity) also functions as its prologue" ("Form," in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006], 188).

[31] In a similar vein to mine here, Carlson contrasts *Pearl*'s 101 stanzas with the "perfectly round total of 100 cantos" in Dante's *Commedia*: "the *Pearl*-poet deployed a deliberately flawed structure, with a patently imperfect, excessive total of 101 stanzas that manages to allude to the kind of perfection embodied in the *Divine Comedy*" and thus emphasize its own refusal to make a comparably bold structural gesture (64). It is a characteristically brilliant paradox of *Pearl*'s construction that the same final stanza should produce both this "patently imperfect, excessive total" of stanzas and the especially perfect number of lines, 1212, praised by Condren, Kean, and others (64). As I have suggested, that number can in turn be viewed as the poem's actual number of lines (marred only by inadvertent scribal error) or the number to which it gestures yet self-consciously declines to attain.

[32] This reading complements Garrison's emphasis on the "personal, inward-looking modes of devotion" that the late-medieval form of the Mass encouraged, in large part because "the most sacred part of the Mass in which the consecration of the bread and wine takes place was inaudible—said silently by the priest in order to avoid revealing the secrets of God" (296). There may be an analogy, in other words, between the faithful at Mass and the reader of *Pearl*, who is likewise kept at a distance from the process of spiritual growth taking place off stage, as it were: in each case, an occluded transformation (mystical at Mass, personal in the Dreamer) encourages personal and inward contemplation.

[33] For a recent defense of speculation as a component of literary criticism, see Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie "Medieval English Manuscripts: Aesthetics, Form, and the Literary Text," *The Chaucer Review* 47 (2013): 346–60.

[34] On the poem's engagement with time, see further Lynn Staley Johnson, "The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour," in *Text and Matter*, 3–15. On its evocation of medieval representations of the Book of Revelation, see Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1996), 21–66 and Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 12–41.

[35] See the entries for *ler* (primary meaning "cheek, face") and *lire* (primary meaning "flesh") in Hans Kurath and others, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1952–2001). The scribe of Cotton Nero A.x spelled both of these words variously *ler(e)*, *lire*, and *lyre*, a point to which I will return.

[36] Martin L. West, *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique Applicable to Greek and Latin Texts* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1973), 51, emphasis in original.

[37] To the following examples from *Pearl* many more could be added from the other poems of Cotton Nero A.x: MS *freles* (line 431) might mean "flawless," from ON *frījulaust*, or "peerless," as a corruption of ME *fereles*; MS *dard* (line 609) might derive from OE *durian* ("to lurk in dread") or OE *durran* ("to dare"); MS *blose* (line 911) might be a corruption of ME *boce* ("a lump of a man") or a form of Scottish *blus* ("a boaster"); MS *walte* (line 1156) might mean "set," from OE *waldan*, or "chosen," from ON *velja*. All these possibilities are taken from Andrew and Waldron's footnotes to the words in question. See also Andrew Breeze, "A Celtic Etymology for *Glaverez* 'Deceives' at *Pearl* 688," *Notes & Queries* 42 (1995): 160–62. Additionally, we have already considered the many significations of concatenation word *date*, but another example that is particularly relevant to the contested reading of line 616 is *fere*, which the poet uses to mean dignity, reward, martial array, company, wife, mistress, and equal. And although variation in scribal orthography is of course ubiquitous in the Middle Ages, the wide range of possible linguistic sources for the poet's usage makes it especially confounding here.

[38] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "fere," adj., 2, 3, and 5, respectively.

[39] The Pearl-Maiden's mediation of the Dreamer's vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem has a clear antecedent in Dante's vision of the Godhead at the end of *Paradiso*, but in contrast to St. Bernard's beautiful supplication to the Virgin and her silent acquiescence, the Pearl-Maiden follows up on her announcement of God's bounty (see lines 967–78) by depicting herself as the agent solely in charge of setting the conditions: "'If I þis mote þe schal vnhyde, / Bow vp towarde þys bornez heued, / And I anendez þe on þis syde / Schal sve, til þou to a hil be veued'" (973–76).

[40] Gordon's rationale for emending *lere* to *fere* will further substantiate this point. He suggests that "ME *fere* in the phrase (*with*) *grete fere* probably derives ultimately from OF *afe(i)re*, commonly used in the phrase *de grant afeire* 'of high rank' or 'with great pomp and circumstance.' The aphetic form may have arisen in this phrase. . . . Rhymes with close *e* suggest that this word has become confused or blended with *fere* from ON *fœri* 'power, ability'. . . . Alternatively . . . *fere* may be derived from OE *gefere* 'company,' and refer to the company of Heaven's queens" (68).

[41] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 3.

[42] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), 15.

[43] Paul uses different words, *littera* and *episola*, for concepts that are both rendered "letter" in modern English, but 2 Corinthians 2–6 as a whole advances a unified, coherent proposition that aligns perfectly with Derrida's observations and broader argument.

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⁴⁴ Catherine S. Cox, "*Pearl*'s 'Precios Pere': Gender, Language, and Difference," *Chaucer Review* 32 (1998): 379. This aspect of the Dreamer's character is a commonplace that has been widely noted. Spearing, for example, takes as a premise that the Dreamer "is hopelessly literal-minded, as dreamers in fourteenth-century poems tend to be" (152). For a revisionist argument that the two disputants are more evenly matched than has generally been allowed, see Jim Rhodes, "The Dreamer Redeemed: Exile and the Kingdom in the Middle English *Pearl*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 16 (1994): 119–42.

⁴⁵ Cox, 379.

⁴⁶ My reading here has benefited from two brilliantly provocative explorations of individual letters in the poems of Chaucer and Gower, respectively: Martha Dana Rust, "'Straunge' Letters and Strange Loops in Bodleian Library MS Arch. Selden B.24," which is Chapter Two of *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books: Exploring the Manuscript Matrix* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 81–116; and Robert Epstein, "Literal Opposition: Deconstruction, History, and Lancaster," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44 (2002): 16–33.

⁴⁷ Derrida, "Différance," 8.

⁴⁸ Cox, 380.

⁴⁹ The Pearl-Maiden herself, and perhaps also the poet, would presumably take the Pauline rather than the Derridean view of the literal; Garrison has rightly emphasized that although "figural truths appear as if they were literal . . . the pearl maiden insists that the dreamer ought to regard them as figurative" (313). But for us on that basis to dismiss the polysemous effects of the literal(ly literal) is in fact to read like the literal-minded Dreamer, rejecting wider interpretive potential in favor of the reassuringly familiar.

⁵⁰ Derrida, "Différance," 3.

⁵¹ Along these lines, he later rejects the existing word "differentiation" as an alternative to *différance* because, "since it is formed from the verb 'to differentiate,' it would negate the *economic significance* of the detour, the temporalizing delay, 'deferral'" ("Différance," 13, emphasis added).

⁵² Otter, for example, worries that the "resurgence of 'form' and 'aesthetics' might signal that the antiquated pendulum is swinging once more from the historical to the formal, and the profession will become enfolded in its rhythms" (123).

⁵³ "Poetry, as a form of 'literature,' exploits potentialities in language, especially metaphorical potentialities, that are not exploited by other forms of discourse. Words in poetry, in the way they are chosen and arranged, have a wider range of possible meanings than they have in ordinary discourse, and not in any way confined to denotation; the language is richer, more suggestive, more elusive, more open; meaning can be dwelt upon, and fresh meanings can emerge in the process of rereading, already there but newly discovered" (Derek Pearsall, "Towards a Poetic of Chaucerian Narrative," in *Drama, Narrative, and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Wendy Harding [Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2003], 99–100).