Pearl in the Context of Fourteenth-Century Gift Economies

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In 1401, Henry IV's daughter Blanche married Ludwig III of Bavaria. Among the rich objects included in her dowry was a coronal, a crown characterized by tall fleurons or floral points and worn by a bride on her wedding day (Fig. 1). Medieval Europeans regarded coronals as essential to the wedding ceremony. Many parish churches owned a simple one to be lent to brides whose families were too poor to possess their own. Wealthy families might commission a goldsmith to make such an object if they did not already own one, and these might serve as part of the bride's dowry.[1] Blanche's coronal, now in the Treasury of the Munich Residenz in Germany, was probably made in the 1370s or 1380s and brought to London in 1382 by Anne of Bohemia, the first wife of Richard II.[2] Made of gold, precious stones, and pearls set in repeating patterns, it was probably crafted within ten years of the composition of *Pearl*. Its construction is intricate, and its materials are wholly precious. It is now one of the most familiar examples of fourteenth-century goldwork, perhaps simply because it has survived the melting and recasting that were the fate of so much medieval treasure.[3]

1. Clare Phillips, *Jewelry: From Antiquity to the Present* (New York, 1996), 70–71; and Neil H. Landman, Paula Mikkelsen, Rüdiger Bieler, and Bennet Branson, *Pearls: A Natural History* (New York, 2001), 73.

2. John Cherry, *Goldsmiths* (Toronto, 1992), 47.

3. The image used for Fig. 1 is available through ARTstor. Descriptions of it appear in John Cherry, *Goldsmiths*, 49, as well as John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge, U.K., 2001), xvii, fig. 7; and Alfred Thomas, *A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2007), 56–57. Bowers uses its existence to argue that contemporary poets would have associated pearls with Anne of Bohemia, but makes no further discussion of the coronal (157–59).

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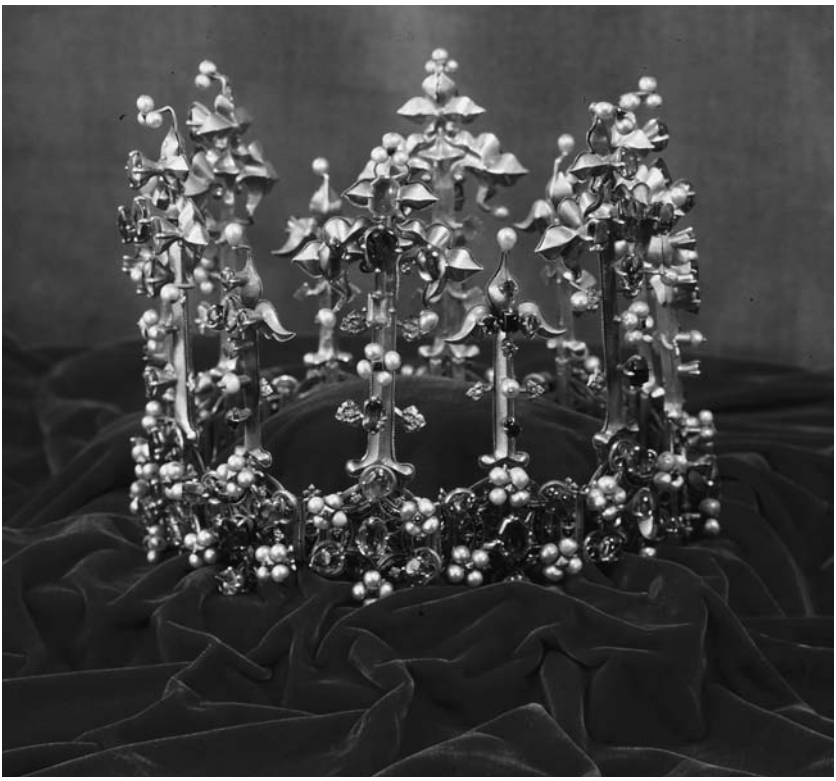

FIG. 1 *Crown of Princess Blanche. Reproduced by permission of Bayerische Verwaltung der staatlichen Schlösser, Gärten und Seen Photographs.*

The coronal of Princess Blanche can help us think about *Pearl* on a number of levels. First on the most basic level, it gives us a visual reference for the crown that the maiden wears: "A pyȝt coroune . . ./Of mariorys and non oþer ston,/Hiȝe pynakled . . ./Wyth flurted flowreȝ perfet vpon" (205–8).[4] Many commentators have noted that her crown signifies her queenship, but if it is a coronal, it also signals that she is a bride—as her unbound hair suggests, and as the maiden herself indicates later in the poem.[5]

4. All quotations of *Pearl* are taken from E. V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford, 1953), cited by line number. I have also found very useful Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 5th edn. (Exeter, 2007).

5. Also noted by Thomas, *A Blessed Shore*, 56–57.

Second, the coronal can serve as a material analogue to the structure of the poem. The poem is made up of twenty stanza-groups, each containing five stanzas. Each stanza in the stanza-group ends with the same word or phrase, and many of these have to do with wealth and treasure: in the first stanza-group, "pryuy perle wythouten spot" (12); in the second, the word "adubbement" (84), adornment, or variations of it; in the third, "ay more and more" (132), a phrase that creates an effect of accumulation as it is repeated; in the fourth, "precios . . . perleȝ pyȝt" (192); and so on. The reiteration of these words creates an effect of elaborate adornment not only because of their repetition but also because they appear in a slightly different context, and a slightly different form, at the end of each stanza. This aspect of the poem has been discussed by many critics. Felicity Riddy points out that the late medieval English use of the word *jewel* describes any highly ornamented and precious object, not just items of personal adornment. Riddy argues that both the dreamer's daughter and the poem itself are *jewels* in this sense.[6] Ian Bishop has noted that the closed nature of the poem—its last stanza links back to its first—is reminiscent of a rosary made of pearls, with each stanza standing for a single pearl. He notes, however, that the grouping of stanzas into fives militates against this interpretation, because fourteenth-century rosaries grouped their beads into decades, or groups of 10.[7] On the other hand, Blanche's coronal features pearls grouped in threes and fours, but on its fleurons the other gems are grouped in fives: four points and a center. If we were to imagine this coronal made "Of mariorys and non oþer ston" (206), the parallel would become apparent at once.[8] At the very least, the maker of the coronal and the maker of *Pearl* have similar ideas about ornamentation through repetition and variation; it is also possible that the object that the poem imitates is not a rosary, but a crown.

Third, the peregrinations of Blanche's crown illustrate for us the networks of gift-exchange in the context of which both coronal and poem circulated. Aristocrats throughout the Middle Ages enhanced their own prestige and created ties of obligation and loyalty by giving and receiving gifts of various

6. Felicity Riddy, "The Materials of Culture: Jewels in *Pearl*," in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge, U.K., 1997), 143–55, at 147–48.

7. Ian Bishop, *Pearl in Its Setting*, 30.

8. Bishop also notes the Renaissance sonnet-sequences known as coronas, crowns, or garlands, in which stanzas are connected by concatenation in the same way that they are in *Pearl*, but since there are no known sequences until much later, this is just an interesting parallel (*Pearl in Its Setting*, 30).

kinds.[9] Scholars of the Middle Ages have mapped the complex networks of gift-giving that bound together the aristocracy and religious foundations such as monasteries and churches.[10] In the last ten years, however, there has been a marked shift away from the study of gifts to institutions, toward the study of the gift-giving that characterized later medieval social relations among the aristocracy.[11] Kings and other high-ranking nobles frequently gave out valuable presents of lands and annuities to those who served them well, or in other cases gave out material commodities such as wine, spices, or household goods. They received presents (usually in kind, and of considerably lesser value) from their social inferiors. On special occasions they might distribute or receive treasures of various kinds. On New Year's Day of 1382, for instance, John of Gaunt gave small, valuable tokens made out of gold and decorated with gems, enamel, or engraving, to the king and queen and to his friends.[12] One received a gift, large or small, through the largesse of another. Small gifts frequently cemented relations of friendship and goodwill, while larger gifts could establish the recipient in a dependent relationship to the giver. For example, during Richard II's 1396 visit to France, he and the French king's brother, Duke Louis of Orléans, engaged in what was essentially a duel of gifts. Richard gave the duke a gold ewer and a *hanap* (a kind of ornate goblet), upon which the duke gave him a more precious ewer and *hanap*. Richard then

9. The influential anthropologist Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York, 1967), 6–18, argues that gifts are central to most if not all cultures, and that their primary function is to bind social agents together through rituals of exchange. To be the giver in such an economy is to establish one's own prestige through largesse, and to establish the recipient in a dependent relationship to oneself. According to Mauss, a giver theoretically acts of his own free will, but there are deep consequences for refusing to engage in such transactions: a refusal to accept a gift is symbolically to refuse social relations.

10. One early study focuses on gifts in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England: Joel Rosenthal, *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307–1485* (London, 1972). Until the late 1990s scholars focused mainly on gift economies before 1200, typically in France. Representative examples include Barbara H. Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909–1049* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988); Stephen D. White, *Custom, Kinship, and Gifts to Saints: The Laudatio Parentum in Western France, 1050–1150* (Chapel Hill, 1988); and Megan McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints: Prayer for the Dead in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994). For a historiography through 1999, see Arnoud-Jan A. van Bijsterveld, "The Medieval Gift as Agent of Social Bonding and Political Power: A Comparative Approach," in Esther Cohen and Mayke De Jong, eds., *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context* (Leiden, 2001), 123–56.

11. See, among others, Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, 2000); Esther Cohen and Mayke B. De Jong, eds., *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context* (Leiden, 2001); Valentin Groebner and Pamela Eve Selwyn, *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the End of the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2002); and Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner, and Bernhard Jussen, eds., *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen, 2003).

12. Riddy, "The Materials of Culture," at 154.

gave him an *ouche*, an ornamental clasp, which he countered with a more beautiful one. Finally Richard stripped off his ruby ring and gave it to the duke, at which point the duke gave him a more valuable one, and left "with his head held high."[13] Even if this exchange was at least partially planned in advance (otherwise why come prepared with matching ewers and goblets?), the pride of the French duke suggests that he perceived the exchange as a contest against the English king, and one that he had won with his more magnificent gifts.

Such precious objects were especially powerful in a gift economy. While an object of treasure might be bought or commissioned by a single patron, it was constructed to embody both literal and symbolic properties that could be transferred to its owner through the physical attributes of precious materials, intricate workmanship, and beauty.[14] The value of these objects could not be calculated strictly in terms of the quantity of precious metal contained therein, so they lent themselves especially well to gift-giving situations in which the giver desired to imbue the recipient with qualities embodied symbolically by the gift itself.[15]

To understand how this practice figures in *Pearl*, we must understand the nature of ownership in the ceremonial gift economies of late medieval England and France. These existed alongside—and are explicitly distinguished from—mercantile transactions, that is, an exchange of goods motivated by a desire for immediate gain, and characterized by exacting calculations as to the comparative value of items exchanged (for instance, through hard bargaining in the marketplace, and sometimes by the use of money to facilitate these calculations).[16] Such behavior was seen as antithetical to the spirit of gift-exchanges and inappropriate for noble persons. To possess treasures was desirable, because to own them was in some sense to participate in their beauty and preciousness. But while medieval kings were expected to be magnificent—and did in fact

13. An account of this meeting narrated from the English perspective is in Oxford, Oriel College MS 46, fols. 104v–106v, published by P. Meyer as "L'Entrevue d'Ardres," *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Societé de l'Histoire de France* 18 (1881): 209–24, and discussed in Jenny Stratford, "Gold and Diplomacy in the Reign of Richard II," in John Mitchell and Matthew Moran, eds., *England and the Continent in the Middle Ages: Studies in Memory of Andrew Martindale* (Stamford, 2000), 218–37, at 227–29. 'With his head held high' is Stratford's translation of "reguarde orgoil" (228).

14. See the many essays in Elizabeth M. Tyler, ed., *Treasure in the Medieval West* (Woodbridge, 2000).

15. For the transfer of symbolic properties via gift-giving, see Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, 1988), 31–43, 104–18.

16. Mauss, *The Gift*, 22.

use precious objects to construct their royal splendor—they were also expected, indeed obligated, to be generous.[17] This is evident in the customs of patronage that surrounded kingship throughout the Middle Ages, and in the criticism that attended kings who failed to fulfill their obligation to dispense land, money, and privileges to their faithful servants. Treasure accrued its greatest benefits not when it was hoarded up or consumed, but when its owners gave it away. This perception held even when the treasure in question had itself been given to the giver by someone else. Especially rich and beautiful presents might be given away again in other exchanges—a public, ritualistic, and very acceptable form of re-gifting. For example, at Christmas of 1495, Jean de Berry gave King Charles VI of France a golden *nef*, a model ship for the dinner table. Charles then presented that same *nef* to Richard II in a public ceremony during the English king's 1496 visit to France.[18] Similarly, Blanche's coronal crossed the English Channel twice within twenty years, accompanying two different royal brides across Europe as part of their dowries. Ownership of such precious objects was inherently transitory.

The central metaphor of *Pearl* emphasizes the ephemerality of ownership and the importance of hierarchical social relations in a ceremonial gift economy. The speakers within the poem contest the meanings of the metaphorical pearl. For the unconsoled mourner who begins the action of the poem by falling asleep in the garden, the pearl carries the emotional value of the lost child. As he is reunited with her in vision, his continued use of the metaphor encodes not only a measure of his joy at reunion with her, but also a culturally sanctioned paternal possessiveness. The dreamer's possessiveness toward his lost pearl is consistent with a stance of absolute ownership, not the temporary possession of a treasure that characterizes gift economies. The poem depicts the dreamer's emotions as deeply and movingly personal; but they are also individualistic in a way that opposes the social bonds necessary in both earthly and heavenly courts. The maiden in her turn resists the dreamer's claims to possession, bespeaking herself as the recipient of largesse from a courtly lord, constituted by social relationships of dependence, rather than as an essentially passive object whose value is ascribed to her by an owner.

17. Stephen D. White, "The Politics of Exchange: Gifts, Fiefs, and Feudalism," in Cohen and De Jong, eds., *Medieval Transformations*, 169–88.

18. Stratford, "Gold and Diplomacy," 229.

I

In *Pearl* the dreamer's characteristic posture is that of possessor, and it appears in a variety of forms throughout the poem. If readers remember any particular phrase from Pearl, it is likely to be one variation of the phrase that ends each of the first five stanzas of *Pearl*: "My priuy perle wythouten spotte" (24) or "My precious perle wythouten spot" (48). In fact, this phrase appears three times as "that precious perle without a spot," twice with the "my" in front of it and once without. The words *my* and *mine* appear in the poem 96 other times, and about three-quarters of these instances occur in the first half of the poem. They appear with particular frequency in the dreamer's initial conversation with the pearl-maiden, where the dreamer emphatically claims the pearl as his. On the most basic level, the pearl metaphor is meant to suggest the pearl-maiden's value by comparing her to the Pearl of Great Price in Matthew 13:45–46, and such value, both in the parable and in the poem, is personal, measured by the perceptions of the one who seeks the pearl. But the persistence of the possessive pronouns *my* and *mine* suggests that the poet is after something much more nuanced than just a description of her value, personal or otherwise. He wants to evoke a particular mental and emotional attitude toward daughters.[19]

The dreamer-narrator in *Pearl* is concerned not with utility or exchange-value, nor with the power that accompanies wealth, but with the particular value of the particular child, figured as a pearl, whom he has lost. In such a metaphor, the dreamer does not seem avaricious or mercenary in his desire for the lost object, as he would if he imagined her as a piece of money; in fact, quite the reverse. First and most obviously, the child-as-pearl equation emphasizes her beauty. His initial description describes equally well the beauty of a pearl and the beauty of a human girl as understood in the Middle Ages—small, round, smooth-sided, lustrous, pure white, arrayed in a beautiful setting. Second, the description emphasizes her uniqueness. In the Middle

19. The relationship between the dreamer and the maiden is of course deeply ambiguous, and scholars have long disagreed over how to interpret the dreamer's statement that "Ho wat3 me nerre þen aunte or nece" (233). This article will assume that the relationship depicted between dreamer and maiden is that of a father and a daughter, though the dreamer is not necessarily to be identified with the poet himself. Many other possible interpretations have been suggested, ranging from the allegorical (Sister Mary Madeleva, *"Pearl": A Study in Spiritual Dryness* [New York, 1925]), to the political (Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl*, 49–86), to the suggestion that the two are lovers (Jane Beal, "The Pearl-Maiden's Two Lovers," *Studies in Philology* 100 [2003]: 1–21, at 2, 16). Lynn Staley has argued that the maiden is a living daughter who has been placed in a convent of Minoresses ("Pearl and the Contingencies of Love and Piety," in David Aers, ed., *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall* [Cambridge, U.K., 2000], 83–114).

Ages as now, it was very difficult to find two identical, perfect, natural pearls due to the many variables in their production. The beauty and uniqueness of the pearl in this poem thus make it an immensely precious thing to be treasured for its intrinsic qualities. The poem makes literal that old truism of parents: "my child is very precious to me."

Obviously the dreamer intends the image of the pearl to reflect the value he puts on her. And yet other aspects of this metaphor ought to make the modern reader profoundly uncomfortable. Think for an instant about single pearls. They are small, portable, inanimate, losable, marketable (though the dreamer seems pointedly to ignore this side of the image), and able to be manipulated (since a jeweler could use a pearl to ornament a piece of jewelry or clothing). But above all, a pearl is inanimate. It is fundamentally a different kind of thing from a lady, or a warrior, or a dove. The *my* in "my pearl" carries different overtones from the *my* of "my daughter"—which may account in part for why the dreamer never says "my daughter." The metaphor of the maiden as pearl, as the dreamer deploys it in the first half of the poem, expands her value while contracting her agency. As a daughter, she may be ruled by her father, but as a pearl, she is *owned* by him.

The directness of this claim of ownership makes good sense within the context of medieval English cultural understandings about family. All children, but particularly daughters, were subordinate to fathers (or, in the absence of a father, to the head of household) by virtue of their age, sex, and dependency.[20] The legal power of a father over a daughter was so great that scholars frequently simply assert that medieval law treated women as the possessions of their male relatives and guardians.[21] The thirteenth-century English law treatise attributed to Henry Bracton draws implicit parallels between the power exercised by fathers over children and the power exercised by lords over their bondmen.[22] It is, in fact, this very subordination that makes the inversion of roles in *Pearl* so powerful (and, for the dreamer, hard to swallow) when the maiden begins to teach her father. The male head of the household exercised a degree of control over his wife and children that we find abhorrent; in particular, the law allowed him to use violence to correct them

20. For a description of this aspect of family life, see Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside* (Oxford, 1987), 6–9.

21. See, for instance, Sandy Bardsley, *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages* (Westport, Conn., 2007), 130.

22. Peter Coss, "An Age of Deference," in Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, eds., *A Social History of England, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, U.K., 2006), 31–74, at 31.

and compel their obedience.[23] It is equally true that medieval courts often considered rape to be less a crime against a person than it was theft of a man's property: the chastity of the wife or daughter who was raped.[24] Moreover, women were often the vehicles by which property passed between families, especially through arranged—and occasionally forced—marriages, and through claims to wardship over heiresses. Feminist scholarship can analyze the power dynamic of this relationship, but it cannot—or will not—tell us what it feels like to be a patriarch. Our myth of the autonomous individual prepares us to sympathize with the controlled or resisting daughter, not so much with the controlling father. Yet in the character of the dreamer, *Pearl* depicts with sympathy the internal emotional logic that underlay late medieval law.

Few fathers would have understood their possessiveness as power wielded for the sake of domination. They would have justified it instead as longing, need, even dependence, and all the more so when, as with this family dyad, it was exacerbated by loss.[25] The dreamer does just this. He depicts himself as totally dependent upon her for happiness:

> "What seruez tresor, but garez men grete
> When he hit schal efte wyth tenez tyne?
> . . . . . .
> When I am partlez of perle myne,
> Bot durande doel what may men deme?"
> (331–32, 335–36)

These lines articulate the dreamer's basic understanding of ownership: a treasure is for the possessor, and its loss renders it altogether useless. The absence of the Pearl from the dreamer does not mean its presence somewhere else. It is nowhere else that matters.

This attitude reveals an approach to treasure that is fundamentally different from that of either the jeweler the dreamer claims to be, or the lord who would buy such a treasure from him. A jeweler's basic relationship to gems was a transitory one. He or she might evaluate the gem but not keep it. At best, the jeweler cleaned and brightened it, or placed it in a fine setting to

23. One man, accused of assaulting his wife with a knife, cutting her and breaking her knee, was acquitted because he was disciplining her. See Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England* (New York, 2001), 57–58; and Bardsley, *Women's Roles*, 139.

24. James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987), 249; and Bardsley, *Women's Roles*, 136–39.

25. My argument here owes much to David Aers, "The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 54–73, at 54–62.

show it off for someone else.[26] Similarly, aristocrats obtained such objects to bestow upon their friends and followers. The treasured object passed out of the hands of both jeweler and lord, creating bonds of patronage and dependence between social agents. Moreover, when such an artifact was given as a gift, its real value was not its innate preciousness, though that could determine the importance of the gift-exchange. Its real value lay in its being exchanged rather than hoarded, for in the act of exchange it could be transformed into reputation, prestige, and gratitude.

The central metaphor of the pearl, then, allows a crucial slippage between two kinds of attachment. From the perspective of the dreamer, the metaphor is one of deeply personal fatherly love and possessiveness. Yet other elements of the poem—the ornate, crown-like structure, the paradisiacal setting full of precious stones, the emphasis on pearls as adornment, the dreamer's naming himself as a jeweler—evoke the larger social context of aristocratic gift-giving. In so doing, they constitute a critique, by contrast, of the dreamer's legally sanctioned claims of possession. Treasures in a gift economy are to be circulated, not hoarded. But the dreamer resists this standard, and instead lays claim to the maiden in order to secure her to himself forever.

II

The pearl-maiden herself stands, however, in stark contrast to the dreamer's metaphoric image of her. Covered in pearls she may be, but her actions could not be less like the passive, static object of desire visualized by the dreamer's description. First, the maiden is an active, vigorous interlocutor. Her very speech is full of commands, exhortations, and statements of judgment and fact. As one would expect from a character in the tradition of Lady Philosophy, her powerful words overwhelm the enervated dreamer, whose dialogue tends toward the emotional and expressive. Second, she actively analyzes and appropriates the dreamer's words in order to use them against him. When he blames fate for stealing his pearl ("What wyrde hatȝ hyder my iuel vayned?" [249]), she adopts his terminology by calling herself "his" ("your" [257], "þy" [411]) in the context of correcting him, then summarizes

26. Nick Davis, "Recognition of Worth in *Pearl* and *Gawain and the Green Knight*," in Tom Scott and Pat Starkey, eds., *The Middle Ages in the North-West* (Oxford, 1995), 177–202, at 186. Riddy and Barr made the dreamer's identity as jeweler central to their interpretations of the poem: Riddy, "The Materials of Culture," 151–53; and Helen Barr, "*Pearl*—or 'the Jeweller's Tale,'" *Medium Ævum* 69 (2000): 59–79, at 59. Tony Davenport has recently taken issue with this view in "Jewels and Jewellers in *Pearl*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 59 (2008): 508–20, at 509–18.

his claims to possession by saying that his words call "þy wyrde a þef" (273), in effect changing what is "his" from the pearl, to the providence who supplied her. She performs the shift again about a hundred lines later:

> "Bot my Lorde þe Lombe þurȝ hys godhede,
> He toke myself to hys maryage,
> . . . . . .
> And sesed in alle hys herytage
> Hys lef is. I am holy hysse:
> Hys prese, hys prys, and hys parage
> Is rote and grounde of alle my blysse."
> (413–14, 417–20)

Previously the dreamer had said "my Lorde" at points when he was indicating submission to God (285, 362). The maiden now uses similar language, but, on her lips, the phrase "my Lorde þe Lamb" (407, 413) becomes a wifely term. In fact, all the possessive pronouns in this stanza are carefully placed. The word *his* is reiterated eight times in this stanza, twice in one line and three times in another. While the dreamer had used *mine* earlier in the poem to mark the maiden out as his property, here she uses *his* to mark herself out as possessed by another. She almost does not need to say, as she does in the last two lines, that Christ's worth and nobility are the root and ground of all her bliss. The structure and repetition in this stanza have said it already for her, and it is underscored by the two lines that use the same initial consonant *H* to alliterate. The dreamer's language refers her back to himself; hers points to someone else.

Yet if the maiden highlights her possession by the Lamb, she also makes clear that she is possessed by a husband rather than by an owner. Her use of the pearl metaphor to describe herself is more or less perfunctory, coming in response to the dreamer's use of that metaphor, while she describes her marriage to the Lamb in the language surrounding gifts of property within marriage in the English legal system. At marriage, a wife gave over all property to her husband, and she did not in turn receive his property. One text says that the wife "can have no property except in her dress"; everything belonged to and was controlled by her husband while he lived.[27] A husband could give his wife more if he liked by securing property to her while he was alive, but it

27. London, British Library MS Egerton 2,811, fol. 100r-v, qtd. in Paul Brand, "Family and Inheritance, Women and Children," in Chris Given-Wilson, ed., *An Illustrated History of Late Medieval England* (Manchester, U.K., 1996), 58–81, at 65.

required special legal machinations. This transfer of rights seems to be what the Lamb has done for the pearl-maiden. She has been married to Christ, and then made the legal possessor of everything that is his ("sesed in alle hys herytage" [417]).[28] However, her ownership of his "herytage" only amplifies his absolute possession of her. The gift might seem to counteract a husband's legal right to dominion over his wife, replacing her one-sided dependence upon him with some economic power inside the marriage (and perhaps it did in many such historical cases), but it also reinforces the hierarchy of giver and recipient. Rather than establishing the maiden's independence, the Lamb's gift links her identity more closely with him, simultaneously honoring her and amplifying her dependence upon him in good Maussian fashion.

Along with the ways in which gift-giving practices inscribed social hierarchy upon its recipients, it also inscribed competition. As in the contest of presents between Richard II and the Duke of Orléans, the value of gifts could measure relative worth, with the person who gave the most valuable present winning the exchange by successfully indebting the recipient to himself. But in more one-sided exchanges, gifts might be sought out as depictions of chosen-ness and preference. A king's gift of a brooch, for instance, might mark out a recipient as belonging within an inner circle of favorites, and by implication it might exclude anyone who did not own and display a similar object. The dreamer is well aware of this fact, as his next question indicates: given the value of Christ's gift, has the maiden supplanted the Virgin Mary's status as queen of heaven? His question enables the maiden to give a picture of ideal heavenly social relations within the kingdom—where all the redeemed souls are kings and queens together, where each wishes that the crowns of the others were five times as precious, and where there is no envy of the Virgin's status because she is the queen of courtesy. The defining feature of this society is its lack of competition for status and wealth between individuals, whose generous desire for each others' advancement is depicted as genuine, and who seek neither to profit from each other's holdings nor to defeat each other in gift-giving.[29]

28. The legal language here was first pointed out by P. M. Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (New York, 1967), 187, and discussed in Andrew and Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 73n417–18.

29. This picture of heaven stands in direct contrast to the culture of Ricardian court life, as well as to the dominant ethic of English society. See Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1980), 134; Aers, "Reflections on *Pearl*," 65; and Rosemary Horrox, "Service," in Rosemary Horrox, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, U.K., 1994), 61–78.

It is interesting, then, that the dreamer's response to this vision is its exact opposite. While the audience might expect the dreamer to accept queenship as Christ's confirmation of the maiden's value (as in the dreamer's initial use of pearl imagery to describe her), instead the dreamer challenges her account. He compares her reward with that of someone who has suffered through a long earthly life, described in terms that equally recall religious suffering ("penaunce" [477]) and his own sufferings at the start of the poem ("bale" [18, 123, 373, 478]). He concludes that the maiden did not live long enough to earn her reward:

> "Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,
> Wer fayr in heuen to halde asstate,
> Oþer elleȝ a lady of lasse aray;
> Bot a quene! Hit is to dere a date."
> (489–92)

Coming so close after the maiden's description of heaven, the dreamer's response, though framed in terms of justice, looks suspiciously like envy. While he has longed for her and valued her above all else, he refuses to believe that she has an equal value in heaven, for to do so would undermine the value of earthly suffering, not least his own. Her reward can only be his detriment. For him, the alternatives are solipsism and deep social competition.

III

The maiden's answer to the dreamer's question, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, reframes justice by shifting the focus from the deserts of individuals to the grace of God. Drawn from Matthew 20:1–16, the parable compares the kingdom of heaven to the owner of a vineyard who recruits workers throughout the day but in the end pays them all the same wages—a penny—regardless of how long they have worked. The landlord's six calls for workers were traditionally allegorized either as the six ages of the world or as the six stages of the life of man, while vernacular sermons tended to use the parable to exhort listeners to labor hard at their allotted work.[30] Yet as Mary Raschko points out, such interpretations minimized the uncomfortable

30. Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley, 1987), 138–39; and Mary Raschko, "Rendering the Word: Vernacular Accounts of the Parables in Late Medieval England," Ph.D. diss. (University of North Carolina, 2009), 76–79.

central problem of grace in the parable, the disproportion inherent in paying both early and late workers the same sum of money (and by implication, the same reward of salvation for all believers, no matter how much or little they have served God)—a problem that both the original gospel story and the retelling in *Pearl* play up.

Critics have discussed the parallels between the plot of the vineyard parable and contemporary discussions of wage negotiations, particularly the labor disputes surrounding the Statute of Laborers.[31] But, in the context of *Pearl*, the parable—in its return to the language of divine gift-giving—also responds to the dreamer's assumption that social relations are inherently a zero-sum game. In the parable, wages that are agreed upon by mutual consent become gifts granted out of generosity, substituting a gift economy in place of a monetary one. As I have already suggested, gift-exchanges in the fourteenth century frequently functioned as markers of social hierarchy; the recipient of a gift might reasonably understand himself or herself as obligated to the giver. Gifts of this nature symbolically bound together not just elites but also different social degrees, making visible the hierarchy of service through an exchange of gifts that ranged from the token to the marketable.[32]

By the time *Pearl* was written, England's social hierarchy had partially transitioned from service obligations to contractual agreements. "Feudal" service to one's lord had been characterized by an appeal to the relative social position of each party. In particular, one's free or unfree birth might determine the type and degree of work bondsmen or vassals rendered to their lord, and the nature of the reward returned for those services. In contrast, in a commercial exchange of labor for wages, the price of the labor is largely determined by the laws of supply and demand. In anthropologist Daniel Miller's words, "The amount of money received for a service rendered is not dependent upon who you are, but upon the abstract relations within which the service is performed, for example as wage labour. Money therefore tends to extend a concept of equality."[33] That the exchange of labor for wages bred a new sense of equality is borne out in the way that wage spikes after the Black Death were accompanied in England by fear of revolution; in the minds of elites, a demand for uncommonly higher wages was the same thing as overthrowing social order because it ignored the role of traditional social status in determining remuneration.

31. John Watkins, "'Sengeley in Synglere': *Pearl* and Late Medieval Individualism," *Chaucer Yearbook* 2 (1995): 117–36, at 121; and Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl*, 41–49.

32. See Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*, 11–22.

33. Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, 1987), 73–74.

The parabolic laborers have worked on the assumption that they are entitled to a certain amount of recompense commensurate to their work, and they chose to work for the lord on the basis of a contractual agreement, rather than being compelled to do so out of feudal obligation or personal loyalty. What has upset them is that the lord of the vineyard is not doling wages out based on the "abstract relations" of wage labor: he acknowledges the "couenaunde" (562) with the earlier workers, but does not apply it to the later workers in the same proportion. But neither is he showing favoritism. The larger wages to the latecomers occur not because of who those workers are (any more than for the earlier laborers). Instead they occur because of who the *giver* is.

The complaining workers have understood their relation as one of wage labor and remuneration: the laborers and employer ought to be on some kind of equal terms because the wages should reflect exactly the worth of the labor.[34] But the lord in the parable is behaving as though their relation is one of giving and receiving favors, and so to be governed by gratitude rather than calculation: he himself calls the wages "my gyfte" (565). What they resent is the right of one person to dispense as he likes, rather than being constrained by contract—in other words, to treat this exchange as an occasion for giving gifts, rather than for calculating the exact worth of his employees' work. For him to do so places him in the position of a benefactor rather than their employer, and they feel that not their labor but they themselves have been devalued by such an outcome.

The maiden obviously intends for the dreamer to identify himself with the envious laborers, and in fact he does this. His response shows the importance of proportional remuneration, where he calls her version of the parable "vnresounable" (590). For the dreamer, justice is inseparable from calculation and comparison: to be paid according to one's deserts does not simply mean receiving a reward, but a reward proportional to one's work. The dreamer amplifies this argument by noting that "euer þe lenger þe lasse, þe more" (600): the less one works, according to the maiden's pronouncement, the more one gets in proportion to the amount of work actually done. If everyone receives the same amount for doing well, he implies, why work any harder than your neighbor? The dreamer is objecting to an image of social life in which comparison is no longer useful for telling individuals apart or for setting a value on their worth. In response, the maiden affirms that each

34. For a fuller discussion of this point in relation to the labor crisis of the late fourteenth century, see Watkins, "Sengeley in Synglere," 124–36.

person receives exactly the same reward, for God "laueȝ hys gyfteȝ as water of dyche" (607), since rather than being a miser, "Hys fraunchyse is large" (609). In replying that everyone gets the same reward, the maiden switches the focus of the debate from the rights of workers to the nature of God. And she builds it up nicely: rather than wages, the reward is God's generous gift of "bliss" to everyone who submits to him. In this context, it makes little sense that those who served God longer should get more reward, because the reward—salvation—is not quantifiable. In fact, the whole language of gift-giving neatly shifts this discussion out of the realm of strict calculative/mercantile negotiation, in which money serves as an equalizer by allowing exact calculation of the worth of one's labor, and into the realm of service, where lords reward faithfulness and service appropriately, but not calculatively, and where the prescribed response is mutual obligation and gratitude rather than exact computation of the worth of labor and reward. In the imagination of the poem, demanding one's rights translates into withdrawing from social relations of generosity into an existence that is narrowly acquisitive, individualistic, and competitive. Moreover, the parable as the maiden tells it suggests that this kind of individualism ultimately leads to conflict not just within the market sphere, but also within the very relationship that the dreamer is so anxious to preserve unchanged—for the maiden and the dreamer are both identified as workers in the vineyard, their ages identified with length of labor there. The maiden appears no longer as the possessed object that the dreamer wishes to keep for himself (competing with God for her presence and favor), but as an independent recipient of Christ's heavenly rewards.

IV

I would like to return to the discussion of gifts and gift economies with which I began this essay. It should be clear by now that the imagined economy of *Pearl* rewrites gift-exchanges as well as everything else. Objects like the coronal of Princess Blanche embodied prestige and honor; they circulated among aristocratic courts to transport that prestige. But their circulation also marked out paths of hierarchy and patronage. To receive such a gift was to be recognized as singularly honored among one's fellows. It was also to become deeply indebted to the giver. Within the logic of medieval gift economies, the recipient's proper response would be not to hoard up such gifts, but rather to give them again to someone else, as we see from the probable path of the coronal from Bohemia with Queen Anne in 1382, to the English royal treasury, and ultimately back to the Continent in 1401 with the marriage of

Blanche, daughter of Henry IV, to Ludwig of Bavaria. Such objects circulated; they were not owned absolutely and irrevocably.

The dreamer of *Pearl* resists such circulation by seeking to keep hold of his daughter forever. Medieval readers from all classes of society would have felt sympathy for his attitude on a number of levels. First, their common culture of hierarchy and deference would make it easy for them to understand a father as entitled to make decisions on behalf of a child, even a grown female child, and as having a power over her that amounted to some form of control. Second, they would have been as sympathetic as modern readers are to the layer of emotional attachment and dependence which complicates the father's power, nuancing it so that his possessiveness is presented as *primarily* the result of emotional attachment. They would have understood his grief as a normal and appropriate reaction to her loss. To figure her as treasure is to underscore her beauty and intrinsic value.

The emotional power of the poem depends upon the ways in which the dreamer's perspective is understandable. But the writer of the poem clearly seeks to criticize this by showing that the metaphor of the girl as a pearl makes it easy for the dreamer to indulge a particular kind of possessiveness, to view her as his absolutely. He resists the idea of her queenship because it is something that sets her outside the paternal relationship. In a very real way, he wants the maiden to be taken out of the circulating economy of gifts between God and humanity. He is absorbed so deeply and exclusively in his desire for her that the claims to her of a husband or even of God can only be seen as competition for an already scarce resource. For him, the personal is the opposite of the social.

In response, the maiden puts forward an alternative mode of valuation in which the good of one is the good of all (noncompetitive, cohesive, collective rather than individualistic). Rather than a dyad of lover and singular loved object, clinging tight to each other and actively excluding the outside world, she presents to him a "meynie," a company, of the saved, all dressed the same way and almost indistinguishable; a city full of inhabitants given to a Lamb whose wound signals that he himself has also sacrificed everything for others. This alternative exists only in paradise, but it serves as a counterpoint to both versions of valuation that the dreamer invokes: both the intensely personal, need-driven, even solipsistic orientation of the early stanzas, and the comparisons by which a jeweler makes judgments of value—but which, as both the parable of the vineyard and the dreamer himself show, inevitably result in a level of competition that cuts him off even from the pearl he so prizes.

In short, *Pearl* demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of gift economies for fourteenth-century English culture. On the one hand, such transactions open up the potential for social relationships based on gratitude and seeking the common good, and an escape from the isolation and competitiveness of individuality. On the other hand, with gratitude comes indebtedness, and so inevitably gift-giving itself inscribes hierarchy upon those who participate in it by giving or receiving. In either case, the gift itself became almost negligible. It is the means of forming social relationships rather than the end desired by those who form them. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that so few objects that functioned as gifts have survived to the present day. Those made from the most precious materials—crowns, jewelry, and tableware—have long since been transformed into other shapes, while less valuable ones have been consumed or lost.

The production of a poem such as *Pearl*—and the other poems of Cotton Nero A.x—suggests an aristocratic patron. If so, it means that the poem itself might have enacted the kind of circulation we see in other gift exchanges in the late fourteenth century: the poet produces a work of literature and presents it, perhaps ceremonially, to his patron in a gorgeous bound volume like the ones created for Richard II and other nobles. John Bowers points out that deluxe books were prestigious gifts, especially when they were covered with gems and goldwork.[35] Such ornamentation placed them firmly in the category of luxury goods, like Blanche's crown. Yet the poem was not simply its physical instantiation in the manuscript. On the material level, the poem would be copied from its originating manuscript, by either amateur admirers or professional scribes, and disseminated to other owners. And it could circulate much more widely still if read aloud to a whole group of listeners, such as the audience depicted in the Cambridge Corpus Christi MS 61 frontispiece that depicts Chaucer reading his *Troilus and Criseyde* to a courtly audience.[36] In other words, *Pearl* had the potential to circulate through fourteenth-century social networks much more widely than any precious object could. We can only guess at how the poem itself functioned as a gift within elite society, impeded as we are by *Pearl*'s existence only in one obscure and badly-executed manuscript, by its apparent lack of attribution, and by the total absence of reference to it or its companion poems by any

35. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl*, 80–81.

36. Although Derek Pearsall, "The 'Troilus' Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience," *Yearbook of English Studies* 7 (1977): 68–74, warns against relying too heavily on the image as a factual depiction of Chaucer's relationship with the court of Richard II (72), the picture does nevertheless suggest the possibility of command performances of such poems to aristocratic patrons.

other contemporary author.[37] But its author understood gift-giving as central to both human social relations and divine grace; he must have understood it as central to literary production too.

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37. Though scholars have found forms of the name "John Massy" appearing in anagram in *Cleanness*, *Pearl*, and *St. Erkenwald*, the name was so common in the fourteenth century as to offer no real information about its writer. See Barbara Nolan and David Farley-Hills, "The Authorship of *Pearl*: Two Notes," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 22 (1971): 295–302; Clifford Peterson, "The *Pearl*-Poet and John Massey of Cotton, Cheshire," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 25 (1974): 257–66; Thorlac Turville-Petre and Edward Wilson, "Hoccleve, 'Maistir Massy' and the *Pearl* Poet: Two Notes," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 26 (1975): 129–43; Clifford Peterson and Edward Wilson, "Hoccleve, the Old Hall Manuscript, Cotton Nero A.X., and the *Pearl*-Poet," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 28 (1977): 49–56; William Vantuono, "John De Mascy of Sale and the *Pearl* Poems," *Manuscripta* 25 (1981): 77–88; and Malcolm Andrew, "Theories of Authorship," in Brewer and Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, 23–33, at 28–31.