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### *Thematic Affinities in Pearl and Saint Erkenwald*

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## Foreword

The two medieval poems *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* were found in separate manuscripts but still they have many elements in common. Apart from sharing the same dialect, that of the Cheshire area of the North West Midlands, apparently the two date back to the same period, the late fourteenth century, and many stylistic features, key themes and phrases can be found in both. A theory of common authorship has been hinted at by many scholars, but others believe that the orthographical and morphological variations are a proof of the contrary. Those in favour of a shared writing ascribe these variations to the scribes responsible for the transcription rather than to different minds behind the works. Nonetheless the reader can recognize a sort of continuity between the texts, and also among the other poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript, and this has led me to believe that the author of *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* is likely to have been the same. The research I carried out examines a possible *fil rouge* between the two texts.

The starting point of my research was the *Saint Erkenwald* poem: while the Christian orthodox elements of the poem are strong, the point the story seems to make is that even a pagan without any knowledge of Christ can be saved from endless punishment in hell, as long as he surrenders himself or herself to the power of the visible Church and is baptised. The poem tells the tale of some builders, working on the church of Saint Paul in London, who come across a strangely preserved body, whose identity nobody seems to know: at a later stage, the body is allowed the gift of speech, even after death. It tells the curious crowd there gathered that he was a righteous pagan, celebrated by his contemporaries and buried in such a glorious fashion for his moral incorruptibility, but unable to enter heaven because he had not been baptised while in life. The only person

who is able to save him is the bishop Erkenwald, who, with the help of the Holy Ghost, baptises the man, fulfilling at last God's plan. The choice of topic is unquestionably interesting in a climate of religious contrast like that of the late fourteenth century England: Lollardy was questioning the legitimacy of the visible Church, wanting to shorten the distance between believer and God through a direct reading of the Bible – in a vernacular translation. The importance of certain rituals – among which baptism – was challenged, as well as the sacred nature of the clergy.

Then, I considered the poem *Pearl*. It can be read as both a consolatory elegy and as an exegesis of the Bible, seemingly presenting a plot and a style quite far away from the poem *Saint Erkenwald*. *Pearl* essentially relies on the tradition of the dream vision, but the emotional context in which it is set makes the text unique among the other texts which belong to the dream vision genre. It tells of how a father who has recently lost a child is trying to cope with the pain, trying to accept that the loss of that innocent creature is somehow part of God's plan and cannot be fought. Through what seems to be a God-given vision, the man is granted one more chance to meet the daughter he lost: in a deep sleep, he gets to see her, no longer a sweet child but now a queen in the city of God. In a landscape that resembles both the earthly paradise of Christian tradition and the New Jerusalem as pictured in the Book of Revelation, the father and the daughter are constantly separated by a stream, but still they connect on a spiritual and emotional level. They have a long conversation covering many topics from the context of the death of the child herself to the theological issue of the salvation of unbaptised children and their fate after life. This sort of sermon, plainly led by the now wise child, helps the man leave his constant state of frustration and longing for the child, bringing him closer to

God and making him accept the reality of the loss of the child in peace and harmony with the divine.

The theme of salvation is an important element in both poems: in *Saint Erkenwald* we witness the acceptance into Christendom of a pagan, thanks to his righteous conduct, the grace of God and mainly the sacrament of baptism. On the other hand, in *Pearl*, the author portrays a young girl who has been saved and welcomed into heaven even if she died too young to be actually able to understand and put into practice the teachings of the Church. The Church expected the common believer to have quite a long life and to be thus able to learn and put into practice Catholic doctrine after baptism – which usually took place when the recipient was still a child. The two characters, however, cannot fulfil such predictions and are offered different and unconventional ways to achieve salvation. The main focus is on the fact that both the Pearl-maiden and the judge do not represent the average saved Christian: one was not baptised and had to wait for the sacrament after death, in order to enter heaven; the other one did not have the chance to fulfil the path of Christianity through religious education and practice, as the Church of the late Middle Ages required. Despite all this, heaven is granted to both, thanks to the will of God, which the author of the texts always highlights profusely and which seems to become the secret leading force of the poems.

Baptism proves to be an interesting element in these two poems as well, even if this sacrament apparently serves opposite goals: for the young Pearl-maiden it is the one and only thing that allows her to become a bride of God. For the pagan judge, baptism is what keeps him away from God's banquet in spite of his uncorrupted life. It is fundamental at this point to keep in mind the religious and historical context of these works:

they were presumably written in a moment of tension between heterodox and orthodox, due to the rise of Lollardy. Considering also the other poems which are believed to be written as well by the so-called *Gawain*-poet, it is quite clear that the author was a conservative orthodox writer, quite possibly in opposition to the upcoming Lollard movement. The importance given to the rite carried out by an ordained minister, in this precise context, could fit a possible agenda of orthodox propaganda. The texts teach that God worked on Earth through the physical people of the clergy and that the Catholic rituals – such as baptism and others – were not at all empty formalities, but actual fundamental milestones towards salvation. Refusing them and opposing the authority of the earthly Church, according to the author of the poems, would lead to eternal damnation.

The theme of the weakness of human reason in the face of God's plan is another shared topic between *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald*. In the first text, the dreamer is a perfect display of human doubt and frailty. He is in awe at the visions he is offered and he experiences a feeling of ignorance throughout the dialogue with the child, struggling to understand what she means: her words, as will be shown later on, are indeed in strong contrast with the earthly experience of men and women. Also in this text, physical sensory perception, the only tool humankind possesses to interact with reality, reveals all its flaws and its limitations, proving that men and women do not have the proper instruments to access divine truth in this life. Secondly, in *Saint Erkenwald*, neither libraries nor common knowledge are enough to understand whom the corpse belongs to: only the arrival of a minister of the Church and the descent of the Holy Ghost make sense of the unusual situation. Human reason only causes chaos among the community and it leads to nothing helpful: the crowd is hopeless and in despair in front of the limitations they



are facing.

Another theme the two poems have in common is the attention given to clothes and other physical elements: external appearances always carry a deeper meaning. For example, both the dress of the maiden in *Pearl* and the array of the corpse in *Saint Erkenwald* convey an implicit – but still central – message, without which the reader's understanding would be suspended. But many other details enrich the plot with deeper significance, which makes the reading of the poems much more complex, but at the same time fulfilling. Details are abundant in any description, taking up large parts of the texts. Even if this is a direct consequence of the choice of metre, requiring an incredibly high number of different alliterations and rhymes, it can be also read as a particular taste, or choice, of the poet.

As for any Italian student, a comparison with Dante's work was natural for me, while making my research on the texts. I will later on show how many scholars have already supported in the last few years the theory of the influence of the *Divina Commedia* on some portion of the works by the *Gawain*-poet. I tried to give myself a little contribution to this theory. Other than showing the quite obvious contact points between *Saint Erkenwald* and Della Lana's *Commentario* on Dante's masterpiece, I will also try to show how some of Dante's female figures resemble closely the female angel-child of the poem *Pearl*.

My main goal is to reflect on whether it is actually possible to assume that the author was such a complex and prepared scholar to present two contrasting examples of salvation like these, or whether it is safer to assume that such diverging beliefs and inquiries belong to two different minds. The visions presented seem to be complementary,

each presenting orthodox beliefs and an absolute faith in the role of the sacraments for a man's or woman's salvation but from different points of view. It is important to reflect on the fact that the readers were common adult Christian men and women and it is not clear what these texts could teach them and how those readers may have related to such controversial topics. The poems do offer complementary visions on the topic of baptism and salvation and may have had the aim of increasing the perception of God's power and good predisposition towards the pure and faithful. Highlighting the necessity of the sacrament of baptism is certainly another main goal of both texts, since they both show that exactly this confirmation is the key requirement for gaining access to the endless realm of God.

Making an attentive study of which other main topics come through in the poems and how such topics are dealt with, it is clear that the attitude behind the creation of *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* is very similar. It is true that the texts offer contexts and styles that may suggest a different authorship, but the contact points are several and, with this brief study, I will try to make a convincing statement about the possibility for common authorship.

## Chapter 1

### About the Texts

#### 1.1 The Background of the Texts

In the Late Middle Ages in England, the title of "poet" was rarely used: it was a term of high praise, granted to the few who had given proof of possessing an exceptional vocation, and certainly not associated with those who chose to write in the vernacular.<sup>1</sup> Only in the late Middle Ages this attitude started to change.<sup>2</sup> Authors of poetry were generally seen as mere versifiers, not worthy of flattery and admiration. Even the talented anonymous author(s)<sup>3</sup> of the alliterative poems *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald*, respectively in the Cotton Nero A.x and in the Harley 2250 manuscripts of the British Library, were not given the due recognition.

In the years of the reign of King Richard (1377-1399), French and Latin were still the two languages of choice in learning and administration and Middle English lacked prestige as a medium for literature.<sup>4</sup> This was due to the fact that the ruler had strong sympathies for France, both culturally and politically.<sup>5</sup> England had a hierarchic society, ruled by a French speaking militaristic aristocracy, above an illiterate English speaking peasantry. The leading class saw religion as an all-prevailing and powerful element and at the same time was moving towards greater refinement and *courtoisie*, which was helped by the revival of Arthurian romance, emphasising the habits of chivalry in the

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1 Spearing, A.C., "Poetic Identity", in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, pp. 36..

2 Riddy, Felicity, "Jewels in *Pearl*", in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan, *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 148.

3 The theory of common authorship will be discussed later on.

4 Stansbury, Sarah, "The *Gawain-Poet*", in Scanlon, Larry, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 16-18.

5 Burrow, J.A., *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain-Poet*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 2.

English courts.<sup>6</sup> People used vernacular English for everyday purposes but, since no standard tradition had yet emerged and competence in French and Latin was restricted by economic and social status and gender, regional dialects were accepted all over the country, in a climate of high linguistic tolerance, especially in the city of London.<sup>7</sup> Only from the 1420s did some government offices begin to use English in documents, with a consequent need for regularisation in spelling and grammar.<sup>8</sup> Langland's *Piers Plowman* is a clear proof of this high level of tolerance: the use of the alliterative form did not inhibit the circulation of the poem and many manuscripts still survive in different locations. He, unlike the author I will deal with in this thesis, managed to have a large readership. Other examples prove the possible familiarity with this archaic form of poetry all over England: the *Siege of Jerusalem*, in the same dialect as *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* but surviving – though in a fragmented way – in seven manuscripts; *Alexander and Dindinus*, whose still existing lines can be found in a richly illuminated manuscript which belonged to a Lord in London in the late Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup>

The alliterative poetry that spread in the fourteenth century, indeed, was written in the archaic verse in the dialect of the Northwest Midlands, but often reached audiences outside its dialect area and became a national rather than a regional phenomenon, becoming popular even in London<sup>10</sup>. This alliterative revival developed around the middle of the fourteenth century and probably originated in rural baronial halls.<sup>11</sup> It had a short

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6 Wilkinson, Bertie, *The Later Middle Ages in England*, London: Longmans 1969, pp. 3-20.

7 Putter, Ad, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet*, London: Longman, 1996, p. 24.

8 Scase, Wendy, "Re-inventing the Vernacular: Middle English Language and its Literature", in Larry Scanlon ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 21.

9 Putter, pp. 30-31.

10 Putter, p. 29.

11 Wilkinson, p. 227.

life, quickly dying out in the first decades of the following century.<sup>12</sup> Rather than a proper revival, it was a revitalisation of the traditional English poetic technique in an altered form, and it developed in contrast with the iambic pentameter of the London school of Chaucer and Gower, which eventually established itself as the main poetic English style in the following decades.<sup>13</sup> The best known representatives of the alliterative revival are Langland and the anonymous *Gawain*-poet. Between the two, the *Gawain*-poet was the one who apparently did not reach great popularity, either among his contemporaries or among the following generations: Dunbar, who lived only a generation later, lists all the great poets worthy of admiration,<sup>14</sup> but does not include in his record the *Gawain*-poet, despite the unquestionable value of his works.<sup>15</sup> This proves how little his poetry was known even in the years in which he should have been at the peak of his success. In retrospect, the survival of a single manuscript, of both *Saint Erkenwald* and the other group of poems, leads twentieth century scholars to accept the obvious unpopularity of this author. The nature of the manuscripts themselves – the fact that they lack important decoration and were mixed with miscellaneous material – suggests they were meant for use and not for prestigious display.<sup>16</sup>

A problem scholars have faced when dealing with the works of this poet is that, among the members of the alliterative school, there are strong similarities and back then imitation and artistic loan were commonly accepted, which causes difficulties in attributing the texts, especially keeping in mind that the current concept of authorship was

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12 Putter, p. 27.

13 Burrow, p. 3.

14 Dunbar, William, *The Lament for the Makars*, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/conlee-dunbar-complete-works-poems-devotional-and-moral>, (accessed 23 November 2016).

15 Gardner, John, ed., *The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. 5.

16 Peterson, Clifford, ed., *Saint Erkenwald*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977, p. 11.

ages away from being born.<sup>17</sup> The general anonymity of the texts is the echo of an attitude of pious humility derived from religious beliefs.<sup>18</sup> Authorship can rarely be identified. Often authors were clerics, who were among the few literate ones and received an education sufficient to write. The poems generally attributed to the *Gawain*-poet are *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Critics have been debating whether we should also add to the list *Saint Erkenwald*, which, apart from offering a city setting, presents many other elements in common to the other works of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, such as the same use of verse forms and narrative framing, propensity for balance and symmetry, key themes.<sup>19</sup> Several studies agree in identifying the dialect of the above-mentioned poems as that of the Cheshire area, even if variations are present in orthography and morphology in each one of them. This fact may be attributed to the lack of standardised conventions and consequently to the fact that the scribes responsible for their transcription were not trained to write according to a set of commonly agreed upon rules: the natural variations of the spoken language were not concealed.<sup>20</sup> Assuming the exactness of the result of their research, it is uncanny that the Western Midlands area produced such a complex author: a sparsely populated and economically underdeveloped area,<sup>21</sup> it had a reputation for tolerated violence and there were no prominent nobility and few large monastic establishments, circumstances which made the region not the ideal *milieu* for a strong literary culture. However, a substantial

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17 Savage, Henry L., ed., *St. Erkenwald: A Middle English Poem*, Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1972, p. XLVI.

18 Newhauser, Richard, "Religious Writing: Hagiography, Pastoralia, Devotional and Contemplative Works", in Scanlon, Larry, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 38.

19 Andrew, Malcolm, "Theories of Authorship", in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 28.

20 Scase, p. 14.

21 Putter, p. 23.

number of local men rose into national prominence in the years of King Richard's reign: some were selected as his own personal bodyguards and others were chosen for an important expedition in Ireland in 1394.<sup>22</sup> No-one could have remained unaffected by this increasing mobility. A poet in the Middle Ages always had in mind the audience he is writing for, the idea of writing for oneself was still far away from the common man's mind. Therefore the choice of vernacular English does not match the theological themes of the texts: an audience educated enough to understand such contents would have been able to understand Latin.<sup>23</sup> The audience the author had in mind was certainly aristocratic, well-read and informed, a combination that seems to have been rather improbable in the Western Midlands.

All considered, it has been suggested that maybe the poems were written for an expatriate audience, away from Cheshire, and that the king may have played the role of patron.<sup>24</sup> London, however, is always presented by the anonymous author as something far away and he seems to be much more familiar with rural life, as proved by the various natural images and the detailed vocabulary of practical activities present in his works.<sup>25</sup> Contradictions appear often in the attempt to identify an author of such beautifully crafted texts and no solution seems possible. Even the theory of common authorship of the poems wavers. In particular *Saint Erkenwald* is often left out of the collections of the works by the *Gawain*-poet, for its presence in a different manuscript and its slightly divergent theme, in addition to the orthographical variations it presents. The absence of an identifiable textual community and the fact that modern readers have to

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22 Bennet, Michael J., "The Historical Background", in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, pp. 72.75.

23 Gardner, p. 14.

24 Burrow, p. 12.

25 Gardner, p. 10.

guess at the sources the author used inhibit any further supposition about the poems.<sup>26</sup>

## 1.2 Religious Circumstances

In this general climate of linguistic disorientation and change, a religious new ideal emerged and somehow helped identifying the rising English language. The decadence of the Papal Curia in Rome affected the ranks of the clergy all over Europe and the standards of education among priests in the more rural parishes were incredibly low. At the same time the laity achieved greater sophistication and education and asked for a revitalisation of religion: the progress of the Church was disappointing in comparison with the general level of civilisation in the country.<sup>27</sup> In the fourteenth century, anti-clericalism reached unprecedented heights. In this climate, John Wyclif (b. 1330) started to condemn the recent ills of the Church and quickly gained a lot of support.<sup>28</sup> In the final decades of the fourteenth century, Lollardy – the religious movement he started – became a major phenomenon in England, opposing heterodox beliefs to the general orthodox doctrine. Anticipating in many different ways the principles of the Reformation, Wyclif attacked the intermediary role of the priest in the communion between God and men, by extension starting a debate on the necessity of the sacraments – in particular of the Eucharist – in the path to salvation and suggesting a private and direct reading of the Scripture.<sup>29</sup> His most important achievement was the first complete translation of the Bible in vernacular English, together with a number of didactic writings and polemical articles aimed at the clergy: these works were crucial for the development of the English

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26 Putter, p. 28.

27 Wilkinson, p. 31.

28 Wilkinson, pp. 205-227, 327-330.

29 Sisk, Jennifer L., "The Uneasy Orthodoxy of 'St. Erkenwald'", *ELH*, 74 (2007), pp. 90-93.



prose and managed to achieve a new higher status for the language.<sup>30</sup> Lollardy, in order to be effective, needed to regularise the vernacular as much as possible, pushing the English prose above dialect boundaries. This effort for translation wanted to fight the use of Latin among the clergy, which the Lollards believed served the Church's interests and allowed them not to be challenged by the English speaking lay-people.<sup>31</sup> Despite the effort put into changing the old pattern of Catholicism, along the years Lollardy remained a humble sect with little scholarship and almost no aristocratic support and consequently conservatism once again triumphed at the end. The ideas suggested by Wyclif and his followers were clearly too far in advance of the times to have a larger impact on society and on the general architecture of the Church.

It is almost certain that the author(s) of *Saint Erkenwald* and *Pearl* lived in the same years in which the debate of Lollardy developed: this had a strong impact on the interpretation of the poems. *Saint Erkenwald* states both the fundamental role of the bishop and that of the sacrament, proving that the salvation of the pagan judge would have been impossible without them. The dream vision of *Pearl*, on the other hand, states once again the importance of the sacrament and then it seems to lay great emphasis on the necessity of an intermediary in the process of biblical reading and of the interpretation of God's divine plan and will. An informed reader, whether from the Middle Ages or modern, can't help but seeing an orthodox response to Lollardy in these two poems.<sup>32</sup> As stated before, no medieval author writes for himself or herself, but he or she always has in mind a specific audience and a specific context: we can suppose our poet had in mind an aristocratic audience, quite educated and certainly aware of the recent threats to

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30 Wilkinson, p. 226.

31 Scase, p. 22.

32 Sisk, p. 90.

the old religious pattern. We can assume as well that such an audience was quite conservative, even if some might have been against the still-standing papal taxations paid to Rome. The conclusion at this point would be that the author was a conscious traditionalist, a representative of medieval Christianity, together with a chivalric social morality, trying to endorse and advertise orthodoxy in a moment of conflict. Another possibility is that his patron, if he had one, wanted to reach this goal, and so the writer followed those instructions and served that purpose with his creations.

Before moving on to the analysis of the poems, some other notions about the process of christianisation are important in order to set the specific context of *Saint Erkenwald*. First of all, the text shows the contradiction of a thirteenth century saint incorporated in the seventh century context of the New Work carried out on the church of Saint Paul. This will be later discussed in detail, but for the some moment some elucidation is required. Christianisation is the dialogue between Christianity and classical Paganism that started in the first centuries AD as a consequence of the contact between the two different forms of spirituality. Obviously, Christianity prevailed and the information we have nowadays belongs to the winning party: no counter narrative is available, if not for some minor instances.<sup>33</sup> In the early years of Christianity, conversion was something imposed from above or from the outside, that is to say by the conquest by a new people with a new religion or by decision of the ruler. Rarely was conversion a spontaneous movement from within a community, finding no obstacle in its acceptance. As far as England is concerned, after the Anglo-Saxons conquered its territory, Pope Gregory sent Augustine of Canterbury, among other missionaries to the island in order to convert

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<sup>33</sup> Petts, David, *Pagan and Christian: Religious Change in Early Medieval Europe*, London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011, p. 14.

those people. This is the background to *Saint Erkenwald*, assuming the author was aware of the contradictory nature of his choice of setting. An attentive reading by Cindy Vitto, has advanced the hypothesis that the increasing interest in the salvation of Pagans was due to the more recent contact with the Muslims.<sup>34</sup> The prophet Mohammed is indeed quoted in the poem *Saint Erkenwald*. The issue caught popular imagination and it is possible that the author of the poem evoked a past historical moment in which Catholicism clearly won, on behalf of a growing hope for another success against the alien culture.

### **1.3 *Saint Erkenwald***

The poem *Saint Erkenwald* was neglected for a long time, both by contemporaries of the author and by scholars of the following generations and as a consequence the background information we have is very limited. Nevertheless it has attracted the attention of many academics in the last decades and it has had a considerable impact on the study of medieval English literature. It has reached modern times in a single copy, apparently without connection to any other work of the period, leaving space for many theories about its birth.

The manuscript is dated 1477 but critics agree it is a much later work than the poem itself. In 1386 the bishop of London Robert Braybrooke (1336-1404) ordered the *translatio* of the body of Saint Erkenwald, and in 1393 he established new festivities to honour him, as a remedy to the fact that this particular saint had been forgotten by English people.<sup>35</sup> The *translatio* events were very important moments for medieval com-

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34 Vitto, Cindy L., "The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature", *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 79 (1989), pp. 33-37.

35 Peterson, pp. 11-14.

munities, celebrated all over Europe but particularly felt in England.<sup>36</sup> Therefore the poem may have been composed specifically for these celebrations or may have become popular only towards the end of the fourteenth century, despite having existed for quite some time, thanks to the revival of the story of this saint. In any case, Saint Erkenwald was relatively unknown up to those years and so we can trace back the birth of the poem to the last decades of the fourteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

The poem narrates the discovery of a miraculously preserved body found in a crypt of the church of Saint Paul in London. The tomb is a beautiful work of art, richly carved in expensive marble and decorated with golden – incomprehensible – runes, but the real wonder is the corpse inside it: the body defies natural law and is not decomposed at all, neither in the flesh nor in the garments. Its clothes are those associated with the most eminent personalities of the Middle Ages: a crown, a sceptre, a golden belt, a fur mantle and precious jewels. Workers, laypeople and representatives of the city's government are not able to find out the identity of the man. Libraries and popular tradition are of no help. At last, the famous bishop Erkenwald is called as the last resort. He carefully concludes his duties as a clergyman before going to the crypt. He does not believe he possesses the wisdom to uncover that mystery, he simply prays God to be given guidance in such an unusual matter. Approaching the corpse, he invokes the Holy Ghost and something exceptional happens: the dead body speaks. He explains he was a good man but, being an unbaptised and unknowing pagan judge, his good behaviour could not grant him access to the banquet of heaven and so he is stuck in limbo, waiting for something to change his fate. The whole crowd is moved to tears by his suffering: at this point the

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36 McAlindon, T., "Hagiography into Art: A Study on 'St. Erkenwald'", *Studies in Philology*, 67 (1970), p. 473.

37 Savage, p. LXXV.

tears of the bishop casually fall on the body exactly in the moment in which the bishop is calling for the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Baptism unexpectedly takes place and the gates of the realm of God are opened for the soul of the pagan, whose material corpse and tomb instantly dissolve, leaving the audience even more stunned than before.

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All the possible sources that shall be considered here in this research may have nevertheless caught the poet's attention not in their original form but through secondary arrangements, such as comments or translations. These theories have been validated on several occasions by a considerable number of critics, but they are and will remain tentative, given the little background knowledge of the manuscript.

As previously said, no direct source for the poem can be identified. The theme of the uncorrupted body and the Trajan-Gregory legend are general common motifs in medieval texts, brought together by the creative work of the author.<sup>39</sup> The author also made the text relevant to English tradition by adding references to the popular English narratives of the founding of New Troy by Brutus, the conquest by the Anglo-Saxons and the arrival of Augustine of Canterbury in England. Several Latin *vitae* of Erkenwald have been considered but none of them contains any reference to the miracle narrated in this poem.<sup>40</sup> This hagiography seems to be a composite of a number of different traditions, connected by the creative mind of a well-read poet. Mentions of the bishop can be found in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*:<sup>41</sup> according to this text, he founded

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38 All the extracts and references from the poem are taken from the following edition: *Saint Erkenwald* (Peterson, Clifford, ed.), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977.

39 Peterson, p. 42.

40 Savage, p. LXXV.

41 Bede's most popular work, dated back to about 731 AD. Its five books narrate the history of England, from the conquest by Caesar in 55 BC. up to Bede's own days. It contains accounts of the major Christian personalities of those years, such as Augustine, Gregory and many Christian kings; it also deals with the general development of the Church among the people of the island, with all its defeats and successes.

two abbeys and was named bishop of London around 675. Given that Bede and Erkenwald must have been contemporaries, we can assume the accuracy of his account.<sup>42</sup> The same source contains information about the Anglo-Saxon king Hengest (line 7), about Augustine of Canterbury and his landing in England (line 12). Belinus, Brennius (line 213), and Brutus (line 207) belong instead to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. They are mentioned by the corpse as references to the span of time in which the pagan lived, presenting however a quite contradictory historical frame. The New Work – which consisted in a series of renovations carried out on the London church of Saint Paul and is said to have taken place in the thirteenth century – is mentioned by John Flete in his *History of Westminster Abbey*<sup>43</sup> and is quoted in the poem as well, providing another example of anachronism.<sup>44</sup> Brutus is indeed believed to have lived around 800 BC while Belinus and Brennius belong to the fourth century BC: the life of the judge is to be set sometime between these two periods without any other precise limitation. On the other hand, while the bishop Erkenwald must have lived in the seventh century, the New Work took place in the thirteenth and so he could not have witnessed it. Whether this lack of attention for historical setting was meant or not is widely debated. First of all historic perception was not at all like that of modern times: no scientific method was adopted and accuracy of dates and timelines was unachievable. Monmouth's *Historia* is a clear proof of such inaccurate attitude, for example. In the specific case of *Saint Erkenwald*, considering the number of scholarly sources quoted in the poem, the choice was likely deliberate. It is possible that the author wanted to estab-

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42 Peterson, p. 35.

43 It consists in a history of the abbey from 184 to 1386. Flete was a monk and an historian who lived in the first half of the fifteenth century.

44 Davidson, Arnold E., "Mystery, Miracle, and Meaning in 'St. Erkenwald'", *Papers on Language and Literature*, 16 (1980), p. 39.

lish a setting that caught the audience's attention because of its paradoxical nature.

As far as the possible sources for the poem are concerned, a less canonical one used as inspiration for *Saint Erkenwald* is the Gospel of Nicodemus: it contains the major guidelines for the outline of the Harrowing of Hell (mentioned explicitly at line 291). Though the tradition established itself in the early age of Christianity and for some time was accepted as part of the Catholic dogma, it was never part of the canonically authorised texts of the Church.<sup>45</sup> This apocryphal Gospel was popular in medieval Europe: even a Middle English stanzaic version of it circulated.<sup>46</sup> As for the topic of the Harrowing and that of the connected *Limbus Patrum* (line 292), the *Gawain*-poet may have relied on oral tradition as well.<sup>47</sup> The general tradition of the Harrowing of Hell involves a few recurring elements: a mortal hero who descends to the underworld and faces many perils on his way in order to recover the souls of the damned. It is implied that there are two rulers of the world, a good and a bad one. Another implication is that the other-world is the place where the spirits of the dead go and exist after death. The Christian tradition hinted at in the New Testament and largely exposed in the Gospel of Nicodemus narrates the descent of Christ into Hell in the days between his death and resurrection.<sup>48</sup>

51At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split 52 and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.53 They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. (Matthew 27:52) <sup>49</sup>

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45 The Gospel of Nicodemus contains narratives about the trial, Passion, resurrection and descent into hell of Christ. It is found in two versions, Latin and Greek, which diverge highly, making it hardly impossible to come down to a unique text. In the council of Trent of 1558, it was placed among the forbidden books. The source for this is: Klauck, Hans-Joseph, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction*, London: Clark International, 2003, pp. 88-97

46 Marx, C. William, *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in Literature of Medieval England*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995, p. 88.

47 Savage, p. XXXI.

48 Burstein, Sona Rosa, "The Harrowing of Hell", *Folklore*, 39 (1928), pp. 113-132.

49 All biblical extracts are drawn from the New International Version.

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. 19 After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits 20 to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. (1Peter 3:18-21)

(Chapter 19) 1 Then Jesus stretched forth his hand, and said, Come to me, all ye my saints, who were created in my image, who were condemned by the tree of forbidden fruit, and by the devil and death; 2 Live now by the wood of my cross; the devil, the prince of this world, is overcome, and death is conquered. 3 Then presently all the saints were joined together under the hand of the most high God; and the Lord Jesus laid hold on Adam's hand and said to him, Peace be to thee, and all thy righteous posterity, which is mine. [...]

(Chapter 20) 1 Then the Lord holding Adam by the hand, delivered him to Michael the archangel; and he led them into Paradise, filled with mercy and glory. (From the Gospel of Nicodemus)

It appears from these extracts that there is no clear indication that any other soul, except for that of Adam, was saved or baptised during the Harrowing. It is a confusing aspect, in contrast with the other more orthodox ideals that the poet seems to describe throughout his works.

All these affiliations with different texts make it quite impossible to consider the poem a simple hagiography.<sup>50</sup> A hagiography usually consists only of the narration of a single event in the life of a saint, which has a particular moral lesson.<sup>51</sup> However, elements of the *inventio* tradition can be recognized in the poem too: indeed we follow the discovery of a spectacular holy relic whose nature can only be uncovered with divine help. Here, surprisingly, the body is not that of a saint, a king or a queen, as it is usual in the *inventio* tradition, but it belongs to an unbaptised pagan judge: the text defies all common expectations about the genre. Another playful unexpected element is precisely the former occupation of the corpse: the average late medieval audience was familiar with legal professionals being at the centre of satirical attack rather than the focus of a

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50 Davidson, p. 37.

51 Vitto, p. 51.



positive moral lesson.<sup>52</sup>

It has already been indicated that no account of such a miracle performed by Erkenwald has reached modern times and so other possible origins have been investigated. A highly likely antecedent is the tradition of the Trajan-Gregory legend. In medieval times it was a common *exemplum* of justice and humility. Many versions of this legend are still available, all offering different approaches to the theme of the salvation of a pagan at the hands of an influential Christian figure. Among all these versions, the one which resembles the English poem most is that offered by Jacopo Della Lana in his *Commentario* to Dante's *Divina Commedia*.<sup>53</sup> Representatives of Italian banking houses and merchants from Genoa and Florence were registered in London starting from the 1220's.<sup>54</sup> They constituted a quite rich and sophisticated community so it is possible that Della Lana's work might have reached the English soil through them, up to the author of *Saint Erkenwald* and *Pearl*. On the other hand, only in the instance of the English poem does the Trajan-Gregory legend involve some saint other than Pope Gregory the Great and an anonymous judge in Trajan's place.<sup>55</sup> Even in later years there is no account of something similar to this and because of this we can safely assume that this brief hagiography did not catch the public's attention and was left absolutely isolated.<sup>56</sup>

While all the other antecedents from the poem are freely revised, starting from line 19, the poet offers a list of former pagan temples, renamed under Christianity: records

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52 Sisk, p. 94.

53 Della Lana was an Italian academic who lived in Bologna around the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He was the first one to gloss Dante's masterpiece from end to beginning, a work that required four years between 1324 and 1328. He saw the *Commedia* as an encyclopedic didascallic work and he took upon himself the task of explaining every detail of it. The source for this is: Della Lana, Jacopo, *Commento alla 'Commedia'* (Volpi, Mirko; Terzi, Arianna eds.), Roma: Salerno, 2009, pp. 1135-1137.

54 Wilkinson, p. 9.

55 Hulbert, James Root, "The Sources of 'Saint Erkenwald' and 'The Trental of Gregory'", *Modern Philology*, 16 (1919), p. 489.

56 Peterson, p. 38.

of some of these ascriptions belong, again, to John Flete's work. According to this document, a temple dedicated to Apollo may have really been found on the same spot where the church of Saint Paul is (line 19), the parish church of Westminster was dedicated to Saint Margaret (line 20) and the abbey itself had a chapel dedicated to Mary Magdalene (line 20). The account provided in the poem could actually be realistic. Moreover, it is possible that in Anglo-Saxon England there was a coincidence between important religious sites and secular centres and so London may have counted a number of pagan temples.<sup>57</sup> Lines 19-24 offer the names of popular Roman divinities and Christian characters, substituted with one another in general terms. No specific reference is offered: these few verses may refer to the general process of christianisation that took place after the re-establishment of Christianity. All this renaming, as has been pointed out by Jennifer Sisk in her article "The Uneasy Orthodoxy of *St. Erkenwald*",<sup>58</sup> is led by alliteration: it is just a nominal substitution and that does not seem particularly effective.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the text, great attention is given to names. No character is only hinted at, everything is precisely detailed. The pagan judge undergoes a different treatment: despite being baptised, he is given no new Christian name and his real identity remains unknown as well. Not even the runes on his tomb (line 52) are translated once the mystery is uncovered. Despite being the pivotal point of the text, the pagan is a character we inexplicably know very little about. Of Erkenwald the audience is told he was bishop in London (lines 3-4), that he was preaching in an abbey in Essex when he was sent for (line 108) and even that the horse he rode to the crypt was white (line 112). No equivalent space is given however to the other character of the poem, the one who earned sal-

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57 Savage, p. 87.

58 Sisk, pp. 89-115.

59 Sisk, p. 89.

vation through his own good actions and deserved a special treatment on the part of God. The title of the poem was written on the manuscript itself: it varied between *De Erkenwaldo* or *De Sancto Erkenwaldo*, depending on the page.<sup>60</sup> The focus is without a doubt on the bishop, not on the judge. The actions of both men are remarkable and meaningful for the Christian community, but the character whose role is highlighted most is Erkenwald: this may be read as an example of the anti-Lollardy propaganda that the texts presumably offer.

Next, the space allowed to the pagan to describe his situation is quite large,<sup>61</sup> he responds however only to the orders of the priest, answering point by point all his questions, never going off topic. He is given little freedom after the Holy Ghost has allowed him the ability to speak once again: his subordination to the representative of the clergy is in this way clearly stated. Even the first words of the corpse recognize the importance of the Church and that of the bishop, setting a precise attitude about religious matters.<sup>62</sup>

“Bishopp,” quoþ þis ilke body, “þi bode is me dere.  
I may not bot boghe to þi bone for bothe myn eghen;  
to þe name þou neuenyd has and nournet me after  
al heuen and helle heldes to and erthe bitwene.” (Lines 193-196 )

The first half of the poem – up to line 177 – is dedicated to the description of the setting, the action starts only at a later stage. In the manuscript, the break between lines 177 and 178 is larger than usual: a structural division may have been intended at this point.<sup>63</sup>

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60 Savage, p. V.

61 Lines: 193-216; 225-256; 265-272; 283-308.

62 Whatley, Gordon, "Heathens and Saints: *St. Erkenwald* in its Legendary Context", *Speculum*, 61 (1986), p. 341.

63 Peterson, p. 26.

## 1.4 *Pearl*

In his poem *Concordia*, carmelite friar Richard Maidstone (b. 1396) offers an account of the 1392 royal entry staged in London for King Richard II and his wife Queen Anne.<sup>64</sup> The city was decorated to look like the biblical city of New Jerusalem, following the descriptions found in the Book of Revelation: king and queen were celebrated as the Bride of the Lamb and as the Lamb of God, while entering the city in a grand procession.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the Wilton Diptych, believed to be painted three years later in commemoration of Queen Anne's death (1394), once again represents on the one side the image of the Virgin with the queen's features and on the other the king, kneeling among John the Baptist, Edward the Confessor and Edmund the Martyr.<sup>66</sup> Considering that the poem *Pearl* is written in French-derived octosyllabic verse and that Richard II was known for his francophilia and his fascination with luxury, it has been suggested that the anonymous poem *Pearl* may have been written on the occasion of Queen Anne's death as an offer to the grieving husband. While the topic of the poem is rather virtuous, the choice of the Cheshire dialect may be due to the fact that the monarch had chosen many Cheshiremen to be part of his court, and one among them may have wanted to pay him homage.<sup>67</sup> These are mere speculations about the birth of the poem, no-one will ever be able to tell whether the loss described in *Pearl* is that of a real father – potentially the author himself – or it refers indeed to that of king Richard II. Another possibility is that the death of the child is totally fictional, just a pretext to introduce the theme of salvation, giving

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64 Maidstone, Richard, "Concordia" (Rigg, A.G., translator; Carlson, David R., ed.), <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/rigg-and-carlson-maidstone-concordia>, (accessed 20 November 2016).

65 Bowers, John M., *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet: New Perspectives on Medieval Literature*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012, p. 103.

66 "The Wilton Diptych", <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/english-or-french-the-wilton-diptych>, (accessed 25 October 2016).

67 Bowers, pp. 105-115.

the poem a didactic rather than a consolatory function.<sup>68</sup> Apart from any other conjecture about its possible birth, the text's nature has long been debated as well: it deals with deep theological matters but its courtly references and its quest-like structure make it difficult to place it under a specific genre. The theme of the loss seems to make it a part of the *consolatio* tradition: the Pearl, even if long lost, has not permanently disappeared, she still lives though in another dimension, as made clear in the following lines:

That juel þenne, in gemmeȝ gente,  
Vered vp her vyse wyth yȝen graye,  
Set on hyr coron of perle orient,  
And soberly after þenne con ho say:  
"Sir, ȝe haf your tale mysetente,  
To say your perle is al awaye  
þat is in cofer so comly clente  
As in þis gardyn gracios gaye,  
Hereinne to lenge for euer and play,  
þer mys nee mornynge com never nere.  
Her were a forser for þe, in faye,  
If þou were a gentyl jueler. ( Lines 253-264) <sup>69</sup>

The poem also offers answers to important Christian theological questions, such as the fate of young children who die before practising the precepts of the Church. This would make it an educational narrative with catechisation purposes rather than a consolatory text. Moreover, the features of Italian and French courtly poetry such as the river, the love garden, the hints at feudal hierarchy, the theme of possession and that of the quest, belong to courtly literature and seem to appeal to a more secular audience.<sup>70</sup>

Above all these guesses, the poem certainly belongs to the genre of the dream vision. Dreams were an extremely common topic in the Middle Ages and were usually divided between good ones – true visions sent by God – and bad ones – disturbances sent

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68 Watts, Victor ed., *Pearl: A Modernised Version of the Middle English Poem by Victor Watts*, London: Enitharmon University Press, 2006., pp. 9-14.

69 This and all the following extracts and references from this poem are taken from: *The Gawain-Poet, The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Malcolm, Andrew; Waldron, Ronald, eds.), Exeter Devon: University of Exeter Press, 1996.

70 Gardner, p. 20-28.

by the Devil, projecting false sights. The main antecedent for this tradition is the Book of Revelation of the New Testament: the protagonist of the book, who calls himself John, tells how he was gifted by God with a vision whose content had to be passed on to the Churches all over the world. This book has a lot of importance for the Christian tradition and consequently it has had a large impact on literary culture in Europe. The genre that eventually sprang, taking inspiration from this book, placed much weight on both the psychological and physical distress experienced by the dreamer throughout and after the vision: the protagonist would indeed be crossing the boundaries of the real world towards a middle realm that would allow them to explore internal human conflicts. The general frame of the dream vision always entails a high level of ambiguity which is rarely solved, as the poem *Pearl* itself proves.<sup>71</sup> In *Pearl* it is also possible to recognize features of the debate tradition that reached the Middle Ages from the late antiquity. Debate was in fact a common practice in medieval Europe: public disputations often took place and rhetoric was a milestone in the training of scholars and public figures.<sup>72</sup> People were therefore acquainted with perceiving contradicting elements at once, it was a sign of intelligence and education, not a proof of unawareness about a certain topic. The frame of the dream and that of the debate were often tied together: this combination, present in this poem as well as in many others, certainly cannot be considered original but the mix of elements with a very different nature is for sure the author's own work.<sup>73</sup>

In the Middle Ages it was believed that numerology and order were God-given

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71 Kruger, Steven F., "Dialogue, Debate, and Dream Vision", in Scanlon, Larry ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 77-80.

72 Bennet, p. 76.

73 Gardner, p. 20.

schemes always recognizable in the natural world by an attentive eye. In *Pearl* great attention is paid to numbers, symmetry, and structure.<sup>74</sup> Everything is carefully crafted to highlight the circular nature of the poem. The text consists of 101 twelve-line stanzas with alliterative concatenation and a recurring rhyme scheme, which make up a total of 1212 lines. This framework recalls the design of the beads of a rosary that overlap at the hook: as the object is meant for meditation, the poem seems to have the same function.

*Pearl* begins with the description of the pain felt by a man at the loss of his precious gem in a garden. Just like the unsatisfied desire that was the focal point of the *troubadour's* tradition, here the same longing is projected onto what is presumably the young daughter of the man. Quickly, the *locus operandi* switches from the corporeal world to the spiritual one.<sup>75</sup> The protagonist falls asleep and something extraordinary happens: his spirit leaves his body and embarks on a quest. Grief gives space to marvel and the decaying images of natural elements disappear, in favour of unchanging stones and gems. The perception of the dreamer already starts to fail:

More of wele watz in þat wyse  
 þen I cowþe telle þaʒ I tom hade,  
 For vrþely herte myʒt not suffyſe  
 To þe tenþe dole of þo gladnez glade.  
 Forþy I þoʒt that paradyſe  
 Watz þer ouer gayn þo bonkez brade;  
 I hoped þat water were a deuyſe  
 Bytwene myrþez by merez made (Lines 133-140)

In this other-worldly scene, a child appears: just like the landscape, she is so beautiful that words cannot properly describe her. The dreamer soon identifies her as the “pearl” he had long lost, someone to him “nerre þen aunte or nece”(line 233): nothing more do we know about the relationship between them. The two start a dialogue that seems to be

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74 Martin, Priscilla, “Allegory and Symbolism”, in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 319.

75 Blenkeir, Louis, “The Theological Structure of ‘*Pearl*’”, *Traditio*, 24 (1968), p. 50.

spoken in two different languages and consequently they struggle to understand each other, constantly having to rephrase their thoughts in order for the message to get through. While the Pearl's perception of things is supra-natural, that of the dreamer is earth-bound, linked to physical senses and not suited for those celestial circumstances. Everything the child says seems too complicated to the dreamer, like a series of riddles he cannot answer; everything he says is a terrible mistake for the young girl. The gap between the two consciousnesses is impossible to fill.<sup>76</sup> To try and partially bridge this divergence, the maiden frequently adopts metaphors and approaches the man with a scholastic point-by-point method. The other solution adopted in this conversation is the use of courtly language: this dimension is the only one the man can understand, already being familiar with it in this world. The hierarchy imposed by feudal order on earth is the same one applied in heaven, which is not pictured as an egalitarian society, despite what a modern reader might expect.<sup>77</sup> In this divine order, the Pearl is no longer a subordinate child, even if she still looks like one, but she is a bride of God, at the top of heavenly hierarchy, someone who is given exceptional wisdom and grace. The dreamer is confused by this inversion of roles: he used to take care of that infant, to teach her and guide her. Now he is the one who needs to be mentored in that unknown reality and he cannot grasp the reason why. The courtly language adopted in these circumstances poses many contradictions: it is deprived of its sexual overtones but it is applied both onto the relation of the father and his daughter and to that of the Pearl and God.<sup>78</sup> Both objects of desire – respectively the Pearl and God – cannot be reached, just like the beautiful wo-

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76 Bullon-Fernandez, Maria, "Courtly and Religious Desire in 'Pearl'", *Studies in Philology*, 91 (1994), p. 36.

77 Watson, Nicholas, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian", in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 303.

78 Bullon-Fernandez, pp. 42-49.



men of courtly tradition. Moreover, the poem does not culminate in union but rather in loss, just as it often happened in the narratives of the *troubadours*.

This dialogue between the narrator and the Pearl is only preparatory for what comes next: the vision of the New Jerusalem, the realm of God that will descend on earth after the Judgement (lines 985-1168).<sup>79</sup> At this point the audience is projected into a third dimension, in an increasing order of perfection: the narrator has already portrayed a picture of Earth, then that of a terrestrial paradise and now he describes heaven. The main source for this description is clearly the New Testament's Revelation of Saint John: though the image of heaven offered in the Scripture is originally quite grotesque, medieval tradition had made it more beautiful and romantic in order to appeal more to the average medieval reader.<sup>80</sup> At this stage, the senses of the dreamer become even weaker than before because what he witnesses is usually forbidden to living creatures and is meant to be experienced only by the souls of dead deserving Christians.

I stod as stulle as dased quayle  
For ferly of þat frech fygure,  
þat felde I nawþer reste ne trauayle,  
So watz I rauyste wyth glymme pure.  
For I dar say, wyth conciens sure,  
Hade bodyly burne abiden þat bone,  
þaʒ alle clerkez hym hade in cure,  
His lyf wer loste anvnder mone. (Lines 1085-1092)

The first impression of the man who is shown the Godly City of New Jerusalem duplicates in many ways the descriptions of heaven that Dante provides in his *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. If the author of these two poems – *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* – is indeed the same, it is likely that the same glossed version of the *Divina Commedia* used as an inspiration for *Saint Erkenwald* was adopted for the celestial pictures of *Pearl*.<sup>81</sup>

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79 Rev 21:1-27.

80 Field, Rosalind, "The Heavenly Jerusalem in *Pearl*", *The Modern Language Review*, 81 (1986), p. 7.

81 See chapter 5.1 and 5.2, pp. 85-96.

What happens after the narrator is allowed a vision of heaven is the punishment every overreacher is handed. Led by his human greed, the protagonist tries to cross the river that separates him from the heavenly procession and doing so he commits the major sin of overstepping the limits set by God. The vision he is allowed is already beyond what he deserves and so he should have been content with it. But his earth-bound desire pushes him to his Pearl and consequently he is punished by being sent back to earthly reality. The fall he experiences has both courtly and religious connotations: he suffers once again for the loss of his loved one and he is also denied participation to God's banquet.<sup>82</sup>

The anonymous dreamer wakes up in the same garden where he first fell asleep. Nothing around him has changed but a conversion has taken place inside him:<sup>83</sup> he has understood that in order to achieve salvation and peace he has to give up his earthly desire for the Pearl and find sufficiency and consolation in the divine rather than in the earthly possession of her.<sup>84</sup> His initial despair was due to the fact that he could not apply Christian Catholic values to his own grief, but at the end of the poem he understands the importance of exercising the doctrine in order to overcome earthly life's difficulties. He develops from a limited view of reality to a larger comprehension of the order that God has established on Earth. The gravity of his original pain was also a consequence of the fact that, being somehow resentful of God's plan of taking away the child, he felt abandoned while what the poem seems to suggest at the end is that finally the man has reached communion with God thanks to the gift his Grace.<sup>85</sup>

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82 Bullon-Fernandez, p. 36.

83 Malcolm, Andrew; Waldron Ronald, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Exeter Devon: University of Exeter Press, 1996, p. 35.

84 Newhauser, Richard, "Sources II: Scriptural and Devotional Sources", in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 268.

85 Blenkeir, Louis, "The Theological Structure of 'Pearl'", *Traditio*, 24 (1968), p. 52.

Throughout the poem the reader tends to identify with the narrator. While the Pearl is without a doubt a creature above human experience we cannot identify with, the male character is a representative of human experience. Especially at the beginning of the poem, the audience can understand his pain at the loss of a child and the awe in front of the heavenly vision. As the narrative proceeds, however, the gap between character and reader becomes larger and the reader starts to understand more than the dreamer does. This gap serves the purpose of teaching the Christian community a lesson about the greatness of the wisdom of God in contrast with the limitations of human intelligence. Though the man is quite stereotypical and the presumed ideal reader of the text should be more prepared than him, people are shown that the tools we are given to perceive things in this world are not enough to understand divine truth. The reader understands the mistakes the dreamer makes in his assumptions about the reality he witnesses and the answers provided by the maiden are a warning both for the narrator and the reader. This reading supports the possibility that the loss of a child is just a excuse for a doctrinal lesson rather than a commemoration for Queen Anne but the two alternatives do not exclude each other: the event might have served as the perfect occasion to focus on this religious message.



## Chapter 2

### Common Themes: Baptism

According to the Scripture, every soul, at the moment of birth, inherits the Original Sin of Adam. Before the Fall, faith was sufficient to achieve salvation, but then, because of Adam's transgression, humanity also needs the gift of God's grace in order to enter the realm of heaven after death in this world. This gift of grace is given to the soul through the rite of baptism. The Church sees the unbaptised soul as a contaminated substance that needs to be purified, and the rite, with its symbolical use of water, provides this cleansing. Men and women cannot free themselves from the original sin, the intervention of the Holy Spirit invoked through baptism is necessary for each member of Christendom. This is the only sacrament that the Church considers imperative for salvation and so through the centuries its celebration has become central to Christian tradition and it is one of its main dogmas.<sup>86</sup> Once the soul has been symbolically purged of the original sin, however, the path to heaven is still long and uncertain: Christians have to exercise faith, hope, and love in order to obtain entrance, and so a certain degree of involvement is expected of men and women who want to be saved. Baptism only provides the possibility of setting out in the right path, it does not automatically grant acceptance into the realm of God.<sup>87</sup>

Many different passages of the Bible narrate the ceremony of baptism, and the event of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan has been assigned a degree of historical certainty.<sup>88</sup> From these passages and from many other references in the

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86 Cramer, Peter, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 137-148.

87 Cramer, pp. 87-88.

88 See: Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Luke 3:15-22.

Bible, we can see how the sacrament was ordered by Christ himself and how its efficacy was plainly stated and eventually accepted from the first communities onwards. Since the ceremony involved Jesus himself, there was no doubt among Christian people about its good impact on one's life. Everyone wanted to follow his example in order to please God and also in order to try and become more like the one they saw as the son of God. After Christ descended in the river, his identity was for the first time openly disclosed: he was recognised as God's son. Following this model, giving a new name to the recipient of the rite became a central element. However, no exact pattern for baptismal rite can be drawn from the Scripture and it had to be eventually established by Christian authorities. Later on, it was agreed that the sequence that would make baptism valid consisted in a submersion in water, a spoken formula involving the triune invocation, and some rite indicating the gift of the Holy Spirit – usually the laying on of hands. Initially no specific wording was required as long as the Trinity was involved in the oration and any mispronunciation did not affect the sacrament as long as the intentions of the authority were pure. Through the invocation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit it is indeed God the principal agent of the ceremony, the physical man performing it is just an instrument, though necessary.<sup>89</sup> In the late fourteenth century, Lollardy began to doubt the importance of the ministers and that of the sacraments, offering a more direct contact with God as the right path to redemption, as has been previously shown. The focus of their criticism was the Eucharist but even baptism received a lot of attention, being the starting point of a believer's life inside Christendom, according to the orthodox belief.

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<sup>89</sup> Spinks, Bryan D., *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 11-12; 145-146.

Among all the Christian people who underwent this sacrament, children made up a special category and their baptism became a debated topic in the Middle Ages. Obviously, children are not able to openly state their will to receive the sacrament and they cannot respond to it. Some believed the practice had to be postponed until the child would show some sort of autonomy, because that was the moment from which he or she might have been exposed to sin. At this point baptism was needed. However, the Middle Ages were marked by a very high infant mortality and parents used to require baptism as soon as possible after birth, to prevent the infants from dying irreligious and being denied entrance to heaven.<sup>90</sup> According to the Bible, children constitute a separate category of souls after death and so such a concerned attitude about their destiny is not fully justified.

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)<sup>91</sup>

They will enter the divine realm for their untouched purity and not for their merits: the only requirement set is that they must have received baptism.<sup>92</sup> People in the Middle Ages indeed believed that everything that happened on earth was part of God's design: the possibility of children dying soon after birth was consequently planned by God and some sort of salvation had to be arranged for this category of innocent souls as well.

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90 Spinks, pp. 128, 147.

91 See also: Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 19:13-15.

92 The practice of infant baptism is officially sanctioned by Augustine who wanted to prevent the child from being banned from the vision of God in the case they died before the sacrament.

Cramer, p. 130.

## 2.1 The Exceptional Salvation of a Pagan in *Saint Erkenwald*

In the poem *Saint Erkenwald*, baptism becomes the pivotal point of the plot. Despite having lived the most righteous life he could under the Old Law, the pagan judge was sentenced to spend part of his after-life in limbo because he had not received proper christening. The only reward he received from God was the exceptional preservation of his body and garments: the benefit he was given was only physical, his spirit followed the fate of any other any soul who was not accepted into heaven, up to this moment.

Until baptism is performed onto the man, the author chooses to refer to him using mainly the word “corpse”, in order to keep the attention focused on the unusual preservation on the body. The soul of the pagan is, for now, overshadowed by the extraordinary picture of the tomb: at this stage in the plot, the path of the soul is absolutely conventional. Moreover, the man is not yet assigned enough dignity and importance in order to be a man of God. Only after the rite takes place, the pagan effectively becomes a man in the eyes of God, and is referred to as such: he is no longer just a corpse.<sup>93</sup> These circumstances show that even the best possible man can receive only a feeble reward without the Church.<sup>94</sup> The speaking corpse is completely aware of this condition and in his own speech (between lines 285 and 301) stresses at length the fact that his actions were not sufficient to obtain salvation. However, this exceptional preservation was part of God's plan in the redemption of the heathen. The only requirement he lacked to be accepted into heaven was baptism and this demanded the body to be intact. As we can see from the Gospel of Mark, this condition is openly stated and unambiguous:

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93 Whatley, p. 336.

94 Whatley, pp. 350, 360-361.



"Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." The second requirement is fulfilled, but the man is not baptised. The author may have wanted to show how God has decided to give the man a second chance, possibly because of his extraordinary belief. The body is just awaiting to be baptised, only then he will be saved, as promised in the Scripture. (Mark 16:14)

If the corpse had followed natural law and so had decayed like any other, the sacrament would not have been possible and the soul would have had to spend eternity suffering the agonies of limbo. The penance imposed on the soul of the anonymous judge was only transient.

A modern reader may question the fairness of such a situation: the future of the spirit depends on the actions of others and in the end the corpse's sufferings narrated in the poem prove to be totally unnecessary, considering that God had already decided to save him, eventually.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, one may be discouraged from behaving respectfully and according to the precepts of the Church if nothing comes of it in the absence of the sacrament.<sup>96</sup> Neither one's good actions nor a minister's intervention is enough, but a great part of the responsibility for one's redemption remains anyhow in the hands of the Church.<sup>97</sup> The ideal situation for a believer to gain entrance in the realm of heaven is for him or her to be baptised and eventually to live respecting the doctrine of the Scripture until the moment of death.

The pagan had already fulfilled the requirements of love, faith and hope – necessary for salvation – but he needed the intervention of the Church as well, otherwise he would have been stuck in limbo forever. Just like every other soul who lived under the Old Law, he could not have known about the new Christian faith and the Scripture. The

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95 Hutchings, William, "The Unintelligible Terms of an Incomprehensible Damnation: Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, *Shaol*, and *Saint Erkenwald*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 27 (1981), p. 108.

96 Thijms, Annemarie, "The Sacrament of Baptism in '*St. Erkenwald*': the Perfect Transformation of the Trajan Legend", *Neophilologus*, 89 (2005), p. 317.

97 Vitto, p. 2.

Church established a sort of special passage for such people: since classical poets and philosophers were much loved and respected and were given an important role in the development of society and culture, they were somehow matched to the category of the Old Testament patriarchs. It was impossible to believe that such influential personalities could have been damned. The Church would have been met with strong opposition on the part of many scholars all over Europe and would have consequently faced a strong decline in its support and possibly in its popularity right from the early times. Some of the pagan souls were even attributed an inner revelation of faith and were considered blessed souls.<sup>98</sup> Thanks to these slight adjustments, the heathen of the poem himself, in the end, is no longer perceived as an alien but is incorporated into Christianity. In the context of the rise of Lollardy, and assuming the orthodox position of the author, this poem seems to be a clear endorsement of the visible Church and of the necessity of the ministers in the life of the Christian community.

However, the bishop Erkenwald did not mean to perform the sacrament (lines 315-324). He did not mean to utter the christening formula and there was no intention in him of saving the soul of the corpse. The combination of the requirements is absolutely accidental: his tears fall casually on the forehead of the man with a perfect timing and so the sacrament is involuntarily performed. This peculiarity reinforces the necessity of the act performed by an ordained minister. Probably the tears of some layman would not have had the same effect on the pagan's soul. The sacrament functions only along a properly ordained member of the clergy.<sup>99</sup> The poem thus seems to be in support of the orthodox Church, even if the possibility of the salvation of pagans is not openly stated in the

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<sup>98</sup> Vitto, pp. 1, 47.

<sup>99</sup> Whatley, p. 351.

Scripture.

An aspect which seems odd as concerns this support of traditional customs is the fact that the baptised man does not receive a name. As we have seen, even though it is not a compulsory passage, this was an important factor. The audience does not even know the real name the pagan had in his life. This may have been determined by the will of the author not to give particular emphasis to the irreligious life he lived. The reader at this point may expect the man to be given a new Christian name but it does not happen and the reason behind such choice remains unclear. The audience may also suppose that the unreadable runes on the tomb may show a revelation of faith once the miracle of christening is performed, but this too does not take place. Their meaning remains hidden and it is as if the author himself forgot about such a relevant portion of his work. All other elements of the poem are given new names in the process of christianisation and even though the judge is the focal point of this operation, he oddly remains nameless. Not even the corpse himself seems to be willing to disclose much about his past life: he focuses mainly on what brought him there and what made him deserve the miracle of the nature-defying preservation. He is able to do so in Christian terms, not according to the pagan mentality.<sup>100</sup>

The fact that he can speak the same language as the crowd around him is already a spectacular element, supposing that he originally spoke the same unintelligible language as the runes. Critics have suggested that this – together with the *Spiritus Domini* prayer, the upward-downward movement, and the final supper reference – constitutes a strong parallel with the Pentecostal events.<sup>101</sup> The corpse, as a matter of fact, is allowed the

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<sup>100</sup> Sisk, p. 96.

<sup>101</sup> Peterson, p. 45. The series of events, today known as Pentecost, are narrated in Acts 2:1-12.

ability to speak the same language as the crowd surrounding him thanks to the Holy Ghost invoked by the bishop Erkenwald, receiving the same gift the apostles received: they could speak languages they had never known before after the Spirit descended onto them. Next, the mass the bishop performs right before going to the miraculous crypt is not by chance the service of the *Spiritus Domini* (line 132), usually performed on the day of Pentecost.<sup>102</sup> The fact that the corpse is buried in a crypt and then ascends to heaven seems to mirror as well the movement Christ completed between Incarnation and Ascension.<sup>103</sup> The final lines of the poem mimic the events of the Bible: the crowd that gathered in the crypt leaves that enclosed space and goes outside to celebrate the event with hymns and processions, letting the whole city of London know what has happened. The final message of the poem is to prove the power of the representatives of the Church and that of the goodness of God and to spread the word of his sensational accomplishments. This is the same task the apostles were assigned: spreading God's word to the entire world. The hypothesis of a parallel with the event of the Gospels is strengthened also by the final reference made by the corpse to the “table” (line 332) and the “cenacle” (line 336) he is now allowed to join. The Holy Ghost had indeed descended onto the apostles while they were sharing a meal in the *coenaculum*.<sup>104</sup>

Another possibility suggested by Marie Boroff<sup>105</sup> is that the core of the poem is the sacrament of confirmation rather than that of baptism. In the Roman Catholic Church, it

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102 Pentecost is the Christian festivity established to celebrate the descent of the Holy Ghost among the apostles.

103 Peterson, p. 45.

104 Acts 1: 13: et cum introissent in cenaculum ascenderunt ubi manebant Petrus et Iohannes Iacobus et Andreas Philippus et Thomas Bartholomeus et Mattheus Iacobus Alpei et Simon Zelotes et Iudas Iacobi. This extract is taken from the *Sacra Biblia Vulgata* (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts+1&version=VULGATE>, accessed 24 November 2016). Boroff, Marie, “Narrative Artistry in *St. Erkenwald* and the *Gawain*-Group: The Case for Common Authorship”, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 28 (2006), p. 66.

105 Boroff, p. 66.

is believed that the confirmation makes the bond with God stronger and through it the Holy Ghost descends to guard the recipient's faith. At the beginning, baptism and confirmation were performed in the same rite, but eventually they were conferred on separate occasions: to this day, it is teenagers who undergo confirmation, hence many years after baptism. Teenage years represent the age of reason, in which the believer can start to understand the importance of his or her bond with God. The rite usually is – and has always been – performed by a bishop, and the poem follows this indication. The strong presence of the Holy Ghost would be justified as well, according to Boroff's hypothesis. The true recipients of this sacrament, if this solution is accepted, would be the crowd gathered in the crypt and not the judge. Indeed the function of the miracle and of the christening is that of confirming and corroborating the faith of those present, showing them the true strength of God, as is clearly stated at several stages in the poem:

“þaghe I be vnworthi,” al wepande he sayde  
 Thurghe his deere deborneté, “digne hit my Lorde  
 In confirmyng þi Cristen faithe, fulsen me to kenne  
 þe mysterie of þis meruaile þat men opon wondres” (Lines 122-125)

And so do we now oure dede, deuyne we no fyrr;  
 To seche þe sothe at oure selfe 3ee se þer no bote,  
 Bot glow we alle opon Godde and His grace aske  
 þat careles is of counselle and comforth to sende,  
 And þat in fastyng of 3our faithe and of fyne bileue. (Lines 169-173)

In conclusion, both possibilities are probable: in any case the general message is the same. Whether the true focus is on the sacrament of baptism or that of confirmation, the resulting idea is that men and women have to do their best satisfy God's requirements but anyhow their inclusion into the earthly Church is of primary importance for their salvation. Only the communion with the rest of Christianity and the involvement of the ministers in a believer's life can lead to redemption and eventually the acceptance into

the realm of God.

## **2.2 The Conflicts of Human Logic in *Pearl***

On the other hand, the poem *Pearl* presents a completely different setting for the sacrament of baptism, but the importance given to the event is the same as in *Saint Erkenwald*. Once again, the path towards salvation completed by the maiden is not the usual one: since she supposedly died very young, she did not have a chance to learn the precepts of the Church and to put them into practice.<sup>106</sup> It is not clearly stated but she must have been baptised by her parents some time in the two years she lived and this, together with the purity typical of a child as stated in the Scripture, opened the gates of heaven to her. The whole poem revolves around this purity as the key to redemption. The dreamer, who may be her father, is both desperate about the loss and worried about the fate of the child. The doubt about what has happened to her is a consequence of ignorance of the Scripture: indeed, in the Gospels, the salvation of children finds absolute support and confirmation. A well-read man would not have doubted the fate of a child, but, unexpectedly, the protagonist does.

The male figure of the poem does not doubt the purity and the goodness of the girl but at the same time he cannot understand how it is possible that she has been saved solely thanks to those factors: the first stanzas are a dedication to the child, a declaration of her perfection, high value and sweetness. The narrator rather worries that her station in the after-life may have been compromised by the little time she had in this world to

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<sup>106</sup> Lines 413: "I was ful yong and tender of age"; 483-485: "Thou lyfed not two yer in oure thede;/Thou cowthes never God nauther plese ne pray/Ne never nawther Pater ne Crede".

give proof of her faith. Even after he is shown that such circumstances did not occur, he has problems grasping the reason why (lines 470-493). He accepts the fact that God chose her as a part of his court but the place she is given in the heavenly hierarchy is, in his earth-bound opinion, way too high and she did not have the tools and the time to deserve it. Considering the merits he thinks she had in life, she may have become a countess (line 489), not at all a queen: that place should have been reserved for those who suffered and dedicated their entire life to Christianity (lines 490-493; 476-479).

Seeing that her own authority is not enough to make the dreamer accept the reality of her after-life, the Pearl-maiden resorts to a higher name in the hope of getting the message through. She decides to tell the parable present in the Gospel of Matthew:<sup>107</sup> the metaphor of the vineyards there narrated shows how the owner of the vines (who represents God) chooses to give the same pay (which stands for redemption) to all his workers (representing Christianity) whether they joined in at the beginning of the working day, or they just arrived for the last few hours before sunset. As the workers rushed to the field as soon as they knew about the job and not because of their laziness, Christians who died infants did not choose to avoid the penances of life but simply had that fate laid down for them: they could not suffer the consequences of an event they did not determine. As the workers who struggled the whole day complain about the decision of the master, the dreamer fights the station of the child. This attitude is certainly not caused by envy, but rather by an attachment to human logic and to a certain conception of profit. To the narrator, it looks as if God, who rules both that divine dimension and the earthly one, does not understand his pain and does not value it properly.<sup>108</sup> The suf-

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107 Matthew 20:1-16.

108 Watson, p. 304.

ference the dreamer is going through because of the loss of his child is something she will never know, and the fact that she has been chosen by God even without experiencing those strong emotions is seen as an injustice. Fearing that he himself may not be allowed into heaven despite his sufferings, the father-figure attacks the position of the child, trying to make sense of a rationality that does not belong to him. The feelings of a father turn into the feelings of an average Christian man, eager to be welcomed into heaven but sceptical about the order of things set by God. Despite all the maiden's efforts, the man still considers the situation “unreasonable” (line 590). Next, she resorts to a final long speech to convince him one last time:

'Grace innogh þe mon may haue  
 þat synnez þenne new, ʒif hym repente,  
 Bot wyth sorʒ and syt he mot hit craue,  
 And byde þe payne þerto is bent.  
 Bot Resoun, of ryʒt þat con not raue,  
 Saeuz evermore þe innossent;  
 Hit is a dom þat neuer God gaue  
 þat euer þe gyltlez schulde be schente.  
 þe gylytf may contryssyoun hente  
 And be þurʒ mercy to grace þryʒt;  
 Bot he to gyle þat neuer glente  
 As inoscente is saf and ryʒte.

'Ryʒt þus I know wel in þis cas  
 Two men to save is God-by skylle;  
 þe ryʒtwys man schal se Hys face,  
 þe harmlez hapel schal com Hym tulle. (Lines 661-676)

These lines are the daughter's last attempt to justify her position and reconcile the man with a religion whose order he has been fighting throughout the dream. The distinction between the two categories of saved souls could not be clearer in this passage and the protagonist is persuaded enough, or at least he seems to be. He understands that the argument behind her salvation is different from the one applied to adult Christians, all thanks to God's fairness and goodness: the choice of allowing children into heaven des-



pite their lack of experience is no longer perceived as an injustice but rather as the ultimate form of equality. He has no choice but to give up his previous earthly convictions and accept this divinely-set possibility. The topic of baptism is thus abandoned.

Another possible way of interpreting the poem is to read into it a warning for the sinful dreamer, a sort of cautionary tale for the father-figure.<sup>109</sup> He is dangerously exposed to sin, doubting God's choice of taking away from him an innocent creature, the most precious thing he owned. He is not able to acknowledge his situation and behave as an accepting Christian, humble in front of God's perfect design. Without the help of the maiden, who speaks to him in the dream showing the real fairness behind the events that led to her death, he would have deviated from the rightful conduct and might have eventually abandoned his faith. The vision works to re-establish his belief and re-make his soul viable for salvation. The possibility of interpreting the poem this way strengthens further the figure of an all-forgiving and all-knowing God: he knows the pain that has been inflicted on the dreamer and somehow seems to make up for it with the vision he grants him. Even if such a brief glance may seem cruel, just like the unnecessary stay of the pagan man in limbo, it effectively leads the man back to the rightful path of Christianity. The fact that the child is shown to the man but only at a distance and for such a short time, in addition to an absolute lack of affection and warmth on her side, might have pushed the man to anger. In the poem this feeling seems to appear only momentarily while the father-figure crosses the river that separates him from the procession, but peace and reconciliation follow that quick moment of frustration.

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109 Anderson, J.J., "Pearl: The Last Shall Be First", in Anderson, J.J., *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-poems*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 52.

The hypothesized average reader of these poems must have been an educated, baptised adult who was not concerned with any of these unusual situations, unless of course they suffered the death of a son or of a daughter. These assumed recipients could be sure that, as adults, they had had the time to prove their faith to God, and, as Christians belonging to the Western World, they surely had the possibility of being baptised quite easily in any circumstance. These poems do not seem to be a warning for them but rather a sort of cautionary tale for all those who, in the Middle Ages, had strayed from the path of the Catholic Church, adopting or favouring instead heresies such as Lollardy. After reading these creations, a Christian Catholic would find proof of the rightness – and almost superiority – of his faith. What the texts suggest is that the power of christening is so great that even in difficult cases it solves any problem and opens the road to heaven. Anyone who decided not to receive this sacrament would put at great risk the future peace of their soul, and the Lollards, among other heretics, chose precisely to do so. The goal that *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* share is thus that of invigorating the faith of the Catholics, holding them back from falling into the heterodox Lollard set of beliefs. They seem to offer indisputable examples of the undeniable importance of the earthly Church in every believer's redemption and to state that the power of the Catholic Church triumphs in all situations, even the most complicated, and there is nothing in this world, neither time nor death, that can interfere with its authority.

Even though the salvation of children finds backing in the Scripture while that of pagans has less strong biblical justification, it is possible that these two poems were written by an orthodox poet. Whether they were penned by the same author or not, the two texts seem to stand on the same side of the religious argument. Furthermore these

two medieval texts offer the same final image of communion between the living community and God. In both texts men and women initially struggle to accept the presence of the divine in their daily life: whether it is a disturbing discovery or a painful loss, anything they cannot explain – the uncorrupted body – or cannot use for their immediate happiness – the absence of a loved one – is immediately rejected. In the end, however, these conflicts are solved in favour of a blind trust in God.

Surely, for someone living in the Middle Ages, accepting the things in life that cannot be inscribed under a certain logic frame must have been frightening and threatening. This is however exactly what believing means: accepting the mysteries of everyday life, thinking that there is an authority and a power behind them that is not at all menacing but rather caring and supporting. The access to such entity is restricted only to the few who do not let the inscrutability prevail on the strength of their ideals.



### Chapter 3

#### Common Themes: The Weakness of Human Knowledge

In both *Saint Erkenwald* and *Pearl* the theme of the weakness of human knowledge is central. With different narrative devices, the author of the two poems explains how he believes that there will always be a higher intelligence that men and women will never be able to comprehend in this world, despite all efforts. This condition is intrinsic to human nature and is inherited through the generations because of Adam's original sin. His sin indeed meant that humankind would always be separated from the divine from that moment on. Assuming that *Saint Erkenwald* and *Pearl* were written by the same author, it is possible to recognize his general interest for situations in which the rules that usually govern human society are contradicted by divine intervention. In these poems a lot of attention is given to the description of everyday scenes fractured by a variety of extraordinary elements. Although the result of the conflict between divine and logic is not always the same, human characters are always pictured as vulnerable creatures, unable to make sense of their experience. Divine authority, on the contrary, is perceived as tyrannical and arbitrary, pushing human reason to the extreme. The final emerging image is therefore quite ironic: human ignorance is impossible to overcome and this condition leads to a tragic picture of mental and physical imprisonment of men and women in this life.<sup>110</sup>

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110 Davenport, W.A., *The Art of the Gawain-Poet*, London: The Athlone Press, 1978, pp. 198-203.

### 3.1 Bridging the Gap Between Divine Wisdom and Human Knowledge: Miracle as Mystery Properly Understood

In *Saint Erkenwald*, before the arrival of the bishop, laypeople cannot understand the nature of what they witness. Natural, logical expectations are not fulfilled and this causes a sort of disruption of the rules of everyday life.<sup>111</sup> In the first stanzas of the poem, the terms used to describe the tomb and the uncorrupted body are “meruayle” and “wonder”. These terms are recurrent in the first half of the poem but once the corpse begins to speak they are no longer used. However, it is exactly at this point that the magical element should be emphasised, since the central characters actually take action. The only thing which recalls the surreal nature of the situation is the fact that one of the two interlocutors is referred to as the “body” or as the “dede body”. The reason behind this choice may be that the author does not want to divert the attention of the reader: the supernatural elements of the plot have to be put aside in order for the focus to be on the dialogue and especially on what the pagan judge can teach the Christian community through his personal experience.<sup>112</sup>

Thanks to the mediation of Saint Erkenwald, the situation is no longer perceived as magical but as miraculous, and so such terms of astonishment no longer fit the context. As Arnold Davidson has stated in his article "Mystery, Miracle, and Meaning in 'St. Erkenwald'", miracle is indeed mystery properly understood.<sup>113</sup>

And as þai makkyde and mynyde a meruayle þai founden (Line 43)

The first word used to describe the tomb is indeed “meruayle”. Right from the beginning the tomb does not seem to belong to natural law, the workers immediately perceive

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111 Davidson, p. 41.

112 McAlindon, p. 483.

113 Davidson, p. 28.

it as something other-worldly and mysterious. For a moment the audience does not even know what that object actually is. Only in the following lines they are told that what the workers have found is actually a tomb, huge and fair. The author creates a sense of suspense, leaving a few moments before describing the monument.

Quen tithynges token to þe toun of þe tounge wonder  
Mony hundrid hende men highide þider sone. (Lines 57-58)

Quen þe maire wyt his meyne þat meruaile aspeid ( Line 65)

Next, the shrine is described with words that enhance its incomprehensible character and the reader is reminded once again that it is not just a common object.

Bot þen was wonder to wale on wehes þat stonden,  
That m3t not come to knowe a quontsye strange. (Lines 73-74)

Mony hym metten on þat meere þe meruayle to telle (Line 114)

The wonderful component is evoked once the tomb is opened and its content finally displayed to both the crowd in the crypt and the reader. An important phrase at this point characterizes the situation: “quontsye strange” (line 74). The crowd there gathered, although it consists of outstanding and well taught personalities, does not consider that what they witness may actually be the result of divine intervention: to their eyes it is something magical, God's role is not taken into account at all. This initial perception plays an important role if we consider that, as previously explained, the whole poem may mirror the rite of the confirmation. The congregation in fact needs something to reinforce their faith and the poet seems willing to highlight how they forgot about God's constant presence in this world. Men and women usually live in a reality controlled by natural law. However, natural law is always subordinate to divine will, and when God breaks earthly order, humankind receives proof of God's existence and is this way re-

minded they have to aspire to something greater than any daily goal.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the sacrament of confirmation has always been performed by a bishop and so the arrival of Saint Erkenwald, a bishop indeed, makes it possible for the miracle to be brought to light, in accordance with the pattern of the rite.<sup>115</sup> Laypeople could have not figured it out on their own since their relationship with God is not as strong as the bishop's, as orthodox belief states. Only in the second part of the text is the divine nature of the event fully disclosed, and the congregation finally shown the divine agency behind it.

In confirmyng þi Cristen faithe, fulsen me to kenne  
þe mysterie of þis maruaile þat men opon wondres. (Line 124-125)

The bishop is the first character to interpret the event from a religious point of view and he openly states that no one else could understand the reality of the situation because their faith is weak.

“Hit is meruaile to men þat mountes to litelle  
Towarde þe prouidens of þe price þat paradys weldes. (Lines 160-161)

Erkenwald is also the first to suppose that the integrity of the corpse has a higher meaning and that, being part of God's plan for humankind, it will disclose something important for the Christian faith. As a matter of fact, the Middle Ages were characterised by a genuine certainty that God's actions were unambiguous and purposeful, according to a perfect cosmic design.<sup>116</sup> At the end of the poem, both reader and fictional audience understand that the underlying message of the event is to show the importance of the sacrament of baptism, fighting the recent heterodox theories introduced by Lollardy.

In its final verses, *Saint Erkenwald* presents two more miracles that are much more meaningful than the first one, which is to say the unusual preservation of the corpse and

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114 Davidson, p. 28.

115 Hutchings, p. 104.

116 Hutchings, p. 110.



of his garments. First, the judge is baptised and then his body and his tomb disappear as soon as the sacrament takes place. Baptism is the most important miracle of the poem and it is both a proof of the presence of the Holy Ghost and a token of the goodness of God. Next, the fact that the pagan's body dissolves is a clear indication that he has finally been allowed to enter the realm of God and so his physical presence on earth is no longer required. When these two events take place, the crowd has already understood that God is behind them and they are no longer bewildered: at this point they react by celebrating and praising God. Such astonishing acts were no longer threatening to earthly order but they rather reinvigorated the presence of the visible Church and the order it established.<sup>117</sup>

Many other elements of the poem *Saint Erkenwald* contribute to devalue human reason. Neither books nor oral tradition clear the mystery surrounding the corpse and the real wonder for a moment is not the condition of the body but rather the fact that no one knows who it may be (Lines 97-104).<sup>118</sup> The “maire” explains to the bishop that there are records of everyone buried there, even the poor, but there is no documentation about that specific body. Old people are interviewed as well but not even their wisdom is enough. Libraries are searched for seven days before the community accepts the ineffectiveness of the search and calls for the bishop Erkenwald on the eighth day. The number seven, in Christian tradition, is associated with the limitations of this life while the number eight represents transformation and renewal.<sup>119</sup> An attentive reader would understand right from these elements that what the corpse and the tomb hide is some-

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117 Davidson, p. 43.

118 Turner Camp, Cynthia, "Spatial Memory, Historiographic Fantasy, and the Touch of the Past in *St. Erkenwald*", *New Literary History*, 44 (2013), p. 480.

119 Vitto, p. 52.

thing divine. Numerology is here perceived as a God-given scheme that helps to understand physical reality.<sup>120</sup> It is important to note that, once Erkenwald is told about that “wonder”, he does not rush to gather information about what it may be. He does not ask anything and does not search libraries looking for something useful, as everybody else did before him. He simply continues to fulfil his duties as a clergyman and does not let that piece of news influence his professional and personal routine.<sup>121</sup> The only thing he decides to do in preparation is asking God to be given strength and wisdom. The bishop is the only character of the poem who seems to know that human knowledge has restraints that can only be overcome with the help of the divine. The Holy Ghost invoked by the bishop is what effectively unveils the truth.

The references to many influential books at the beginning of the poem seem to disagree with this lack of effectiveness of the books in the following verses. The author seems to blindly trust the accounts of Bede, Flete and Monmouth in describing the setting, but eventually his characters show a much different attitude towards written culture.<sup>122</sup> We can assume that the fact that books failed to disclose the truth about the pagan is a narrative device, while the actual approach of the author to literature was substantially different.

For a modern reader, interpreting the role of the unreadable runes on top of the tomb poses many difficulties as well. In the first half of the poem, it is logical that their meaning cannot be uncovered, but later on the audience may expect to be given some explanation about them. However, it does not happen. This is probably the only element

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120 Martin, p. 319.

121 Thijms, p. 314.

122 See chapter 1.3, pp. 19-27.

of the poem that remains veiled by magic, those letters seem to be an unknown spell. This may imply that, even though in the final picture of the poem human logic seems to be able to make sense of that exceptional circumstance, it will never be able to fully uncover the mystical nature of the divine and of his actions on Earth. The runes hint at a certain piece of knowledge too pure for the corrupted human mind to grasp.

On the other hand, the one element that human and divine reason have in common in this poem is the fact that they judge human actions with absolute strictness. The pagan judge says he always judged people with extreme rigour, trying not to be affected by his personal feelings and ideas, as explained in the following verses.

Paghe had been my fader bone, I bede hym no wranges,  
Ne fals fauour to my fader, þaghe felle hym be hongyt.  
And for I was ryȝtwis and reken and redy of þe laghe  
Quen I deghed for dul denyed alle Troye. (Lines 243-246)

The same strictness of judgement is adopted by God when he has to decide what to do with the pagan's soul.<sup>123</sup> His conduct is flawless and his mind spotless, but, as any scrupulous judge would do, God has to take into consideration that the man is not baptised and so cannot obtain the same reward as those who are properly christened. It is as if the judge is inadvertently being punished by his own rules. It is the very same precision and rectitude of evaluation that he applied to his work that keeps him from entering heaven. The ironic sense of human tragedy returns once again .

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123 Davidson, p. 42.

### 3.2 The Unsettling Inversion of Roles in *Pearl*

The vulnerability of human reason is portrayed even more cruelly in *Pearl*. The dreamer is at the centre of this struggle: he finds himself in a reality he cannot place under any known frame of reference and the meaning of such experience remains hidden from him until the end.<sup>124</sup> He desperately tries to decipher what the Pearl represents, but the results are not quite satisfying. The whole plot can be read as a dramatization of not knowing, as Nick Davis suggested in his contribution to the *Companion to the Gawain Poet*.<sup>125</sup> Although the reader understands more than the character does, the audience cannot help but feel a strong empathy for him: sharing with the man the sense of imprisonment caused by the limitations of human logic.<sup>126</sup>

First of all, in the earthly paradise pictured in the poem, courtly language is given a completely different meaning than the one it fulfils on earth: courtly themes are adjusted to this extraordinary liminal space and this fact causes a great misinterpretation that only the reader perceives.<sup>127</sup> Courtly language becomes a vehicle for both secular and religious concepts, gradually switching from one set of references to the other all through the poem, giving both divine and courteous significance to the dialogues.<sup>128</sup> The dreamer, up to the vision of New Jerusalem, is obsessed with the theme of hierarchy, displaying the typical attitude of the average fourteenth-century man.<sup>129</sup> The hierarchy in which he believes is however not the same order he is faced with in the vision.

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124 Stansbury, p. 4.

125 Davis, Nick, "Narrative Form and Insight", in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 344.

126 Watts, p. 21.

127 Stansbury, p. 2.

128 Sklute, Larry M., "Expectation and Fulfilment in *Pearl*", *Philological Quarterly*, 52 (1973), p. 666.

129 Riddy, p. 144.

The first instance of the dreamer's limitations is expressed in the second stanza of the poem. Just like the crowd in *Saint Erkenwald*, he is unable to see God's hand behind the loss of his Pearl: all he feels is injustice and pain.

A deuely dele in my hert denned,  
þaʒ resoun sette myseluen saʒt.  
I playned my perle þat þer watz spened,  
Wyth fyrce skyllez þat faste faʒt.  
þaʒ kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned,  
My wreched wylle in wo ay wraʒte. (Lines 51-56)

All he can think of doing is forgetting about the loss, he does not take into account the possibility that religion may help him accept and overcome the event. While the maiden has seen that both loss and grace exist and that both can come from God, the dreamer at this point has only experienced loss. He still does not believe in God's grace and is consequently upset at God: he doubts the very existence of heavenly bliss.<sup>130</sup> Only at the end of the poem this fracture will be healed. Once the man falls asleep and is shown the first landscape of the vision, the narrator does not know where in this world he is: this world is all he can contemplate (line 65), he does not think of the possibility of another dimension. Although it is only the first step towards the final vision of New Jerusalem, this landscape is already too beautiful for words, according to the dreamer. He voices this feeling of inadequacy as if he were aware of the fact that someone else is reading or listening to his account of the dream.

For wern neuer webbez þat of wyʒez weuen  
Of half so dere adubbenente. (Lines 71-72)

Not even the finest crafts of men come closer to the beauty he is witnessing. All possible human efforts add up to nothing in front of such a magnificent landscape.

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130 Sklute, p. 674.

De derþe þerof for to deuyse  
Nis no wyȝ worþe þat tonge berez. (Lines 99-100)

The same sentiment of shortcoming is described at lines 223-228. The beauty of the garden helps him overcome his grief, as if in that alternate dimension pain cannot be perceived. Further in the poem, earthly works of art are adopted in an attempt to frame the beauty of the child.

Þy beauté com neuer of nature –  
Pymalyon paynted neuer Þy vys,  
Ne Arystotel nawþer, by hys lettrure,  
Of carped De kynde Þese propertéz. (Lines 749-752)

The same classical authors who, together with the pagan judge, made the Harrowing problematic, appear in *Pearl*. Since there is no other another possible reference for the beauty he observes in his daughter, he resorts to classical artists. The man knows Greek and Latin texts but he is not prepared in all the theological matters he has to face in the dream. This can be read as a hint of how of much he was exposed to sin and this situation makes it more likely to read the poem as a true salvation for him.

Once the protagonist meets the child, his inadequacy becomes even more obvious: it is indeed the girl who points out his several mistakes and tries to correct him. Representing divine wisdom, she shows how little men and women can comprehend of divine design and intelligence. The clearest instance of the maiden's superiority is given in stanza 25. The dialogue between the two characters has just begun and the dreamer has already had to apologise for his impertinent statements:

'Wy borde ȝe men? So madde ȝe be!  
Þre wordez hatz þou spoken at ene:  
Vnavysed, forsoþe, wern alle þre.  
Þou ne woste in worlde quat on dotz mene;  
Þy worde byfore þy wytte con fle.

Dou says Dou trawez me in Bis dene  
Bycawse Dou may wyth yʒen me se;  
Anoþer, Dou says in Bis countré  
Þyself schal won with me riʒt here;  
Þe Þrydde, to passe Þys water fre:  
Þat may no joyful jueler. (Lines 289-300)

The Pearl-maiden's approach is the same a teacher would have with a young student. Both crossed and patient, she wants to make the dreamer realise his mistakes, but at the same time she is appalled by the ignorance of her interlocutor. She explains, one point at a time, all the things he misjudged, carefully making sure that everything is clearly disclosed. However, the explanations the dreamer receives are far from satisfying. Divine subjects must indeed remain incomprehensible for human beings until their souls are elevated into heaven after death.<sup>131</sup> First of all, in her speech, the young lady points out the frailty of human senses, then she warns the narrator not to trust his sight: just because he can see her, it does not mean that she still physically exists. The second mistake made by the dreamer is the assumption of being able never to part from the child again, but she lives in the realm of the dead and unless he dies as well, it is not possible for him to remain. The third and final misunderstanding involves the stream dividing them: a metaphor of death, it cannot be crossed by living creatures, unless God allows them. The water represents indeed the contact between earth and heaven. The dreamer has not yet understood that he is receiving a vision of the other-world and this is the core of all his mistakes. He seems to forget that the child is dead and there is no way back from that condition.<sup>132</sup>

The dreamer at this point seems to be scared by how wise the child is. Other than

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131 Watts, p. 16.

132 Modern analysis would suggest that the man is keeping the very fact of the death of the child away from him, not to face the entirety of the pain, as suggested in Anderson, p. 21.

being confused by such an inversion of hierarchical positions, he seems unable to understand how it is possible that his child knows so much. In the relationship they held in life, the father-figure was in control while the child was inferior and still weak.<sup>133</sup> The dreamer approaches the dialogue with the same assumption of superiority upon her, but he is scolded for “pryde” and “maysterful mod” (line 401). Stanza 31 shows how the narrator tries to justify himself, blaming the earthly-bound pain caused by the loss for the offences he made to the Lord (line 362). He prays the Pearl not to be harsh with him and finally recognizes his inferior position asking to be explained more about that dimension. He knows he is just “bot mol” and “marereȝ mysse”.

With her strong admonishments, the maiden tames the man: now that he has accepted his ignorance and inferiority, he is allowed into the garden of Eden (lines 399-402). Once again, despite all the clarifications received, the concerns of the dreamer are strongly material: he wants to know what life she leads, who made her so beautiful and wise, where she lives and whom she lives with. Since he is given this exceptional chance of entering the other-world, he should worry about learning more about the divine but he does not: all his perceptions and thoughts are earthly and human. What the maiden keeps doing throughout the poem is trying to redirect the man from the secular logic to the sacred one.<sup>134</sup> Her answers leave the protagonist constantly speechless: she says she is a queen, married to the Lamb. “May this be true?” is the puzzled reaction she receives: even though the dreamer has accepted her higher wisdom, he cannot accept her words. In his human conception, what she says makes no sense and is totally impossible. The mistake this time consists in assuming that the child is *the* queen of the

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133 Gardner, p. 58.

134 Newhauser, p. 268.



Lamb – meaning the Virgin Mary – and not *a* queen of the lamb. For a moment his certainty of having met his long lost daughter falls to pieces. At this point the girl tries to use another source of authority, seeing that her own is not sufficient to convince the man of her station. She refers to Saint Paul, whose holiness is commonly accepted in the earthly Church. She also makes use of a metaphor, that of the body, to show how each member of the Church has his or her own function, in perfect collaboration and synchrony with the other believers. The child-queen does not succeed: the dreamer still believes she has reached too high a station for what her real merits in this world are (stanza 41). He does not believe her when she says she is a queen, she might have been a countess, but nothing more.

Ȝif hyt be soth þat þou saye,  
 þou lyfed not two Ȝer in oure þede.  
 þou cowþez neuer God nauþer plese ne pray,  
 Ne neuer nauþer Pater ne Crede –  
 And quen mad on þe fyrst day!  
 I may not traw, so God me spede,  
 þat God wolde weyþe so wrange away.  
 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!' (Lines 481-492)

Another source of higher authority is adopted by the Pearl to reinforce her status: the vineyard parable of the Gospel of Matthew. She adopts biblical paraphrase and standard methods of exegesis to get the message through.<sup>135</sup> Once again, the dreamer struggles: to him it is absurd that innocent children and adults who have spent their life in penance achieve the same station in heaven. The two categories should occupy different ranks and all earthly pain should be acknowledged. But heaven is pictured as a hierarchical society in which everybody respects their station peacefully, no-one argues

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<sup>135</sup> Sklute, p. 671.

against the grade assigned them. This parable functions as homily right in the middle of the poem, and it may result too long and digressive with respect to the general theme; however it provides an effective motivation for the estate of the girl and for how the hierarchy of heaven actually functions according to the Scriptures, in contrast with the earthly one. Heaven seems to be a marketplace where the souls of Christians receive a payback for the quality of their action on earth. The definition of “paye” is indeed functional for the whole dialogue.<sup>136</sup>

Another strong admonishment follows the dreamer's bold statement that the story is “vnresounable” (line 590): once the maiden has explained that salvation is granted to two separate categories, that of the pure innocents and that of the deserving adults, the dreamer seems to be convinced and the topic of the redemption of children is left aside. Although it is no easy consolation, the dreamer is told that the very fact of the early death of the child has allowed her to become someone so special in the realm of God: the Pearl herself says that nothing to the Lamb is more important than the purity and the integrity found in children.

A vision of the New Jerusalem follows. For these few stanzas, the poet may have used some literature of biblical interpretation – also in Latin – or may have just used his own poetical abilities to expand the chosen passages. It is also clear that he knew the Vulgata quite well: in some quotations he even respects the same order of words as in the Vulgata version.<sup>137</sup> The narrator of the poem seems to be totally ignorant of what the New Jerusalem is: he thinks she is talking about the real, physical city of Jerusalem. The Pearl has to correct him once again. In the last section of the poem the dreamer seems

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136 Stansbury, p. 14

137 Newhauser, p. 258.

even more vulnerable than before: his senses are earth-bound and at each stage of the vision they display a growing weakness. He does not have any means of comparison for the beauty he sees. He fights the lack of words with metaphors but he keeps reminding the audience that his description cannot convey the fullness of the vision. He often says that the New Jerusalem is exactly as the apostle John explained it in the Apocalypse.<sup>138</sup> The dreamer is this way trying to offer an alternative text describing the same landscape: he knows his perception is not enough but he seems to be really wanting to get the vision through to the reader. The only instruments the protagonist owns to portray what he sees are metaphors of earthly materials: gold, gems, crystals, pearls. He is amazed also by the light of that place: for someone from the Middle Ages, natural light comes from the sun – and the moon. In New Jerusalem, on the other hand, the source of light is God himself and night never falls (stanzas 88-90). The city has no churches or chapels either: unlike the earthly city where the divine presence has to be celebrated and protected in buildings, in that heavenly place God is all prevailing and the souls do not need to have a specific place to honour him. The whole place is dedicated to the Lamb. The power of the vision is comically explained in a few verses in stanza 91:

Hade bodyly burne abiden þat bone,  
 þaʒ alle clerkeʒ hym hade in cure,  
 His lyf wer loste anvnder mone. (Lines 1090-1092)

The human mind is so weak it cannot bear the beauty of the heavenly city. Human remedies are not sufficiently effective to cure the madness that such beauty may lead to.

By allowing the mortal man a vision of heaven, the Pearl arouses his human greed. Her intent may have been to teach the dreamer to be humble and respectful, but that

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<sup>138</sup> In each first line of the stanza, from stanza 83 to stanza 87.

goal is not achieved. He wants more than what he can have and so ends up “falling” and grieving again, all because of his sensual longing. This fall is marked in religious, courtly and almost sensual terms as well: but the object of desire cannot be obtained.<sup>139</sup> The man's excessive desire implies a punishment and consequently he is sent back to earthly reality all of a sudden. Though the dreamer struggles throughout the whole spiritual experience to make sense of a dimension above him, at the end of the dream, once he wakes up in the garden, he has to go backwards. While at first he had to translate the divine concepts into earthly ideas in order to understand them, now he has to make his supra-natural new education useful for his physical life.<sup>140</sup>

The *Gawain*-poet faces the same challenges his characters face in not having the appropriate instruments to express the completeness of what he means: the earthly tools of language are all he can use, even when he needs to describe an order beyond nature. The audience, then, is only equipped with imperfect mortal understanding in receiving the message. This situation makes it impossible for any divine revelation to reach the human mind in its fullness and to be properly understood. Language is indeed a bodily activity, designed to describe earthly experience, so when one wants to talk about a transcendental truth the only solution is the use of metaphors and symbols, hoping that this strategy will be successful. Nature provides many possibilities for poets to express their thoughts through metaphors, since the natural world is God's creation and it can always be read to reveal something of his supra-natural design. However, in this translation

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139 Bullon-Fernandez, pp. 37-48.

140 Cooper, Helen, “The Supernatural”, in Brewer, Derek; Gibson, Jonathan eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 284.

from a sign system to another, concepts often become contradictory: words describing the physical world cannot match perfectly spiritual notions.<sup>141</sup>

The resulting message of the two poems is at the same time tragic and ironic. In both plots the first picture of human capacities is quite positive: the lay crowd in *Saint Erkenwald* joins the efforts and takes advantage of every possible tool to make sense of the discovery. They have absolute faith in their potential. The results of their inquiries are nevertheless disappointing. The one category excluded from such negative evaluation is the clergy: as we have seen, its representative knows how weak men and women are and resorts to different means to fully understand the nature of the situation. The fact that the London congregation feels the need to call the bishop may be interpreted as an effort to exorcise the demonic nature of the event: its ambiguity is certainly perceived as potentially threatening to both the religious and social fabric of the town. The pagan demons seem to be haunting the Christian foundation of the community, menacing their absolute faith in God.<sup>142</sup>

On the other hand, in *Pearl*, at first the protagonist stands absolutely firm in his convictions: the loss of the child is an injustice and faith cannot ease his pain. He resorts to all possible human instruments to overcome the sufferance caused by the death of the child, but the results of his emotional inquiry are disappointing for him as well. The vision he is gifted with shows how proud and self-sufficient he is: all his mistakes and his frailties are displayed. Although he struggles to understand the meaning of the Pearl's speech because of his earthly logic, he successfully completes his spiritual improvement thanks to her intervention. Once he wakes up from his dream, the only conceivable solu-

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141 Cooper, Helen, p. 277.

142 Turner Camp, p. 473.

tion to overcome his sinful state is to rely on the Church and to trust the goodness of God's plan.

Humankind is thus portrayed as generally arrogant and excessively confident in their possibilities. Only the intervention of God through his delegates – the bishop Erkewald and the angel-child – can fix the situation and remind men and women of their actual inferior position in this world, keeping them from being sinful. Always assuming that the author of the two medieval poems is the same, his perception of humankind is not absolutely negative. Indeed, at the end, after their respective reproaches and revelations, both the London crowd and the dreamer repent and become closer to God. They somehow rectify their behaviour by celebrating God and putting all their faith in the Church. The final moral message fights the assumptions of Lollardy, in favour of the traditional interpretation of religion.

## Chapter 4

### Common Themes: The Symbolic Meaning behind Objects

#### 4.1 How Matter Reflects the Spirit in *Saint Erkenwald*

A meticulous approach to physical details and the constant presence of a symbolical meaning behind them can be easily recognized in both *Saint Erkenwald* and *Pearl*. Time and space are also structured symbolically respecting theological tradition.<sup>143</sup> In both poems great relevance is given to the description of clothes and settings or landscapes.

As far as the poem about Saint Erkenwald is concerned, to begin with, it is important to point out that the author decided to portray the city as something remote and unknown. A person who is familiar with the city should not feel the need to specify the country to which it belongs, but the poet does so in the very first line, writing: “at London, in Englonde”. Many critics have read into this approach a clear statement of the author's residency in the countryside. However, given that all other information is provided in a rather thorough way in the first few stanzas as well, this specification could be simply read as an accurate detail, possibly needed for metrical balance.<sup>144</sup> The city of London is pictured from the beginning as a contested site, in which Christianity still struggles to remove its heathen past. The country's pagan history can be still felt in the poem through the memory of the temples, renamed and dedicated anew to Christian characters: however the foundation of these newly consecrated churches is still the ancient idolatrous one. The metaphorical implications of this statement influence the development of the plot. It is indeed exactly on the foundation of the church of Saint Paul that the New Work wants to operate.<sup>145</sup> The encounter with the supernatural tomb ques-

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143 Martin, p. 318.

144 Gardner, p. 5.

145 Turner Camp, pp. 472-480.

tions the simplistic approach adopted by Christianity: the wish to erase selectively the past elements that create discomfort for a new conception of reality proves to be nothing but an impossible fantasy.<sup>146</sup> But once even the groundwork of the pagan architecture is absolved through the rite of baptism, the incorporation of the English idolatrous past into a Christian history is completed and Christianity officially prevails. The Christian community, throughout the plot, confronts itself with a difficult element and they do not know whether it should be incorporated or erased, whether it is a threat to their culture or rather it could be used to their advantage. Since the poem is a Christian narrative, the tomb happens to be an object that not only can be incorporated but rather has to be celebrated.

It is inside the crypt underneath the church of Saint Paul that the majority of the events in *Saint Erkenwald* take place. The room seems to be subjected to its own particular set of natural laws. It houses an uncorrupted corpse which speaks and eventually dissolves into nothing, defying the logical laws that rule the rest of the world. Except for a brief mention of the abbey in which the bishop was preaching (line 108) and the final hint at the procession through the streets of London (lines 351-352), the whole narrative remains confined in the tight location of the crypt and is not allowed any movement.<sup>147</sup> A third of the poem is dedicated to the description of the tomb and to its indecipherable nature, a clear indication that the real focus of the poem is the content of that room. In spite of these circumstances, the consequences of what happens in the crypt reach a lot further than its boundaries, both in time and space: the event of the baptism indeed saves the soul of the pagan for eternity, freeing him from the limbo in which his soul has

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146 Turner Camp, p. 478.

147 McAlindon, p. 482.



lived for centuries. The impact of the miracle affects, on the other hand, not only the population of London or England, but the whole of Christendom, strengthening the faith of the community with an effective proof of God's presence.

The time setting is another interesting element of the poem: it has already been pointed out that the plot offers several instances of anachronisms and that, while at the beginning plenty of details are provided in the presentation of London and of England, the only fact we are given about the years in which the event took place is “no3t fulle longe sythen [...] Crist suffride on crosse and Cristendome satblide” (lines 1-2). Depending on the historical approach that one may adopt, this “not long while since” could stand for much different spans of time. Arnold Davidson has indeed suggested that this attitude expresses the will of the author to create a setting in which time intertwines with timelessness.<sup>148</sup> No clear frame is provided and a generic point in time seems to be able to influence both past and future, maybe to highlight the eternal power of God. Even if the audience is not able to understand in which year the event is set, there seems to be a clear indication of the day: as previously showed, there are indeed several elements that suggest that the miracle takes place on the day of Pentecost.<sup>149</sup> In addition to this, a strong criticism is moved by the author against the archival process of the Middle Ages.<sup>150</sup> The material provided by the libraries does not help the identification of the corpse and all the oral tradition possibly achievable is useless as well. While this statement can be attributed to the theme of the weakness of human knowledge previously uncovered, this perception could nevertheless be read as an actual criticism to the treatment of the past in medieval times.

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148 Davidson, p. 29.

149 See chapter 2.1, pp. 40-45.

150 Turner Camp, p. 472.

This attention to the physical setting has a greater aim: the author highlights as well – both here and in *Pearl* – a link between the environment that surrounds the characters and the change they undergo spiritually. The purification of the soul of the judge through baptism functions metonymically as a consecration of London's civic history to the Christian order, permanently removing the pagan obstacles of the city's identity.<sup>151</sup> It is debated whether the responsibility for the baptism of the corpse should be attributed to the divine presence of the Holy Ghost or rather to the human intervention of the bishop, but the centrality of the human action of renovation of the church is undeniably important for the narrative. If it had not been the choice of the visible Church to reconstruct the foundation of the building, the soul of the man would have remained for ever in limbo.

Though I have previously stated that the whole text functions as an anti-Lollardy propaganda, this element challenges that assumption. Without the presence of Erkenwald the miracle would certainly not have taken place, but without the work of the laypeople the tomb would have never been discovered to begin with. This observation seems to support heterodox mentality rather than an orthodox one, since it reassures men and women of their importance in the salvation of both themselves and others. The discovery, in addition to the event of the christening, leads to the confirmation of the community: this chain of cause-effect events seems to allow partial autonomy to laypeople in the path to redemption. If not absolute self-determination, it suggests for sure a need for collaboration, usually not taken into consideration by the more conservative Catholic party.

The clothes that the characters of the poems wear are used to add silent meaning to

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<sup>151</sup> Turner Camp, p. 485.

the narratives.<sup>152</sup> Even before the maiden and the judge explain who they are, their appearance already contains a great number of suggestions about them. In *Saint Erkenwald* even the tomb has a symbolical meaning: being heavily sealed and difficult to open even by expert workers, it represents the difficulty of reaching out to God's truth and to his design. In the Middle Ages, people assumed that all kings and queens were saints: seeing the clothes of the buried man, the London crowd consequently assumes that whoever he is, must be a king as well as a saint.<sup>153</sup> The surprise is the fact that not only the man had a low station in life, but also that he was a pagan. Only the golden runes on top of the tomb anticipate the contradiction of heathen-saint. The poet plays on the different concepts of earthly and spiritual royalty, which in the Middle Ages were considered almost equivalent.<sup>154</sup> Next, once the marble lid of the tomb is opened, the crowd fails to read the true meaning of the garments: they only believe he must have been a king, they do not consider the spiritual significance of the objects. Indeed the crown was a symbol of moral and spiritual excellence, the pearls and the gold jewels acknowledged emblems of purity, the uncorrupted flesh and fabric indication of an immaculate soul.<sup>155</sup> Clothes in the Middle Ages had a prominent role in the communication of wealth and authority and functioned as a propaganda both for secular and sacred rulers. Textiles could display power thanks to their financial worth: because of this, dressing had a performative function, highly exploited in those centuries. The quality of garments established one's worldly status as well as their spiritual aspiration: someone who was indeed chosen to be a clergyman and serve God on earth was believed to be

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152 Scott, Margaret, *Medieval Dress and Fashion*, London: The British Library, 2009, p. 92.

153 Dimitrova, Kate; Goehring, Margaret, "Introduction", in Dimitrova, Kate ed., *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014, p. 7.

154 McAlindon, pp. 475-476.

155 McAlindon, p. 487.

closer to the divine and consequently more likely to receive salvation and blessing after death.<sup>156</sup> Clergymen were expected to have a higher moral integrity than laypeople and to be a model for Christian behaviour.<sup>157</sup> Secular and religious power were however so linked to one another that representatives of the clergy had adopted the traditional vestments of powerful lay people, despite the indications found in the Scripture.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. (Rev 3:4-5)

As explained in the Book of Revelation, the souls chosen and blessed by God are dressed in white, which has nothing to do with the expensive embroidered and colourful garments typical of eminent priests.<sup>158</sup> On the other hand, in *Pearl* this tradition of the white garments is perfectly respected, as proved by stanzas 17, 18, and 19, as will be discussed later on.

#### **4.2 *Pearl* as a Constant Metaphor**

The poem *Pearl* forces a constant re-evaluation of material objects into mystical terms. The pearl itself, to start with, is not just a precious object but stands for a series of specific traits such as perfection, purity and beauty. With the term “pearl”, the author indicates at the same time the stone, the angel-maiden, his daughter (presumably), and the divine virtues the protagonist aspires to.<sup>159</sup> The poem can indeed be read on different levels: literally the pearl is a gem, an object the protagonist lost; allegorically it is one of

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156 Dimitrova; Goehring, p. 7.

157 Walden, Catherine, “‘So Lyvely in Cullers and Gilting’: Vestments on Episcopale Tomb Effigies in England”, in Dimitrova, Kate ed., *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014, p. 121.

158 Walden, p. 109.

159 Stansbury, pp. 3-4.

the members of the heavenly court; tropologically it is a symbol of the soul of the saved innocents; analogically it represents the soul of the lost daughter, now a part of the divine procession.<sup>160</sup> All these possible alternatives in reading into the word “pearl” apply as well to the other gems quoted in the poem: they are not simple objects but hide a symbolical meaning – mainly drawn from the book of Revelation.

Gems and precious materials are indeed the only images the dreamer can use in order to describe the immutability of the things that surround him in the vision. Throughout the poem the audience encounters two sets of imageries: one representing change and decay – organic matters – and the other immutability and perfection – gems and jewels. Rosamund Field, in an article about this poem, points out an interesting paradox of its first part: the narrator has lost a pearl in a garden and is desperate because the earth will destroy his precious possession. However Field has argued that, being the pearl not subjected to any change in time, the earth could not have possibly destroyed it.<sup>161</sup> Right from the start the dreamer is unable to reason logically, his feelings have the best of him. Gradually the presence of immutable precious materials increases. In the garden of Eden, the natural decaying elements represent the majority of the objects, while in the description of New Jerusalem several stanzas are dedicated to the listing of all the different gems layered in the buildings of the heavenly city (Stanzas 83, 84, 85).

The jeweller himself is reproached by the Pearl-maiden for being too attached to his “jewel”, while he should be trying to behave more like the jeweller in the Gospel of Matthew, ready to sacrifice all his material possessions in order to get inside the realm of God.

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<sup>160</sup> Martin, p. 322.

<sup>161</sup> Field, p. 14.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (Matt. 13:44-46)

Instead, the narrator is obsessed with the ownership of the stone. This unstoppable desire for the Pearl and the fact that the narrator is pictured as a jeweller seem quite comical if we consider what was the actual relationship between the jewellers and their creations in the Middle Ages. First of all, jewels were not at all timeless pieces: they were often exchanged as money and melted for some other purpose. They were fluid objects, exploited for their material value and not for their beauty or for the emotional attachment of the owner. A jeweller, moreover, would not have owned what he produced: he would have sold his creations, giving up any claim on them. The poem mirrors this transient possession, closing indeed with an image of separation rather than union.<sup>162</sup>

Possession and longing of material things are two central themes of the poem, as shown by the metaphor of the jeweller owning his gem. The loss of the child is the motivation behind his initial despair: the fact that the Pearl is so priceless is due to the narrator's sole ownership of it. Now that the ownership has come to an end because of the rules set by God in the heavenly city, the man is almost jealous of him, he does not understand that exclusive possession is a concept that does not exist there and that all creatures who live in the New Jerusalem are free, bound only by their self-determined love for God. The Pearl indeed has now become unachievable as a part of the heavenly city from which the protagonist is kept. This insatiable longing is the reason why his vision is cut short: he is expelled from the place for wanting to cross the limit set by God.

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<sup>162</sup> Riddy, p. 154.

This unbridled longing is often described in the poem through expressions common to French courtly poetry. The girl, even if she is supposed to be the dreamer's daughter, is pictured as his object of desire. On the other hand, Christ as well is pictured as the girl's love interest. However, sexual undertones are not taken into consideration. Even in this case, the narrator struggles to understand how it is possible that the the king of that realm has married a child: he does not consider the marriage as a spiritual union, but a physical one. The only sexual undertone present in the text is at the end, when the loss of the vision is projected into terms of sexual frustration.<sup>163</sup>

The courtly behaviour functions differently whether it is adopted by the dreamer or by the girl. When the dreamer speaks in courtly terms, he is admonished for using a rhetoric inappropriate for ghostly matters, but when the child does the same, it becomes an effective vehicle for expressing spiritual truth. As a matter of fact, by the mid-fourteenth century the language of Christianity had been fully assimilated to that of courtesy and there was a well established philosophical tradition of using courtly language as a metaphor for the ineffable.<sup>164</sup>

Another interesting element of the poem is that the affectionate terms the maiden uses for the Lamb are never applied to the man.<sup>165</sup> Though the reader is not sure about the role the narrator had in the girl's life, it is clear that the two were close. He seems however not to be deserving of any tenderness, if not on a physical level – which is impossible in that dimension because of the stream between them – at least on a verbal level. She is characterised by an extreme harshness towards him, always showing su-

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163 Bullon-Fernandez, p. 37.

164 Gross, Charlotte, "Courtly Language in *Pearl*", in Blanch, Robert J.; Youngerman Miller, Miriam; Wasserman, Julian N., eds., *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*", Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1991, p. 81.

165 Anderson, p. 57.

periority and distance. On the other hand the dreamer is clearly vocal about his love for the girl. He portrays her like a pearl and demonstrates the perfection he projected onto her.

Among the different phrases the man uses to describe and celebrate the child, other than the simile of the pearl, a word in particular stands out. He often refers to the child as a “rose”, contradicting all the previous statements about her perfection and immutability. Being a natural thing, the rose is indeed subjected to growth and decay and this would make her stay in the heavenly city impossible. Considerable efforts can be recognized on the part of the speaker for conveying an image of something that is extremely beautiful and at the same time not subjected to the common laws of dissolution but this term seems to invert the perspective and nullify all the accomplishments of the previous descriptions. The term “rose” is used at first by the maiden to explain the transience of material possession, in an attempt to console the mortal man of his loss (lines 265-270). But, later on, the dreamer uses the same word in an opposite context, behaving as if he did not understand the true meaning of the girl's speech, once again (as in lines 905-908: “I am bot mokke and mul among,/ And þou so ryche, a reken rose”). The contrast between the weakness and ugliness of the “mokke and mul” – meaning dirt and mud – and the perfection of the maiden would have been stronger if the second term of comparison were a gem, resistant and beautiful, instead of a flower, which is still doomed to decompose.

Other than the metaphor of “mokke and mul”, the dreamer describes his state by frequently adopting images of animals, relying both on the Scripture and on bestiaries, to convey symbolical meaning. Through the tradition of bestiaries, animals were both



moral signs and zoological specimens.<sup>166</sup> The first simile is offered in stanza 16:

More þen me lyste my drede aros:  
I stod ful stylle and dorste not calle;  
Wyth yʒen open and mouth ful clos,  
I stod as hende as hawk in halle. ( Lines 181-184)

The image of the hawk enhances the attentiveness of the man looking at the angel-child: the hawk was known as an excellent predator, a regal bird accomplished in devouring its preys. This trait mirrors the dreamer's temptation and attraction towards the maiden, who becomes his prey. On the other hand, this ability in capturing other animals was used as well to denounce the rapacity and pride of human nature. Though this creature is generally pictured as a noble creature, it has its negative sides. Next, in the middle of the vision, the poet chooses to adopt the simile of the doe for the mortal man.

Þe oʒte better þyseluen blesse,  
And loue ay God, and wele and wo,  
For anger gaynez þe not a cresse.  
Who nedez schal þole, be not so þro;  
For þoʒ þou daunce as any do,  
Braundysch and bray þy braþez breme,  
When þou no fyrre may, to ne fro,  
þou moste abyde vat He schal deme. (Lines 342-349)

The doe, according to bestiaries, is a quite positive animal but it shows a propensity to flee swiftly from dangerous situations, rather than using craft or strength to get out of them. Joining the hunting theme to the tradition of the bestiaries, the doe in this stanza is pictured “dancing”, quickly moving to avoid its unpleasant destiny. The doe is found in the Scripture as well, representing the attempt of humankind to avoid the truth of divine doctrine (Prov 6:5). All these different readings contribute to portraying the man as a creature desperately trying to avoid both the pain of the loss and his awareness of hav-

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166 Reichardt, Paul F., “Animal Similes in *Pearl*”, in Blanch, Robert J.; Youngerman Miller, Miriam; Wasserman, Julian N., eds., *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 17-29. This article will be used as guideline throughout the paragraph.

ing disregarded his faith. Next, the reader encounters the simile of the quail, gradually descending through the ranks of nobility in the animal kingdom.

I stod as styllle as a dased quayle  
For ferly of þat frech fygyre,  
þat felde I nawþer reste ne trauayle,  
So watz I rauyste wyth glymme pure. (Lines 1085-1088)

The quail, though a bird, cannot fly and is often used as the emblem of carnal minds, unable to understand the beauty of divine truth. Again, this animal is quoted in the Scripture: it was offered to the Israelites as food while they were crossing the desert, after they complained about the scarce quality of their food (Ex 16:4-15; Num 11:31-34). Because of this narrative, the quail is also associated with the ingratitude of man toward God, which perfectly fits the themes of *Pearl*. Considering the order in which the animals are presented to the reader, a descending pattern can be easily recognised. This gradual decline in the nobility of the subjects of the similes can be read as an attempt to mimic the mortification of a father after the death of his child, as a struggle to explain the disgrace into which he has fallen. Unable to deal with the pain of the situation and feeling inadequate for his life in front of the death of his beloved, the father we meet in the poem is gradually humiliating himself, until he falls into a completely degraded position, the only one he finds fitting for himself in that state of mind.

The same coincidence between the event and a Catholic festivity recognisable is *Saint Erkenwald* is present in *Pearl*.<sup>167</sup> Just like Pentecost might be the setting for *Saint Erkenwald*, another Christian celebration is mentioned in the poem *Pearl* as the possible setting. Since the text talks about the universal feeling of loss, it does not need a specific historical frame. A precise time of the year is however suggested as the potential background: August (lines 37-40). This month is the time when the harvest begins and so the

<sup>167</sup> See chapter 2.1, pp. 40-45.

child's death can be seen as God harvesting the earth for the first fruits.<sup>168</sup> Critics have suggested that this general day in August could coincide with both Lammas Day (celebrated between 1<sup>st</sup> August and 1<sup>st</sup> September) or the Assumption of the Virgin (15<sup>th</sup> August). While the Assumption is a Christian celebration and here it may offer a parallel with the entrance into heaven of the young girl, the Lammas day is a lay festivity and celebrates indeed the first harvest of the year. This celebration gradually became Christian through the years, with the offering of the first loaf of bread made from the season's first crops at the altar.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, the summer setting is typical of courtly poetry.<sup>170</sup> All these possibilities about the setting of the poem make it a multi-layered narrative right from the start: the secular overlaps the religious and love can be read both as a mystical and as a earthly, physical feeling.

Finally, as far as clothes are concerned, even though the image of the blessed souls dressed in white is not respected in *Saint Erkenwald*, here it coincides. The predominance of the colour white in this description seems to contradict the identification of the Pearl-maiden with the desired woman of the courtly tradition, as explained earlier. Picturing the young girl, many elements correspond to the typical portrait of the loved one in that tradition: loose long blond hair (lines 211 and 214), white hue (line 213), gleaming stones all over her clothes (lines 221-222). The one thing that clearly is missing to complete the perfect image of the courtly lady is the presence of the colour red in her face.<sup>171</sup> This may be due to the will of the poet to highlight the girl's unearthly radiance and to remove any possible connection to physical attraction. Red was usually an indic-

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168 Gardner, p. 47.

169 The Gawain-Poet, *Pearl: An Edition with Verse Translation* (Vantuono, William ed.), Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999. , pp. 102-103.

170 Blenker, p. 44.

171 Anderson, p. 28.

ation of the sensuality of the woman, being an earthly living creature, unlike the Pearl.

As it has been proven in this chapter, the symbolical meaning behind physical details is constant in both poems. This attitude could be attributed to the widespread care for material possession in the Middle Ages, but the two narratives correspond on so many levels that it becomes a possible solution that the same mind could have been behind both. A reader can indeed recognize so many similarities between the two texts such as the correspondence of the event with a Christian celebration, the careful description of garments with hidden meaning, the coincidence of the spiritual changes in the characters and those in the environment, the expansion of time and the power of God to break natural order.

## Chapter 5

### The Possible Influence of the *Divina Commedia* on the Middle English Poems

#### 5.1 Traces of Dante and Della Lana in *Saint Erkenwald*

It is possible to recognise a strong parallelism between the Trajan-Gregory legend, as presented in the *Divina Commedia* and in its *Commentario* by Jacopo Della Lana, and the poem *Saint Erkenwald*. At this point it becomes useful to take into consideration some extracts from the Italian masterpiece. The first time the reader encounters Trajan in Dante's pilgrimage is in canto X of the *Purgatorio*. In some marble decorations on the wall, Dante recognizes the person of Trajan, depicted while having a conversation with an old woman asking for help on his part:

Quiv'era storiata l'alta gloria  
del roman principato, il cui valore  
mosse Gregorio a la sua gran vittoria;

i' dico di Traiano imperadore;  
e una vedovella li era al freno,  
di lagrime atteggiata e di dolore.

Intorno a lui pareva calcato e pieno  
di cavalieri, e l'aguglie ne l'oro  
sovr'essi in vista al vento si movieno.

La miserella intra tutti costoro  
pareva dir: «Signor, fammi vendetta  
di mio figliuol ch'è morto, ond'io m'accoro»;

ed elli a lei rispondere: «Or aspetta  
tanto ch'i' torni»; e quella: «Signor mio»,  
come persona in cui dolor s'affretta,

«se tu non torni?»; ed ei: «Chi fia dov'io,  
la ti farà»; ed ella: «L'altrui bene  
a te che fia, se 'l tuo metti in oblio?»;

ond'elli: «Or ti conforta; ch'ei convene  
ch'i' solva il mio dovere anzi ch'i' mova:  
giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritene».<sup>172</sup>

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172 Alighieri, Dante, *La Divina Commedia: Purgatorio* (Giacalone, Giuseppe ed.), Roma: Angelo Signorelli Editore, 2003, pp. 270-272.

The comment Della Lana offers on these few lines is the following:

Elli si legge che al tempo di San Gregorio papa si cavò a Roma una fossa per fare un fondamento d'un lavoro, e cavando li maestri trovòno sotto terra uno monimento, lo quale fu aperto e dentro era infrall'altre cose quello della testa del defunto: e avea la lingua così rigida, carnosa e fresca come fosse pure in quella ora seppellita. [...] Alle orecchie di San Gregorio venne tal novità. Fèssela portare dinanzi e coniurolla dalla parte di Dio vivo e vero [...] ch'ella li dovesse dire di che condizione fu nella prima vita; la lingua rispuose: "Io fu' Traiano imperadore di Roma [...] e sono allo inferno perch'io non fui con fede". Investigato Gregorio della condizione di costui per quelle scritte che si trovòno, si trovò ch'elli fu uomo di grandissima iustizia e misericordiosa persona. E trall'altre novelle trovò che [...] una vedovella si gittò dinanzi al cavallo in ginocchie dicendo allo detto imperadore ch'elli facesse ragione con ciò che fosse che uno suo figliuolo gli era stato morto. [...] Allora lo'imperadore costretto da iustizia e da pietade [...] mandò a trovare colui che avea fatto lo omicidio, e trovòssi essere lo figliuolo del detto imperadore Traiano. Apprestato dinanzi da lui suo figliuolo per malfattore, chiamò la vedovella e disse: "Or vedi costui ch'è mo' mio figliuolo, è quello c'ha commesso l'omicidio. Quale vuoi tu innanzi: o ch'ello muora o ch'io tel dia per tuo figliuolo? [...]". Pensato la vedovella ch'el suo figliuolo morto non resuscitava perchè questo morisse, disse che lo voleva per suo figliuolo, e così l'ebbe e possedéolo da quella ora innanzi. [...] Per le quali istorie così bontadose lo detto san Gregorio si mosse a pregare Dio per lui e tanto pregò che 'l detto Traiano resuscitò e visse nel mondo e fu battizzato e tiense ch'elli sia mo' salvo. Vero è che, perchè il detto san Gregorio fece preghiera per dannato, volle Dio per penitenza di tal peccato che da quel dì innanzi per tutta la sua vita elli avesse mal di stomaco.<sup>173</sup>

The contact points between this and the plot of *Saint Erkenwald* are indeed several: some renovation works accidentally leading to the discovery of an inexplicably preserved body (or some part of it); the talking head summoned to speak by order of God; the Christian representative called upon to solve the mystery; a righteous pagan's soul stranded outside heaven despite deserving admission; the virtuous conduct of the heathen – even when the judgement involves a loved one; the turning point of baptism and the final admission of the heathen into heaven. On the other hand, the contrasting elements spark some interesting debates. The additions and variations made by the *Gawain*-poet (assuming such authorship) are nothing but casual: since his general beliefs seem to be those of a conscious orthodox traditionalist, they were most certainly aimed at fixing the unorthodox points of the original legend while endorsing the importance of baptism among English people.<sup>174</sup> He used an extremely popular narrative and

173 Della Lana, Jacopo, *Commento alla 'Commedia'* (Volpi, Mirko; Terzi, Arianna eds.), Roma: Salerno, 2009, pp. 1135-1137.

174 Gardner, p. 13.

adjusted it to fit his own agenda, or that of a potential patron. The context of the clash between Lollardy and the Catholic Church in those years makes this hypothesis not impossible.

First of all, among these several modifications, it is important to observe that the minister involved in the story is no longer Pope Gregory the Great, but a minor figure, relevant mainly to the English community and little known outside the country. The different identity of the clergyman may simply reflect the will of the author of the poem to come closer to English traditions and make the text more appealing to English people. The change of identity as far as the corpse is concerned is, on the other hand, rather significant.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, Trajan lived after the Incarnation,<sup>176</sup> which means he was aware of the existence and development of the Christian faith but refused to convert to it. The anonymous judge of *Saint Erkenwald*, on the contrary, lived in an imprecise span of time clearly in the centuries BC. This makes it impossible for the man to have been in touch with the new faith and so a potential problem about the irrevocable damnation of Trajan's soul is avoided. According to Thomas Aquinas, the only pagans who could hope for salvation consisted of two categories of men and women: those completely alien to God because of time and place – meaning those who lived too far away from the sites of the Incarnation in the first centuries AD and those who lived before it – but who chose to follow the best religious code and moral conduct they knew of; and those who lived before the Incarnation but were chosen by God to be saved and received some sort of revelation that made them aware of his existence.<sup>177</sup> Trajan fits none of these criteria: an orthodox narrative could not offer such an example, the subject had to be slightly men-

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<sup>175</sup> Peterson, p.42.

<sup>176</sup> The Roman Emperor Trajan is indeed believed to have lived between 53 and 117 A.D..

<sup>177</sup> Whatley, p. 343.

ded to result more credible and to be generally approved without raising any possible criticism on the part of the Church.

Secondly, considering Della Lana's commentary on Dante's work rather than the *Divina Commedia* itself, we can recognize another substantial difference between the commentary and the Middle English poem. It concerns the attitudes adopted by Pope Gregory and the bishop Erkenwald with regards to the fate of the heathen's soul. While the first questions God's choice of leaving the man to suffer despite his good conduct and a plan to eventually save him, the latter simply wishes he could do something to ease the pains of the heathen's soul, recognising the motivation behind God's sentence. The English poet consequently chooses to adopt what Gordon Whatley has conveniently defined a "theologically conservative response".<sup>178</sup> Questioning God's choice, under any circumstances, was a serious sin and a great Catholic man such as Pope Gregory would have made a terrible mistake in doing so. In some early versions of the legend, Gregory is indeed punished for his sin, while in others the guilt is largely overlooked: the punishment inflicted to the Pope in Della Lana's rendition is however quite mild and slightly comic, a humble but never-ending stomach-ache.

Furthermore, in most versions of the legend, Pope Gregory only learns about Trajan's fame and history from books and, praying for his soul, succeeds in saving him. The emperor is never physically present in the plot and never receives baptism either.<sup>179</sup> For the first time in the tradition of the Trajan legend, Della Lana tells of the background events that led to the discovery of the head and how it comes to life again to receive the sacrament – even if this passage remains quite vague.<sup>180</sup>

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178 Whatley, p. 352.

179 Whatley, p. 334.

180 Hulbert, p. 487.



The role of human knowledge is also widely scaled back in the English version. While Della Lana's Gregory gathers all he needs to know about the man from books, the English community does not have the same luck. Libraries are searched and the older and wiser are questioned, but clearly earthly tools are not sufficient to uncover the mystery. Only the direct intercession of the Church leads to a clarification of the matter: this topic has already been largely dealt with in the previous chapters.<sup>181</sup>

To state that the Italian text undoubtedly influenced the Middle English one would be a mistake, even with all the elements here shown to support this idea. We are facing once again the same problem we deal with in trying to attribute to the same author the two poems considered in this research: the tools we have as scholars and students are not sufficient to make such statements. The two versions of the legend may be so much alike only because of the similarity of the cultural contexts in which two separate authors were immersed, and not because of one text being read by another writer. The evidence that emerge from the comparison of the texts seem to be quite comprehensive and seem to allow us to really consider that the poet behind *Saint Erkenwald* had read the Italian *commentario* prior to writing down his own text, but still this is just a theory that will likely remain widely untested.

## **5.2 The Influence of Dante's Mentor-Women on the Character of the Pearl-Maiden**

After having taken into consideration the strong possibility of the influence of the *Commentario* to the *Divina Commedia* on the poem *Saint Erkenwald*, it is useful to show how the *Divina Commedia* itself may have had some impact on the creation of *Pearl* as well. In doing so, I will try to further prove the closeness of the two poems – *Pearl* and

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<sup>181</sup> See chapter 3.1, pp. 54-58.

*Saint Erkenwald* – and the affinity they present in dealing with theological themes, especially that of baptism and salvation. Investigating the last few cantos of the *Purgatorio* – especially from canto XXVIII to canto XXXI –, it looks like many elements of the *Pearl* poem might have been taken from this text, and eventually displayed with some slight variation. The two characters that have caught my attention for resembling strongly the *Pearl*-maiden are the two guides the pilgrim Dante encounters in the earthly paradise right before entering paradise: Matelda and Beatrice.

It is important to note that the setting itself as described in the *Divina Commedia* echoes the one the reader finds in the Middle English poem. It may seem a long shot to declare that *Pearl* was inspired by Dante's work building this assumption solely on this feature. The image of the rich and beautiful terrestrial paradise separated from the world of the living by a stream is indeed a common narrative device of the literature of the Middle Ages, and so the two authors may have just relied on the same set of conventions in portraying that landscape. Luckily, a number of other elements make the two texts closer.

In the last cantos of the *Purgatorio*, we indeed encounter two female characters who belong to the world of the after-life, Matelda and Beatrice. While the character of Beatrice has long been celebrated and the nature of her role seems to be quite clear, that of Matelda remains more marginal. However, it is exactly this woman who seems to have inspired the daughter-figure of the poem *Pearl*. Matelda, together with the other dream visions the pilgrim Dante receives – those of Lia and Rachele –, depicts the believer's soul's path towards God: without the gift of his grace the believer would not be able to obtain eternal salvation. Because of Adam's act and of its consequences, human

nature was corrupted, and so faith and will no longer be enough in order to obtain that same salvation.<sup>182</sup> But Matelda, sent by the will of God, performs the needed cleansing rituals and so the living human soul of the pilgrim is allowed to continue on the journey. She seems to represent the qualities of the innocence in which Adam and Eve lived prior to their corruption and it is thanks to this characteristic that she is capable of leading the protagonist to the next step towards paradise.<sup>183</sup>

It is inevitable as well to recognize many traits of Beatrice's attitude towards Dante in how the child talks to the dreamer. As far as Matelda is concerned, in the *Purgatorio*, she appears to the pilgrim in a way that strongly resembles the appearance of the Pearl in our other poem:

Coi piè ristetti e con li occhi passai  
di là dal fiumicello, per mirare  
la gran variazion d'i freschi mai;  
e là m'apparve, sì com'elli appare  
subitamente cosa che disia  
per meraviglia tutto altro pensare,  
una donna soletta che si già  
cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore  
ond'era pinta tutta la sua via.<sup>184</sup>

(Canto XXVIII, lines 34-42)

Perlez pyʒte of ryal prys  
þere moʒt mon by grace haf sene,  
Quen þat frech as flor-de-lys  
Doun þe bonke con boʒe bydene.[...]

[...]To hed hade ho non oþer werle;  
Her lere-leke al hyr vmbegon;  
Her semblaunt sade for doc oþer erle,  
Her ble more blaʒt þen whallez bon.  
As schorne golde schyr her fax þenne schon,  
On schylderez þat leghe unlapped lyʒte.  
Her depe colour ʒet wanted non  
Of precios perle in porfyl pyʒte.

[...]A mannez dom moght dryʒly demme  
Er mynde moʒt malte in hit mesure.  
I hope no tong moʒt endure  
No sauerly saghe say of þat syʒt,  
So watz hit clene and cler and pure,  
þat precios perle þer hit was pyʒt.

(Lines 194-229)

The richness of the plants in the landscape is only hinted at in this passage but is a re-

182 Pacchioni, Paola, "Lia e Rachele, Matelda e Beatrice", *L'Alighieri*, 18, 2001, p. 48.

183 Pacchioni, p. 63.

184 This extract and all the following are taken from the edition: Alighieri, Dante, *La Divina Commedia: Purgatorio* (Giacalone, Giuseppe ed.), Roma: Angelo Signorelli Editore, 2003.

curing element in the canto: it recalls the variety of vegetation that the dreamer describes in *Pearl*. The woman, just like the maiden, stands on the opposite side of the stream that cannot be crossed by any living soul and so only three steps separate her from the other shore (line 70). Her beauty is immediately acknowledged by the narrator (line 43: Deh, bella donna [...]). Matelda eventually voices plainly the function she will perform in the journey of the pilgrim: she will clear the clouded intellect of the man and she will purge the fog that surrounds him.<sup>185</sup> The character is indeed still trapped by his human perception and the ignorance typical of the earthly life makes it impossible for him to figure out the real meaning of what he sees. She condemns his ignorance, showing her higher knowledge of both physical reality and the divine. She represents wisdom and this is the reason why the narrator is greatly drawn to her, to the point that he seems to be in love with her. In the same way, the dreamer of *Pearl* represents human frailty and the angel-looking child divine understanding. Moreover, the same process of instruction is carried out by the maiden when the dreamer cannot understand where he is and needs a guide to make sense of the situation.

Critics agree that another crucial role that Matelda performs is that of leading Dante through the cathartic cleansing rituals that will allow him to enter paradise, once he declares his sins and is washed from them. Dante is indeed the first man to enter that place after Adam, who broke the pact with God and condemned humanity to always be marked by the Original Sin.<sup>186</sup> Consequently the pilgrim has to recuperate the original innocence of men and women if he wants to proceed in his climb towards paradise. Un-

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185 Lines 80-81: Ma luce rende il salmo *Delectasti*/ che puote disnebbiar costro intelletto. Lines 88-90: Ond'ella: "Io dicerò come procede/per sua cagion ciò ch'ammirar ti face,/ e purgherò la nebbia che ti fiede.

186 Ariani, Marco, "La Lieta Sapienza di Matelda", in Rati, Giancarlo ed., *Purgatorio: Catone, Sordello, Marco Lombardo, Forese, Matelda*, Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2009, pp. 151-174. This article will be used as a source of inspiration for many reflections throughout the paragraph.

like the dreamer of *Pearl* who is sent back to reality after the vision because of his sinful condition, the pilgrim of the *Divina Commedia* is allowed to enter heaven after a symbolical immersion in the stream, in canto XXXI.

Later on, in the next canto (XXIX), another image – present also in *Pearl* – is described: that of a heavenly procession. This procession introduces the character of Beatrice to the scene (canto XXX). Dressed in white and looking like a bride of God, exactly like the Pearl-maiden, she is once again separated from Dante by the stream.

Genti vid'io allor, come a lor duci,  
venire appresso, vestite di bianco;  
e tal candor di qua già mai non fuci.

So sodanly on a wonder wyse  
I watz war of a prosessyoun.  
þis noble cité of ryche enpresse  
Watz sodanly ful, wythouten sommoun,  
Of such vergynez in þe same gyse  
þat watz my blysfyl anvnder croun.[...]

With gret delyt þay glod in fere  
On golden gateg þat glent as glasse;  
Hundreth þowsandez, I wot þer were,  
And alle in sute her liuréz wasse.  
Tor to know þe gladdest chere.

(Canto 29, lines 64-66)

(Lines 1095-1109)

We can recognise another similarity between the two texts by considering how Beatrice addresses the pilgrim, reproaching him for not understanding comprehensively what the situation means. She takes up the role of a scolding mother, worrying for the well-being of her child.

Così la madre al figlio par superba,  
com'ella apparve a me; perchè d'amaro  
sente il sapor de la pietade acerba. (Canto XXX, Lines 79-81)

But it is the core of this heartfelt reproach – between lines 102 and 145 – that resembles most the dialogue we can find in the Middle English poem:

“Voi vigilate ne l'eterno die,  
sì che notte né sonno a voi non fura  
passo che faccia il secol per sue vie;

'Thow demez noȝt bot doel-dystresse,  
þenne sayde þat wyȝt, 'why dotz þou so?  
For dyne of doel of lurez lesse

onde la mia risposta è con più cura  
che m'intenda colui che di là piagne,  
perchè sia colpa e duol d'una misura. [...]

Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto:  
mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,  
meco il menava in dritta parte volto.  
Sì tosto come in su la soglia fui  
di mia seconda etade e mutai vita,  
questi si tolse a me e, diessi altrui.  
Quando di carne a spirto era salita  
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,  
fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita;  
e volse i passi suoi per via non vera,  
immagini di ben seguendo false,  
che nulla promession rendono intera. [...]

Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti  
e la salute sua eran già corti.

(Canto 30, lines 103-137)

Ofte mony mon forgos þe mo.  
þe oʒte better þyselven blesse,  
And loue ay God, in wele and wo,  
For anger gaynez þe not a cresse.  
Who nedez schal þole, be not so þro;  
For þoʒ þou daunce as any do,  
Braundysch and bray þy braþez breme,  
When þou no fyrre may, to ne fro,  
þou moste abyde þat He schal deme.

'Deme Dryʒtyn, ever Hym adyte;  
Of þe way a fote ne wyl He wryþe.  
þy mendez mountez not a myte,  
þaʒ þou for sorʒe be neuer blyþe.  
Stynt of þy strot and fyne to flyte,  
And sech Hys blyþe ful swefte and swyþe;  
þy prayer may Hys pyté byte,  
þat mercy schal hyr craftes kyþe.  
Hys comforte may þy langour lyþe,  
And þy lurez of lyʒtly fleme;  
For, marre oþer madde, morne and myþe,  
Al lys in Hym to dyʒt and deme."

(Lines 337-360)

Beatrice, in life, led the pilgrim Dante on the right path of love and faith and he proved a good man. But as soon as she died, just as God's design outlined for her, the man strayed from the right path and abandoned himself to the pleasures of earthly life, forgetting that the true aim of every believer's life is to honour God, remembering that physical objects are illusory and cannot fill a man's or a woman's life. Dante should have instead honoured Beatrice even more after death: even if he could not see her, he should have known that she still existed somewhere and that her grace and wisdom had increased and should have inspired him even more than before. However, the guide-figure says that the pilgrim fell so low that every effort she could have made to save him would have been too weak and ineffective. The same pattern can be easily recognised in *Pearl*. A man is tormented by the loss of a loved one, he does not accept God's decision to take away a life and deviates from the path of true faith, putting his own future salva-

tion at risk. Such a sin is quite dangerous, making it likely that they would not be admitted into the realm of God after death. Their loved ones, respectively Beatrice and the Pearl-maiden, worry for the men to the point that they decide to intervene to save the two sinners from the potential upcoming tortures of hell. Through a God-allowed intervention, the women succeed in re-establishing the faith of the pilgrim and of the dreamer respectively.

The presence in both *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* of features that resemble rather closely extracts from the *Divina Commedia* may be used as another argument for the common authorship of the two texts. First of all, these affinities seem to suggest that the sources used as inspiration were the same, and also that their author had the same predisposition to adaptation and re-elaboration. The theme of salvation is in both cases emphasised by these amplified – and fixed – quotations taken quite explicitly from Dante's masterpiece.





## Conclusion

Many different studies have tried to prove the identity of the authors of *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* focusing on grammatical and morphological aspects, as C.J. Peterson explains in his essay "*Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald*: Some Evidence of Authorship".<sup>187</sup> However, the study seems doomed from the start: it is necessary to consider the possible great impact of the scribe on the original texts, and all the possible manipulations that it may have undergone before reaching modern times. The structures we recognise may be original or may as well have been born as a result of different scribes or owners of the text intervening on it. Moreover, this type of approach has come to the conclusion that, while the other poems of the so-called *Gawain*-group offer many similar structures, it is exactly *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* that present themselves as outsiders.

Scholars have spent years and years trying to figure out the true nature of the poems and still a satisfactory result has not been reached. Certainly I do not expect to find a solution that would solve all those problem with the limited and brief research I carried out in the last few months, but I nevertheless have tried a different approach to the problem. Rather than focusing on technical matters, which, as I have said, has proven to be delicate and critical, I chose to focus on which themes are dealt with in these texts and how these specific topics are explained to the reader. This same starting point was adopted by Marie Boroff, and the conclusions I am gathering from my research are close to those she came to herself.<sup>188</sup> Even though she focused her attention on thematic issues, she started her analysis from single words and the context they were

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187 Peterson, C.J., "*Pearl* and *St. Erkenwald*: Some Evidence of Authorship", *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, 25 (1974), pp. 49-53.

188 Boroff, Marie, "Narrative Artistry in *St. Erkenwald* and the *Gawain*-Group: The Case for Common Authorship".

used in the two texts. Some of her ideas have been useful for my own inquiry, such as the presence of the image of the heavenly banquet, the attention to ceremonial protocol and hierarchy, the care for spatial limitations, the recurrence of the theme of confirmation and the constant presence of the Holy Trinity in the poems.

My research focused on three main topics: baptism, the theme of the weakness of human knowledge, the symbolic meaning behind objects. In addition I considered as well the likely possibility of the influence of Dante's work on the poems. The way these topics are introduced and handled in the two poems is very similar. To start with, as far as the sacrament of baptism is concerned, it was a pivotal point in both texts. It proved the rightness of Catholicism in the face of the rising Lollard heresy, and it invigorated the orthodox faith of the believers. Thanks to the sacrament, the final image we come across in the two plots is of communion between the living and God: those who did not believe in his power and strayed from the right path have been led back to the earthly Church and have repented for doubting about God's goodness and control over humanity.

Furthermore, both in front of the amazing tomb and of the Pearl-maiden, both characters of respectively *Saint Erkenwald* and *Pearl* seem to lack the proper instruments to describe what they witness. Although the general image of human abilities is quite positive, the author tries to highlight the constant presence of a gap between divine truth and earthly reality. To fill this gap, divine intervention is always necessary: otherwise men and women would be left to sin and stray from faith without hope of repentance. Luckily, God chooses to save them through the mediation of his intermediaries: the clergy or some angel in a vision. Humanity, thanks to his good

nature, finally understands the need to rely on the Church and to trust God in order to be saved.

Finally, the attention to details is something that all medieval poets have in common. In the two texts here considered, however, the attention seems to be excessive and to hide much deeper meaning. This second layer of meaning often leads in the same direction in both the poems I have considered. An attitude that therefore could not be used as a proof of the identity of the authors of the two poems, here can serve exactly this purpose.

Modern and contemporary scholars lack the access to the type of information that could clearly state the identity of the authors of our texts. This will likely never be solved. It is possible that the two texts were much different in their original form and may have become more similar through the influence of the same scribe or they may have actually have been written by the same author. The authors could have been different people who knew each other and shared the same mentality and the same style or one could have tried – successfully and problematically – to imitate the other.

However, my research has led me to believe that the coincidence of the authors of *Pearl* and *Saint Erkenwald* is possible. The contact points are so numerous that it becomes impossible to ignore them, both on a technical and on a thematic level of analysis.



## Riassunto

I due poemetti inglesi medievali *Saint Erkenwald* e *Pearl* sono stati ritrovati in manoscritti separati, apparentemente non connessi tra loro. Presentano tuttavia numerosi punti di contatto tra cui, prima di tutto, l'uso dello stesso dialetto (quello associato alla zona delle North West Midlands) e poi il fatto di risalire apparentemente allo stesso periodo, cioè il tardo XIV secolo. È stata presa in analisi svariate volte la possibilità che l'autore di questi due testi sia il medesimo, anche grazie all'impiego di espressioni ricorrenti e alla presenza delle stesse tematiche portanti, nonché grazie ad una certa continuità tra i testi. Tale continuità può essere chiaramente riconosciuta nei testi generalmente attribuiti al *Gawain-poet*, ma può essere rintracciata anche in *Saint Erkenwald*. In opposizione a questa teoria, numerosi esperti hanno considerato il fatto che si riscontrino numerose variazioni grammaticali e morfologiche nei due testi. I sostenitori della tesi di un autore comune attribuiscono queste variazioni al fatto che scrivani diversi abbiano copiato i testi: partendo da testi che inizialmente presentavano strutture morfologiche e grammaticali coincidenti, hanno lasciato che la loro lingua e la loro predisposizione influenzassero il risultato dell'opera trascritta. La presenza di queste variabili è innegabile, tuttavia non potrà mai essere giustificata con certezza. A dispetto di ciò, in questa mia breve ricerca, tenterò di supportare a mia volta la possibilità che la mente dietro *Pearl* e *Saint Erkenwald* sia la stessa, partendo però da aspetti tematici, piuttosto che tecnici.

I punti di partenza della mia ricerca sono stati appunto i due poemetti *Pearl* e *Saint Erkenwald*. In quest'ultimo elementi che chiaramente rispecchiano la mentalità cristiana ortodossa dell'epoca sono accostati alla strana storia di un pagano, il cui corpo e la cui

anima sono mantenuti in una situazione di precarietà nel limbo per secoli fino al momento in cui gli viene finalmente consentito di accedere al paradiso cristiano. La morale che la trama sembra presentare è che un uomo qualsiasi, anche per l'appunto un pagano non battezzato senza alcuna nozione di Cristianità, possa essere ammesso nel Regno di Dio, fintantoché ammetta di sottoporsi al potere della Chiesa sulla terra e confidi nella bontà di Dio. Questo corpo, grazie appunto alla volontà di Dio, non subisce il normale decadimento fisico e resta intatto per secoli e secoli tra le fondamenta di una chiesa, fino al momento in cui viene scoperto, lasciando la comunità che lo ritrova in uno stato di totale smarrimento e meraviglia: non riescono infatti a capire come ciò sia possibile. La meraviglia cresce ancora di più quando, grazie all'intervento del famoso vescovo Erkenwald, il corpo parla, spiegando il perché della sua straordinaria condizione. L'uomo, vissuto prima della nascita di Cristo, era stato un uomo di legge di rinomata integrità morale e per questo era stato sia celebrato dai suoi contemporanei, sia scelto da Dio per venire salvato dalla dannazione. L'accesso al paradiso non gli era però mai stato concesso dal momento che il pagano non era stato battezzato: la purezza della sua anima gli avrebbe concesso di venire salvato, ma questo fattore lo bloccava. Una volta che il vescovo Erkenwald lo battezza, l'uomo viene finalmente ammesso al “banchetto di Dio”, riportando equilibrio anche nella comunità che ne aveva scoperto il corpo.

*Pearl*, invece, presenta una trama apparentemente molto diversa da quella appena riassunta. Il poemetto tratta infatti la storia di uomo che ha appena perso la figlia e che fatica a riconciliarsi con la realtà del lutto e ad accettare che la bambina gli sia stata tolta per volontà di Dio, secondo il suo grande disegno. Il testo abbina alla tradizione della

visione cristiana un contesto emotivo unico nel genere. La visione generalmente è concessa da Dio agli uomini e ha lo scopo di dimostrare qualche realtà universale che permetterà all'umanità intera di avvicinarsi al bene divino. In questo caso però il padre presente nel poemetto, in sogno, incontra quella che una volta era stata sua figlia e la visione sembra aiutare lui singolarmente. Questa bambina ora non ha bisogno del suo aiuto, ma è diventata una regina nel regno di Dio e, in una drastica inversione di ruoli, è lei che diventa guida e salvezza per la figura paterna. Nel lungo dialogo che i due intrattengono, vengono affrontati una grande varietà di temi, dalle circostanze della morte della bambina stessa, al problema teologico della salvezza dei bambini morti prematuramente. Il risultato della visione coincide con quello tradizionale degli altri esempi della tradizione cristiana: anche se la verità rivelata non incide sulla collettività ma sul singolo, quest'ultimo è comunque riammesso nella grazia di Dio e comprende la volontà divina dietro gli avvenimenti che lo hanno toccato.

Nella mia ricerca, ho notato come nei due testi il concetto della salvezza, sempre letta in chiave cristiana, sia centrale. In *Saint Erkenwald* la storia ruota attorno alla salvezza del pagano grazie al sacramento del battesimo, effettuato da un importante vescovo. In *Pearl*, invece, la trama si concentra sulla salvezza dei bambini morti prematuramente e su quale sia il loro destino dopo la morte, secondo la volontà di Dio. Considerando che il “cristiano medio” veniva comunque battezzato generalmente da bambino e aveva quindi la possibilità di mettere in pratica la dottrina cristiana durante tutta la sua vita adulta, i due personaggi principali dei testi qui considerati non rispettano questo percorso. Tuttavia viene loro concessa salvezza eterna: ciò avviene grazie alla bontà di Dio che sceglie di accettarli nel suo regno, ed è appunto questo fatto

che viene abbondantemente messo in luce dall'autore dei testi.

Di conseguenza, anche la nozione stessa di battesimo assume notevole rilevanza. Il sacramento riveste però funzioni contrastanti: mentre per la giovane cristiana in *Pearl* è il fattore principale che le permette di essere ammessa in paradiso, per il pagano di *Saint Erkenwald* il fatto di non essere stato battezzato sembra inizialmente condannarlo alla dannazione.

È fondamentale a questo punto considerare il contesto storico in cui i due testi sono nati: si tratta infatti di un momento in cui in Inghilterra la religione cristiana ufficiale si scontra con il movimento dei lollardi. Quest'ultimi, pur condividendo i fondamenti del cristianesimo, sostenevano, tra i numerosi allontanamenti dal cattolicesimo, che il clero non fosse direttamente legato a Dio e che non costituisse fonte di divinità in terra e inoltre che i sacramenti (tra cui appunto il battesimo) fossero pure formalità vuote. Entrambi i testi sembrano quindi essere la creazione di un autore apertamente ortodosso e conservatore, il cui scopo sembra essere quello di fare della propaganda per il cattolicesimo. I due testi mostrano infatti da un lato le terribili conseguenze del non rispettare i sacramenti e il clero, dall'altro l'infinita bontà di Dio nei confronti di coloro che rispettano i precetti del cattolicesimo.

Un altro tema che si può facilmente riconoscere nei due testi e che viene affrontato in maniera piuttosto coincidente è quello della debolezza dell'intelligenza umana di fronte al divino. In *Saint Erkenwald* vediamo come di fronte ad un evento che sfida le normali leggi naturali si crei il caos e come la gente sbaglia, non ricorrendo alla religione per trovare delle spiegazioni. In questo testo è anche chiaramente dimostrato come la conoscenza umana, per quanto enciclopedica possa essere, non possa mai coprire anche



lo spettro del divino: dovendo trovare un'identità per il corpo così stranamente ben conservato, tutte le biblioteche di Londra non sono d'aiuto e solo l'intervento del vescovo Erkenwald porta chiarezza alla situazione. In *Pearl* invece, l'uomo-sognatore prima di tutto non riconosce la volontà di Dio dietro alla morte della bambina e si oppone a questo disegno divino. Successivamente, non coglie la natura della visione concessagli e continua a combattere le circostanze a cui è sottoposto. Gli avvenimenti del poemetto però si concludono con una positiva comunione tra umano e divino, in cui l'uomo comprende appunto la necessità di sottomettersi, anche senza averne una motivazione esauriente, al divino, nella speranza di ottenere serenità in vita e grazia dopo la morte.

Un altro tema che i due testi hanno in comune è l'attenzione data ai dettagli degli oggetti fisici, che nascondono sempre un significato religioso più profondo di quello che appare ad una prima lettura. Per esempio, il vestito della bambina in *Pearl* si avvicina molto a quello che le anime benedette hanno secondo quanto descritto nel libro dell'Apocalisse. In *Saint Erkenwald* invece, l'ampia descrizione dell'abbigliamento del pagano al momento della scoperta del suo corpo denota una chiara ostentazione della propria purezza d'animo e un'aperta volontà di associarsi ai più alti ranghi del clero cattolico, a dispetto del fatto che l'uomo non faccia ancora per niente parte di quel mondo religioso.

Sorge poi spontaneo, considerata la formazione letteraria italiana e considerata la vicinanza temporale dei testi, paragonare i poemetti inglesi alla *Divina Commedia*. Già molti studiosi hanno suggerito come l'opera dantesca abbia influito su alcuni passaggi dei testi del *Gawain-poet*, e nel mio contributo, ho provato a mettere in luce qualche

altro elemento che supporta questa possibilità. Risulta senza dubbio chiaro il peso che il *Commentario* di Jacopo della Lana alla *Divina Commedia* abbia avuto sulla creazione di *Saint Erkenwald*: il testo è una variazione della leggenda di Traiano e di Papa Gregorio, ma molti dettagli usati dall'autore inglese sono rintracciabili esclusivamente nel commentario. Per quanto riguarda *Pearl*, invece, le figure femminili presenti del Purgatorio dantesco si avvicinano sotto molti aspetti alla protagonista del poema inglese. In particolare i passaggi che riguardano Matelda e i primi momenti in cui Beatrice si mostra a Dante nel paradiso terrestre sembrano essere una chiara guida alla trama di *Pearl*.

Lo scopo della mia ricerca è quello di capire se sia possibile che i due testi siano stati creati da uno stesso autore, così altamente preparato da proporre testi così vari e simili allo stesso tempo. Sembra esserci una visione comune dietro *Saint Erkenwald* e *Pearl*, che sicuramente appartengono entrambi ad una sorta di propaganda ortodossa. Presentano due esempi chiari e complementari dell'importanza del rispetto dei precetti cattolici e del clero, ma di certo una risposta chiara non può essere data.

Ho contribuito in piccola parte al dibattito sull'identità dell'autore di questi testi, partendo da posizioni tematiche piuttosto che tecniche ma il risultato purtroppo è lo stesso: l'incertezza delle supposizioni non può essere eliminata, dovendo anche tenere in conto tutte le possibili variazioni che i testi potrebbero aver subito dal momento della loro creazione a quello dei nostri studi. Una risposta soddisfacente non potrà di certo essere data se le informazioni a disposizione restano quelle a cui si ha accesso oggi.

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