

ABSTRACT

“Ryztwysly quo con rede”
Parables and Judgment in the *Pearl*-Manuscript

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The poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, are illuminated by a consideration of the three Gospel parables they contain, as well as by a consideration of the hermeneutics of parables. A selective survey of medieval and modern accounts of the hermeneutics of parables shows that the *Pearl*-manuscript shares with parables a self-reflective concern with the difficulties of interpretation, a pedagogical method of disjunction and paradox, an eschatological emphasis on the advent of the Kingdom of God, and a robust sense of the theological and pedagogical possibilities of multivalent images. A study of the poems anchored by an in-depth consideration of the parables of Jesus which appear in *Cleanness* and *Pearl* reveals a range of perspectives on the capacity of language to communicate insight and of a variety of individual interpreters to judge well. The synthesis of this variety of perspectives offers a nuanced account of ‘righteous’ interpretation. *Cleanness’* parable of “The Wedding Feast” presents a radically skeptical perspective on the human capacity to interpret, particularly with respect to the ineffable. This perspective is repeated in a number of images of failed

interpreters throughout the manuscript. *Pearl's* "The Pearl of Great Price" and "The Workers in the Vineyard," however, offer a corrective to "The Wedding Feast's" account, suggesting that an interpreter's success depends upon the habit of righteousness and the willingness to understand. This suggestion, too, reverberates through the manuscript. Additionally, "The Workers in the Vineyard" shows the pedagogical capacity of paradox. An interpretation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through the lens of the manuscript's parabolic strategies and storylines shows that interpretation in the face of the unknown requires, not passive acceptance of truths not understood, but active searching after knowledge. This paradigm of courtesy, consisting in a delicate balance of deference, curiosity, and participation, is illustrated in *Pearl's* account of heavenly courtesy, as it is in *Pearl's* use of multivalence, especially in the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price."

“Ryżtwysly quo con rede”: Parables and Judgment in the *Pearl*-Manuscript

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To Matthew, who never doubted me even when I doubted myself
By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established (Proverbs 24.3)

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Literature Review

The four poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,¹ have inspired many quests for their unity. Preserved in a single anonymous manuscript, the poems' shared dialect, images, metrical and stylistic features provide significant evidence that the four poems are the work of a single author (Andrew and Waldron 5-6; Vantuono xv-xvi). The poems are diverse in genre. *Pearl* is a dream-vision in which the narrator-dreamer is granted a vision of his dead child beatified. *Cleanness* is a disquisition on the importance of the virtue of cleanness or purity, illustrated with biblical exempla. *Patience* is a literary retelling of the story of Jonah, illustrating the virtue of patience. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an Arthurian romance. Given this diversity of subject and genre, it is significant that the poems share many thematic concerns: courtesy, the city, and community,² epistemology, interpretation, and the human relation to the ineffable,³ to name a few. I propose that the poems' meditations upon both interpretation and community are illuminated by a consideration of the pedagogical method of Gospel parables, of which three appear in the manuscript.

The Manuscript

Pearl, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are preserved in a single manuscript in the British Library: MS. Cotton Nero A.x (Andrew and Waldron 1). All four poems are written in the same hand, dating to the end of the

fourteenth century. The dialect of the manuscript places its composition in the Northwest Midlands (Vantuono xiii). The manuscript contains twelve illustrations of scenes from the poems (Vantuono xiii-xiv), but is otherwise modest (Andrew and Waldron 1). The poems are untitled in the manuscript (Gordon ix). The first known record of their existence is in the British Museum's MS. Harley 1879, a catalogue of the library of Henry Savile (1568-1617) of Banke in Yorkshire (Gordon ix). It is next recorded in the famed library of Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631), where it came to be bound between two unrelated Latin works (Vantuono xiv-xv). The entirety of the Cotton collection came into the possession of the British nation, and was placed in the British Museum in 1753 (Vantuono xv). The first print editions of the poems were not published until the nineteenth century, when in 1839, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appeared in a collection of romances published for the Bannatyne Club and edited by Sir Frederic Madden. *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience* appeared first in 1864 in a collection of alliterative poetry edited by Richard Morris for the Early English Texts Society. An early facsimile of the four poems was published by the Early English Text Society with an introduction and notes by Sir Israel Gollancz. Since their publication, all four poems have been the subject of much scholarly study, and *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in particular have been recognized as two of the greatest works of the imagination to emerge from the English Middle Ages. Because the poems are only known to exist in a single manuscript, the text of the poems is well established.⁴ I employ the standard scholarly text of the four poems, originally published in 1978 and now in its fifth edition, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron.

The Pearl-Manuscript and Parables

Three New Testament parables of Jesus appear in the manuscript. “The Workers in the Vineyard” and “The Pearl of Great Price” are thematically and structurally central to *Pearl*, and “The Wedding Feast,” an amalgam of two parables from Matthew and Luke, appears near the beginning of *Cleanness*, offering thematic structure to the whole.⁵ The thematic characteristics of these parables in particular and of parables in general have a broad influence on the manuscript. These general characteristics of parables are: a) a self-reflective concern with the difficulties of interpretation, b) a pedagogical method of disjunction and paradox, c) an eschatological emphasis on the advent of the Kingdom of God, and d) a robust sense of the theological and pedagogical possibilities of multivalent images. The *Pearl*-manuscript’s direct treatment of parables amplifies and draws attention to these thematic characteristics, while the poems considered more broadly meditate extensively upon them.

In his book on allegorical interpretations of the parables in the Middle Ages, Stephen Wailes argues that the parables of Jesus might plausibly have been considered a template and justification for the composition of works of fiction in the Middle Ages: “Because the parables are literary inventions of the Lord, and in this regard, ipso facto, the model of narrative invention for medieval Christians, it is also plausible that all who imitated Christ as storyteller during the Middle Ages understood themselves to be writing parables of greater or lesser complexity” (*Medieval Allegories* 23). For Wailes, the parables are paradigmatic of medieval works of fiction because of their necessarily allegorical character. The works of the *Pearl*-poet are parabolic, on the other hand, primarily insofar as they recognize and reflect upon the parables’ engagement with the

broad issue of the nature of knowing, learning, and living. The poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript, in a manner similar to parables, take pains to emphasize the disjunction of outward sign from inward meaning which is latent in all fiction, not to mention in language itself. This disjunction, the poems show, serves the double purposes of revealing the ineffability of God and of disturbing the reader or hearer's complacency. Furthermore, the poems argue, the parabolic method forms its reader or hearer, showing by its reversals what is necessary for conversion and participation in the divine life. Thus, the poems are concerned to emphasize the interdependence of human reason and of human righteousness. "Judgment," as it is used in the title of this dissertation, is designedly ambiguous. While it is often noted that the *Pearl*-manuscript, like the parables, is concerned with the Judgment, both particular and general, I venture to add that it is also preoccupied with the human faculty of judgment, and with God's judgment of human judgments.

Chapter two of this study investigates the tradition of professional exegesis of the parables with particular reference to the question of how Gospel parables work: to whom do they seek to communicate, and how so? The medieval study of the parables concentrates upon the character of Jesus' audience in relation to this question. Parables, a consensus of exegetes argues, speak to those who desire with a good will to understand, but withhold their lessons from those who approach them with ill will. Modern exegetes of parables offer a plethora of further insights into the themes of the parables and a diversity of views on the pedagogy of parables. The insight of many that parables teach through paradox is of special relevance to the *Pearl*-manuscript, as is the nightmarish possibility that parables are designed not to teach but to obscure

meaning and to point to the impossibility of discovering authoritative meaning altogether. The *Pearl*-manuscript takes up each of these positions in turn. The poet shows knowledge of the tradition of exegesis of his own day, but also insightful anticipation of many of the concerns of modern exegetes.

Chapter three centers upon the parable of “The Wedding Feast” which orients *Cleanness* thematically. The poet’s combination of two discrete Gospel parables creates an effect of disjunction. The parable asks the reader seriously to consider whether God, analogous to the lord of the parable, is simply beyond human comprehension. Other episodes, particularly in *Cleanness*, but also in *Pearl* and *Patience*, reproduce this anxiety. This pessimism about human knowledge is combined, in both “The Wedding Feast” and in *Cleanness* considered more broadly, with an emphasis upon the immediacy and seriousness of God’s judgment upon humanity. These dual emphases anticipate one of the most distressing of the conclusions of modern exegetes about parables: that God’s demands upon humanity are real and serious, but tragically inscrutable. Chapter four, however, shows that the poems work dialectically to respond to the apparent pessimism of *Cleanness*. *Pearl*’s version of “The Workers in the Vineyard” is, like “The Wedding Feast,” designed to assert mystery and to complicate interpretation through its use of paradox and disjunction. Yet the narrative framework within which the parable is told reveals that the listener is at fault for misunderstanding. Even in light of the listener’s recalcitrance, however, the parable helps to transform his perspective, precisely through the pedagogical use of disjunction. *Pearl*’s account of “The Workers in the Vineyard,” then, shows that insight is not categorically impossible, but rather, must follow upon humility and righteousness. Other images of righteous readers and their

insights from *Cleanness* and *Patience* reinforce the point. Further, the poet argues through the example of the dreamer in *Pearl* that the pedagogical method of disjunction can be a tool, not just for the discussion of the ineffable, but also for conversion.

Chapter five concerns the nature of an appropriate response to the challenge of parables. If humility is the prerequisite for interpretation, it seems to follow that the human subject must simply be subsumed into divine realities. The *Pearl*-manuscript shows in two ways, however, that interpretive righteousness requires not only obedient self-abnegation, but also a subsequent reassertion of the human will. Through a study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the chapter shows the pervasiveness of parabolic themes even in the manuscript poem least explicitly concerned with the Bible. The Green Knight poses a parabolic challenge to the court at Camelot. Gawain, who takes up the Green Knight's challenge, is the knight best suited to do so, for his characteristic virtue, courtesy, if undertaken actively and not simply self-regardingly, is the key to solving the Green Knight's puzzles. Thus it is through passivity that Gawain fails the Green Knight's test. Analogously, active engagement, not passive submission, is a necessary part of the confrontation with an Other—even a divine Other. The idea of courtesy as a way of discussing the dynamic interaction of obedience and action, unity and differentiation, in turn has applications for *Pearl*, where courtesy is a defining characteristic of God's court. There is a poetic dimension to the concept of courtesy as well, for the unity and differentiation which coexist in God's court are analogous to the fruitful use of polyvalence in *Pearl's* account of "The Pearl of Great Price" and elsewhere.

Interpretive diversity, then, bounded by obedient humility, is an appropriate and necessary exercise of human freedom.

Review of the Scholarly Literature

In the broadest terms, my work participates in a scholarly conversation about the *Pearl*-manuscript's position concerning the accessibility to human understanding of God and God's justice. The many scholars who study this topic form a spectrum: at one extreme, those who view the God of the manuscript—and often, by extension, his justice—as inscrutable and perhaps cruel; and at the other, those who argue that the poems affirm the justice of God and the accessibility of knowledge of the divine. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is something of an outlier in the manuscript, since it does not concern an overtly religious or biblical topic, however, as many scholars have noted, it evinces a cognate concern to its companion pieces, investigating the nature of interpretation *per se*. I concur with the broad scholarly sense that interpretation, particularly in relation to the ineffable, is central to the poems, and hold that the poet's position is nuanced, acknowledging both the reality of ineffability and the partial success of mediation. My work also participates in a second, more limited scholarly conversation concerning the function of parables in the manuscript. Whereas scholars to date have mainly limited themselves to discussions of the manuscript's parables in and of themselves, I propose that the thematic implications of the poet's retellings of parables reverberate throughout the manuscript, forming a solid basis for an understanding of the poems' position on interpretation.

On the topic of human understanding in relation to the divine, Ad Putter presents the extreme position, arguing that all three religious poems are studies in the failures of mediation. God's patience with the Ninevites is the manuscript's only manifestation of mercy (143) from a God who is otherwise inscrutable.⁷ David Wallace argues something similar of *Cleanness*: for him, the God of *Cleanness* is either analogous to a human being and thus unjust or mysterious and inaccessible. The relationship of perceived reality to the inner truth of things in the poem is consistently fraught (97). While J.J. Anderson concurs that *Pearl* and *Cleanness* gesture toward the incommensurability of divine judgment to human perception, he suggests that *Patience* supplies a counterpoint, highlighting God's mercy.⁸

In the middle of the spectrum, a large group of scholars argues that the poems show both continuity and disjunction between the earthly and the heavenly realms. Theodore Bogdanos suggests in his detailed study of *Pearl* that the poem uses metaphoric concepts of both dissimilar similitude and incarnational symbol, emphasizing disjunction and synthesis respectively. Lawrence Clopper suggests that the God of the manuscript seems capricious and hence incomprehensible as a function of the limited human perspective. While characters such as Jonah see only God's *potentia absoluta*, the narrator—thus presumably thoughtful people more generally—recognizes God's voluntary covenantal self-limitation; his *potentia ordinata* ("God").⁹ Douglas Thorpe argues that the ineffable for human beings is necessarily related to the earthly, but that the relationship consists in a sacrifice of the earthly in order that it may be redeemed and transformed. John Gatta, Jr. discusses this same kind of sacrificial movement with respect to the sacrifice of the Mass.

Another line of thought suggests that, although the poems show the difficulties of mediating the heavenly, the human characters can be faulted for their failure to understand.¹⁰ Eugene Vance has an even more sanguine view of mediation, arguing that *Pearl* is a study in the Plotinian version of Platonic participation, which authorizes active human participation in the divine through raising itself into the Idea. At the end of the spectrum, Nicholas Watson suggests that the theology of the manuscript is designed to offer a practical guide to virtue for lay-people; thus that, at least at a practical level, the content of godliness is uncontroversial in the manuscript.

Finally, many scholars, though not explicitly concerned with the problem of mediation of the divine, address this problem implicitly by arguing for the structural and thematic unity of the poems. Lynn Staley Johnson makes such a case, arguing that the dreamer in *Pearl* does indeed learn and develop in the course of the poem, and that *Cleanness* ends on a positive note, emphasizing reward (*Voice*). For her, mediation is not primarily at issue. Derek Brewer discusses courtesy as a unifying theme, suggesting that the manuscript's God is a feudal lord, at once exalted, noble, just, and hot-tempered. Courtesy also forms the frame for further discussions of God's nature, such as the purity of Christ and the nature of unity in diversity of the heavenly kingdom.¹¹ J.W. Nicholls, too, argues for courtesy as a unifying theme in the manuscript, suggesting that the sins of the various human characters amount to offenses against courtesy, and thus that courtesy is the conceptual tie that binds the earthly and heavenly realms. A large group of scholars of *Cleanness* argue for the poem's unity around a given image or concept, suggesting, variously, the *imago dei* (Brzezinski; Glenn), the vision of God (Tinkle) or the image of the vessel and its connection to

God's judgment (Morse; Clark and Wasserman) as unifying principles. These scholars, in portraying the God of *Cleanness* as a just judge rather than as terrifyingly other, suggest the success of mediation.

Considered in its broadest terms, my work will participate in this conversation. The parabolic form, insofar as one and the same story can be seen as both straightforward and critically opaque, is an ideal vehicle for discussing both the possibilities and limitations of mediation. The parables of the *Pearl-*manuscript teach us that understanding requires, first, a radical submission of one's will to God, after which a limited understanding of God's will follows. Thus my argument aligns broadly with Thorpe and Gatta's notion of sacrifice followed by the return of that which has been sacrificed, transformed and elevated.

Scholars who suggest that the poems are fundamentally concerned with interpretation or epistemology broadly, rather than only with respect to the knowledge of God, include Pyotr Spyra, who argues that the epistemological gap between man and God is figured by linguistic indeterminacy in the manuscript, and that this linguistic indeterminacy is only overcome by the salvific intervention of Christ (156). John Plummer, in discussing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman (13-26), in discussing the whole manuscript, also argue that interpretation depends upon linguistic convention, and thus that the construction of meaning is a central theme of the poems. Sarah Stanbury, in *Seeing the Gawain-Poet*, discusses the poems' visual hermeneutic, arguing that the hearer or reader's lines of sight are limited by the characters' lines of sight (5). Thus, in Stanbury's view, perspective is deeply constitutive of meaning in the poems' account. Robert W. Hanning argues that in *Sir Gawain and*

the Green Knight, interpretation depends upon the context offered by civilization, but that the meaning of this context is veiled; thus that good interpretation is revealed as difficult if not impossible (5). J.J. Anderson, J.A. Burrow and Ad Putter discuss the ways in which generic and contextual clues in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seem designed to foil interpretation on the part both of Gawain and of the hearer or reader (Anderson 191; Putter 70-82). I concur with this group of scholars that interpretation and its difficulties are centrally at issue in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as in the rest of the manuscript. With Stanbury, I argue that perspective affects one's ability to see. Further, I suggest that one's perspectival orientation depends upon one's moral character for the poems. The lens of parabolic pedagogy does much, I argue, to show both the nature and the purpose of misdirection in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as in the remainder of the manuscript. Further, the context of parables points the way to possible fruitful interpretive strategies.

The role of parables in the *Pearl*-manuscript is the subject of a small but vibrant dialogue amongst scholars. John T. Irwin and T. D. Kelly, the first scholars to reflect substantively upon parables and the problem of interpretation in the manuscript, suggest in an article on *Cleanness* that parables incorporate both revelation and hiddenness: an initial proclamation to all, followed by the audience's self-selection into those who listen and those who refuse to listen (257-59). Thus, in *Cleanness*, the link between the parable of "The Wedding Feast" and the Old Testament stories of the flood, the destruction of Sodom, and Belshazzar's feast is in the eschatological idea that "'many are called but few are chosen.'" This maxim, in turn, is a reflection of the parabolic form (259). Finally, Irwin and Kelly argue, both parables and sacraments are effective signs; in other

words, as sacraments impart the grace of which they are symbols, so too do parables effect the separation of the few from the many which is their subject (260).

Mary Raschko's 2009 dissertation responds implicitly to Irwin and Kelly by suggesting that "The Wedding Feast" in *Cleanness* as well as "The Workers in the Vineyard" in *Pearl* emphasize the disjunctive aspects of the parables. Thus, whereas Irwin and Kelly see the 'few' and the 'many' as groups defined by their willingness to listen to Christ, Raschko shows that the opacity of parables lies not only in the audience's attitude toward the parables, but also in the narratives themselves. Hence, the parables demonstrate the abiding tension between God's mercy and God's judgment (72) or between God's justice and human justice (121). J. Allan Mitchell argues, similarly, that *Pearl's* retelling of the parable of the vineyard emphasizes disjunction. *Pearl*, he says, uses figural typology only provisionally because it is concerned with that which is eternal, and so by definition, not with symbols that find their fulfillment in time (108). By preserving the parable's scandal, he says, the poet opens up space for a truly hopeful faith, not based upon the "idolatry of the word," but rather upon the "evidence of things not seen" and the recognition that the things of heaven cannot be fully seen or known in this life (109). Douglas Thorpe, too, presents an analysis of the parables in *Pearl* that attends to the benefits inherent in their apparent failures to communicate. For Thorpe, as I discuss above, knowledge of the ineffable is achieved only through self-sacrificial action on the model of the death of Christ (30). The story of *Pearl* has a structural similarity to the method of parable, he suggests, because both partake of this pattern. Just as the dreamer must learn to let go of his will in order to receive himself back transformed into a

precious pearl, so must a reader of parable recognize the way in which the story builds up and undermines itself simultaneously in order to achieve insight which exceeds the image without resorting to dualism (70-71). Thorpe argues, too, that the self-reflection effected by poetry, and especially by *Pearl*, embodies and reflects upon the incompleteness inherent in its form (71-72).

Stephen L. Wailes briefly discusses the parables in *Cleanness* and *Pearl*, suggesting some possible exegetical sources for their adaptations of the Biblical text (*Medieval Allegories* 30-34; 37-41). Kelly and Irwin also study the relation of *Patience* to parables, arguing that the poem is an allegory for the contemplative life. They claim that the defining characteristic of parables is the veiled nature of their meaning; thus they equate the allegory they suggest with a parable.¹²

Finally, Ad Putter briefly discusses the parable genre in relation to the parable of the workers in the vineyard in *Pearl*. For him, parables divide insiders from outsiders. *Pearl* teaches, further, that no amount of rational insight will make us insiders if we are not already (174-75).

I concur with the scholarly consensus that the *Pearl*-poet recognizes the parables of Jesus as a peculiarly powerful locus for the consideration of the ineffable in terms of human understanding. With Kelly, Irwin, Raschko, Mitchell, Thorpe, and Putter, I argue that the *Pearl*-poet enhances the paradoxes present in the Gospel parables he uses in order to discuss the distance between the heavenly and the earthly. A faultline emerges in the literature, however, concerning the purpose of articulating this distance. Kelly, Irwin, and Putter argue that this disjunction is presented for descriptive purposes—so that a hearer may understand that ‘many are called but few are chosen.’ Mitchell, Raschko, and Thorpe, on the other hand, articulate a pedagogical purpose in the

presentation of such disjunction. In the course of being surprised by parabolic paradox, a hearer may be jostled from his complacency, making the leap to a faith which is humble and open rather than simply self-justifying. I align with this second group, arguing, further, that the *Pearl*-poet uses the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price" to assert the possibility of partial mediation, which can fruitfully coincide with the recognition of ineffability presented in the other parables.

I investigate parables and their implications in the *Pearl*-manuscript more thoroughly than has yet been attempted, discussing all three of the Gospel parables in the manuscript in relation to all four of the poems. While Mary Raschko has studied two of the parables found in *Cleanness* and *Pearl* and John T. Irwin and T.D. Kelly have co-written two articles considering *Cleanness* and *Patience* in light of parables, no scholar has offered a synthetic consideration of all three parables and their implications for all four poems. Several scholars have investigated selected themes of the manuscript's parables, such as the disjunctive retellings of "The Workers in the Vineyard" and "The Wedding Feast" (Braeger; Mitchell 101-09; Putter 168-75; Raschko; Thorpe 70), the eschatological theme in the parables and the poems (Irwin and Kelly, "*Cleanness*," 259), the relation of parables to sacraments (Gatta 250; Irwin and Kelly, "*Cleanness*," 260), and the self-reflective form of both parables and poetry (Thorpe 32-33). These ideas can be enriched and deepened, however, when they are considered in conjunction with each other, and when their implications for the manuscript are considered in a thoroughgoing way. The interpretive pessimism of *Cleanness* requires completion by the hopefulness of *Pearl*. The parabolic pedagogy of welcome and rebuff is evident, not only in the manuscript's parables, but also, for example, in

God's gift to Jonah of the woodbine and in Bertilak's welcome of Gawain to Hautdesert.

The implications of Gospel parables for the way we read the *Pearl*-manuscript are far-reaching. The presence of parables in the manuscript illuminates the importance of the theme of interpretation for the poems considered broadly. Taken together, the four poems tell a story of the difficulties of interpretation in the face of the ineffable, but reveal the ways in which the recognition of this difficulty is itself a positive lesson opening out into a better hermeneutic of humble participation. Even *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which contain no parables, are deeply inscribed with parabolic pedagogy, not only for the benefit of their characters, but also for the benefit of a reader or hearer. Just as the Gospel parables frequently conclude by inviting the participation of their hearers,³ so too do the poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript leverage the concerns and methods of parables throughout the manuscript to invite the reader or hearer to a self-reflection conditioned by the perspective of an Other.

CHAPTER TWO

Hermeneutics and the Study of the Parables

In order to understand the use of parables in the Pearl-manuscript, it is necessary, first, to investigate the nature of parables themselves. The *Pearl*-poet shows familiarity with medieval exegetical sources, but also appears to anticipate many of the insights of modern scholars of the parables. Thus, this chapter discusses some key elements of scholarship on the parables from both medieval and modern perspectives. The medieval and modern study of the parables of Jesus entails both discontinuities of method and continuities of concern. The modern study of the parables began as a reaction against the medieval method of allegoresis. Though many modern commentators have retreated from the extreme version of this reaction, acknowledging that the application of allegory to the parables is in many instances justified, modern commentators continue to see the medieval method as both oversimplifying the parabolic method and as giving insufficient attention to the parables' context in history and in the ministry of Jesus. Given this major disagreement about method, however, scholars from the two eras agree in many surprising ways about the content and concerns of the parables. A plurality of voices emphasize various ways in which the parables demand a response from their audience. Many scholars of both eras, however, recognize that such a response is rendered problematic by the fact that the parables are designedly obscure. While another group—again, comprising both modern and medieval scholars—counters that the parables are aids to the understanding, not hindrances, the question of the hermeneutics of parables

remains important for most commentators in light of Jesus' perplexing statements on the subject.

In order to understand the ways in which *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* engage with the parables, it is necessary, first, to consider their engagement with the allegorical element of the parables they retell in comparison to the medieval scholarly tradition's concerns—an engagement which ranges from a restrained and unusual allegory coupled with a narrative focus on the literal in the parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard" to a broad use of allegory in *Pearl's* retelling of "The Pearl of Great Price," to a conflation of two parables with reference to a third in the case of the parable of "The Wedding Feast" which so confuses the application of allegory as to seem to suggest its unimportance. Second, and more importantly, an investigation of the hermeneutic issues raised by the use of parables will illuminate the ways in which the poems are concerned with these hermeneutic questions. The ability to see and the failure to see are considered by these poems both as moral actions and as indicators of the human confrontation with the transcendent. The medieval tradition will be especially relevant for the discussion of morality in relation to vision, while the modern conversation about parables has much to say in dialogue with the poems about the role of parables in the approach to that which exceeds human understanding.

The history of parable interpretation is too large a topic by far to be addressed exhaustively. In selecting my texts, I have been guided, first, by the attempt to deal with influential or well-known accounts of the parables, second, to select those texts which take a particular interest in the hermeneutic and pedagogical possibilities of parables, and third, to offer a broad range of

perspectives on the parables. In my account of the medieval study of the parables, I have selected Thomas Aquinas' compilation, the *Catena Aurea*, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, and Nicholas of Lyra's *Postillas* on the Gospels. These three texts were all widely read and influential in the later Middle Ages. They also offer a very broad range of perspectives: The *Catena Aurea* and the *Gloss* both incorporate the work of scholars, largely in the Latin tradition, from the period of the Church Fathers all the way down to the time of their compilation in the 13th and 12th centuries, respectively. I do not claim any direct link between the *Pearl* poet and the *Glossa*, *Catena*, or *Postillas*.¹⁴ I assume that these works were part of the cultural milieu in which the poet lived and wrote, however not even this is necessary to my argument, since I wish only to make a comparison rather than to establish influence. My selection of scholars from the modern period in biblical studies includes a group chosen for the extent of their influence—Adolf Jülicher, C.H. Dodd, and Joachim Jeremias—a group chosen for their interest in hermeneutics, literature, and the parables—J. D. Crossan, Paul Ricoeur, and Frank Kermode—and a group chosen to give breadth to my account of the modern study of parables—Klyne R. Snodgrass, N.T. Wright, Jacques Dupont, and Warren S. Kissinger.¹⁵

Allegoresis and the Canon of the Parables

As a rule, modern interpreters of the parables differ from medieval interpreters—often define themselves, in fact, in contradistinction to medieval interpreters—in relation to the use of allegory in parables. The virtual consensus in the Middle Ages was that the interpretation of parables, like the interpretation of most of the rest of Scripture, necessarily included an account of its allegorical

meaning (Wailes, *Medieval Allegories* vii). Although by its nature as self-consciously fictitious a parable always contains an implicit lesson, medieval exegetes typically sought out further implicit allegorical significances. This search for allegorical meanings in Scripture was ultimately justified by Jesus' own comparison of Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale to the son of man's three days in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:40; cf. also Luke 11:30). Similarly, in his letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul likens Abraham's two sons to the children of the two testaments: Ishmael, born of a bondwoman, represents the Jews, living under the law, while Isaac, born of a free woman, represents the followers of Christ, living in the freedom of grace (4:22-31). In both of these examples, an historical event from the Old Testament represents an event or reality of the New Testament: the Old Testament prophetically foreshadows the New. Thus, Christian interpreters—notably, Origen, whose influence was widespread throughout the Middle Ages—developed a practice, based to some extent on Hellenic and Hebraic precedents (Wailes, *Medieval Allegories* 10),¹⁶ of discerning more of such prophetic allegory in the Bible.

Exegetes also discerned other kinds of allegory in the Bible in addition to the interpretation of the Old Testament as a prefiguration of the New. The fourfold method is a typical means whereby exegetes categorized these distinctions in allegory. These four levels of meaning included the literal level, the allegorical level (the form of allegory discussed above, in which the story—particularly a story from the Old Testament—is interpreted as an allegory concerning Christ or the Church), the tropological level (allegories of the individual's moral life), and the anagogical level (allegories of the Final Judgment and the life to come).¹⁷ Thus, a single interpreter could offer a number

of different interpretations of a given passage: Jerusalem, for John Cassian, is literally an earthly city, allegorically, the Church, tropologically, the human soul, and anagogically the City of God (Smalley 28). Multiple interpretations of a single level of a particular image are even possible: Gregory the Great argues, in his *Moralia in Job*, for example, that Job's three thousand camels could represent either Gentile converts to Christianity or Samaritan converts to Christianity (I:I.21-22). Offering alternate allegorical meanings does not amount, for Gregory, to contradicting himself. While the distinctions between different kinds of allegory were often discussed, Stephen L. Wailes argues that in practice, these distinctions often collapsed into the simpler categories of 'literal' on the one hand and "'spiritual,'" "'mystical,'" or "'allegorical'" on the other (*Medieval Allegories* 11).¹⁸

Augustine, in his *On Christian Doctrine*, offers a theoretical defense of this practice of allegoresis. Interpreters who read figurative Scriptural passages literally are in danger of grave error—specifically, of reading according to the dead letter rather than the quickening spirit (III.9). A popular latter-day objection to this method of reading Scripture holds that the kind of limitless interpretation possible within the allegorical method disregards the text's original context and intention.¹⁹ For Augustine and the tradition that followed him, however, the variety of interpretation possible within the allegorical method is appropriate because the subject of Scripture is similarly limitless. The interpretation of Scripture is "an approach to the depths of God," thus by no means exhausted by a univocal interpretation (de Lubac 1.34). Augustine believed, therefore, that since Scripture teaches only charity and condemns only cupidity, specific passages should be examined with respect to their contribution to an

understanding of charity. Sometimes, then, a literal interpretation of the passage is sufficient, while in those instances in which the literal meaning of the passage does not accord with the principle of charity, a figurative meaning should be sought (III.15-III.23).

Allegorical exegesis of the parables was part and parcel of the allegorical exegesis of Scripture considered more broadly. Fictional stories told by Jesus were different only in that, being fictional and not historical, they necessarily had a meaning beyond the literal, whereas other parts of the Bible—understood to be historical—needed not necessarily be imbued with figurative meaning (Wailes, *Medieval Allegories* 3-4). Thus, for the Middle Ages, the parables were not considered a strictly delineated genre different in kind from the rest of Scripture. Medieval exegetes were not concerned to establish a canon of parables or to differentiate systematically between a *parabola*, a *similitudo*, and an *exemplum*. The former two terms are in any case not rigidly distinguished from one another in the Vulgate version of the New Testament.²⁰

The modern study of the parables began as a reaction against the allegorical method. Adolf Jülicher's two-volume study of the parables, published in the late 19th century, was a watershed in this respect (Kissinger xiii). Jülicher rejects the allegorical method for the interpretation of the parables. Furthermore, he denies that Jesus ever used allegory—defined as expanded metaphor—and considers those cases in the Gospels in which he appears to use and defend allegory²¹ as the creations of the Evangelists. Jülicher's objection to allegory lies in the fact that he considers allegory and metaphor to obscure meaning, and considers the obscuring of meaning to be at odds with Jesus' intention. The modern suspicion of allegory, according to Klyne R. Snodgrass, arises from this

notion that allegories are a method of obfuscation (15). Parables, according to Jülicher, are expanded similes, not expanded metaphors. They are simple, self-evident comparisons which do not require interpretation. Furthermore, the messages of the parables can be reduced in each case to one meaning, usually a general moral or religious maxim (Snodgrass 5; Kissinger xiii). Although Jülicher's work has been a touchstone for the study of parables from its publication to the present day, its conclusions, including the complete rejection of the allegorical method in the interpretation of parables—have undergone significant revision by later scholars.

Snodgrass, summarizing the work of earlier scholars, points out that "*no literature is self-interpreting*" (6). He objects to the thesis that allegory is necessarily obscure or not subject to explanation. The import of Snodgrass' argument is that allegories, like similes, can be relatively transparent. Ultimately, he says, parable and allegory work according to the same mechanism; each representing a reality by means of an image external to that reality (15-16). Snodgrass also suggests that Jülicher fails to distinguish allegory, a literary form which Jesus used, from allegoresis or allegorizing, the practice of reading allegory into a story where Jesus did not intend it (6). Thus, for Snodgrass, parables are to varying degrees allegorical, according to the degree to which Jesus deliberately constructed them as allegory (16)—to reject Jesus' own allegories along with the much broader use of allegoresis is to throw out the baby with the bath water. N.T. Wright, too, argues that parables can be allegorical, but suggests, in a move which contrasts with Snodgrass, that Jesus' mission was not incompatible with a bit of obfuscation. At the time when Jesus spoke them, according to Wright, the parables were meant to be cryptic because their message was dangerously

subversive. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the parables remain obscure: by the time of the evangelists, Jesus' earthly mission was clear, so the evangelists could offer explanations of the parables in the context of the Gospels (180-82). The modern study of the parables, then, has produced a variety of positions on the relation of parables to allegory. The modern tradition is largely agreed, however, contra the medieval approach, that the parables' context in the life and ministry of Jesus and in relation to cultural precedents is central to their interpretation. Modern interpreters do not tend to see the allegories contained in the parables (and in the Bible more generally) as subject to multiple interpretations in the way that medieval interpreters did.

Because many modern scholars of the parables do not have so expansive an approach to allegory in the Bible as their predecessors did, they have been more interested in distinguishing parables as a genre; of establishing a definition and a canon of parables. If parables are (more or less) allegorical stories, but the Gospel considered more broadly is more fittingly interpreted literally and historically, then the distinctiveness of parables within Scripture is clearer. This scholarly preoccupation is not without its difficulties, however. The Greek word *parabolē* in the New Testament "can be used of almost any comparative saying intended to stimulate thought," including proverbs, riddles, comparisons, contrasts, simple and complex stories, and allegories (Snodgrass 10).²² *Parabolē* also frequently translates the Hebrew noun *mashal* in the Septuagint.²³ The noun *mashal* has a broader range of meanings even than *parabolē*: in addition to the meanings discussed above, it can also designate "a taunt, a prophetic oracle, or a byword" (Snodgrass 10). *Mashal* also has a related verb form, generally meaning 'be like,' 'become like,' 'compare,' 'use a proverb,' or 'use,' 'tell,' or 'speak a

parable' (Snodgrass 570). Even if we restrict ourselves to the noun forms of *parabolē* and *mashal*,²⁴ this range of meaning, argues Frank Kermode, encompasses "pretty well all the possibilities of narrative at large," from "strong saying" to developed story. It also runs the gamut in terms of difficulty of interpretation, from transparent to opaque (24). Nevertheless, many modern scholars have found it useful to establish a canon of the parables of Jesus, where parable is defined as a fictitious image or narrative, with simple metaphors and similes excluded.²⁵

The Interpretive Challenge of the Parables: the Biblical Cruc

Despite their differences on questions of definition and appropriate method of interpretation, both medieval and modern scholars of parables have been interested in the nature of the interpretive challenge posed by parables. In Matthew 13.1-23, Mark 4.1-20, and Luke 8.4-15, Jesus tells the parable of "The Sower," after which the disciples question him about the meaning of the parable and about why he teaches in parables. Jesus' answer is most troubling in Mark:

vobis datum est mysterium regni Dei
Illis autem qui foris sunt in parabolis omnia fiunt
ut videntes videant et non videant
et audientes audiant et non intellegant²⁶
nequando convertantur et dimittantur eis peccata (4.11-12)²⁷
[To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but
to them that are without all things are done in parables:
That seeing they may see and not perceive; and hearing they may
hear and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted
and their sins should be forgiven them].

Jesus then proceeds to explain the parable of "The Sower," which is itself a parable about the dissemination of the Word and the conditions for its success or failure (Matthew 13:18-23; Mark 4:13-20; Luke 8:11-15). These passages represent the exegetical tradition's most significant opportunity for understanding the

theoretical basis for Jesus' use of parables. At the most basic level, the passages evoke two divergent reactions from their readers. On one hand, parables seem to be straightforward teaching devices which use homely similes to explain difficult concepts (*Catena Aurea* 2.73). This perspective on parables finds support in these passages³⁸ and in classical rhetoric (Wailes, "Why Parables?," 45). On the other hand, Jesus' stern division of insiders and outsiders seems to suggest that parables are told for the purpose of excluding some portion of the audience from understanding. Both the form of parables and the content of the parable of the sower, then, concern the conditions in which communication, on the speaker's side, and interpretation, on the hearer's side, succeed or fail.

In Matthew, Jesus' description of the person who fails to understand a parable is more in line with a human sense of justice:

Ideo in parabolis loquor eis quia videntes non vident
et audientes non audiunt neque intellegunt
et adimpletur eis prophetia Esaiiae dicens
auditu audietis et non intellegitis
et videntes videbitis et non videbitis (13.14)
[Therefore do I speak to them in parables: because seeing they see
not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.
And the prophecy of Isaias is fulfilled in them, who saith: *By
hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand: and seeing you shall see,
and shall not perceive* (13.14; italics reproduced as in the original)].

In this passage, the failure of the hearer to hear, see, and understand precedes Jesus' speaking in parables. Jesus' parables, according to this passage, do indeed obscure meaning, but only in the case of those who are predisposed to misunderstand--predisposed, conceivably, by their own fault. Contrastingly, Mark's account of this episode seems to establish a causal link between Jesus' intention in using the parabolic method and the listeners' inability to understand: he teaches in parables *so that* his audience may see and not perceive ("ut videntes

videant”), lest they should be converted (“nequando convertantur”). Jesus seems to mean to conceal his message, and concomitantly, to deny the possibility of conversion to at least part of his audience—an interpretation which is hard to square with Jesus’ universal mission.

Thus, in the investigation of the reason why Jesus teaches in parables, it matters a great deal whether the commentator places interpretive priority on the Gospel of Mark or of Matthew. On this issue, medieval and modern commentators differ. Most modern commentators give priority to Mark, believed to be the earliest of the canonical Gospels (Perkins 16). Medieval commentators, following Augustine’s *The Harmony of the Gospels*, understand Matthew to be the prior text, and Mark to condense those materials from Matthew which he repeats (I.ii). Thus, medieval commentators tend to focus on Matthew’s version of this passage rather than on Mark’s. Nevertheless, many commentators study Mark’s version in conjunction with Matthew’s (Wailes, “Why Parables?” 44). Wailes suggests that Mark’s version has certain virtues from the perspective of the medieval commentator: it is shorter and simpler than Matthew’s account, and, moreover, the syntax of Mark’s version makes the meaning of the passage clearer than it is in Matthew. The “ut...nequando” sequence in Mark, then, can clarify what is unspecified in Matthew’s citation of Isaiah and use of “quia.” Matthew may be prior to Mark, but insofar as both are divinely inspired, they ultimately concur, and Mark may provide the interpretive key to Matthew (Wailes, “Why Parables?” 44).

The Interpretive Challenge of the Parables: the Medieval Approach

One strain of medieval exegesis on parables suggests that parables are pedagogical tools for making spiritual ideas more accessible. This is not, perhaps, the most obvious interpretation of the Markan parable theory. Yet although Mark 4 provides the clearest evidence that parables are meant to be obscure, it also provides some fairly indisputable evidence that parables are meant to teach. The verb *docere*, 'to teach,' appears twice in the first two verses of Mark 4, the introduction to the parable of the Sower and Jesus' theoretical statement on parables. Jesus, in speaking to a great crowd, is said to "docebat eos in parabolis multa" ["he taught them many things in parables"] (4:2).²⁹ The use of the verb 'docere' here suggests that Jesus intends his parables to teach, not just the limited audience of the disciples, but the large and diverse crowd. Additionally, the norms of classical rhetoric support the idea that parables are tools for communication (Wailes, "Why Parables?" 45 & 49).

Wailes cites a homily by Gregory the Great as the most influential remark for the Middle Ages on the parables as pedagogical tools. Homely similes, says Gregory, cause the spirit to ascend from the familiar to the unfamiliar ("Why Parables?" 50). In the *Catena Aurea* on Mark, this argument is echoed in passages attributed to Pseudo-Jerome and Chrysostom:³⁰ Pseudo-Jerome takes the use of parables to be an example of Christ's merciful providence (73). Albert the Great interprets parables as a characteristically human mode of speech: he interprets the passage in which Christ is said never to speak to the crowd without parables³¹ to mean that he accommodates his pure spiritual being to human understanding (Wailes, "Why Parables?" 51). Parables for Albert, then, are an incarnational form of discourse. Jerome, too, sees the parables as accessible. On the one hand, they

are accompanied by an invitation to attempt to understand, and on the other hand, they are themselves accommodations to human understanding:

He spake not all things to them in parables, but *many things*, for had He spoken all things in parables, the people would have departed without benefit.³² He mingles things plain with things dark, that by those things which they understand they may be incited to get knowledge of the things they understand not. The multitude also is not of one opinion, but of divers wills in divers matters, whence He speaks to them in many parables, that each according to their several dispositions may receive some portion of his teaching (*Catena Aurea* 1.481).³³

Jerome suggests that Jesus' manner of speech is always attentive to the benefit of his audience—that dark sayings are never delivered so very darkly as simply to baffle. His goal in all of his modes of speech, then, is ultimately to communicate, whether by speaking in ways appropriate to specific people or groups, or by mingling the plain with the obscure in such a way as to encourage further investigation.

Medieval exegetes often interpret the setting of the parable of “The Sower” allegorically as an extension of Jesus' explicit discussion of parables and teaching. Thus, it is significant that, according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus speaks while standing in a boat at sea. His audience, a great multitude, stands on the shore (Matthew 13.2; Mark 4.1). For many interpreters, this setting indicates the universality of Christ's mission. Immediately previous to these passages in the Gospel texts, Jesus has been inside a house.³⁴ Thus, in moving to the seashore, says Jerome, the Lord allows a greater number of people to hear his message (*Catena Aurea* 1.480).³⁵ Jesus preaches from a boat to a crowd on the seashore, says Chrysostom, so that “He should have none behind him, but all should be before His face” (*Catena Aurea* 1.480; cf. also *Catena Aurea* 2.73).³⁶ Bede specifies that this movement from house to seashore signifies Christ leaving God's ‘house’—that is,

the synagogue—to proclaim salvation to the Gentiles (*Catena Aurea* 2.73); an idea which is repeated by Rabanus Maurus (*Catena Aurea* 1.480).³⁷ For Rabanus, the “swelling and bitter waves of the sea” signify the proud and unbelieving nations.³⁸ The fact, then, that Jesus preaches in the midst of these nations seems to mean that salvation has come even to them.³⁹ In an alternate allegory, Rabanus proposes that the crowd on the seashore signifies those who hear the word of God, are separated by their faith from the reprobate (represented by the sea), but are “not yet imbued with heavenly mysteries” (*Catena Aurea* 1.480-81).⁴⁰ In Rabanus’ account, then, the multitude who hear Jesus’ message veiled are nevertheless on the path to beatitude. Rabanus might accept that parables are obscure, but does not seem to accept that the crowd’s exclusion from the mysteries is a fault in them. Rather, their exclusion is temporary, and will be overturned when they are admitted into the mysteries of the Church. Many medieval exegetes, then, emphasize those gestures toward the universality of Jesus’ mission which accompany his explicit, harsh account of parables’ exclusivity.

Another strain of medieval commentary foregrounds the fact that the parables are critically obscure to ‘outsiders,’ a suggestion which is supported by the very fact that Jesus explains the parable of “The Sower” to the disciples but not to the crowd: “vobis datum est mysterium regni Dei/ Illis autem qui foris sunt in parabolis omnia fiunt” [“To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but to them that are without all things are done in parables”] (Mark 4:11). The disciples, then, merit an explanation of the parables when others do not.⁴¹ Thus, Origen: “For not many but few there are who walk the strait road, and find the way which leadeth to life. Hence Matthew says, that He taught

without the house by parables, but within the house explained the parable to his disciples" (*Catena Aurea* 3.265). The fact that an explanation is necessary—even for Jesus' intimates—also emphasizes the opacity of parables. In discussing the setting in which Jesus tells the parable of the sower, Hilary goes so far as to suggest that the entire crowd on the shore is simply excluded from understanding the parables. The boat from which Christ teaches, he says, signifies the Church, which preaches the Word to those outside the boat—those on the seashore—but that these outsiders "being barren sand cannot understand it" (*Catena Aurea* 1.480). Jerome, too, acknowledges the significance of the fact that those on the seashore are separated from Christ (*Catena Aurea* 1.486). Bede, attending to Jesus' statement, in Mark, that to outsiders "all things are done in parables," argues that the obscurity of Jesus' message to outsiders extends to "both the actions and the words of the Saviour, because neither in those miracles which He was working, nor in those mysteries which He preached, were they able to acknowledge Him as God. Therefore they are not able to attain to the remission of their sins" (*Catena Aurea* 2.76).⁴² For Bede, then, all manner of interpretation, not just the interpretation of metaphorical forms like parables, is difficult or impossible for 'outsiders.'⁴³

What makes a hearer an outsider? As the passage from Origen, above, suggests, it is possible to justify Jesus' obfuscation in using parables by arguing that those who misunderstood were at fault for their own misunderstanding. This was a popular line of reasoning for medieval exegetes. Wailes points out that Jesus' quotation of Isaiah supports this interpretation: in its original context, the passage condemns the Jews' turpitude; thus, in this instance, Jesus could be using the passage to make a similar condemnation of the Jews for their failure to

believe in him (“Why Parables?” 46). Pseudo-Chrysostom identifies the Jews’ failure to follow the law as the reason for their inability to understand the parables, “[f]or it was right that they who did not hold fast their obedience to that law which they had received, should not have any share in a new teaching, but should be estranged from both” (*Catena Aurea* 2.75). The *Gloss*, similarly, suggests that love of the Word is the prerequisite to understanding the Word (*Glossa super Mat.* 2545); thus, by implication, that the hearer’s fault—failure to love the Word—is the reason for exclusion.

Discussions of the parable of “The Sower” provide the opportunity to reflect further upon the nature of the specific faults which blind those ‘outside.’⁴⁴ Jesus himself begins this process of interpretation, saying that the wayside represents those from whom the Devil is able to steal the Word, the stony ground represents those who, having received the Word joyfully, in time of persecution or temptation fall away, and the thorny ground represents those for whom the cares of the world and riches choke their devotion to the Word (Mark 4.15-19; Matthew 13.19-22; Luke 8.12-14).⁴⁵ Thus, Chrysostom observes, “the seed is not lost through the fault of the owner, but of the earth, which received it, that is, of the soul, which hears” (*Catena Aurea* 2.75).⁴⁶ Jesus’ identification of the thorny ground with riches and other earthly cares is clear, and requires little in the way of additional explanation. His readings of the meaning of the wayside and the rocky ground, however, leave significant room for further exegesis: what qualities of action, mind, and heart allow the Devil to steal the Word or prevent the Word sufficiently from taking root? Exegetes offer various answers to these questions.

The wayside, says Bede, represents unbelief, lack of faith, understanding,⁴⁷ or effort to understand (*Catena Aurea* 2.74; *Catena Aurea* 3.269).⁴⁸ This reading, that the wayside represents a fundamental lack of engagement with the Word, is persuasive, since the seed sown by the wayside seems never to take root at all in the parable: Satan steals it ‘immediately’ (Mark 4.15). In offering an allegory more specifically aligned to the details of the parable, Bede suggests further that the ‘wayside’ represents the mind hardened by the passage of bad thoughts (*Catena Aurea* 2.74).⁴⁹ According to this line of reasoning, a mind is predisposed to reject the Word outright if it is accustomed to thinking wicked thoughts.

In contrast to the wayside, the stony ground represents the mind which receives the Word initially, but later falls away. The *Gloss* on Mark suggests that, though these individuals see the value of the Word and desire it, they fall away ultimately from lack of faith (406-07).⁵⁰ Contrastingly, the *Gloss* on Matthew suggests that their fault is insufficient desire for salvation (2517). These faults, the lack of faith and desire, are similar to those which Bede attributes to the minds represented by the wayside. If both of these positions are accepted, the difference between the wayside and the stony ground seems less a matter of the nature of their fault and more a matter of degree. Though this distinction is plausible, Bede interprets the stony ground to represent a slightly different fault than lack of faith. The stony ground, for Bede, is hardness of mind⁵¹ combined with inconstancy in obedience,⁵² which he opposes to the “honesty of a mind trained in heavenly discipline” and obedience (*Catena Aurea* 2.74).⁵³ Similarly, Cyril invokes a lack of consistency associated with the rocky ground, calling its characteristic fault “infirmity of purpose” (*Catena Aurea* 3.269). The *Gloss* on Matthew suggests that the roots which are unable to develop in the rocky ground can be equated

with charity (2600). Thus, whereas the wayside represents a person who is consistent in wicked thoughts and disinclination to understand, the rocky ground represents inconsistency. Certain passages in the *Gloss* suggest that the inconsistency is a failure to hold fast to faith. Another perspective, held by Bede, among others, suggests that the failure is a matter of internal consistency: hardness of mind prevents an individual from bending him- or herself to the demands of the faith he or she has received.

Some exegetes offer attempts to synthesize the meaning of the three types of bad soil. The *Gloss* on Matthew points out that both the rocky soil and the thorn-infested soil—both representative of human minds—receive the Word well. The contrast of these two types of soil to the wayside, where the seed fails to take root at all, seems implicit. In the case of the rocky soil, however, terror causes the one who receives the Word to fall away, whereas in the case of the thorny ground, prosperity dulls devotion (2595). The parable, then, is comprehensive of those who do not understand at all, those who fall away because of good fortune, and those who fall away because of bad fortune. Chrysostom, too, suggests that the parable is comprehensive of human types: “Some indeed as careless hearers, some as weak, but others as the very slaves of pleasure and worldly things, hold aloof from what is good” (*Catena Aurea* 3.270).

The exegetes discussed above suggest that a prior wicked disposition, laziness, or disbelief can cause an individual to fail to understand the Word in the first place. Once the Word is heard and accepted, the mind remains susceptible to misunderstanding it insofar as it is unwilling to conform itself to the Word through obedience, or insofar as it is distracted either by fear or by earthly goods. The larger point to be drawn from the parable of the sower

according to these exegetes is that a hearer's faults, and especially faults of the will, are the cause of his or her inability to hear the Word.

This argument is echoed by a number of exegetes with reference to Jesus' statements about the disciples' worthiness to understand and the people's unworthiness.⁵⁴ Chrysostom argues that Matthew places emphasis on the free will both of those who understand and those who fail to understand:

“[W]hen they hear that *to you it is given*, He shews that the beginning of all lays with ourselves, and then He adds, *For whoso hath, to him shall be given, and he shall abound; and whoso hath not, from him shall be taken what he hath*. As much as to say, Whoso has the desire and zeal, to him shall be given all those things which are of God; but whoso lacketh these, and does not contribute that part that pertains to him, to him neither are the things which are of God given, but even those things that he hath are taken from him; not because God takes them away, but because he hath made himself unworthy of those that he hath (*Catena Aurea* 1.485).

Thus, referring to those members of the crowd who, elsewhere in the Gospels, see Christ perform miracles and effect conversions and still deny that Christ comes from God,⁵⁵ Chrysostom argues that Christ spoke at first plainly, and only later, because of the crowd's perverse understanding, in parables (*Catena Aurea* 1.486). Parable, then, is a device designed to obscure meaning from those without the desire to know. Chrysostom makes clear, however, that it does not obscure simply, but only from those lacking the correct orientation of the will, when he explains that Jesus tells the parable of “The Sower” because he is speaking to a crowd which contains the Scribes and Pharisees (*Catena Aurea* 2.481). Though this passage is somewhat lacking in clarity, it seems as though Chrysostom is arguing that Jesus is obscuring his teaching *because* of the presence of the Scribes and Pharisees—those who are unwilling to understand.⁵⁶ Similarly, Theophylact argues that “it was God who made them to see, that is, to understand what is

good. But they themselves see not, of their own will making themselves not to see" (*Catena Aurea* 2.76). Conversely, the necessary prerequisite for understanding is desire and zeal according to Chrysostom and Remigius (*Catena Aurea* 1.485).

For some exegetes, in contradistinction to those discussed above, failure to understand could be less a result of sinfulness than a direct, divine punishment for sin. For Jerome, this is the necessary explanation of the use of the conjunction "ut" in Mark (4.11) and Luke (8.10): Jesus teaches in parables *so that* he will not be understood (Wailes, "Why Parables?" 46). Augustine, finding the idea that obscurity is the *cause*, not the *consequence* of the hearers' obduracy in John 12:39-40, points out the problem with this line of thinking for a belief in God's justice. "But if it be so," he points out, "who would not rise up in defense of the Jews, and pronounce them to be free from all blame for their unbelief?" (*Catena Aurea* 1.488). Thus, to exonerate God from the charge of injustice, Augustine concludes that the hearers' *former* faults justify their being made blind, even if this blindness leads to further faults (*Catena Aurea* 1.488). In the case of the Jews who will go on to crucify Christ, Augustine argues that the purpose of their blindness is to cause them to persist in sin, thus to make their penitence and humility all the greater when they are eventually converted (*Catena Aurea* 1.488-89; cf. also 2.75-76; 3.269).⁵⁷ For Augustine, then, though the obscurity of parables is sometimes a punishment, it can also lead, by a long and circuitous route, to God's mercy.

Other exegetes take up this idea that even obscurity could be a form of God's mercy. This line of reasoning often maintains the unworthiness of those 'outside,' but suggests that God shows them mercy nevertheless, whether by their proximity to truth (without understanding) or even by their very exclusion.

A passage in the *Catena* attributed to Pseudo-Chrysostom suggests that “[h]is speaking to them only in parables, and yet not leaving off speaking to them entirely, shews that to those who are placed near to what is good, though they may have no good in themselves, still good is shewn disguised” (2.76). God is gracious in giving reprobates access to truth, even if disguised: he does not owe them even so much. Theophylact says that the truth is obscured from the unworthy such that they may not be all the more culpable for understanding and still failing to believe (*Catena Aurea* 2.76; 3.269).

A final approach to the reason for the parables’ obscurity suggests that the very obscurity of the parables is at least one of the ways that they teach. Many commentators implicitly reject Hilary’s condemnation of the crowd who hear the parable of the sower as “barren sand,” arguing, rather, that the boundary between insider and outsider is permeable, especially in light of the grace of God. Chrysostom brings an allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Sower to bear on this point. An earthly sower, he points out, could be faulted for sowing on rocky ground, in the road, or amongst thorns, because he knows that this ground is infertile: it is a waste of the seed. In spiritual things, however, that which is infertile can become fertile. Jesus as the Sower sows everywhere because repentance is possible for all (*Catena Aurea* 2.75). Jerome, as previously discussed,⁵⁸ argues that Jesus mingles plain speech with parables so that the plain speech will incite his hearers to discover the meaning of his obscure speech (*Catena Aurea* 1.481).⁵⁹ Jerome locates the pedagogical intent, then, in the plain speech, not the parables. Chrysostom says that Christ speaks the parable of the Sower to make his hearers more attentive (*Catena Aurea* 1.481), though whether it is the accessibility or the obscurity of the parables that inspires the attention is

not clear. Others, however, express clearly that the obscurity of the parables is itself a goad to the understanding. Theophylact suggests that Jesus teaches in parables so as to attract the interest of his audience rather than to expose his teaching to disdain, since “men were accustomed to exercise their minds on dark sayings, and to despise what was plain” (*Catena Aurea* 3.265).⁶⁰

The medieval commentary on the parable of “The Sower” and the discussion of parables that surrounds it is varied, but can be distilled into two major ideas. First, parables can be understood as devices designed to make meaning plainer. Second, and contrarily, parables can be understood as devices designed to obscure meaning for those ‘outside’ and to communicate to those ‘within.’ When exegetes understand the parables to be obscure to outsiders, they offer a variety of justifications for this obscurity. First, the parables may be obscure to some members of Jesus’ audience because their own sins or unwillingness to hear blind them. Second, some people’s lack of understanding may be a punishment for past sins. Third, the parables’ obscurity could be a form of divine mercy insofar as those who would not have obeyed or assented even had they understood are preserved from further culpability. Fourth, the obscurity of parables may itself be pedagogical, designed to arouse the interest of hearers. Insofar as the medieval tradition synthesizes the two apparently contrary notions that, on the one hand, parables make meaning plainer, and on the other hand, parables divide those within from those without, it is in suggesting that the difference between insiders and outsiders lies in the will of the reader and in God’s grace to the reader.

The Interpretive Challenge of the Parables: the Modern Approach

As discussed above,⁶¹ the modern study of parables began as a reaction against the hegemony of allegoresis. The proliferation of meanings possible within the allegorical method seemed, to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentators, incompatible with attention to the parables' original, specific setting and context. Relatedly, exegetes of the parables in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century were likely to resist the notion that parables were meant to obscure meaning. Rather, a group of prominent commentators of this era argued for the univocity of individual parables, and even of parables as a genre. Adolf Jülicher represents an early, influential version of this tradition. Two further scholars whose work has remained influential with the passage of time are C.H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias.

For Dodd, the distinction between parables and allegories lies in the fact that, whereas in allegories, each detail has a distinct metaphorical interpretation, in the typical parable, there is "one single point of comparison" between story and reality (18). Thus, to return to the familiar example of the parable of "The Sower," Dodd rejects the Gospels' account of Jesus explaining the parable. This explanation, he says, is an interpolation by Mark. The birds, the stony ground, and the thorns are not "cryptograms," but, rather, serve only to support to the parable's central notion that much labor is wasted in the sowing; thus that the harvest is all the more satisfying when it comes (19). The realism of Jesus' parables, says Dodd, reinforces the notion that they are not allegories, which are often necessarily awkward stories: the concern of the parables is not to conform to an esoteric interpretation, but to depict nature and human relations as they actually occurred in first-century Palestine (19-20). Dodd qualifies his distinction

between allegory and parables, suggesting that secondary meanings are bound to intrude occasionally in the longer parables, but nevertheless asserts that the realism of the parables is their defining characteristic (20). The point of this realism, Dodd argues, is to affirm that “there is no mere analogy, but an inward affinity, between the natural order and the spiritual order; or as we might put it in the language of the parables themselves, the Kingdom of God is intrinsically *like* the processes of nature and of the daily life of men” (20). Thus, to interpret a parable, we must immerse ourselves in the situation considered realistically, and make a judgment upon it; answer the question which is sometimes explicit but always implicit within it (21). A parable, he says, invites this kind of immersion and judgment, “arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (16).

Bearing this strategy of immersion and judgment in mind, Dodd is interested in exploring the historical context of the parables and their specific, original settings—as distinct from their contexts in the Gospels, which he believes can be misleading—in order better to understand the interpretive situation of their original audience. He rejects Jülicher’s reduction of each parable to a bland, moral generalization (22). Rather, he argues that the form of parables—their realism—relates to the meaning of parables, considered at its broadest level:

“While Jesus employed the traditional symbolism of apocalypse to indicate the ‘other-worldly’ or absolute character of the kingdom of God, He used parables to enforce and illustrate the idea that the Kingdom of God had come upon them there and then. The inconceivable had happened: history had become the vehicle of the eternal; the absolute was clothed with flesh and blood” (147).

Thus, the response of the hearer is the consummation of the parable. The real world evoked by the parables is itself the “scene of a divine drama,” and a decision from the hearer is required, not in some indeterminate future, but in the present (148). For Dodd, the message of the parables is “realized eschatology” (148). Dodd’s position is vaguely reminiscent of Albert the Great’s conviction that the parable is an incarnational form.

Joachim Jeremias’ work is built on Dodd’s notion that the historical and rhetorical context in which the parables were spoken is essential to the recovery of their meaning. Like Dodd, Jeremias rejects Mark’s account of parables’ esotericism and begins from a position of skepticism in considering the Gospel settings of the parables (13). In their original context, Jeremias contends, the parables show daily life as it was actually lived—they are so straightforward that “even a child can understand” (13). The recovery of this original context represents the only significant challenge in their interpretation. This is no small challenge, however, since, Jeremias suggests, ‘context’ in this case does not simply mean Palestinian social history, but rather, additionally, the specific occasion in Jesus’ ministry in which each of the parables was spoken, and to whom it was spoken (21). When he undertakes this rigorous project of contextualizing, Jeremias reaches the conclusion that the parables are “weapons of controversy” employed in situations of conflict to offer “justification, defence, attack, and even challenge” (21). Although he considers generalizations about the message of the parables unwise, Jeremias does note some “characteristics” of the form, including the clarity with which they reflect Jesus’ good news, “the eschatological nature of his preaching, the intensity of his summons to repentance, and his conflict with Pharisaism” (11). Jeremias objects to Dodd’s

exclusive focus upon the Kingdom's existence in the present time—to the detriment of considerations of future eschatology—but he acknowledges his great debt to Dodd's method of attempting to recover the original setting of the parables (21). Like Dodd, as well, Jeremias points to the fact that the parables demand a response: "Every one of them calls for an answer on the spot" (21).

Some later exegetes have concurred with Jülicher, Dodd, and Jeremias that the parables are designed principally to instruct or to make a point, and not to obscure meaning. Furthermore, the notion that parables require a response—whether in words or in actions—has continued to persuade many interpreters. Klyne R. Snodgrass asserts that the parables of Jesus can be understood by a general reader. Some, he says, are enigmatic, and the interpretation of all of them can benefit from an understanding of context, but nevertheless, they are designed to be understood (xi). Moreover, the work of living the parables is ultimately more important than the work of interpreting them (3). Snodgrass rejects methods of interpretation which, in his view, seek to bury the voice of Jesus under the concerns of the interpreters. "The parables," he argues, "do not need to be curtailed, rewritten, domesticated, psychologized, theologized with foreign christological and atonement contributions, decontextualized, or controlled" (3). Interpretation, he contends, can easily become rewriting. Thus, the practice of finding allegory where Jesus did not intend it comes in for criticism (4), but so do modern practices of interpretation, including the excessive search for original context (à la Jeremias and Dodd) to the detriment of hearing and living the parables (3; 32). Another pitfall to be avoided is an unnecessarily rigid classification of parables; for example, Dodd's assertion that parables are realistic. Snodgrass argues that parables must be treated on their own terms

before an ill-fitting categorizing framework is applied to them (28). Snodgrass does, however, attempt a partial categorization related to the degree of a parable's obscurity. Some parables, he says, are "diaphanous:" the analogy to reality is clear, often precisely because the parable does not make sense as a realistic story. Others are "surreptitious:" as in Nathan's parable to King David (2 Samuel 12:1-12), referents remain hidden until the hearer has made "self-incriminating judgments." Still others are neither diaphanous nor surreptitious, but rather "hold forth an analogy that may or may not be clear until the account is completed." Some in their current form are not clear at all, but, Snodgrass asserts, must once have been (21-22).

I note above that Theophylact sees a pedagogical intent in the very obscurity of the parables:² they offer the opportunity for mental exercise. Dodd's suggestion that a parable arrests "the hearer by its vividness or strangeness" and teases the mind "into active thought" (16) presents a similar suggestion despite its radically different methodology. This idea surfaces with variations again in Snodgrass, but in a more fully developed form. Snodgrass denies that parables are obscure per se, however he does suggest that parables make things new to us by making them strange: "The storyteller is in control so that we are forced to see from new angles and so that the message cannot be easily evaded. Hearers become willing accomplices, even if the message is hostile. From this "other world" we are invited to understand, evaluate, and, hopefully, redirect our lives" (1). The strangeness, then, of the vehicle for the message invites participation, and this participation in the story, in turn, points toward the need for action in the world beyond the story. Similarly, a parable aims, first of all, to be interesting, and because it is interesting, it "diverts attention and disarms" our

normally ossified oppositions to its conclusions (8). Snodgrass connects this method to Søren Kierkegaard's account of indirect communication:

[D]irect communication is important for conveying information, but learning is more than information, especially when people think they already understand. People set their defenses against direct communication and learn to conform its message to the channels of their understanding of reality. Indirect communication finds a way in a back window and confronts what one thinks is reality. Parables are indirect communication (8).

Snodgrass refines the discussion of the purpose of parables' obscurity by suggesting that parables are not obscure in the sense of lacking a clear message. Their obscurity consists, rather, in the strangeness of the world they create and in the strangeness of their message. The world of parables is not one that appears to the hearer blurry or unfocused. Rather, to hear a parable (and understand it) is to put on a pair of corrective lenses (8): the result is strange and the strangeness is pervasive, but ultimately it leads to a new, clearer, more focused insight.

Jacques Dupont, like Snodgrass, outlines the parabolic method as one of indirect communication (though not in so many words). Like Snodgrass, as well, he suggests the paradigmatic nature of the parable that Nathan tells to King David in 2 Samuel 12:1-12. The initial obscurity of the parable's application, in which a rich man steals a poor man's only ewe (12:1-4), is preliminary. When once David has passed judgment upon the rich man's greed, Nathan reveals the application of the parable: David is the rich man of the parable, who has stolen Bathsheba from Uriah and arranged for Uriah's death to boot (12:5-10). Dupont, then, belongs to that camp of modern interpreters who understand the parables as primarily intelligible. Contra Jeremias' suggestion, however, that parables are weapons of controversy, Dupont argues that parables are the exact opposite of belligerent (47). Parables, says Dupont, facilitate dialogue, especially amongst

those who disagree with each other. Dupont argues that the method typical of a parable is, first, to put aside explicit statements about the issue of disagreement, thereby to neutralize defensiveness on the part of the hearer. Second, the parable takes place on a terrain where the opposing opinions can encounter each other, but in disguise. Third, on this neutral ground, the hearer enters into judgment, unwittingly adopting the point of view of the speaker on the original subject of disagreement (49). Nathan's parable offers a clear example of this method at work (49-50).

Dupont also agrees with Snodgrass in arguing that parables are calls to action, pointing out that parables, insofar as they are narratives, describe action (19). Sometimes, the message of a parable concerns the behavior appropriate to its listeners, but other times a parable describes Jesus or God (26-40). Even in the latter cases, however, the parables speak of God, not by way of definition, but through a discussion of God's *actions*; of what God does (40). Thus, it is a grave error to reduce the meaning of parables to theoretical generalizations, as does, for example, Jülicher. Rather, parables are concerned with practice; with application; with action (41). Relatedly, Dupont notes, the early Christians described their faith as "'la Voie', 'le Chemin': un chemin dont il ne suffit pas de connaître l'itinéraire sur une carte, mais où il faut s'engager et qui caractérise un certain style de vie" ["'the Way,' 'the Path:' a path for which it is not enough to know one's route on a map, but on which one must set out; a path which is characteristic of a certain way of life"] (41).⁶ For Dupont, too, a parable does its work when it provokes action in its hearer.

Snodgrass notes in passing that parables' insistence on a response from their hearers places them in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets (9). N.T.

Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* dilates upon this point, arguing that the prophetic tradition inheres not only in the parables' "urgent summons" (178)—their theme of welcome and warning (176)—but in their use of allegory, which he says is related to the Jewish genre of apocalyptic allegory (175; 177). The parables, says Wright, "radicalized" tradition (176), appealing to the Jews of Jesus' community, but calling them to adjust their perspective on old, familiar things. They were "tools to break open the prevailing worldview and replace it with one that was closely related but significantly adjusted at every point" (175). By participating in the apocalyptic tradition, Jesus frames the parables as a matter of the story of Israel; as concerned with "a new exodus, a new world, a new creation" (176). It follows, if the parables are a radicalization of tradition, that they were at first intentionally obscure because of their dangerously subversive character—because, for example, the parable about defilement upends a cherished cultural tradition (179). During the period of Jesus' ministry, then, the parables were cryptograms designed to be decoded only by initiates. By the time that the Church was established, however, such secrecy was no longer necessary. Thus, the evangelists can offer an interpretation of a parable where Jesus would not have done so (180).

The modern interpreters I have summarized thusfar are united in their belief that the parables are fundamentally intelligible. Many of them are also united on a number of other points. After Jülicher, exegetes became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that the message of parables can be reduced to generalizations. Later exegetes tend to diversify the spectrum of possibilities in relation to parables' meanings: Jeremias, for example, suggests that Dodd's focus on *realized* eschatology is too narrow. Rather than focusing on a particular theme

or idea in parables, then, a number of later exegetes turn to a consideration of method in parables. Thus, where there is obscurity, they say, it is pedagogical, requiring the hearer to enter the discussion, make a judgment, and act upon it. Alternatively, for Wright, the obscurity is designedly cryptic, but its reservation to initiates is provisional. Jeremias differs from Snodgrass and Dupont in suggesting that the parable is a weapon of controversy rather than an invitation to dialogue, but all three agree that the metaphorical nature of parables is a kind of diversionary tactic, designed to facilitate communication between the speaker and a hearer with whom he disagrees. To the extent to which these exegetes are concerned with Mark's account of parables' obscurity (and some simply reject it as an inauthentic account of Jesus' purpose), this obscurity ultimately serves understanding, perhaps especially for the recalcitrant (Snodgrass 9). For this group of interpreters, to consider the parables ultimately indeterminate is to miss their purpose entirely: it is to reject the call to action and choice which is central to their meaning and method.

Warren S. Kissinger suggests that the sixties and seventies saw the development of notable new approaches to the parables, including a movement concerned with the literary form of the parables (xiv), interested in the cross-fertilization of parable studies with contemporary trends in literary theory. Whereas Jacques Dupont, N. T. Wright, and Klyne R. Snodgrass offer important affirmations of the intelligibility of parables, this group includes scholars who are less sanguine about parables' ability to communicate. John Dominic Crossan and Frank Kermode engage extensively with the unpalatable parable theory of Mark 4, confronting the possibility that those "outside" are excluded deliberately and permanently.

John Dominic Crossan considers the parables as an assertion of and (paradoxical) approach to a completely transcendent God. He argues⁴⁴ that language becomes religious when it points beyond itself toward the “Wholly Other” (*Cliffs of Fall* 13). The difficulty with this perspective (if one chooses to see it as a difficulty) is, of course, that language cannot tell us anything about that which is “Wholly Other.” Crossan affirms the connection of language and world, but considers this connection to avoid the fundamental question: “does narrative refer to a world and a reality that it itself has created and which without it is humanly incomprehensible and unintelligible, is just the humming buzz of meaningless sense impressions?” (*Cliffs of Fall* 12-13). Without the hermeneutic frame of language, he argues, the world is not susceptible to interpretation. Concomitantly, language refers, not to the world in itself, but to “linguistic world” (*Cliffs of Fall* 13). “Or, in other words,” says Crossan, “if, as Paul Ricoeur claims, reality is *redescribed* by poetic fictions, by what was it described in the first place?” (*Cliffs of Fall* 13). The particular genius of Jesus’ parables, for Crossan, is the fact that they point to their own limitations as linguistic, narrative phenomena. Parables serve, not to teach us about the God ‘out there,’ about whom nothing can be known, but rather to show us the limits of language and hence of thought; those aporetic edges where we may approach transcendence precisely because we recognize the limits of our own minds (*The Dark Interval* 45-46). Thus, paradox is the key element in parable—parables are stories which reverse our expectations and leave us bewildered from an interpretive perspective.⁴⁵ Crossan identifies three kinds of parables: parables of Advent, in which the Kingdom of God is experienced as hiddenness and mystery, gift and surprise, and discovery and joy (*In Parables* 37-52); parables of Reversal, in which

the Kingdom is experienced as an inversion of the hearer's world (*In Parables* 53-78); and parables of Action, in which the Kingdom is revealed in the actions of their protagonists, but actions which are morally bewildering because some conform to our moral expectations and some do not (79-120). This is a radical statement of the idea, presented by Wright, for example, that parables are meant to "break open the prevailing worldview" (175). According to Crossan, the purpose of breaking open the prevailing worldview is not to replace it with another, but to experience and respond to limit as such. The objective of such an exercise is to recognize God in God's otherness; in other words, to avoid idolatry. "I admit most openly," says Crossan, "a rooted prejudice against worshipping my own imagination and genuflecting before my own mind" (*Cliffs of Fall* 41). The completely aporetic nature of Jesus' parables directs us to a radically negative theology in which we are challenged to live in a manner befitting the advent of God, but in which "wise and prudent readiness is impossible because it [, God's advent,] shatters also our wisdom and prudence" (*In Parables* 119-20). Crossan, like most of the modern scholars I have discussed so far, affirms that parables call for active response. The nature of this response, however, is permanently uncertain—its most tangible fruit is uncertainty itself. Our "security is the serenity that comes from accepting insecurity as our mortal lot" (*The Dark Interval* 122).

Frank Kermode, a literary scholar by training, bases his account of parables on Mark 4, arguing, in a move reminiscent of the Medieval position, that Jesus is drawing a distinction between privileged insiders and excluded outsiders. For this reason, Kermode suggests, the scene is emblematic of processes of interpretation generally: interpretation proceeds from within an

institution which privileges “the superiority of latent over manifest sense” (2), and which licenses its members to explore this latent sense in its sanctioned texts. The latent senses—the insiders’ interpretations—of a text which has been licensed for exegesis may be infinite (10). In Kermode’s conception, a text’s manifest sense is associated with outsiders, ‘carnal’ readers, while insiders, ‘spiritual’ readers, divine a text’s latent meanings (10). Thusfar, Kermode is in lock-step with the exegetical tradition pre-Jülicher, and this is no accident. He goes on to argue, however, that interpretation, even interpretation undertaken by insiders, is doomed to failure precisely because of the persistence of the text’s manifest sense. Insiders are outsiders too, trapped by the paradox that their interpretation must always deal in that which is not manifest, but that the text always—and stubbornly—retains its manifest form (27). The drama of the Gospel of Mark, for Kermode, is precisely that Jesus’ disciples—those who most clearly belong to the category of insider—fail to understand him even unto the end of the Gospel (70). Beginning from a traditional perspective on the parables, Kermode undermines this perspective by pointing to its failure to deal with the word on the page taken at face value. The naïveté of the Medieval method of interpretation, however, turns out to be shared even by those scholars, like Jülicher, who most vehemently reject it, insofar as the ‘literal’ meaning of the parables turns out to be no less latent than the ‘allegorical’ meaning—it too translates the stubbornly lasting word on the page into a significance which is quite apart from its manifest form. Kermode might even argue that Jülicher, in his insistence on the univocity of the parables, is worse than Medieval interpreters: at least Medieval interpreters recognize the inherent plurality of literary interpretation.

Thus, beginning from a traditional approach to the interpretation of parables, Kermode ends by emphasizing the darkness of these 'dark sayings' of Jesus, making the small field of parable exegesis an emblem, not only of literary interpretation in general, but of interpretation simply. The interpretive method which is explicit in Jesus' words to his disciples in Mark 4 ends by serving a radically indeterminate account of hermeneutics in general. Like Crossan, Kermode suggests that parables are emblems of the fact that our only access to the raw data of the world is the arbitrary framing structure of language. Kermode concludes: "world and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermeneutic tricks" (145).

This aporetic conclusion is reminiscent of Crossan, but Kermode does not acknowledge the possibility of transcendence that Crossan claims comes from recognizing this limit. Thus, whereas Crossan expresses the need for active engagement in light of God's advent (though the form of this engagement is necessarily indeterminate), Kermode's pessimism about the insusceptibility of the world to objective understanding prevents him from making any claim about appropriate action. To return to the problem expressed in Mark 4, Crossan and Kermode agree that outsiders are deliberately excluded from understanding the parables. Further, they concur that everyone belongs to the category of 'outsider.' They differ, however, in their understanding of the ultimate purpose of parables. For Crossan, our inability to assimilate parables to our own limited understanding points toward that which lies outside our understanding. For

Kermode, our actions are reduced to futility: “Hot for secrets, our only conversation may be with guardians who know less and see less than we can; and our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut upon us” (145). The world of language ultimately offers no access to reality per se. Meaning is not imposed from above as though from Platonic forms; rather meaning is an artificial human creation. The tragedy of interpretation is the tragedy of life itself—that no authentic relation of interpretation to action is possible. Thus, Kermode agrees with Dodd, Snodgrass, and Dupont, to name a few, that one of the characteristics which makes parables most revelatory is their call to action; their demand to be completed by a response from the hearer. For Kermode, however, this characteristic is revelatory, not because it succeeds in jolting the hearer from complacency, but because it points out its own futility.

The work of Paul Ricoeur offers something of a mediation between those parties who argue for the pedagogical value of obscurity and the ultimate intelligibility of parables and those who believe that *aporia* is as near as parables can bring us to insight. Ricoeur offers a robust account of the nature of metaphor, arguing that meaning as derived from metaphor results from the tension between “[l]iteral falsity” and “metaphorical truth:” “Metaphor is nothing other than the application of a familiar label to a new object which first resists and then surrenders to its application” (86-87). Whereas one might understand metaphor as a matter of substituting a non-literal descriptor for a literal one, and thus consider metaphors to be ‘translatable’ into literal language, their figurative dimension disposable, Ricoeur suggests, in contrast, that metaphor is not a matter of substitution of one concept for another, but of the tension between two

concepts: “Metaphorical interpretation presupposes a literal interpretation which is destroyed. Metaphorical interpretation consists in transforming a self-defeating, sudden contradiction into a meaningful contradiction” (78). Thus, metaphors are untranslatable in the sense that they create new meaning through the novel association of two semantic fields. Without the tension between these two fields, the innovative meaning of the metaphor is lost (80).

Ricoeur applies his theory of metaphor by analogy to the study of the parables, wherein the nature of the tension is between “the scene” described in the parable and “everyday life and reality” (95). Parables, argues Ricoeur, juxtapose a narrative of apparent everydayness with an ‘element of extravagance’ (99) which breaks with our expectations of everydayness:

This trait has not been emphasized, even where the ‘realism’ of the parables has been insisted upon. The parables tell stories that could have happened or without a doubt have happened, but it is this realism of situations, characters, and plots that precisely heightens the eccentricity of the modes of behavior to which the Kingdom of heaven is compared. The *extraordinary in the ordinary*: that is what strikes me as the dénouement of the parables (115).⁶⁶

Thus, to return to the familiar example of the parable of “The Sower,” Ricoeur identifies extravagance in the extraordinarily large yield of grain at the conclusion of the parable (116).

This phenomenon of transgression of the ordinary, however, is not in itself the religious dimension of the parables; rather, parables cease to be simply expressions of themselves only insofar as they are modified by their reference to the ‘limit-expression’ ‘Kingdom of God.’ This “becomes their point of encounter with the infinite” (109). For Ricoeur, the phrase ‘Kingdom of God,’ as used by Jesus in the parables recorded by the synoptics and in the proverbial and eschatological sayings of Jesus, is precisely the extravagance factor--the

extraordinariness of the parables only becomes meaningful in a religious sense in light of its identification with God's Kingdom (100-05). Thus, the message of parables is that the Kingdom of God breaks with our expectations; it is a scandal—even a contradiction. If parables describe the Kingdom of God, they do so, for Ricoeur, by pointing to the things which language cannot say, thus pointing out the ways in which we cannot speak directly about the Kingdom of God. Thusfar, Ricoeur concurs with Crossan.

From this position that parables point to the ineffable, Ricoeur, like Crossan, cautions that understanding the idea of the 'Kingdom of God' as the key to the interpretation of parables should not cause us too hastily to decode the parables as calls to "moral application" by the reader (108-09). Ricoeur disagrees with those interpreters who judge that readers and hearers, like the characters in the parables, are called to make "a decision in a time of 'crisis'" (109). Parables, he says, point not to straightforward ethical application or generalization,⁶⁷ but rather to limits; to the individual's confrontation with 'something more' (108-09). Symbolic language by its nature, he acknowledges, calls for interpretation; calls for an answer (133). But insofar as each interpretation also forecloses the plural possibilities inherent in the text's manifest meaning, all interpretations are incomplete (134-35).⁶⁸ The danger of foreclosing interpretation, says Ricoeur, is the interpreter's resultant self-satisfaction--the world shrinks conceptually to the size of the individual mind. Jesus, says Ricoeur, avoids such gestures toward closure: "the characteristic qualifier of religious language⁶⁹ dislocates our project of making wholes of our lives—a project which St. Paul identifies with the act of 'self-glorification,' or, in short, 'salvation by works' (125). For Ricoeur, as for

Crossan, avoiding the ossification of meaning is coextensive with avoiding idolatry or self-worship.

In contradistinction to Crossan, however, Ricoeur sees intelligible meaning as well as resistance to meaning in parables. Crossan argues that the parables point to the advent of God only to assert our inability to understand or to act in light of that advent. Ricoeur, on the other hand, argues that “[t]o speak of a limit-experience is to speak of our experience” (127). Invoking the work of Karl Jaspers, Ricoeur points out that “[t]he human condition as such includes experiences which baffle discourse and *praxis*,” among them death, suffering, guilt, hatred, and also ““peak experiences”” of, for example, joy (128). Thus, to say that a text describes ‘limit’ does not mean that it describes something completely other; rather, the concept of limit speaks directly to human experience—“[i]f this were not so, the claim of the Scriptures that Christian self-understanding in fact is the understanding of authentic human existence would fail entirely” (127). In other words, “paradox disorients only to reorient” (126). The parables’ call to action highlighted in most of the other modern commentators discussed above recedes somewhat in Ricoeur, but importantly, does not disappear:

I too am therefore ready to speak of the Gospel as a project of liberated humanity and to develop the political implications of this project. What I am saying is that the properly religious moment of all discourse, including political discourse, is the ‘still more’ that it insinuates everywhere, intensifying every project in the same manner, including the political project. Political discourse therefore is no less oriented, disoriented, and reoriented than any other form of discourse; and the specific way in which it is disoriented and reoriented is that it becomes the place for the insertion of an impossible demand, a demand that we can validly interpret in utopian terms, meaning by this a quest that cannot be exhausted by any program of action (126-27).

Thus, the parables point us *to* politics (and also by implication to ethics), but also *beyond* politics, and it is this *beyond* which Ricoeur emphasizes as illuminating the whole, “in tension and conflict, I might add, with all the traits that carry this experience [of everyday life] toward a shadowy humanism, or even an aggressive atheism” (128). In resisting putting ‘the answer’ directly into words or actions, the parables resist the deification of the political and ethical spheres. It is for this reason that Ricoeur asserts an “identity between the ‘logic’ of justification by faith and the ‘logic’ of parables” (138)—no human story has the capacity to ‘capture’ God’s kingdom any more than human action can afford justification before God. In asserting that a story or an image ‘is like’ the Kingdom of God, a parable also implies that it ‘is not’ the Kingdom of God, guarding against what Ricoeur calls ‘a new scholasticism’ (143). Yet both of the sides of this tension must be maintained in order to give meaning to the whole: the image is not identical with the thing which it portrays, but it ‘is like’ the thing it portrays, and to say this much is not to say nothing. “Only the awareness of this paradoxical status,” says Ricoeur, “may preserve symbols from becoming idols” (145).⁷⁰

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have framed my account of the interpretation of parables in terms of the tension which exists in the Gospel narratives between a vision of parables as teaching tools for the unsophisticated and a vision of parables as deliberately obscure. I might equally have expressed this tension by pointing to the moments when parables seem immersed in everydayness and the moments when parables seem to point beyond everydayness toward ‘something more.’ Interpreters past and present have recognized that parables point toward

infinitude, indeterminacy, and the limits of human understanding. Medieval exegetes held that interpretation was endless because the subject under discussion—God in his own self-revelation—was infinite. Similarly, in their focus on ‘something more,’ modern interpreters have pointed to the ways in which God’s infinitude, toward which parables gesture, can never be captured in its fullness, nor can it be distilled into formulas which would dispense of figurative language—which would present the thing ‘in itself.’

On the other hand, and in apparent contradistinction to their infinite character, parables also require specific action from their hearers, whether this action consists in an initial disposition of the will, as is foregrounded in medieval interpretations, or in a response or reaction to the parable, as is suggested by many modern commentators. This requirement that a hearer engage with a parable is part and parcel of the inexhaustibility of the parables: a parable is incomplete without a response, but insofar as a response can only come from an individual, and the number of individuals to which it reaches out is virtually limitless and ever growing, so too must the meaning of a parable in a general sense remain unforeclosed. But from the angle of vision of an individual hearer, the parable’s call to action and response represents a severe circumscription of its infinite character. Parables frequently dramatize decisive decisions: the results of making the wrong decision are irrevocable. Yet if parables concern the ineffable, that which exceeds us, that which we can apprehend, if at all, only at the very limits of our understanding, how can we respond with actions appropriate to them? In what sense can our imposition of limits upon ourselves by means of acting—choosing one path and not another—do justice to the ineffable? This paradox causes some interpreters, Kermode and to some extent Crossan, for

example, to throw up their hands and despair of reaching definitive conclusions or of acting worthily. Some interpreters, on the other hand, suggest that the everydayness of the parables throws us back upon the world as the only place in which to encounter the 'beyond.' Thus, suggest Ricoeur and Wright, among others, parables transform our outlook upon reality, but in such a way as not to invalidate experience, but rather to transform and intensify our experience in the light of apocalypse, prophecy, incarnation; in light of those ways in which the world is suffused by 'something more.'

The poems of the *Pearl*-Manuscript offer an approach to the parables which shows the influence of the medieval tradition of exegesis, attending to the moral prerequisites for understanding. Yet the *Pearl*-Manuscript is not limited by the medieval perspective on parables, offering a penetrating criticism of the excesses of the fourfold method of allegorical interpretation in its foregrounding of the problems of polysemeity misused. The poems also show their depth in anticipating both the most extreme and the most astute modern positions on the purposes and methods of parables. *Cleanness* presents the extreme position that parables are ultimately unsusceptible to understanding, and show that God is so transcendent as to be unapproachable. *Pearl*, however, tempers the extremity of this position with the aforementioned argument concerning the moral component of good interpretation. Additionally, both *Cleanness* and *Pearl* emphasize, like many modern commentators, that parables demand a response from their hearers. Finally, the poems' focus on the pedagogy of shock and on the value of polysemeity takes up the position of many modern interpreters that parables teach when logic will not suffice because of the disposition of the hearer or because of the incommensurability of the subject matter.

CHAPTER THREE

“Fayre Formez:” The Parable of “The Wedding Feast” and Interpretation

Narrated in the third person, *Cleanness* discusses God’s love of purity and hatred of impurity through the negative examples of the great flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the defilement of the temple vessels by Belshazzar. The introductory section of the poem concludes with a parable I shall call “The Wedding Feast,” a combination of Matthew’s parable of “The Son’s Wedding and the Guest without a Wedding Garment” (22.1-14) and Luke’s parable of “The Great Supper” (14.15-24). In this parable as related in *Cleanness*, a host extends a warm invitation to a feast to all manner of people. But a guest who has arrived at the host’s feast in an inappropriate and soiled garment is peremptorily cast out, illustrating by his literal uncleanness the necessity of spiritual cleanness if one hopes for a place at the table at the banquet of heaven. Thus, the parable is both a positive and a negative illustration of the text’s theme, expressed as an elaboration on one of the beatitudes: ““Pe hapel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre, / For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere”” (27-28). The converse of this assertion also resonates outward into the text’s major exempla, in which the unclean—sexual deviants, idolaters and blasphemers—receive punishment from an angry God.

Scholars are divided concerning the argument—writ large—of *Cleanness*. Some argue that the poem offers an intelligible account of morality, and a God who enforces it. The poem’s theodicy, for many, is revealed through the patterns of imagery and the thematic unities which structure the poem as a whole. Some

argue, contrarily, that the poem fails to offer a rational elucidation of the all-important virtue of cleanness, and hence that its portrait of God is similarly not susceptible to rational comprehension.

Representing the former view, Charlotte Morse argues, “the primary message of the poem, that men should repent, is not obscure” (2); put another way, for Morse, God’s judgment is the poet’s theme (202). Another powerful argument for the poem’s fundamental unity suggests that its central theme is cleanness and uncleanness (Anderson 11; Spearing 44-50). For S. L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, the poem’s theme is revealed, not by the work’s editorially assigned title, but by the message of the *parable* it contains; namely, in their view, the Last Judgment (285-86). Michael Twomey suggests that the apparently disparate sins described in the poem are unified as failures of ‘trawþe’ (“The Sin of *Untrawþe*” 117-18). Theresa Tinkle, Sarah Stanbury, and Jonathan A. Glenn note a sustained thematic focus on the vision of God (Tinkle 451-52; Stanbury, “In God’s Sight,” 105) and, relatedly, the *imago dei* in human beings (Glenn 79). Earl G. Schreiber argues that the poem adopts the form of a homily—moral principle and amplifying exempla—as well as including complex and sustained interlocked metaphors (131). Further, scholars note patterns of imagery which lend coherence to the whole. For Morse, the relevant images are the poem’s literal and figurative vessels of God (202). Similarly, Stanbury notes the importance of images of enclosure (“Space” 482). For Clark and Wasserman, the unifying images are cities, evocative of the New Jerusalem (284-86).

Given this array of unifying principles and images, most of which are not mutually exclusive, it is surprising that the experience of reading *Cleanness* is fraught with discomfort and disorientation. Though a bird’s-eye view of the

poem reveals a satisfying unity of theme, structure, and images, the experience of reading individual episodes is arduous and alienating. The reader is confronted with a portrait of God at times chillingly distant and at times disturbingly human in his propensity for anger and his apparently capricious judgments. J. J.

Anderson accounts for this portrayal of God by arguing that *Cleanness'* rhetorical aim is not to make its case persuasively, but rather, forcefully:

Unlike *Patience*, which wants to inspire reflection, *Cleanness* wants to make an impact, and to this end it is not logical, but works by repeated assertion, albeit disguised as argument. The purpose of the discussions and illustrative stories is not so much to enlarge perspectives on the nature of cleanness as to give reinforcement to the assertions. The poem is in the business of rhetoric rather than exposition, and it may be regarded as, in essence, one long rhetorical flourish based on its opening proposition (84).

Thus, Anderson argues, like Morse, that *Cleanness* is perfectly clear. Contrary to Morse, however, he suggests that *Cleanness'* clarity results from repeated assertion rather than from any sustained image or pattern which would suggest a larger argument about morality. Thus, for Anderson, there is a kind of opacity even in the very clarity of *Cleanness'* message, to "'be clean or else!'" (83). The reader is called simply to obedience rather than to intellectual assent. Anderson also suggests, however, that *Cleanness* is a companion-piece to *Patience*, representing God as Justice and Truth where *Patience* represents God as Mercy and Peace (5). Thus, the God of *Cleanness* may be unappealing because the poem's account of him is incomplete. Insofar as the poem's opacity from a rational standpoint is blameable, then, the failure is supplied by *Patience's* very different portrait of God and engagement of the intellect.

For Ad Putter, however, the poem's lack of effort to argue its case logically is blameable. Putter suggests that the poem aims to condition our reaction to

moral uncleanness by an appeal to feelings of disgust arising from *physical* uncleanness. Thus, he sees in the poem a kind of intellectual dishonesty; an attempt to indoctrinate readers into its undefended cultural prejudices by way of a specious analogy of physical filth with moral sin. *Cleanness* is not concerned with arguments, but rather with developing in its reader an unconscious and visceral reaction to sin (234-36).⁷ David Wallace argues that *Cleanness* is about the failure of reason in light of the divine: the text offers negative and confusing accounts of the virtue of cleanness because, ultimately, God's judgment is not subject to human reason (100).

These scholarly reactions to *Cleanness* form a contrast to each other: on the one hand, *Cleanness* is understood as imagistically and thematically satisfying, depicting a navigable moral world. On the other hand, it is understood to depict a God who is frighteningly violent and unpredictable and a world governed by moral expectations at once very serious and not subject to the discernment of reason. Contrary as these perspectives seem, each has something to recommend it. The artistry with which the poem deploys the image of the vessel of God, both figurative and literal, for example, is undeniable, but does nothing to mitigate the pathos with which the antediluvians say their goodbyes in the face of the waters of the flood. The synthesis which is evident in a consideration of the whole is a contrast to the disturbing particulars, such as God's all-too-human anger. Scholars have tended to focus their attention on one or the other of these two textual phenomena: either the poem displays "the pattern of God's judgment" (Morse 202), or it makes only the tautological assertion that "those are righteous whom God deems to be righteous" (Wallace 100). I believe that a reading of *Cleanness* must account for both of these textual phenomena; must come to terms

with the paradoxical reality that the text makes us feel at once welcomed and comfortable in its patterned world of images and ideas and rebuffed by the glimpses it shows us of a God outside of the categories it has been encouraging us to create.

The possibility of this kind of interpretive doubleness is represented in the text of *Cleanness* itself by the parable of "The Wedding Feast." In it, the host offers a welcome still more expansive than his counterpart in the Gospels, but also judges one of his guests negatively according to standards which are inscrutable even to his own household. This interpretive doubleness, involving both welcome and rebuff, is also the paradox of the parable form itself, at once an aid for the understanding and a barrier to understanding. Thus, both the general form of parables and the specific content of the parable of "The Wedding Feast" are deeply implicated in the structure and themes of *Cleanness* as a whole. The artistry involved in the poem's doubleness is a parabolic artistry. *Cleanness* is certainly interested in the phenomenon of God's judgment, and whether this judgment is intelligible or unintelligible. A parabolic reading of the poem reveals, further, that the poem's concern with interpretation is broader than only a consideration of the intelligibility of God's judgment. The possibility of interpretation in general is equally under consideration. Thus, the possibility and the method of *human* judgment are considered as a necessary corollary to the consideration of God's judgment.⁷²

A careful reading of *Cleanness'* parable of the wedding feast, followed by an examination of the ways in which its themes recur in the remainder of the poem, reveals, first, that *Cleanness'* portrayal of an often inscrutable God is deliberate, and serves to focus the poem thematically on the difficulties of

interpretation. Second, the initial, generous welcome to the wedding feast, although it seems to be overcome, rhetorically, by the final expulsion of the guest in dirty garments, in the final analysis, retains its significance. Having recognized the dichotomy of God's judgment and human judgment, we can recognize anew the sincerity of the invitation to share in the interpretive feast.

This chapter focuses on the former element of the poem: its concern with the difficulty of interpretation in light of God's transcendence. Chapter three takes up the latter, focusing on *Pearl* primarily but also on *Cleanness* and *Patience*. Each contains images of righteous reading, and thus the reassertion of the invitation to interpret even in light of its difficulties.

Biblical Sources for the Parable of "The Wedding Feast"

The parable of "The Wedding Feast" occurs near the beginning of *Cleanness*. It follows an introductory meditation on God's love of cleanness, a condemnation of hypocritical priests, a statement on cleanness drawn from the beatitudes, and a hypothetical account of the story of the parable—an earthly lord would be offended by an ill-dressed guest; how much the more would such an impertinence offend the Lord of Heaven? The parable's source is identified by the poem as Matthew (51), but it is in fact a conflation of Matthew 22.1-14 ("The Son's Wedding and the Guest without a Wedding Garment") and Luke 14.16-24 ("The Great Supper"⁷³) with an allusion to a third parable, "The Choice of Places at the Table" (Luke 14.7-11).⁷⁴ This conflation is curious, since the two former parables are considered distinct within the medieval tradition. Modern commentators, too, note the thematic difference between the two parables, and recognize the need to account for this difference in their interpretations of these

parables. *Cleanness* conflates the two parables without comment, retaining even Matthew's distinctive account of the guest without a wedding garment. The result of this conflation is that the parable presents two distinct and contrasting messages. This conflation seems to be an innovation of the poet of *Cleanness*, for it is a departure from the tradition of Latin exegesis as well as from the vernacular tradition of gospel harmonies and devotional literature.⁷⁵

In Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of "The Wedding Feast" to the chief priests and the Pharisees in response to their taking offense at a series of parables which they interpret as being about their own corruption (21.42-45). The rhetorical import of the parable in its context, then, seems to be that the Pharisees should not assume that their place at the heavenly banquet is secure. The occasion for the feast in Matthew's version of the parable is the marriage of a king's son (22.2). The invited guests refuse the invitation once (22.3). The king sends messengers to them again and they refuse the invitation again. One group simply has better things to do—"But they neglected, and went their ways, one to his farm, and another to his merchandise" (22.5)—but another group of invitees seizes and kills the king's servants. The text offers no justification or explanation for this behavior. The king's response is even more swift and violent (though also more justifiable): "he destroyed those murderers, and burnt their city" (22.7). He then dispatches his servants to the 'highways,' and these servants gather "together all that they found, both bad and good" (22.10). These guests once gathered together, the king notices that one is not dressed in a wedding garment (22.11). When the guest fails to explain his lack of appropriate attire, the king commands his servants to "Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the exterior darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (22.12-13). The

parable concludes with the grim moral: “[f]or many are called, but few are chosen” (22.14).

The parable of “The Great Supper” is told in Luke within an extensive frame: Jesus, having been invited to a Sabbath meal at the home of one of the chief Pharisees, cures a man of dropsy, despite the Pharisees’ implicit disapproval (14.1-6). He then tells the parable of “The Choice of Places at the Table” in response to the actions of the guests at this feast. “[M]arking how they chose the first seats at the table,” he pronounces that a guest at a wedding feast should choose the lowest place at the table so that his host may exalt him by asking him to move to a higher place, rather than choosing the highest place at the table only to be asked to move to a lower place (14.7-11). Jesus next gives advice concerning the guest list for one’s dinner parties: do not invite the rich, who may repay your kindness, but rather, invite “the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind,” so that you may have your reward, not in a reciprocated invitation, but at the resurrection of the just (14.12-14). These preliminary parables have obvious, immediate applicability to their context. Jesus is, at least in part, talking about everyday, earthly dinner parties. It is a guest at the dinner who first draws attention to the celestial analogue of earthly feasting: “When one of them that sat at table with him, had heard these things, he said to him: Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (14.15). In response to this aphorism, Jesus tells the parable of “The Great Feast,” warning against complacency amongst those who consider themselves the elect (Snodgrass 314). As with Matthew’s parable, then, Luke’s parable seems to be geared to the specific context in which it is spoken. A man (not, as in Matthew, a king,) invites many people to a great feast, but when he sends his servants to fetch his guests,

the invited guests excuse themselves, the first because he has bought a farm, the second because he has bought five yoke of oxen and the third because he has married a wife (14.16-20). In short, all have better things to do. Luke's parable lacks the violence of Matthew's at this juncture: there is neither murder nor the subsequent revenge. Instead, the host, in his anger, sends his servants to seek out more guests for the feast: "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the feeble, and the blind, and the lame" (14.21). After complying, his servants tell the host that there is still room in his hall, whereupon he sends them out to gather still more guests: "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled" (14.23). The parable emphasizes the breadth, then, of the host's invitation, and the intensity of his desire to fill his hall. It lacks the incident, present in Matthew, of the expulsion of the ill-clad guest. There is, however, a gesture toward punishment in Luke. The host's concluding words concern the permanent exclusion from the feast of the original guests who have refused his invitation: "none of those men that were invited, shall taste of my supper" (14.24).

Both parables have dual emphases, on one hand, on the invitation to the feast and the need to respond to the invitation, and on the other hand, on the exclusion from the feast of those who refuse the invitation. In Luke's account, however, the malfeasance of those who refuse the lord's invitation is limited to an inappropriate focus on other things. Similarly, their punishment consists solely of exclusion from the feast. Matthew, on the other hand, paints a darker picture, in which the king's invitation is greeted with murderous violence and the king retaliates with violence in turn.⁷⁶ Further, the episode of the guest

without a wedding garment has no analogue in Luke, and suggests a discrete moral: that even amongst those who accept the lord's invitation, some will be found unfit to participate in the eschatological banquet. This parable asserts that accepting the invitation is not enough. Invited guests must also make preparations to attend the feast. The guest lacking a wedding garment has arrived to the feast without having made suitable preparations (Snodgrass 321).

The addition of the episode of the ill-clad guest also suggests distinct broad-stroke allegorical interpretations of Matthew's and Luke's parables. Gregory, following Augustine, articulates the standard medieval account, that Matthew's parable is an allegory for the Church militant, and Luke's is an allegory for "the last and eternal feast" (*Catena Aurea* I.II.739).⁷⁷ This distinction arises from the episode of the guest without a wedding garment, since those who enter the Church may still be cast out, but those who enter into beatitude cannot thereafter be expelled (*Catena Aurea* I.II.739).⁷⁸ Middle English vernacular retellings of these parables also treat them as two different parables.⁷⁹ Joachim Jeremias similarly recognizes that the guest without a wedding garment suggests a discrete moral from Luke's account of "The Great Feast." He therefore suggests that, whereas both parables of the great feast (from Matthew and Luke) stem from the same occasion in the ministry of Jesus, the episode of the guest in the dirty garment was originally a separate parable (64-66). Snodgrass suggests that the parables for Matthew and Luke stem from different sources in the ministry of Jesus, since their contexts and wording differ considerably from each other (310). He also points out that, for many modern commentators, the murder and retaliation plotline as well as the episode of the ill-clad guest give Matthew's parable a more disturbing tone than Luke's (317).⁸⁰ Thus, within the medieval

tradition and amongst influential parties in the modern tradition as well, the episode of the guest without a wedding garment distinguishes Matthew's parable from Luke's.

Another highly significant distinction between Matthew's and Luke's parables concerns the identity of the guests who receive and accept the invitation. In Matthew, after those originally invited reject the king's invitation, the king orders his servants to go to the "highways" and to gather "all that they found, both bad and good" (22.10).⁸¹ In Matthew, then, all those encountered are invited, and Jesus particularly notes their moral diversity. Contrastingly, in Luke, it is social outcasts who receive the second invitation: "the poor, and the feeble, and the blind, and the lame" (14.21). When the hall is still not filled, the lord sends his servants out once again, this time to "the highways and hedges" (14.23). Presumably this third round of invitees is even more unusual than the second, incorporating, perhaps, outlaws and the homeless. While both parables emphasize the expansiveness of the summons, in Matthew, the summons is inclusive of a group whose *moral* diversity is emphasized. Contrastingly, in Luke, it is the group's *social* diversity, and in particular the inclusion of outcasts, which receives emphasis.

A final distinction between the two parables concerns the timescape of each and the urgency of the summons to the feast. In Matthew, the king sends for his original guests the first time without any indication of time constraints. The second time he sends for his original guests, he indicates that they should make haste, for "[b]ehold, I have prepared my dinner; my beeves and fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come ye to the marriage" (22.4). The interlude that follows, in which the king prepares and executes a military expedition

against his original guests, indicates that Jesus is playing fast-and-loose with time in this parable. We should exercise caution, then, against taking the parable too literally on the subject of time. When the king sends his servants out for the third time, he indicates that the “marriage is indeed ready,” and that the servants are to “call to the marriage” all those whom they can find (22.8-9). Thus, in Matthew, the summons is to some extent urgent. In Luke, the urgency of the summons is more immediately apparent: the host sends his servant out “at the hour of supper” (14.17). When the original guests refuse the invitation, the host tells his servant to “[g]o out quickly” to “bring in hither” the outcasts (14.21). The parable elides the time it takes to fetch this collection of outcasts to the feast, skipping immediately to the servant’s explanation that the host’s will has been done but that there is still room to spare (14.22). When the host next sends him out, he tells him to find more guests and to “compel them to come in” (14.23). The urgency is more unremitting in this account than in Matthew. Since it is the ‘hour of supper,’ one can imagine the food getting cold on the table as the servant seeks out guests to eat it. In Matthew, contrastingly, and without laying undue emphasis on the incident of the military expedition, the original summons is not as urgent. This is indicated by the fact that the host sends his servants to the original invitees not once, but twice. Additionally, the king in Matthew instructs his servants to “call”⁸² the second round of guests to the marriage, whereas Luke’s host tells his servants to “bring in hither”⁸³ the second round of guests and to “compel”⁸⁴ the third round of guests to come in. Thus it would seem that the servants in Matthew are meant to invite simply, whereas the servants in Luke are meant personally to escort the guests to the feast.

For Snodgrass, the distinctions between the two parables on the nature of the invitees and the immediacy of the summons are the keys to understanding the episode of the guest without a wedding garment. It would indeed be problematic, Snodgrass suggests, if “the poor, and the feeble, and the blind, and the lame” were plucked off the streets, brought immediately to the feast, and then judged on the appropriateness of their apparel. But it is in Luke, not in Matthew, that the poor are invited to the feast. Similarly, it is in Luke, not in Matthew, that guests seem to come straight from the streets to the feast. Thus, the host in Matthew is not unjust for expelling the guest without a wedding garment: “The parable assumes that the man has had time to come appropriately attired” (321). Not to do so would be a sign of disrespect. What is significant about this poorly attired guest for Snodgrass, then, is that he has not made any preparation for the feast. The audience, then, is warned that they, similarly, must prepare for God’s judgment (321).

Cleanness’ Parable of “The Wedding Feast” and its Biblical Source Material

Cleanness’ parable of “The Wedding Feast” represents a conflation of these two parables, which is curious given the differences between them outlined above. A rich man holds a wedding banquet for his heir, and sends his messengers to tell his invited guests that they should assemble in fine garments (51-54). He chronicles the animals he has slaughtered for the occasion: they are now roasted and ready to be served (55-60). Thus, the invitation is pressing: “Comez cof to my corte, er hit colde worþe” (60). The originally invited guests give the three excuses outlined in Luke, and Matthew’s episode of the murder of the servants and the host’s revenge is omitted (61-71). The host, enraged by these

guests' refusal, sends his servants out into the city to invite all those whom they meet:

'Ȓe wayferande frekez, on fote and on hors,
BoȒe burnez and burdez, Ȓe better and Ȓe wers,
LaȒez hem alle luflyly to lenge at my fest' (79-81).

The host indicates the inclusiveness of the invitation by phrasing it in terms of a series of binaries: *both* those on foot and those on horse, *both* men and women, *both* those of high and low class.⁸⁵ Upon arrival, the guests are seated by the steward and the marshal according to their social class (89-92).

When his servants tell the host that there is still room at the feast, the host extends the geographical area of his search for guests to include the countryside: "Ȓe felde" as well as "gorstez and greuez" (98-99), and places a particular emphasis upon the inclusion of the physically and mentally disabled:

Whatkyn folk so Ȓer fare, fechez hem hider;
Be Ȓay fers, be Ȓay feble, forlotez none,
be Ȓay hol, be Ȓay halt, be Ȓey onyzed,
And Ȓaz Ȓay ben boȒe blynde and balterande cruppelez,
Pat my hous may holly by halkez by fylled (101-04).

In Luke's version of the second and third round of invitations, the host first sends for "the poor, and the feeble, and the blind, and the lame" from the streets of the city, and second for anyone encountered on the highway. *Cleanness's* version of the second and third invitations is evidently based on Luke's but is even more expansive. In the course of both the second and third invitations, the host emphasizes that the invitation is all-inclusive. Though he makes a particular effort to include outcasts, those of sound body and members of the lower aristocracy are also explicitly included. From Matthew, *Cleanness* obliquely adopts the host's disregard for moral distinctions: guests include both "Ȓe better and Ȓe wers" (80) and the "worȒy oȒer wers" (113). Malcolm Andrew and

Ronald Waldron suggest in their notes and index that both of these lines are making social rather than moral distinctions (note to l. 80; pp. 359 & 361). This does appear to be the primary meaning of these lines, surrounded as they are by further discussions of rank and its implications. A secondary moral meaning cannot be excluded, however, particularly given that the host of the parable uses the word “worþy” with obvious moral implications to describe the first group of guests who refuse his invitation (84).

Once the hall is full, the guests proceed to enjoy the feast (119-24). The host circulates in the hall, offering gracious hospitality to his guests, until he catches sight of one guest whose attire is inappropriate for the occasion. The host

fande with his y3e—
Hit watz not for a halyday honestly arayed—
A þral þryzt in þe þrong vnþryuandely cloped,
Ne no festiual frok, bot fyled with werkkez;
þe gome watz ungarnyst with god men to dele (133-37).

The host chides his unmannerly guest severely (139-48), and the guest is reduced to abashed silence (149-52). The host orders his torturers to bind the offender and cast him into the dungeon (153-60). Thus, the narrator concludes, Christ likens the kingdom of heaven to “þis frelych feste þat fele arn to called” (162). Christ’s moral from Matthew, then, is partially reproduced by the narrator, with the crucial caveat that “few are chosen” is left out.

This retelling of the parables from Matthew and Luke combines elements from the two parables in incongruous ways. The expulsion of the guest in dirty garments from Matthew is combined with the expansive welcome as recounted in Luke. The heightened contrast created by this combination is already surprising. In fact, this combination of the Lucan account of welcome with the judgment on the single guest as described by Matthew calls into question the

justice of the host's expulsion of the ill-dressed guest. An additional wrinkle in the combination of the two parables, however, is that the poet omits the violence present early in the Matthean parable. The first guests' violent response to the host's invitation and the host's retributory violence are not featured. While one of the moments of judgment from Matthew's parable is retained, another is omitted. Mary Raschko suggests persuasively that these changes have the effect of heightening the reader's shocked response at the expulsion of the guest in dirty garments (65). The opening of the parable emphasizes exclusively the generosity of the host's welcome. Thus, the narrative does not anticipate the expulsion of the guest in dirty garments by other intimations of judgment, and the warning offered thereby is all the more stark.* *Cleanness'* parable, which begins by offering a welcome untinged by any hint of exclusiveness, concludes with a warning unsoftened by any hint of mercy.

This contrast is deliberate. The parable resists the straightforward allegorizing which would be necessary if it were meant to be interpreted as straightforwardly didactic without designs on unsettling the reader or hearer. Further, several curious pieces of diction in the parable heighten its destabilizing effect. Finally, the relationship of the host in the parable to his servants is dramatized in such a way as to reiterate the contrasting, dual elements of the parable as welcome and exclusion.⁸⁷ The actions of the host's servants highlight the difficulties of understanding the host's standards. The parable, then, is not focused simply on offering a portrait of God and an account of his judgment. Rather, it is an account of *human* judgment in contrast to divine judgment, focalizing other characters more than the host and thus offering insights and

raising questions in its audience, not only about the host's motives, but also about his servants' responses.

The host in *Cleanness*, like the host in Luke, invites outcasts to his feast. The host in *Cleanness*, however, intensifies the invitation as presented in Luke. To Luke's "the poor, and the feeble, and the blind, and the lame" (14.21) are added the "fers," the "onyzed," and those "bope blynde and balterande cruppelez" (101-03).⁸⁸ Luke's guests from "the highways and hedges" (14.23) become, in *Cleanness*, guests from "pe greet streetez" (77), "by bonkez" (86),⁸⁹ "pe felde," and those found 'lying' in "gorstез and greuez" (98-99). Guests arriving from the fields are perhaps called directly from their work to the feast, and those who have been found lying in gorse heaths or in the woods are perhaps either homeless or outlaws. These guests, when contrasted to Luke's, are described as more vividly disabled and as emerging from even wilder locales. *Cleanness'* account of the invitees to the feast is more particular and hence more visually evocative. Whereas Luke's 'poor, feeble, blind and lame' has a formulaic quality,⁹⁰ *Cleanness'* invitations to the 'one-eyed' and to the 'blind and stumbling' cripples are specific enough to call pictures to mind—perhaps even to recall specific diseases. Thus, *Cleanness* foregrounds a problem already present in the attempt to conflate the feast-parables of Matthew and Luke: we are not inclined to hold the poor accountable for the state of their garments; still less so the *blind*. To this problem, *Cleanness* adds the possibility that these guests are homeless or that they have come directly to the feast from their work as laborers. Thus, by fusing Luke's parable together with Matthew's, *Cleanness* brings the host's justice into question. In Matthew's parable, the host's expulsion of the single guest is justifiable because the man has had time to prepare and because there is no

indication that the man is too poor to have the appropriate garment. *Cleanness'* parable, however, does not allow the host these excuses. How can the host justly expel one of his guests because the man is not dressed appropriately when he may not have had time to change, and may not have had anything else to change into? And if the man's dress is only an allegorical stand-in for his interior state, then why does the poem go out of its way to fill in so many literal, visual details about the guests—details which might excuse their being inappropriately dressed?¹

This line of thinking might be criticized as too literal. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, the editors of the standard edition, suggest that the expulsion of the ill-clad guest “does not appear to have caused anxiety to medieval commentators, perhaps because the wedding garment could so readily be allegorized as good works” (note to ll. 139 ff.). This allegorical account of the dirty garments is, in fact, discussed explicitly in *Cleanness*:

Wich arn þenne þy wedez þou wrappez þe inne,
þat schal schewe hem so schene schrowde of þe best?
Hit arn þy werkez, wyterly, þat þou wrozt hauez,
And lyned with þe lykyng þat lyze in þyn hert (169-72).

Andrew and Waldron also point out that the host has explicitly asked his guests to dress appropriately (note to ll. 139 ff.).² *Cleanness'* own allegorical interpretation of the parable seems to do what Andrew and Waldron suggest that it does, reducing the parable's complexity to a single point of correspondence with reality, thereby smoothing out its apparent problems. If the application of this allegory expressed in its entirety the meaning of the parable, however, the poet need not have incorporated the incongruous details from Luke, which seem to problematize the expulsion of the guest in dirty garments.

The inclusion of the material from Luke seems deliberate, since it flies in the face of the tradition of exegesis. Furthermore, this very conflation of the two parables makes the task of the allegorical interpreter more challenging, as the two parables appear to be subject to different allegorical interpretations. Luke's parable, allegorically speaking, is about the final judgment with an emphasis on the *inclusion* of outcasts,⁹³ whereas Matthew's parable, allegorically, is about the presence within the Church—on earth—of some who will *not* be welcomed to the heavenly banquet. To allegorize away the ambiguities of the story is to ignore the fact that the parable as told in *Cleanness* in fact resists allegorical interpretation.

Even the *poet's* statement of the allegorical significance of the dirty garment raises as many questions as it answers. In this passage, quoted above, 'werkez' signifies *good* works; 'werkez' are the necessary prerequisite to God's judgment. When the ill-clad guest is expelled from the feast, however, it is because his garment is "fyled with werkkez" (136)—here, 'werkkez' means evil deeds, not good. Thus, the word 'werkkez,' which signifies elsewhere the prerequisite to *cleanness*, here precisely signifies *uncleanness*. The literal meaning also intrudes into this discussion of works insofar as we can well imagine why this man has arrived at the feast in a dirty garment: perhaps he has been *working* in a field or doing some other sort of manual labor immediately prior to his arrival at the feast. If it is his honest labor which has dirtied his garments—an interpretation which the text does not foreclose—then the literal dirt ought to signify spiritual cleanness, as it would, for example, in *Pearl's* parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard," where each of the workers in the lord's vineyard receives a reward for his labor (546). The guest's dirty garment is contrasted, in fact, to a "festiual frok" (136): the implication is that the man is wearing his

everyday garments, and has not changed into his 'Sunday best.' This might be blameable if he had had time to change, but not if he has been brought straight from the field to the banquet. If his garments are 'fyled with werkkez' in a literal sense, it is hard for a reader to blame him.

It does not follow that the host expels this guest from the feast unjustly. Indeed, insofar as *Cleanness* makes the host a stand-in for God, and never broaches disagreement with God as a tenable position, God's justice is surely being upheld in this instance as well. The difficulty raised by this parable is that God's justice may not be susceptible to rational discernment. The diction surrounding the description of the guest's garment and the description of cleanness which explicates the parable rather confuse the rational account of what it means to be clean than illuminate it straightforwardly.³⁴ The host need not be unjust; he could simply be prescient beyond the reader's abilities and thus inscrutable to the reader.

A similar quibble concerns the use of the word 'clene' in the parable, which is used primarily in a social rather than moral sense. As the guests are welcomed to the feast, they are seated according to rank, but all are fed generously: "Clene men in compaynye forknowen wern lyte, / And 3et þe symplest in þat sale watz serued to þe fulle" (119-20). Here, the 'clene' are evidently the social superiors who are in attendance at the feast (perhaps this status correlates with literal cleanliness), since they are contrasted to the 'symplest.' But this passage is ambiguous insofar as the parable is being narrated precisely for the sake of distinguishing the clean from the unclean in the eyes of God (26-30). The social categories of 'clean' versus 'simple,' however, do not speak to this distinction. The text's use of the words 'worþy' 'better' and 'wers'

with possible social *and* moral connotations⁹⁵ performs a similar destabilization of the reader's conceptual categories. In its varying uses of these two terms so critical to an understanding of God's justice in the parable, *Cleanness* dramatizes the problem of interpretation, and specifically, the disjunctions of understanding which follow from the fluidity of words. In order to receive the reward of the vision of God, you must be clean, but not necessarily 'clean' in the sense of aristocratic; you must undertake works, but not just any works, as some works have precisely the property of making you *unclean*. These ambiguous words do not make the parable's meaning indecipherable: an intelligent person, after all, can navigate between the diverse meanings of words in order to understand what is going on. It is notable, however, that *Cleanness* points to the ambiguity of its own language at precisely the moments when clarity seems most crucial or when the text aims at clarity most narrowly. The interpretation of the allegorical significance of the dirty garment seems geared to clarify matters, but ends up introducing a new ambiguity. And in one place where clarity seems most crucial—the definition of cleanness itself—the text opens up new puzzles.

The difficulty of interpretation is presented still more dramatically in the parable by means of the distinction between the host's judgments and those of his servants. The host's servants are as disoriented as the reader by the host's apparently vacillating attitudes. They fail to understand either the sweeping nature of the host's welcome or the grounds on which the guest in dirty garments should be excluded from the feast. First, with respect to the welcome which the host wishes to extend, the host's servants are hesitant to be as radical as their master. They are defensive, in fact, about the guests they have gathered,

perhaps believing that they have overstepped the host's command, when in fact, the opposite is true:

'Lo! lorde, with your leue, at your lege heste
And at þi banne we haf brozt, as thou beden habbez,
Mony renischche renkez, and zet is roum more' (94-96).

The servants are careful to emphasize that they have invited this strange crowd with the lord's 'leave,' at his 'behest,' at his 'order,' and as he has 'bidden.' Their discomfort with the guests they have welcomed into their lord's hall is evident. Their only defense for inviting such "renischche renkez," they seem to think, is to remind the host that they have been doing his bidding. But whereas they believe that they have extended the invitation too far, the host tells them, on the contrary, that they have not gone far enough. He immediately instructs them to go out again, forcefully reiterating the breadth of the invitation, this time explicitly including all manner of cripples (98-104). This interaction reinforces the opacity of the lord's motivations and actions, even to his servants.

Still more pointedly, the host's servants misjudge their master's will in the very act of imitating him. The marshal and the steward, charged with seating the guests at the banquet, do so according to their understanding of the host's preferences. The marshal and the steward are servants of high rank, and thus likely share a closer degree of intimacy with the lord than do the servants sent into the countryside to invite the guests. They are also likely more adept at fulfilling the lord's will than these lower-ranking servants. They fail, however, to differentiate the guest in dirty garments from the rest of the crowd, showing that their supposed intimacy with the lord does not preclude their misjudging his will. If the parable in *Cleanness* is designed to suggest that *God's* will is inscrutable, the failure of the steward and the marshal further emphasizes this

fact. Not even God's servants, the analogy suggests, should assume that they are privy to his judgments. Even supposed intimates can get it wrong, and they can be wrong even when they believe that they are judging precisely according to God's criteria.

The marshal and steward seat the first set of guests courteously and with careful attention to propriety:

When þay com to þe courte keppte wern þay fayre,
Styztled with þe stewarde, stad in þe halle,
Ful manerly with marchal mad for to sitte,
As he watz dere of degré dressed his seete (89-92).

One might well ask whether the marshal and steward are truly attending to the lord's wishes by seating his guests according to their 'degré,' or social rank. Does not the lord's aggressively expansive invitation suggest that concerns about rank are to be cast aside? With the second set of guests to arrive, however, the marshal shows that guests are being seated according to a coherent account of the lord's wishes:

Wheþer þay wern worþy or wers, wel wern þay stowed,
Ay þe best byfore and bryztest atyred,
Þe derrest at þe hyze dese, þat dubbed wer fayrest,
And syþen on lenþe bilooghe ledez inogh.
And ay as segges serly semed by her wedez,*
So with marschal at her mete mensked þay were (113-18).

The criterion for judging the guests' rank is the quality of their clothing. The reader or hearer will discover in short order that the lord does indeed care about the way his guests are clothed—he ejects one guest because his clothing is inappropriate. Thus, in attending to the clothes of the guests and determining their placement at the table according to their dress, the marshal and steward are imitating the host's interest in his guests' apparel. They understand something about the host that is not immediately apparent to the reader or hearer: the

guests' clothing matters to him. There appears, then, to be a greater degree of understanding between the host and his high-ranking servants than there is between the host and the reader or hearer.

The marshal and steward's judgment and the host's, however, are only superficially similar. With the episode of the guest in dirty garments, the limitations of the servants' judgments become evident. The inappropriate appearance of the guest in dirty garments is immediately apparent to the host, who can see the man's filthiness even in the midst of a crowd:

Bot as he ferked ouer þe flor, he fande with his yze—
Hit watz not for a halyday honestly arayed—
A þral þryzt in þe þrong vnþryuandely cloped,
Ne no festiual frok, bot fyled with werkkez;
Þe gome watz ungarnyst with god men to dele (133-37).

This passage makes it seem as if the ill-dressed man is obviously out of place in his surroundings. This same man, however, has presumably been welcomed and seated by the marshal and steward in a place which they have deemed appropriate based on the man's appearance. It is especially significant, then, that the man is not seated at the lowest place at the table or set apart from the others: he is in the midst of a throng. The marshal and steward have failed to recognize the distinction—so obvious to their master, the host—between this man and those around him. Thus, though they have attempted to imitate the host in assigning places at the table based on the garments of the invitees, their judgment has, in the case of this man, been flawed. The apparent intimacy between the host and his servants is partial at best: not even they can discern and effect his will consistently.

This section's emphasis on the guests' rank determining their place at the table recalls "The Choice of Places at the Table," another parable of Jesus which

appears near at hand to “The Great Supper” in chapter 14 of Luke (14:7-11). In it, Jesus advises anyone invited to a dinner to sit at the lowest place at the table so that he may be exalted by the host rather than sitting at the highest place only to be asked to move down. The moral of the parable is that “every one that exalteth himself, shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself, shall be exalted” (14:11). As in “The Choice of Places at the Table,” in “The Wedding Feast,” guests are seated according to perceived rank, only to be rearranged by their host (when he expels one of their number). This comparison sheds light on the role of the host’s servants in contrast to their perception of their role. The marshal and the steward believe that they are competent to rank the guests at the banquet. In so doing, they place themselves in the position of the host in the parable of “The Choice of Places at the Table.” Their ranking, however, proves to be inadequate when the host expels the guest in dirty garments. Thus, they are not so much like the host in “The Choice of Places at the Table” as they are like the guests: they are not, in fact, competent to judge as the host does. Furthermore, they are like the *presumptuous* guests who choose the seats of honor in “The Choice of Places at the Table.” Though they do not seat themselves in the places of honor, they presume to understand the host’s judgments in a way that is not borne out by the action of the parable.

Both the host’s servants who gather the guests for the feast and the host’s marshal have trouble discerning their lord’s will, but the two groups make opposite mistakes. The sergeants are too fastidious to take the host at his word and extend his welcome to as many people as he has requested. The marshal and the steward, on the other hand, fail to exclude (or to differentiate) a man who deserves to be excluded. This dichotomy of errors draws attention to the sense in

which the host's two actions, to throw the gates wide open, but then to rebuff a guest who has been invited, are apparently at odds with one another. The host's servants represent the larger, contrasting movements of the parable, toward welcome and exclusion. But those who seek to welcome are initially insufficiently welcoming, and the marshal and the steward, who seek to judge, judge insufficiently.

The Lord of Luke's parable extends an invitation to the feast so broad as to strain credibility, whereas the Lord of Matthew's parable rains down death and destruction on both those who refuse his invitation and those who accept his invitation unworthily. Rather than flattening out these contrasts in the course of grafting the parables together, *Cleanness* emphasizes them. Indeed, the *Pearl*-poet's version, rather than simply conflating the two parables, clarifies the thematic contrasts between them, juxtaposing two contrasting images of God. Mary Raschko characterizes these contrasting images as linked to the actions of inclusion and exclusion (71-72). The invitation to the great feast is extended to all, but guests had best prepare themselves appropriately. This message is present in muted forms in the gospel parables of Matthew and Luke, each of which include both a welcome and a warning, though the emphasis is variously placed. In addition to this account of God's actions, however, the parable in *Cleanness* gives us still further matter for consideration. The inscrutability of the host's desires and judgments, even to his servants, raises concerns about how guests are to prepare themselves for the feast. The question "what can I do to be clean?" is more complicated than it might seem, since even the host's marshal and steward cannot recognize it when they see it.

Scholars' accounts of the pedagogy of parables are useful in illuminating the curious message of "The Wedding Feast." The dual messages of "welcome and warning" are reminiscent of the two possible hermeneutical methods of parables as articulated by medieval exegetes. Insofar as parables are at once aids to the understanding for the simple and also tools for obfuscating Jesus' message from the unworthy, "The Wedding Feast" proves an apt symbol for the duality of the parabolic method. The invitation to respond to God's call is incredibly broad and includes all manner of unlikely folk—parables cast a broad net—but truly accepting the invitation (like truly understanding the parable) requires a preparatory righteousness. This parable, in fact, helps us begin to understand how parables can offer *both* welcome and obfuscation. But insofar as *Cleanness'* version of the parable is pessimistic concerning the human ability to judge as God judges, and thus truly to understand what it is that God requires of us, its message is bleaker than it seemed at first blush. The host's servants in *Cleanness* attempt faithfulness to their lord, but (in the case of the servants sent to invite guests) succeed in doing their lord's will only on the second and third tries, and against their own better judgment, or else (in the case of the marshal and the steward) fail altogether to imitate their lord at critical moments. Thus, the parable in fact illustrates Frank Kermode's argument concerning the parabolic form. The purported distinction between privileged insiders and excluded outsiders does not hold up: it turns out that everyone is an outsider. The host's servants misjudge their lord's wishes, just as the guest in dirty garments has done. Everyone at the feast—even the reader—is justifiably surprised when the host shifts from offering his guests cheer to confronting one of them with angry accusation. "The Wedding Feast," then, involves the rebuff of several groups

who believe themselves to be insiders. First, those invited to the feast discover belatedly that the invitation has had strings attached—one of them with disastrous consequences. Second, those members of the host's household charged with carrying out his will find themselves unable to understand their duties because they do not understand his will. Third, the reader is confronted with an allegorical account of God's justice which seems contradictory and difficult to understand. It turns out, then, that according to "The Wedding Feast," we are all outsiders, confronted with a God beyond our capacity to understand. This inscrutability is not precisely presented as a critique of God. Rather, the holiness of the God thus presented is inscrutable to human unholiness.

The inscrutability of the host and thus allegorically of God in "The Wedding Feast" would not be so alarming if it were not paired with the absolute necessity of understanding. J.D. Crossan captures this distressing paradox when he suggests that parables are calls to action in light of the advent of God, but that such action is necessarily indeterminate: "wise and prudent readiness is impossible because it [, God's advent,] shatters also our wisdom and prudence" (*In Parables* 119-20). Similarly, in "The Wedding Feast," the invitation to the feast demands a response, and the choice to accept or reject the host's invitation is decisive, as is one's choice of apparel for the feast. But when servants and guests alike misjudge the host's desires, the reader is faced with the frightening possibility that decisive action undertaken in good faith could quite simply be the wrong action. No wonder, then, that many readers' response to *Cleanness* is shock and alarm.

Implications of "The Wedding Feast" for Cleanness: The Call to Action and the Difficulty of Response

The paradoxical and opaque characterization of the host in "The Wedding Feast" resonates thematically through the remainder of the poem.⁹⁷ *Cleanness*, then, is parabolic insofar as it works hard to unsettle its readers with a portrait of a God at once ready to exercise violent judgment on sin but whose will is also inscrutable and unpredictable. Even where the poem explicitly exhorts the imitation of Christ, it does so in such a way as to make the method of this imitation murky at best. Additionally, the poem reflects the parable form insofar as it displays a persistent fascination with the unpredictable relationship of the insides and outsides of things. Whereas the interpretive crux of parables, for Kermode, is that parables explicitly distinguish between the exterior, manifest sense and the interior, latent sense, *Cleanness* makes clear how very difficult it is to determine the latent by reference to the manifest. Thus, by a wealth of narrative incidents and images, *Cleanness* repeatedly throws its readers back on the simple, shocking fact of the parable of "The Wedding Feast": God's desires for us and God's justice are as inconsistently relayed to us as the exterior of a thing reveals its interior.

Cleanness has a certain kinship of structure to a series of parables: several stories illustrate moral truths which are meant to be enacted in the lives of the listeners. Thus, it invites its readers to make judgments and to apply those judgments practically, as C.H. Dodd argues that parables do (21). *Cleanness* is addressed directly to its readers, and it exhorts their immediate response. After its introductory musings on the importance of cleanness, it offers its first direct advice to its audience: "Forþy hyz not to heuen in haterez totorne,/Ne in þe

harlatez hod, and handez vnwaschen" (33-34). In offering interpretation of its narrative episodes, the poem again addresses its audience directly:

If þou wyl dele drwrye wyth Dr3tyn þenne,
And lelly louy þy Lorde and His leef worþe,
Þenne confourme þe to Kryst, and þe clene make (1065-67).

At its conclusion, too, the poem asserts that its message is eminently practical, meant to be applied by its readers in their own lives: "Þat we gon gay in oure gere þat grace He vus sende,/ Þat we may serue in His syzt, þer solace neuer blynnez" (1811-12). The fact that some scholars have taken God's judgment to be the primary theme of *Cleanness* also indicates the importance of the call to action offered by the poem. The actions which the text advises are not simply academic: uncleanness rouses God to anger and violent judgment. Thus, to state the obvious, the text's three major exempla, the flood, the sin and destruction of Sodom, and the defilement of the temple vessels by Belshazzar followed by his overthrow by the Persians, all concern God's active intervention in history to punish uncleanness. The call to action is urgent and practical: to disregard it means punishment, perhaps in this life, but certainly in the next.

Answering this call to action, however, is not so simple as it first appears. The text's account of God as well as its definition of 'clannesse' rather confuse the issue than elucidate it. As many scholars have noted, the portrayal of God in the poem is marked both by all-too-human motivations and by moments of distressingly inhuman aloofness. While sin in general causes God to punish sinners measuredly (for example, cf. 215; 247), filth of the flesh, contrastingly, causes God to "forzet alle His fre þewez,/ And wex wod to þe wrache for wrath at His hert" (203-04). Specifically, the sexual malfeasance of the antediluvians causes a "temptande tene" to touch God's heart (283). After the flood, the

contingency of God's anger is further revealed by the fact that he feels regret for the extent of the punishment that he has exacted upon the earth (561-62).

Cleanness' portrayal of God, then, suggests that he is changeable, liable to forget his nobleness, be tempted by anger, and experience regret at his past actions.

Andrew and Waldron note that the poem is unusual in ascribing such human motives to God (note to l.197)—indeed, such a time-bound and limited God comes as a shock to any student of Christian thought. Contrastingly, however, the poem also occasionally reflects a God unmoved by that which is traditionally held to move the Christian God. When brimstone has already begun to fall from the sky, the Sodomites call upon Christ for mercy, but to no avail (971-72).⁸ If the text depicted either a God detached from human affairs or a God humanlike in his motivations, the task of understanding how to act in relation to this God would be easier. Rather, though, the text depicts a God who is, by turns and unpredictably, both immanent and transcendent. Furthermore, this God's actions seem excessive, both in the direction of immanence and of transcendence. He is so human as to seem susceptible to vice; so detached from the world as to disregard cries for mercy.

A similar paradox emerges with respect to God's knowledge. As is perhaps to be expected, the text frequently gives the impression of God's omniscience. It is a sign of Lot's insight that he is able to recognize his inability to hide from God (915-18). Similarly, the narrator argues that he who invented sight and hearing is unlikely to be blind or deaf (581-87), then goes on to extend the text's concept of God's vision still further:

Per is no dede so derne þat dittez His y3en;
Per is no wy3e in his werk so war ne so styllle
Pat hit ne þrawez to Hym þro er he hit þo3t haue.

For He is þe gropande God, þe grounde of alle dedez,
Rypande of vche a ring þe reynyez and hert (588-92).

God's vision, the text suggests, is not limited by time—he knows our thoughts before we have thought them ourselves. Significantly, it is easy for God to see the inner man. In suggesting that God sees the heart of each person, the text is distinguishing insides from outsides, and asserting that God sees easily the truths manifested inside human persons, even if they give no outward signs.⁹⁹ This supernatural perception is exemplified in the text in God's ability to perceive Saré laughing behind the door at the idea that she shall bear a son (653-70), and also in the fact that Lot's wife is punished for serving salt to her angelic guests, though she salts their food in privacy (993-1000).¹⁰⁰ Thus far, God's faculty of perception is what we should expect it to be. Yet in one instance, God's actions suggest that he is limited in his ability to perceive. In discussing the sin of Sodom, God says that he is going to visit the city in order to confirm what he has heard: "I schal lyzt into þat led and loke Myseluen / If þay haf don as þe dyne dryuez on lofte" (691-92). This passage is closely based on Genesis 18:21, where the Lord, on his visit to Abraham, also expresses a desire to see whether the rumors are true. The fact that this passage originates in Genesis, however, does not denude it of its power to perplex. On the contrary, if God appears to lack omniscience in the very text of the Bible itself, then the poet of *Cleanness* is all the more justified in making this problem his theme. The poet shows himself a careful and devoted reader of the Bible insofar as he takes seriously the problems it raises rather than avoiding them. The poet's use of a Biblical crux to illustrate a difficulty indicates, in fact, that he is not simply seeking to confound the reader, but rather, is wrestling faithfully with a problem which he believes to be real and

serious.¹⁰¹ Again, in relation to perception this time, God is portrayed in contradictory ways as omniscient and as limited. The reader has further occasion for confusion about who this God is.

One might argue that it is entirely appropriate for the God of the Old Testament to be presented to the reader in a mysterious manner, and that depictions of Christ are more likely than depictions of God the Father to offer intelligible answers to questions about who God is and how he may be served. Indeed, *Cleanness'* most sustained positive account of the virtue of 'clanness' is a portrait of Christ. Preliminary to this section, the narrator gives advice on precisely the issue of how to do what God wishes of us, and how Christ may be a practical guide in this process of discovery. The narrator counsels the reader that the advice presented in the *Le Roman de la Rose* for gaining the favor of a lady applies also to the task of following God:

'And fol3 þe fet of þat fere þat þou fre haldes;
And if þou wyrkkes on þis wyse, þaz ho wyk¹⁰² were,
Hir schal lyke þat layk þat lyknes hir telle' (1062-64).

Thus, this section of the poem argues, one should observe Christ's behavior and imitate it in order to live a life worthy of Him. Problematically, however, the aspect of Christ's story which *Cleanness* goes on to recount as worthy of imitation is so imbued with the miraculous and the supernatural as to be completely inimitable. Christ's cleanness, it suggests, is illustrated by the virgin birth, Christ's ability to heal those suffering from unclean diseases, and his ability to 'break' bread with his hands 'cleanly,' as though with a knife (1069-1108). This discussion of Christ explains clearly that to imitate Christ is to be clean, however it is equally clear that Christians cannot be clean in literally the same ways as Christ is clean according to this passage. A passage which purported to be a

literal, practical account of virtue, it turns out, is metaphorical, requiring further interpretation. Thus, we are thrown back on uncertainty concerning what it would mean to imitate Christ. Relatedly, the meaning of 'cleanness' in relation to human behavior becomes increasingly fraught in the course of the metaphorical stretching it undergoes in the description of Christ's literal and miraculous cleanliness.

The limitations of the human perspective and the distinctions between God's vision and our vision become particularly clear in moments when God's judgment is inscrutable or seems cruel to us. The text arouses the reader's sympathy for the sinners who are the recipients of God's justice. Most notably, the victims of the flood are described with heart-rending detail: children perish (378), beasts look to heaven and roar with dread (389-90), and the people of the earth, recognizing its inevitability, surrender to their death with dignity and pathos, clinging to friends and lovers:

Pen vche a segge sez wel þat synk hym behoued:
Frendez fellen in fere and fapmed togeder,
To dry3 her delful destyné and dyzen alle samen;
Luf lokez to luf and his leue takez,
For to ende alle at onez and for euer twynne (398-402).

It is hard to see, on the face of things, the justice of the indiscriminate and cataclysmic destruction of the flood. It does not necessarily follow that these actions of God are unjust. The episode of Abraham's bargaining with God for the just people of Sodom is included in *Cleanness* (713-66), and its implication is that God does distinguish the just from the unjust in the application of punishment. What is clear from these moments when God's judgment distresses or confuses us is that which has been the import of so many episodes and images in

Cleanness: human judgment exists at an apparently unbridgeable distance from divine judgment.

Neither is this fact mitigated by the incarnation. Christ in the poem is a close analogue of the host at the wedding feast insofar as both signify God. He is also a close analogue of the host in his ability to adjudicate the significance of literal dirt and cleanness variously and insightfully in a way that is opaque to the reader:

By nobleye of His norture He nolde neuer towche
Oȝt þat watz ungoderly oþer ordure watz inne.
Ȝet comen lodly to þat Lede, as lazares monye,
Summe lepre, summe lome, and lomerande blynde,
Poysened, and paralatyk, and pyned in fyres,
Drye folk and ydropike, and dede at þe laste,
Alle called on þat Cortayse and claymed His grace.
He heled hem wyth hynde speche of þat þay ask after,
For whatso He towched also tyd tourned to hele,
Wel clanner þen any crafte cowþe devyse.
So hende watz His hondelyng vche ordure hit schonied (1091-
1101).

Christ, we learn, hates dirt and refuses to touch anything unclean. In the same breath, however, the poem describes his healing of lepers and other ritually unclean people by his very touch. Thus, Christ discerns two kinds of uncleanness, one of which is not worthy of his touch, but the other of which *requires* his touch. In this latter case, it is true, uncleanness flees at his touch. Nevertheless, the text goes out of its way to suggest that there are kinds of filth which Christ actively avoids touching. The principle whereby a given filth is avoided and another is healed receives no elaboration.

Insidies and Outsides/Insiders and Outsiders

The most sustained motif whereby *Cleanness* explores the difficulties of judgment is that of insides and outsides. As a parable's literal story encloses a deeper significance, so too is Noah's ark, for example, a vessel for that which is inside it.¹⁰³ As Sarah Stanbury notes, the depiction of Noah's ark in *Cleanness* offers a commentary on the nature of human perspective. The reader's view of the scene is from the outside of the ark ("Space" 483). Noah and his family, the righteous according to the logic of the story, have an altogether different angle of vision: they see only what is *inside* the "cofer closed of tres, clanlych planed" (310).¹⁰⁴ The reader's positioning with respect to the flood suggests that the reader belongs outside the ark: a grave moral indictment, but also a valuable comment on the relation of perspective to an understanding of God. To be within the ark, *Cleanness* suggests, is to see differently, and thus perhaps to gain new insights. But the position of the reader of *Cleanness*, not only in this instance but throughout the text, is symbolically outside, lacking the insight of either Noah inside the ark or of the God who can see a man's heart. The widely various relations of insides to outsides in *Cleanness* demonstrate the impossibility of true understanding from the position of 'outsider.'

The meditation upon this theme of insides and outsides begins with the strange literalization which occurs in *Cleanness'* presentation of the episode of the guest in dirty garments. In Matthew, the guest without a wedding garment is readily allegorized as a person morally unfit or unprepared for the heavenly banquet. In *Cleanness*, however, the incorporation of details from Luke makes the process of allegorization less comfortable. The poor and the crippled are invited to the banquet, and the marshal and steward cannot pick out the one unfit guest

in the midst of the motley crowd. If external appearance is to be allegorized as moral failure, why do the beggars and the cripples in attendance escape judgment? Like the host's servants, the reader is left without a stable basis for the formation of judgments, since appearances are sometimes revelatory (as in the case of the guest in dirty garments) and sometimes not. This lesson is reinforced in the course of the remainder of the poem, which deals extensively with the idea of hypocrisy, but, conversely, also with the equation of truth to beauty.

The sins which come in for criticism most obviously in *Cleanness* are sins of bodily or spiritual pollution. But an important secondary thread of criticism in the poem is reserved for hypocrisy—for those sinners who, like the guest in dirty garments, accept the invitation to the Lord's feast, but fail to live up to the invitation (1133-38). Such sinners are at fault for claiming the role of 'insider' but refusing to do what is necessary to deserve the title. These sinners are often figured as whited sepulchres, beautiful in outward appearance but inwardly ugly. The most clearly symbolic portrait of false seeming in the poem is the description of the fruit that grows beside the Dead Sea as a reminder of Sodom:

And þer ar tres by þat terne of traytours,
And þay borgounez and beres blomez ful fayre,
And þe fayrest fryt þat may on folde growe,
As orange and oþer fryt and apple-garnade,
Also red and so ripe and rychely hwed
As any dom myzt deuce of dayntyz oute;
Bot quen hit is brused oþer broken, oþer byten in twynne,
No worldez goud hit withinne, but wyndowande askes (1041-48).

Notably, this fruit is an appropriate memorial to the "traytours" of Sodom.¹⁰⁵

Elsewhere, the poem speaks repeatedly of sin in terms of beautiful appearance hiding an ashen interior. Priests who perform the sacrament of the alter in a state of uncleanness are "honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylþez" (14). Babylon, too, is

described as exceedingly beautiful (1377-88). Some images of hypocrisy, like the parable, even invoke the metaphor of clothing. Satan's fault is precisely pride at his beautiful appearance, including his clothing: "þe feloun [was] so fers for his fayre wedez/ And his glorious glem þat glent so bryzt" (217-18). Part of God's punishment of Satan is to make his outward appearance align with his inward ugliness—he and the other angels become "fendez ful blake" (221). The symbol of Belshazzar's hypocrisy is the fact that he calls his concubines 'ladies' (1352; 1370). These 'ladies' are both beautiful and well-clothed: "clere concubynes in clopes ful bryzt" (1400).

These images of hypocrisy offer a curious comparison to the parable's guest in dirty garments. Both the images of whited sepulchres and the image of the guest in dirty garments represent a similar moral state of feigning inclusion in the category 'good,' 'worthy,' or 'beautiful' without truly deserving it. The images themselves, however, are the opposites of each other. Whereas the guest in dirty garments is as ugly externally as he is within, Satan, the sons of Adam, and Belshazzar's concubines present a mismatch between appearances and realities. The reader attempting to discern the appearance of sin or the nature of cleanness from these examples would be justifiably disconcerted. One might conclude that the parable's guest in dirty garments is an allegorical image presented as it is for the sake of a clearer revelation, but that the text's images of whited sepulchres are a more literal presentation of the appearance of sin in the world. Two further sets of images in the text, however, interrupt this interpretive complacency.

First, Cleaness' version of the parable of "The Wedding Feast" very carefully decouples disability, ugliness, and misfortune from sinfulness insofar

as the guest in dirty garments is one in the midst of a throng of misfits, and is the only one to be singled out for expulsion. Here, again, appearances do not accord with realities, but in this case, the paradigm of the hypocrite is reversed—beauty is not discernible from appearances, but exists internally.

The generalizable stance on moral interpretation which emerges from most of the above images is that appearances are deceptive. Crucially, however, this generalization too proves false. The conclusion of *Cleanness* hearkens back again to the clothing-imagery so central to the parable of “The Wedding Feast,” exhorting its readers to dress themselves so as to please God:

And þose þat seme arn and swete schyn se His face.
þat we gon gay in oure gere þat grace He vus sende,
þat we may serue in His syzt, þer solace never blynnez (1810-12).

Although “The Wedding Feast” does not feature any characters who receive praise for being well-dressed, and though, indeed, the remainder of the poem offers mainly condemnations for those who are well-dressed, nevertheless, the poem’s conclusion continues to present external beauty as an apt metaphor for moral uprightness. Indeed, following its description of the destruction of Sodom, the poem glosses the Dead Sea and the hypocrite-fruit that surround it as tokens that God “the wlonk louies” (1052), and proceeds to describe the way in which Christ’s perfection was expressed as both literal and moral cleanliness. Christ’s conception was achieved without the loss of his mother’s virginity, leaving her body “much clener” than it had been (1070-72). Christ’s birth, too, replaces the normal ugliness of birth with beauty: pain becomes gladness, sickness becomes health, the smell of roses replaces the smell of rot, and even the cowshed becomes beautiful, filled with angels singing (1074-84). The newborn Christ-child is literally clean at the moment of his birth, and this fact so transparently

bespeaks his divinity that even the ox and ass recognize it (1085-88). External beauty and literal cleanness has largely signified hypocrisy when it has appeared in the text. In the case of Christ, however, cleanness is an unambiguous sign of holiness. From an interpretive perspective, this is troubling, since it is not the case that cleanness or beauty is always unambiguous. How, then, to distinguish between genuine, praiseworthy beauty and cleanness, on the one hand, and false seeming, on the other? Two further examples muddy the water surrounding this question yet again.

God's messengers to Sodom are incredibly beautiful, with beardless chins, hair like raw silk, and skin colored like briar-roses (789-91). The word 'clene' is used in the description of this beauty, and the cleanness of their clothing is noted: "Ful clene watz the countenaunce of her cler yzen;/ Wlonk whit watz her wede and wel hit hem semed" (792-93). Lot correctly deduces from the perfection of their features that these men are angels, and acts accordingly, bowing to them and welcoming them with warmth and generosity (794-804). His fellow-citizens, however, confronted with the beauty of these visitors, conceive a wholly inappropriate response, seeking to rape them (841-44). Abraham, similarly, is visited by God in the guise of three beautiful men. Like Lot, he recognizes their divinity on the basis of their beauty (606-20), correctly deducing reality from appearance. The text draws attention, however, to the complexity of this mental operation, expressing the three visitors' beauty not, for the most part, propositionally, but as a matter to be deduced by the reader from Abraham's *response* to them: "If þay wer farande and fre and fayre to beholde / Hit is epe to leue by þe laste ende" (607-08). The reader, then, must first understand the relation of beauty to goodness—or rather, Abraham's understanding of the

relation of beauty and goodness—in order to understand the three men’s beauty from the account of Abraham’s response to them. The portrayal of Christ as literally beautiful and clean causes us to question how (and whether) we might distinguish such a divine presence in our midst from a hypocrite who is only externally beautiful. The arrival of the angels in Sodom is a test-case for humanity’s ability to recognize and respond appropriately to true beauty. Though Lot passes this test, his compatriots fail spectacularly. Abraham, like Lot, makes the correct deduction based on the appearance of his guests, but the text foregrounds the fact that Abraham’s judgment depends on Abraham’s act of appropriate interpretation.

A final image that meditates on the connection between internal worthiness and external appearance arises in the story of Daniel and Belshazzar. Having interpreted the mysterious writing on the wall as a prophecy condemning Belshazzar and the Chaldeans for their unfaithfulness, Daniel receives the reward which Belshazzar had promised to anyone who could interpret this writing (1725-52). He is elevated to the third-highest position in the kingdom, and clothed in a sumptuous purple garment (1740-52). Beautiful garments in the poem have variously signified nobility, goodness, and faithfulness (as in the case of the angels who visit Sodom) and hypocrisy (as in the case of hypocrite priests, Satan, and Belshazzar’s concubines). In this case, the image is more complicated. Daniel is clearly emblematic of faithfulness: beautiful garments are an accurate reflection of his interior state. Belshazzar, who bestows the garments upon him, however, is about to be punished by God for his blasphemy. Thus, insofar as it is Belshazzar who judges Daniel good, we have grounds for being suspicious of this judgment (even though it happens to reflect

reality). Daniel's interior faithfulness is reflected by his outward splendor, but this outward splendor is less *naturally* connected to his interior state as it is *accidentally* (though correctly) applied by an agent who is otherwise wont to give the trappings of beauty and nobility to those who do not deserve them. This image dissevers the connection between appearances and interior moral states. A person's appearance, it suggests, is merely a matter of chance. No logic governs the alignment or lack of alignment between moral state and appearance—a single agent may bestow the appearance of nobility on both the worthy and the unworthy. This image leaves us in a state of confusion more radical than ever with respect to the original image of the guest in dirty garments.

In *Cleanness'* first sentence, the poet has already begun the discussion of appearances by asserting that the discussion of 'cleanness' makes for beautiful stories:

Clannesse whoso kyndly cowþe comende,
And rekken vp alle þe resounz þat ho by rist askez,
Fayre forme myzt he fynde in forþering his speche,
And in þe contraré kark and combraunce huge" (1-4).

The implication of this passage is that there is a fundamental kinship between truth and beauty; that a thing which is true—in this case, that cleanness is worthy of praise—will, narratively, have a beautiful form. This is a curious introduction to *Cleanness*, for this opening assertion is not explicitly borne out by the poem. The bulk of *Cleanness* is concerned, not with beautiful stories about cleanness, but with ugly stories about uncleanness.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the poem is repeatedly concerned to decouple truth from literal beauty. What is good has an unpredictable relationship to what is beautiful. Furthermore, and relatedly, the various meanings of the word "clannesse" show that words have an

unpredictable relationship to meaning. What is at stake in the human failure to see God from the perspective of an 'insider' is not only the ability to understand and obey God (though this is no small thing), but also the ability to understand the linguistic world. In presenting problematic allegories and unstable metaphors, *Cleanness* problematizes linguistic meaning as such and calls human judgment radically into question.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Cleanness is a sustained engagement with the most negative possible account of the hermeneutics of parables. It confronts the possibility that parables are meant to obscure Jesus' message from the unworthy or from outsiders, and suggests that perhaps we too are outsiders. It also generalizes the problem of meaning outward from parable, suggesting that all interpretation is fraught, and that perhaps we are all outsiders from meaning simply. Thus, in "The Wedding Feast" and in the exempla that follow it, the text systematically positions us on the outside looking in at an inscrutable God exercising fearsome judgment. The text's repeated attempts to penetrate beyond the symbolic surfaces of its images to a literal account of how to serve God result in just as many repulsions from meaning. Even words, such as 'clannesse,' used so variously as to be denuded of meaning, fail in the end to offer insight. This is not done simply to frighten, however. The purpose of such a warning is, first, to unsettle the reader: do not assume that because you have been invited to the Lord's feast that your place at the table is therefore assured. Do not assume that because you think you are the Lord's servant that you are therefore His intimate and privy to His will. Second, however, *Cleanness* is designed to demonstrate the need for its own position on

meaning to be overcome. By emphasizing the urgency of God's call to cleanness alongside the difficulty of understanding how to respond, the poem demands a reevaluation of the human understanding of God. Because God's judgment is real and applies to us, we must make any motions possible in the direction of understanding God's will in order to abide by it. Because linguistic meaning is precarious, we must try all the more diligently to use language well. If *Cleanness* does not offer a full-fledged account of how to change our perspective to that of an insider and thus to see differently and better, it asks this question in no uncertain terms. It also offers some hints with respect to this question in its portrayals of 'insiders'—Noah, Abraham, Lot, and Daniel. But for an account of what true understanding requires, the reader would do well to turn to a consideration of *Pearl* and its parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard."

CHAPTER FOUR

“[I]s thy eye evil because I am good?": *Pearl's* Parables, Interpretation and Will, and the Pedagogy of Obscurity

The poem *Pearl* contains a significant meditation upon insides and outsides which shows the connection of *Pearl's* study of interpretation to that which appears in its manuscript companion, *Cleanness*. It also offers a concise image of how *Pearl* offers a distinct perspective from *Cleanness* regarding interpretation.¹⁰⁸ *Pearl* is an account of a dreamer's vision of the beatified soul of his beloved child and of the New Jerusalem. Throughout the vision, the distance between the earthly dreamer and the heavenly realm is physically demarcated, first, by a river that separates him from his daughter, and later, by the walls of the New Jerusalem. The dreamer, then, is marked definitively as an outsider by physical barriers representative of intellectual, moral, and spiritual barriers. In *Cleanness*, standing outside of a thing would prevent a person's coming to a sure account of what is to be found inside. In *Pearl*, however, the dreamer receives the gift of vision even into the places where he cannot tread: he sees the land beyond the river, his daughter transformed and dwelling there, and even through the walls, to the streets of the New Jerusalem. While *Pearl* also upholds a distinction between outsider and insider, the category 'outsider' is revealed as porous. Ever alive to the mystery of holiness which *Cleanness* is at pains to represent, *Pearl* investigates the means whereby an interpreter can achieve partial insight. The will, it concludes, must precede the understanding. Even where the will is stubborn, however, important means for confronting it with its own

shortcomings are offered by the parables. Thus, while it remains true that we are all outsiders to the mystery of God, this fact does not preclude some vision beyond the walls.

Two biblical parables appear in *Pearl*. The parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard” is a narratively and thematically central element of the Pearl-Maiden’s attempt to educate the recalcitrant dreamer in *Pearl*. “The Pearl of Great Price” is mentioned briefly by the Pearl-Maiden, but its thematic reverberations far exceed its brief appearance, as is evident from the title which editors have given to the poem.¹⁰⁹ *Pearl* is a poem in the dream-vision tradition, narrated in the first person by a man who describes himself as a “jeweler” (252) who has lost a precious pearl and now mourns in the enclosed garden where he lost his treasure. The jeweler falls suddenly into a dream: he finds himself in the midst of a beautiful, bejeweled landscape and quickly encounters his lost ‘pearl’ who, it turns out, is in fact a young woman. Through the course of a series of unveilings, the reader discovers that the ‘pearl’ is the dreamer’s daughter, who died as a young child and who now appears to him as a beatified bride of Christ, physically separated from him by a river which he is not permitted to cross. A joyful meeting soon turns to a fraught theological debate. The dreamer presumes too much on his past intimacy with the Pearl-maiden, and she rebuffs him with the unpalatable theological reality that his former intimacy with her is radically secondary to her new intimacy with the Lamb of God. The discussion concludes, not with any resolution of the conflict between the maiden and the dreamer, but rather when she is granted a request that the dreamer be shown a vision of the New Jerusalem. This vision, in turn, concludes when the dreamer, overcome by passion, steps into the river which separates him from his Pearl-Maiden and the

New Jerusalem, and awakens abruptly. The concluding stanzas of the poem meditate retrospectively on the experience, indicating that the dreamer is at last reconciled to God's will and has finally found comfort for the loss of his Pearl-Maiden in a new dedication to serving God.

The parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard" occurs in the course of a long debate between the dreamer and the pearl-maiden about the nature of her status in heaven. The dreamer is surprised and scandalized to hear that his daughter, who died before she was even old enough to know her prayers (483-86), has been elevated to the status of queen in heaven (one among a multitude of such queens and kings) (413-14; 445-48). The pearl-maiden recounts the parable of the vineyard ostensibly to elucidate the equal nature of heavenly reward. In recounting it, however, she heightens its paradoxes in such a way that her father is more disturbed than he was before, responding indignantly that the maiden's story is unreasonable (590). The dreamer's response highlights the fact that audience members may react to the same story in different ways—some may reverence the mercy which it articulates while others are offended by its apparent injustice. Thus, the issue of interpretation and of distinctions between insiders and outsiders is highlighted at the same time that the moral obscurity of narrative is discussed.

Unlike *Cleanness*, however, *Pearl* does not leave its reader foundering amidst apparently straightforward claims which in fact leave the important questions about the parable unanswered. Rather, because the parable occurs within a narrative framework, the reader is afforded the opportunity to observe the respective interpretations of both an 'insider' and an 'outsider.' Thus, the poem gives the reader an opportunity to make a determination of what makes

the difference between an insider and an outsider. The poem's meditations on the image of the pearl, when anchored by its retelling of "The Pearl of Great Price," assist in this effort. The dreamer's and the Pearl-Maiden's interpretations of the image of the pearl, set alongside the parabolic image of the pearl, reveal the motives and desires of each.

Pearl's parables do more than simply offer a taxonomy of insiders and outsiders, however. Rather, "The Workers in the Vineyard" affords 'outsiders' a way 'in' by virtue of its very paradoxes. In *Pearl*, the parable form, inclusive of its paradoxes and its tendency to perturb, is leveraged by the Pearl-Maiden as a teaching tool: her retelling of "The Workers in the Vineyard" seems designed to upset her father's complacency. This action of the Pearl-Maiden suggests that the obscurity of parables can have a positive pedagogical effect in revealing to the listener the depth of his misunderstanding. A parable may, in fact, allow an outsider to cross the boundary into understanding precisely by means of its perplexities.¹⁰ This is an ingenious solution to the biblical crux of parabolic meaning: even misunderstanding a parable through one's own fault could be an opportunity for conversion rather than inevitably an occasion of punishment. Parables are not, then, simply self-fulfilling prophecies that confirm a disposition already present. They can also teach, not only those who are predisposed to learn, but also those who, though obdurate, can see their fault when it is presented to them with sufficient force. Images of conversion from *Patience* and *Cleanness* reinforce this hopeful argument.

Pearl's parables complement the account of parables presented in *Cleanness*. Whereas *Cleanness* uses "The Wedding Feast" to make clear our status as 'outsiders' who manifestly do not see as God sees, "The Laborers in the

Vineyard” reinforces the provisional, paradoxical and metaphorical character of our understanding of the things of heaven, but couples this caution with portraits both of virtuous and faulty interpretation and a paradigm of conversion effected through the challenge of parables. The method of parable as actualized in “The Workers in the Vineyard” shows the particular virtue of poetic fiction for the affective articulation of truths which are not usefully presented propositionally. Thus, we do not do amiss to articulate an analogy between the Pearl-Maiden’s retelling of “The Workers in the Vineyard” for the benefit of the willfully naïve dreamer and *Pearl’s* artistic renderings of paradox for the benefit of us, its interlocutors.

“The Workers in the Vineyard” in Pearl and its Biblical Source Material

Jesus tells the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard” in chapter 20 of Matthew. The text offers no frame story which would locate the telling of the parable in terms of occasion or chronology. The parable does have thematic connections to the pericopes that surround it, though. Chapter 19 of Matthew contains a number of accounts of the inversion of earthly categories in heaven, including Christ’s statement that the kingdom of heaven is for the little children (19:13-15). It also details Christ’s encounter with a young man who wishes to follow Christ but is put off by Christ’s demand that he sell his possessions and follow him. This incident leads to Christ’s subsequent discussion with his disciples of how difficult it is for a rich man to enter into heaven (19:16-24). In the course of this discussion, Christ articulates the particular blessing which will come upon those who sacrifice their earthly goods for the sake of Christ’s name, concluding that “many that are first, shall be last: and the last shall be first”

(19:27-30). This inversion of the expected categories of social and economic importance binds these episodes to the conclusion of “The Workers in the Vineyard”: “So shall the last be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen” (20:16). This theme appears again after the parable of “The Workers”: the text recounts Jesus’ journey toward Jerusalem and his prophecies to the twelve of his coming betrayal, death, and resurrection (20:17-19). The mother of the sons of Zebedee requests a special place for her sons in the coming kingdom, arousing conflict between her sons and the rest of the disciples, and leading Jesus eventually to admonish the group to stop seeking to “lord it over” one another, and to understand, rather, that the new paradigm of greatness is service (20:20-28). In the context of this discussion of the inversion of the normal rules of deserving, the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard” appears well placed thematically, though without indication of its place chronologically or in terms of the context of its telling.

The biblical parable of “The Laborers in the Vineyard” is narratively sparse. “The kingdom of heaven,” Jesus tells us, “is like to an householder, who went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard” (20:1). With this initial group of hires, the householder agrees to a wage of a penny a day (the normal daily wage),¹¹¹ and with a subsequent group, hired in the marketplace at the third hour, he agrees to pay “what shall be just” (20:3-4). At the sixth and ninth hours of the day, the householder goes out and does “in like manner” (20:5)—no dialogue between the householder and these new hires is recorded. At the eleventh hour, the householder goes out a final time, and this time dialogue is recorded: “he saith to them: Why stand you here all the day idle? They say to him: Because no man hath hired us. He saith to them: Go you also into my

vineyard" (20:6-7). When evening comes, the lord instructs his steward to pay the laborers, beginning with the last ones hired and concluding with the first: each laborer receives a penny (20:8-10). Those hired first and paid last have been expecting more based on the wages received by those who worked less, and "murmur" against the lord, saying "These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal to us, that have borne the burden of the day and the heats" (20:10-12). Here, the householder offers his most sustained account of himself, saying to one of the laborers: "Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take what is thine, and go thy way: I will also give to this last even as to thee. Or, is it not lawful for me to do what I will? is thy eye evil, because I am good?" (20:13-15). The parable concludes with the moral discussed above: "So shall the last be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (20:16).

The parable concerns the overturning of hierarchies based on calculable accounts of merit.¹¹² This overturning of proportionality is characteristic of the kingdom of heaven in Jesus' account, as indicated by the other parables and incidents which surround "The Workers," but this does not make it any less surprising and unsettling. In arranging the laborers so that the last to arrive receive their payment first, the householder exacerbates the head scratching which is already bound to arise from his unique approach to accounting. As the early arrivals watch the latecomers receive a full day's wage, we imagine, their minds take flight, counting up the hours they have labored and imagining the proportional reward they have reaped. In arranging the spectacle of payment as he does, the householder virtually guarantees the outcry which he does in fact incite. But in his response to the outraged early-riser, the lord makes no

allowances for the ways in which he himself has manipulated the situation to give the greatest possible sense of offense. He has been just, he points out, giving the worker the amount agreed upon. His summative rhetorical question, “is thy eye evil, because I am good?,” is technically unassailable. He suggests that it is not his own generosity (and he has been, in fact, excessively generous to the latecomers to the vineyard), but rather the jealousy of the laborer which is at fault. But this logical correctness sits uneasily beside the fact that the lord has manipulated the situation for the maximum appearance of injustice. The householder, like the storyteller, wants us to ‘bite’—he means to offend.

The pearl-poet recognizes a facet of the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard” which has garnered significant attention amongst twentieth and twenty-first century commentators: the justice of the vineyard owner’s action in paying equal wages for unequal work is not straightforwardly apparent. One of the parable’s purposes is to unsettle its reader (Crossan, *In Parables*, 113-15; 119). The tradition of exegesis with which the poet might have been familiar, however, was not particularly interested in the question of the lord’s justice or of paradox as features of the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard.” Rather, exegetes focused on decoding the allegory contained in various facets of the parable. For some, the workers called at various hours represented the saints of various ages of the world, from the patriarchs forward (*Catena Aurea* 1.ii.680-84), while for others, the various hours represented different stages in the life of a human being, from childhood (morning) to dotage (the eleventh hour) (*Catena Aurea* 1.ii.686).¹¹³ In his treatment of the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard,” then, the poet shows significant insight and independence of mind. In extending his

consideration of the literal sense of the parable beyond the norm, he discovers a pedagogically fruitful crux.¹¹⁴

The Pearl-Maiden has chosen her parable carefully, and leverages its offensive possibilities to their utmost.¹¹⁵ The Pearl-Maiden modifies her source in Matthew, placing increased emphasis on the passage of time:

“My regne,” He¹¹⁶ saytz, “is lyk on hyzt
To a lorde þat hade a uyne, I wate.
Of tyme of zere þe terme watz tyzt,
To labor vyne watz dere þe date.

“Þat date of zere wel knawe þys hyne.
Þe lorde ful erly vp he ros
To hyre werkmen to hys vyne,
And fyndez þer summe to hys porpos” (501-08).

Pearl uses a technique of concatenation¹¹⁷ to link its stanzas together: within each of the twenty sections of five (and once, six) stanzas, the last line of a previous section and the first line of the next section, as well as the last and first lines of each stanza within a section, are linked together by a shared word. As Barbara Newman notes, these shared words link stanzas and sections of the poem together, forming, as it were, a chain of pearls, which becomes a perfect circle when the last line of the poem echoes the first (5). These words take on thematic significance through their multiple meanings and the ironies contained therein. In the above passage, the link word, significantly, is ‘date,’ glossed by Andrew and Waldron in their index as “limit,” “(point of) time,” “beginning,” “end,” “date,” “season,” and “rank” (312). In telling a parable which is ultimately concerned with the irrelevance of measurement in the heavenly account of reward, the Pearl-Maiden emphasizes measurement repeatedly, both through her link-word ‘date’ and a constellation of related words.

In Sarah Stanbury's edition of *Pearl*, glosses on the passage quoted above suggest that line 503 refers to both 'time of year' and 'season' ("terme") (46). Andrew and Waldron give a looser translation, apparently translating "tyme of zere" as 'season' and "terme" as 'beginning' (77). Either reading, however, when paired with the next two lines, shows an unusual concentration of references to the season. The maiden also extends the biblical parable's concern with the time of day. "Er date of daye hider arn we wonne" the laborers in the marketplace protest, "We haf standen her syn ros þe sunne" (517 & 519). The lord of the vineyard continues to look for workers "al day" (526), bringing more men into his vineyard "Welnez wyl day watz passed date" (529). The final workers arrive "At þe date of day of euensonge, / On oure byfore þe sonne go doun" (530-31). These references to the passage of time with respect to the day modify the account in Matthew, in which time is designated by hours—the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours—rather than by the place of the sun in the sky or the liturgical hour (20:1-8). As Ad Putter argues, *Pearl's* references to time of day are earthier than Matthew's: "In contrast to Matthew, who measures time in numbers, not in seasons and setting suns, the passage of time in *Pearl* appeals directly to the world of our senses, as well as our preconceptions about the way the world works" (171). The sun rises and sets in *Pearl's* homey vineyard.

The maiden again uses the word 'date' to show the lord's concern that his servants be conscious of time. In line 505, above, "þys hyne" are said to be conscious of the season. The poet amplifies his source in Matthew by extending the discussion between the lord and the workers hired at the third hour. "Why stande ze ydel?, he sayde to þos; / Ne knawe ze of þis day no date?" (515-16). In addition, the lord repeats the words of his Matthean counterpart (20:6) to the

workers hired at the eleventh hour: ““Wy stonde ye ydel thise dayes longe? ”” (533). The lord wants all the men he meets, like his own ‘hyne,’ to be conscious of the passage of time, and of the concomitant urgent need for them to work in the vineyard. The workers in the lord’s vineyard also toil arduously, ““wrypen and worchen and don gret pyne, / Kerven and caggen and man hit clos”” (511-12). This description of labor is an innovation of the poet, and has no counterpart in Matthew. Both the strenuousness of the laborers’ work and the meticulous focus on time make the conclusion of the parable all the more shocking even than it is in the original. Whereas time is marked so carefully in the course of the day, and whereas the lord repeatedly asserts the importance of time, one might reasonably expect that the amount of time one has labored will bear a relation to the amount of pay one receives. It appears to matter, too, in terms of their reward, that the laborers have been engaged in grueling physical labor: those who arrived in the vineyard early have not only put in more hours than the latecomers; their work has taken a greater toll on their bodies in proportion to the amount that they have labored. In his retelling of “The Workers in the Vineyard,” the poet has recognized and emphasized the dialectic in parables of everydayness and superlativeness which Ricoeur terms “the extraordinary in the ordinary,”¹¹⁸ and which Wright discusses as the adjustment of perspective on familiar things.¹¹⁹

When the time comes for the lord to pay the workers, he instructs his reave to arrange the laborers in a line, then to pay them their wage, beginning with the latecomers and concluding with the early arrivals (545-48). This resembles the spectacle of payment found in Matthew, with the addition of the fact that the workers are explicitly instructed to stand in a line together to receive payment. In Matthew, contrastingly, it is not even clear whether all of the

workers are called to receive their wage at the same time (20:9-10).¹²⁰ The lord's stated reason for making the payment of his workers into a spectacle is so that his fairness may be verified: "Gyf hem þe hyre þat I hem owe," he says, indicating his commitment to paying his debts,

And fyrre, þat non me may reprené,
Set hem alle vpon a rawe
And gyf vchon inlyche a peny (543-46).

The lord wishes to avoid any possibility that he may be reproached for not fulfilling his obligations, and so insists that a crowd of witnesses be present when each laborer receives his wages. This demonstration, however, is interpreted in two ways by two different audiences. For the lord, the spectacle of payment is a demonstration of his justice to all and of his particular generosity to some. The early-comers, however, are, as in the biblical parable, disappointed because of the way in which the spectacle has initially raised their expectations. Insofar as payment has been awarded all the more publicly, the disappointment of the early arrivals must be all the more acute. Just as the earlier link-word, 'date,' has served to emphasize the importance of time whereas the lord's payment ultimately deemphasizes time, in this section, the link word 'more' underscores the conflict between the laborers and the master once again. The laborers request more payment for more work, but the master counters that this request does not reflect their earlier agreement, and asserts, ultimately, his sovereignty over and beyond considerations of proportionality (552-69). In its poetic form, the poem seems to side with the workers in their desire for 'more,' yet the Pearl-Maiden's stated arguments undercut the force of the section's concatenation. The concatenation, then, works according to a similar mechanism to the lord's public payment, beginning with the latest hires. The poetic form works rhetorically

against the text's explicit argument, causing discomfort to the reader or hearer, no matter which side of the debate she chooses.

The interchange between the master of the house and one of these early arrivals is similar in *Pearl* to its source. In each case, the laborer complains that he and his fellow early arrivals have worked more than the latecomers, suffering through the day's heat, and that the lord has made the latecomers equal to them (20:11-12; 549-56). *Pearl* also virtually reproduces the lord's reply, in which he calls his interlocutor 'friend,' reminds him of their agreement, tells him to take his money and go, and asserts his right to be generous with that which is his own (559-68). The moral of the parable concerning the first and last, the many and the few, is also reproduced, and attributed by the Pearl-Maiden to Christ (569-72).

On the face of it, *Pearl's* retelling of "The Workers" bears important similarities to *Cleanness's* retelling of "The Wedding Feast." A wild assortment of guests are welcomed into the lord's hall just as workers are invited to the vineyard even when the day is nearly done. Having begun with movements of generous invitation, though, both parables end with a group of workers and a guest receiving less than they expect. The Pearl-Maiden has introduced "The Workers in the Vineyard" by suggesting that it will discuss the limitlessness of God's goodness: "'Per is no date of Hys godnesse,'" she avers, countering the dreamer's objection that she cannot possibly have deserved to be a queen of heaven (481-93). The evocative word 'date' reappears repeatedly in the parable, where it tends to mean 'time,' not 'limit.' The maiden is right, then, that the parable shows that God's goodness has little regard for *time*. On the face of it, however, God's goodness as represented in the lord of the parable's behavior is strictly subject to *limit*: nobody gets more than a penny.¹²¹ In "The Workers," as in

“The Wedding Feast,” the rhetoric of the retelling seems at odds with the explicitly articulated reason for the retelling. In “The Wedding Feast,” we are instructed to be clean by the example of a feast to which the clean and the unclean are invited, and from which a single unclean guest amongst many such is expelled. Likewise, in “The Workers,” we are to recognize the limitlessness of God’s love from the example of a parable which, though it features extraordinary generosity alongside justice, is told in such a way that it emphasizes, not the lord’s generosity to the latecomers, but the apparent limit placed on the reward received by the early arrivals. It is not the case, though, that “The Workers in the Vineyard” intends for us the same aporetic lesson as “The Wedding Feast,” namely, that God’s judgment is so radically different from ours as to be beyond our comprehension. The narrative frame within which the parable appears mitigates the difficulties of the parable, even doing so much as to reveal the pedagogical impetus for the emphasis of paradox.

Whereas “The Wedding Feast” is recounted by a third-person narrator directly to the reader or listener, the narrative frame of “The Workers in the Vineyard” allows the reader the opportunity for more detached reflection upon the character and situation of the dreamer, his response to the parable, and the relationship between these factors. This consideration reveals both the reason why the parable offends the dreamer in particular and the reason why the parable is particularly appropriate to him, evidently chosen with his needs in mind.

"The Pearl of Great Price": Perspective and Righteous Reading

A valuable entry point into a discussion of the dreamer's character and situation is the ubiquitous image of the pearl. This image is underlain by another biblical parable, "The Pearl of Great Price,"¹²² which is itself discussed explicitly by the Pearl-Maiden. The first meditation on the image of the pearl, however, begins as the poem itself begins, and is initiated by the dreamer. It is especially useful for understanding the dreamer's character because his manipulation of the text and deviation from traditional notions reveals a great deal about him.

The biblical account of "The Pearl of Great Price" occurs in chapter thirteen of Matthew: "Again the kingdom of heaven is like to a merchant seeking good pearls. Who when he had found one pearl of great price, went his way, and sold all that he had, and bought it" (13.45-46). The medieval and patristic exegetical tradition offers a number of possible allegorical significances for the good pearls as well as for the one singularly precious pearl. The precious pearl is, for Chrysostom, the gospel preaching, for Jerome, the knowledge of the savior and the Sacrament, and for Gregory, the "sweetness of the heavenly kingdom" (*Catena Aurea* I.II.513-14). The many good pearls, for Jerome, are the law and the prophets, which are not condemned but are infinitely exceeded by the revelation of Christ (*Catena Aurea* I.II.513). For Nicholas of Lyra, the precious pearl signifies the contemplative life, distinguished by its unity from the multiplicity of the active life, signified by the multiplicity of good pearls (5.247). Augustine offers a reflection on the unity that underlies all of these allegories. He himself suggests a number of possible significances for the good pearls and the unique pearl (good men and Christ; precepts of life and love of neighbor; good thoughts and "the Word in which all things are contained") (*Catena Aurea* 1.ii.514). But he also

discusses the logic of the story, thus explaining why its allegorical interpretations are appropriately various:

“if there be anything else that can occur to us, that can be signified under the figure of the one precious pearl, its preciousness is the possession of ourselves, who are not free to possess it unless we despise all things that can be possessed in this world. For having sold our possessions, we receive no other greater return than ourselves, (for while we were involved in such things we were not our own,) that we may again give ourselves for that pearl, not because we are of equal value to that, but because we cannot give anything more” (*Catena Aurea* 1.ii.514).

In the broadest possible terms, then, the good pearls are all of those things which enslave us if we become possessed of them: these are the mutable and diverse goods of this world which ultimately fail to satisfy if they are upheld as the greatest goods. The one precious pearl, contrastingly, is a figure of the greatest good, whether construed in its aspect as path to salvation (the Gospel, Christ, contemplation, charity) or as salvation itself. Significantly, Augustine suggests that to seek after this one pearl entails freedom in a way that is not possible for one drawn in different directions by a multitude of lesser goods.¹²³

The pearl in Matthew is the greatest—indeed, the only—object of the merchant’s desire. The lesson of the parable seems to be that one who would participate in the kingdom of God must desire and take action to do so above and before all else; be willing to lose everything for the sake of the one most precious thing. In his first discussion of his own “*pryuy perle*,” the dreamer clearly shows that he has understood the lesson of the parable at one level. The dreamer describes his pearl as a perfect object, and as his most precious possession:

Perle plesaunte, to prynces paye
To clanly clos in golde so clere:
Out of oryent, I hardyly saye,

Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.
So rounde, so reken in vche araye,
So smal, so smoþe her sydez were;
Queresoever I jugged gemmez gaye
I sette hyr sengeley in synglure (1-8).

The pearl is peerless: though pearls from the Orient were greatly prized (Andrew and Waldron, note to ll. 3-4), this pearl exceeds even those. The roundness and smoothness of the pearl indicate its perfection, which is later amplified when the dreamer describes the pearl as blemishless; “withouten spot” (12). The dreamer’s personal love for this particular pearl is poignantly expressed in his final statement of its singularity: “I sette hyr sengeley in synglure.” Stanbury’s edition glosses “synglure” as “unique” (31), a gloss which shows the sense in which the dreamer holds his pearl to be irreplaceably precious.

The dreamer reveals that he has lost the pearl in a garden, where he now returns often to mourn his loss (9-16). And the loss has indeed been devastating to him: “I dewyne,” he says, “fordolked of luf-daungere” (10). David Fowler suggests “mortally wounded” as the meaning of ‘fordolked’ (203). The narrator contrasts the pleasure he once received from his pearl to the desolation that its memory now causes him:

Syþen in þat spote hit for me sprange,
Ofte haf I wayted, wyschande þat wele
þat wont watz whyle deuoyde my wrange
And heuen my happe and al my hele—
þat dotz bot þrych my hert þrange,
My breste in bale bot bolne and bele” (13-18).

Whereas the pearl gave him pleasure when it was his, it seems now to give him *only* grief—the repetition of ‘bot’ effectively suggests that the narrator’s past pleasure is *negated* by present grief. Not even the memory of his pearl seems to retain any joy for him. Further, the dreamer recounts that “A deuely dele in my

hert denned" (51): the loss of his pearl has made the dreamer desolate in his grief.

Though the dreamer does not explicitly identify the pearl of which he speaks with the Matthean pearl of great price, he uses the parable's identification of a pearl as something uniquely precious in describing it. He also evokes another, related parable to discuss the plight of his own pearl. Immediately before the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price" in Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of "The Buried Treasure": "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in a field. Which a man having found, hid it, and for joy thereof goeth, and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth the field" (13:44). The connection between this parable and "The Pearl of Great Price" exceeds simply proximity. As Snodgrass remarks, the two parables are both similitudes of a particular kind, comparing "the kingdom of heaven" to a sequence of action (242). Both parables also describe a man who sells all that he has in order to buy a single thing; thus, they share the sense that the thing sought or found and subsequently bought is uniquely valuable. *Pearl* performs an inversion of the parable of "The Buried Treasure," for the precious pearl, like the treasure, is buried in the ground (10; 22-23).¹²⁴ But whereas the buried treasure is *found* in the course of the parable, the pearl's burial represents an incontrovertible *loss*. Whereas the finding of the buried treasure is occasion for "joy," the loss of the pearl is occasion for sorrow.

Thus, the dreamer evokes the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price," and secondarily the parable of "The Buried Treasure," to describe the experience of losing (rather than finding) the one thing most precious to him. Since we later learn that the pearl is in fact a young girl, almost certainly his daughter (161-64; 186-92), the pearl image seems all the more deliberately chosen by the dreamer to

suggest 'that which is most precious' rather than a literal pearl. The dreamer reads the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price" with great sensitivity and accuracy insofar as he calls that which is most dear to him a pearl.

Yet the parable is also obscure to the dreamer: he misidentifies the pearl of great price—traditionally understood as the supreme object of Christian longing or the fundamental principle of Christian action—because he does not long for the kingdom of God above all else. In committing this misidentification, the dreamer is a typical obdurate reader: an outsider in the interpretation of parable. Conforming to a possibility which Bede discusses in the *Catena Aurea*,¹²⁵ the dreamer's status as outsider depends on his lack of desire or effort to understand. He is unwilling to acknowledge the existence of something more precious than his dear pearl maiden, and so he cannot understand an image designating something as more important than her. Perhaps more to the point, the dreamer *desires* to despair at the death of his daughter, and not to be consoled. In retrospect, he admits that he did not have grounds to despair: "resoun sette myseluen sa3t" (52), he owns. Specifically, the dreamer had grounds for hope in Christ: "Þaz kynde of Kryst me comfort kened, / My wreched wylle in wo ay wra3te" (55-56). Yet though he has grounds for hope, the dreamer does not want to have to live in this hope: thanks to his 'wretched will,' he does not want to live as though the parable of the pearl of great price applies to salvation and not to his daughter. Pseudo-Chrysostom and Theophylact identify wickedness or perverse will as the reasons why someone would fail to understand a parable correctly (*Catena Aurea* 2.75-76). In his interpretation of the parable of the pearl of great price, the dreamer in *Pearl* clearly exercises a perverse will, but he also exhibits wickedness in succumbing to despair rather

than living in the hope which he recognizes a more appropriate. The dreamer's interpretation of the parable makes it an image of himself²⁶ rather than an image of anything transcendent. The only lesson that the dreamer learns from the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price" is the nature of his own dearest desire. His apparent interpretation of a text outside of himself reveals only himself; it is "little more than [an exercise] in self-justification" (Jeffrey 362). Because his perspective is willfully limited, the dreamer is an outsider in the interpretation of parables. A parable confounds in this case, then, not because it is a puzzle or coded language designed to deceive anyone, and less still because it is not subject to understanding per se. Rather, because it requires interpretation, it allows its reader (or hearer) great latitude as an interpreter. Thus, it is bound to reflect its reader's own preoccupations, and will only reflect the teller insofar as the reader's preoccupations are similar to the teller's. It remains the case, then, that parables are indecipherable to outsiders, however, one's status as outsider is based on one's own wilful lack of self-transcendence.

The visionary dream in which the dreamer participates takes up the image of the pearl with which he is overwhelmed. The presence of pearls in this landscape offers the dreamer a chance to consider his own precious pearl in the context of many, and thus possibly to come to a new understanding of its significance. The dream-landscape where the dreamer awakens is largely constructed of precious jewels, and pearls figure among them: the gravel on the ground consists of "precious perlez of oryente" (82). Pearls next appear in the description of the Pearl-Maiden. She is, we will discover, the dreamer's own precious pearl (241-62), and the description of her own person reflects this: the dreamer describes her appearance in the vision as "[s]o smope, so smal" (190),

repeating language which he has previously used to describe his pearl (6). His subjective account of her 'pearliness' is confirmed by her apparel: her white garment is adorned in many places with pearls and "non oþer gemme" (193-220), and she wears a crown set with pearls and "non oþer ston" (205-07). More importantly, though, a single pearl set on her breast is singular in its beauty, size, and perfection:

Bot a wonder perle withouthen wemme
Inmyddez hyr breste watz sette so sure;
A mannez dom mozt dryzly demme
Er mynde mozt malte in hit mesure.
I hope no tong mozt endure
No sauerly saghe say of þat syst,
So watz hit clene and cler and pure,
þat precios perle þer hit watz pyzt.

This pearl, we will learn later, is the *veritable* Pearl of Great Price (740-42), which has been placed on the maiden's breast by the Lamb.

In placing this singular pearl amongst a proliferation of lesser pearls, the text engages in a sophisticated meditation on the relation of the greatest good to lesser goods. This meditation hearkens back to the biblical parable: the merchant finds the Pearl of Great Price in the course of searching for "good pearls" (13:45). In imaging any number of lesser pearls, the poem affirms the real existence of lesser goods.¹²⁷ Insofar as the scene includes downright humble pearls which make up the gravel under the dreamer's feet, even humble goods are acknowledged as real and as genuinely analogous to greater goods. The Pearl-Maiden herself is still greater than these pearls, however, deserving to be adorned with many pearls, and even to wear a crown. Thus, the poem affirms the dreamer's intuition that his own "precious pearl" is very precious indeed. Yet the text also acknowledges the subordination of all of the scene's lesser pearls—

including the Pearl-Maiden herself—to the true Pearl of Great Price, the only pearl which defies the dreamer’s attempts at description and understanding. It is this pearl that the Maiden will later call “makellez” (733)—that is, matchless or without equal—and it is for the sake of this pearl that the Maiden advises the dreamer to “forsake þe worlde wode” (743). The argument of the dream-landscape, then, is partly in sympathy with the dreamer, and partly out of sympathy. His idiosyncratic love of the Pearl-Maiden is indeed good and significant, but she is not the *most* significant object of love, as he has attempted to believe. Further, the beauty of the Pearl-Maiden is enhanced by her adornment with the Pearl of Great Price: attention to the Pearl of Great Price does not seem to detract from one’s ability to appreciate lesser things; rather, it illuminates them. Thus, the dream landscape presents an argument for the *ordo amoris* which affirms that lesser loves abide, and indeed, are perfected and enhanced under the governance of the greatest Love.

In addition to the implicit argument of the dream landscape, the Pearl-Maiden’s account of “The Pearl of Great Price” also offers a counterpoint to the dreamer’s discussion of this parable. Using many of the same images of perfection as the dreamer, the pearl maiden explains the parable as a reference to the kingdom of God. Her reading is authoritative, as she herself shows when she discusses what it means to ‘read’ well. Before she begins her discussion of the requirements for entering heaven, the pearl maiden makes a statement about who is able properly to discern the meaning of biblical texts: “Ryztwysly quo con rede,/He loke on bok and be awayed ” (709-10). Though Stanbury glosses ‘ryztwysly’ as ‘correctly’ (53), ‘righteously’ seems an equally apt modernization. Faithful interpretation, the Pearl Maiden suggests, requires preliminary

righteousness.¹²⁸ The Pearl-Maiden is a figure of this faithful interpreter; one whose desires and intentions, perfected in her beatification, align her with the paradigm of correct reading which she herself identifies.

For the Pearl-Maiden, the Pearl of Great Price signifies heaven and the possession of it. The image is complex, for in order to reach heaven, the soul itself must come to resemble a precious pearl, “withouten mote oþer mascle of sulpande [polluting] synne” (726). Thus, the Maiden’s conclusion with respect to righteous reading is repeated: the soul must resemble that which it seeks. Where the Maiden evokes the parable of “The Pearl of Great Price” explicitly, she indicates that it means heaven and the state of beatitude:

‘Per is þe blys þat con not blynne
Pat þe jueler sozte þur3 perré pres,
And solde alle hys goud, boþe wolen and lynne,
To bye hym a perle watz mascellez.

‘This makellez perle þat bozt is dere,
þe joueler gef fore all hys god,
Is lyke þe reme of heueneſse clere—
So sayde þe Fader of folde and flode—
For hit is wemlez, clene, and clere,
And endelez rounde, and blyþe of mode,
And commune to alle þat ryztwys were.
Lo, even inmyddez my breſte hit ſtode:
My Lorde the Lombe, þat ſchede Hys blode,
He pyzt hit þere in token of pes.
I rede þe forſake þe worlde wode
And porchace þy perle maſkelles’ (733-44).

Like the dreamer’s pearl, the Pearl-Maiden’s pearl is without equal, perfectly round, clear, and free of blemish. But there is a one startling difference between the dreamer’s pearl and the maiden’s: whereas the dreamer believes that the pearl is his possession, the pearl maiden describes her pearl as common to all the righteous. The maiden lifts the symbol of the pearl of great price beyond the level of individual, idiosyncratic desire and love, and identifies it as a goal shared by

all people, and available to all without limit. Thus, she suggests that the image of the pearl can be understood by a higher, objective standard than the dreamer's subjective, idiosyncratic one. The great advantage of the maiden's wider perspective is that it allows her, not only to gaze upon herself and to understand her own perspective and desire, but in fact to recognize something beyond her in the Pearl of Great Price which she has sought. The symbol becomes for her, not just descriptive of her own preoccupations, but indeed transformative. The dreamer is able to see only his own desire—hence only himself—in the image of the pearl. Because the Pearl-Maiden is willing not only to possess the pearl, but also to allow herself to be possessed by it, she is able to see herself as a member of the *whole* through the image of herself. She sees herself in the pearl, but herself elevated, glorified, perfected in and by the whole of which she is a part. The dreamer has lost his pearl; the maiden's pearl, once gained, cannot be lost. The great fault of the dreamer as an interpreter is that he sees himself as the center of the drama of life, and hence his interpretations point only toward himself and succeed only in explaining himself. The 'righteous' interpretation of the pearl maiden identifies a point of reference beyond herself. She understands that she shares a common goal with all people, and places herself amidst a multitude of interpreter-saints.

"The Workers in the Vineyard" in Context: Two Paradigms of Interpretation

With the background of "The Pearl of Great Price" in mind, one can see the way in which the dreamer's limited perspective¹²⁹ is evident in his interpretation of "The Workers in the Vineyard." The Pearl-Maiden tells the

parable of “The Workers” in response to the dreamer’s challenge to her to defend her status as a queen of heaven. ““Pat Cortayse is to fre of dede,”” he complains,

“Ȝyf hyt be soth þat pou conez saye.
Pou lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede;
Pou 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,
Pat God wolde wryþe so wrange away” (481-88).

But though the dreamer’s explicit complaint concerns God’s apparent injustice in elevating a person so unworthy of queenship as a small child, the true force of his objection concerns, not the justice of the Pearl-Maiden’s elevation per se, but rather himself and his own relationship to her. Repeatedly in the lead-up to the Maiden’s account of the parable, the dreamer has attempted to resume his normal relationship, as he understands it, with the maiden. The joy of seeing his dead child again is mitigated, first, by the fact that he is neither able to cross the river to her nor to stay with her indefinitely, and second, by the fact that she is very different from what she was, having far surpassed him in status and in wisdom. Thus, when the dreamer protests that the maiden is a queen of heaven, the force of his protest is that she stands now in so very different a relationship to him—she is not his any more, nor is she subject to his authority.¹³⁰ It is a mark of the dreamer’s self-absorption that he is unable to rejoice in seeing his beloved happy and whole: his concern is in important respects not for her but for himself.

After she recounts the parable, the Pearl-Maiden offers an explanation that illuminates some of its difficulties, and relates it to her situation specifically, in line with the dreamer’s explicit objection. Though the parable itself seems to suggest that God’s generosity is limited insofar as no one receives more than a

penny from the master of the vineyard, the Pearl-Maiden argues, rather, that the penny represents the greatest possible reward, and it is for this reason that the master of the vineyard does not offer more:

‘Þus pore men her part ay pykez,
Þaz þay com late and lyttel wore,
And þaz her sweng wyth lyttel atslykez,
Þe merci of God is much þe more.

More haf I of joye and blysse hereinne,
Of ladyschyp gret and lyuez blom,
Þen alle the wyzez in þe worlde myzt wynne
By þe way of ryzt to aske dome
Wheþer welnygh now I con bygynne—
In euentyde into þe vyne I come—
Fyrst of my hyre my Lorde con mynne:
I watz payed anon of al and sum.
Ȝet oþer þer werne þat toke more tom,
Þat swange and swat for long zore,
Þat zet of hyre noþynk þay nom,
Paraunter nozt schal to-zeze more’ (573-88).

Everyone receives more than his due from God, the Maiden argues. She was a late arrival to the vineyard insofar as she died young and so labored little, and yet her reward is a greater one than *anyone* (not just a latecomer to the vineyard) could attain ‘by right.’ Insofar, then, as early arrivals and late arrivals all receive the *same* reward, the early arrivals are ill-advised to complain about their treatment. Their envy is misplaced, not because the master of the vineyard has fulfilled his agreement with them, but because, in fact, he has been infinitely merciful and generous to them as well as to the late arrivals.

Tellingly, the dreamer does not respond to the Maiden’s explanation of the parable, failing to acknowledge fully her authority as teacher and interpreter. Rather, he considers the parable alone, focusing narrowly on people in the parable like himself, that is, early-risers who have toiled much in the vineyard of

the world. Such people, he argues, should be rewarded before the 'late arrivals' to the vineyard (589-600). Whereas his ostensible purpose in wishing to discuss the nature of heavenly reward with the Maiden was to understand better *her* place in heaven, this concern evaporates when he is faced with an account of his own status. He is concerned that the Pearl-Maiden should be a queen of heaven, not because he is concerned for her, but because he is concerned for his relationship with her, and wishes to resist it changing. Thus, rather than rejoice in her elevation, he clings to self-justification.

With the benefit of critical distance, the reader or hearer of *Pearl* can see the limitation of the dreamer's perspective. The poem places "The Workers in the Vineyard" in a narrative frame, offering the parable in conjunction with an account of the dreamer's character. His character, in turn, illuminates the nature of his error in taking offense at the parable. In order to understand, the poem suggests, a hearer or reader must attempt a degree of self-transcendence, seeking not simply to justify or reinforce a position already held. Rather, a reader or hearer must be alive to the possibility of being transformed.

"The Workers in the Vineyard" in Context: Obfuscation as Pedagogy

I have suggested, above, that the dreamer chooses to focus on those characters in the parable of "The Workers" who resemble him, and thus misunderstands the lesson of the parable. I have somewhat elided the fact that the Maiden's own retelling of the parable has tempted him into just such a preoccupation. The Maiden's retelling of the parable intensifies the biblical account of the difficulty of the labor in the vineyard and the length of the work day; thus, it emphasizes the scandal that the early arrivals should receive the

same pay as those who have scarcely worked at all.¹³¹ It is as though the Maiden has set a trap for the dreamer, daring him to object to the apparent mistreatment of the early arrivals. The parable, both in the biblical original and in the Pearl-Maiden's retelling, figures something exceedingly great—the kingdom of heaven—as an amount of money which is not only limited in nature but also modest in amount. In this, too, it seems as though the parable itself colludes in its own misinterpretation. Three possible reasons for this obscurity suggest themselves. Perhaps this technique of scandalizing the hearer is designed to hide the true interpretation from the unworthy. Perhaps its intention is purely aporetic: 'my thoughts are not your thoughts.' Or perhaps this is precisely a technique of engagement, designed, through surprise, to startle a hearer into a broader perspective. The journey of the dreamer in *Pearl* is a case-study in the effect of difficult teachings on an obdurate hearer. The position of the dreamer by the poem's end shows a transformation which, though some scholars have held it to be unaccountable or non-existent,¹³² can in fact be traced back to the parable of "The Workers" and to the dreamer's expulsion from his vision of the New Jerusalem, an analogous moment of rebuff.

The early part of the dialogue between the dreamer and the maiden sheds light on the maiden's motives for telling the parable of "The Workers." The dreamer puts his interpretive shortcomings on display in the discussion leading up to the parable. This causes the maiden to recognize his need for a different kind of persuasion, and the parable of "The Workers" is her response to this need. The Maiden turns to parable because, in her initial conversation with the dreamer, he shows himself insusceptible to the persuasions of argument. The parable is particularly fitting to speak to the dreamer in light of his shortcomings.

A large portion of the dialogue between the dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden consists of a repeated rehashing of a single theological point: that the apportioning of heavenly reward does not conform to earthly categories of deserving. The parable of "The Workers" is a part of this discussion. Prior to the beginning of the discussion of heavenly reward, however, the dreamer and the maiden must become reacquainted. The dreamer is unexpectedly granted a vision of the pearl he had believed lost. His reaction to this vision reveals his character. Reflecting his typical position of self-regard, the dreamer's first speech to the Maiden is not an inquiry regarding her wellbeing or even an expression of gratitude that he has been granted a vision of her, but rather a lament concerning the anguish that her departure has caused him (241-52). The Maiden rebukes the dreamer for his misplaced priorities, pointing out that she has been elevated by her new life, changing from a 'rose,' subject to the ravages of time, to a 'pearl,' perfected and lasting (253-76). The implication of this speech is that the dreamer's love for the Maiden ought to lead him to rejoice in her beatification rather than excessively to mourn her loss. To wallow in mourning is a form of self-love, distinct from love of the supposed beloved. The dreamer misses the Maiden's point, however, continuing to believe that his happiness will be restored, not by his reflection on *her* happiness, but by his reunification with her. The maiden's speech, he says, has comforted him completely. He will be a "joyful jueler" if he can cross the water which separates them and once again live together with his beloved Pearl (277-88). The dreamer's response completely avoids reflection on what he terms the Maiden's "gentył sawez" (278). Unsurprisingly, the Maiden's reply to this expression of hope is scathing. The dreamer has unwittingly repeated the error of which she has just accused him,

continuing to concentrate on regaining the Pearl-Maiden for himself. As a result of the misdirection of his attention, the dreamer has become guilty of presumption, assuming that he will be allowed to cross the river and live with the Maiden before he has thought to ask for this privilege (289-300).¹³³

This initial exchange is revelatory of the dreamer's shortcomings as a conversationalist and a student. The Maiden's attempt to reorient the dreamer's priorities by explaining his fault to him has failed because he has been unable or unwilling even to understand her argument. "Py worde byfore þy wytte con fle" (294),¹³⁴ she rebukes him, suggesting that he is at fault for failing to hold his wits in check. This episode, then, shows that straightforward argument is of limited use in confronting the dreamer with his shortcomings, since he is not averse to subordinating his comprehension to his desires. Furthermore, consistent with his conflation of love of the Pearl-Maiden with self-love, the dreamer is initially unable to distinguish her position from his own. In this moment, he fails to countenance the possibility that they may disagree. The maiden's forthright scorn at the dreamer's stupidity may seem unduly harsh: "'Wy borde ze men?,'" she exclaims, "'So madde ze be!'" (290). Perhaps, however, this lack of subtlety is the appropriate response to the dreamer's muddleheadedness. The dreamer has proven unable even to recognize that he disagrees with the maiden. The maiden's ferocity leaves the dreamer no choice but to acknowledge the substantive distinctions between his position and hers.¹³⁵ This confrontation with the reality of their conflict is a necessary prerequisite to further meaningful conversation. Yet even in response to this sharp rebuke, the dreamer proves recalcitrant, failing to understand that the maiden's scorn arises from anything other than wanton cruelty (325-30). The failure of the maiden's strategy,

however, does not indicate that she is misguided to employ it. The kind of rough treatment she administers is more likely than any other rhetorical strategy to clear away the haze of the dreamer's thinking.

"The Workers in the Vineyard" occurs following a similar sequence of abortive conversation. Like the maiden's earlier rebukes, it is designed to awaken the dreamer from his stupor of self-pity and self-love. The dreamer shows a subtly improved attitude when he abandons his attempt to blame the maiden for her unkindness at leaving him and at last inquires after her wellbeing. He expresses a wish to know what her life is like now (390-96). The maiden responds by explaining that she is the bride of the Lamb and hence queen of heaven (413-18). In response to the dreamer's very reasonable question, whether she has, then, displaced the Virgin Mary as queen of heaven (421-32), the maiden explains that earthly accounts of hierarchy do not apply in heaven, where no one begrudges another his or her position, and thus all are kings and queens, happy at once in their equality with each other and in their subordination to Mary (445-56). Saint Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ, she says, appropriately describes the organization of heaven, where everyone is happy to be who she is, and also fundamentally equal with everyone else insofar as all participate in the exalted body of Christ (457-68). The dreamer follows up on this lucid account of the unlikeness of heavenly courtesy to earthly courtliness with a far less intelligent question than his first. How can it be, he asks, that the maiden has been made a queen of heaven when others, who have lived longer and performed more good works, deserve this honor more than she? Indeed, he argues, it would have been more appropriate for a soul so undistinguished as hers if she had been made a countess or other "lady of lasse aray" (469-92). As

in the dreamer's previous disagreement with the maiden, this question shows that the dreamer has either not been listening to her or at the very least not understanding what she has said. Having been informed that the sovereignty of each, derived from the sovereignty of Christ, does not preclude difference between individuals, the dreamer falls back on the familiar image of a hierarchical court rather than grapple with the difficulties of a concept foreign to his understanding. In this context, the maiden tells the parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard." The parable is in an analogous position to the earlier rebuke, which also follows a moment when the maiden's arguments have become utterly opaque to the dreamer.

The fact that the parable heightens the paradoxes present in the biblical original serves the pedagogical function of engaging the dreamer's emotions when his reason has proven inadequate to the maiden's arguments. The maiden's argument that a soul in heaven is at once both sovereign and subject is shocking in itself, overturning the very notion of human selfhood as it is experienced on earth. But this shock fails to move the dreamer because it is so far removed from his experience that he cannot understand it. The parable illuminates the distance between earthly and heavenly logics by the paradoxical technique of appearing to bring earth and heaven nearer to each other in homely images. In this context, the difference between earth and heaven is all the more affecting. J. Allan Mitchell provides an insightful account of why the pearl maiden might be trying precisely to shock the dreamer. "A parable," he argues, "uses the ordinary in strange ways in order to intimate the extraordinary." The maiden "addresses us with images and figures of supposed similitude and proximity only to surprise us with their actual non-similitude and distance"

(102).¹³⁶ The pearl maiden is administering a shock to the drowsy dreamer: if he can once realize that what he thought was familiar is, in the heavenly context, rendered strange, then he may be incited to try to understand what is now strange to him. Jerome has raised this possibility in the *Catena Aurea*, in discussing the way in which Jesus mingles plain speech with parables, “that by those things which they understand they may be incited to get knowledge of the things they understand not” (*St. Matthew* 481). The pearl maiden furthers this insight, showing that parables themselves depend precisely on the conjunction of the familiar and the strange to disrupt their listeners’ earthly perspectives and to incite them to knowledge of the unfamiliar. The fact itself that one does not understand a parable full of homely and familiar images is a goad pricking one to try to understand. The understanding thus achieved is bound to remain provisional and incomplete. Moreover, the abiding element of difference inherent in any image, but especially in this paradoxical parable, asserts the persistence of mystery. This mystery, however, does not preclude improved understanding.¹³⁷

By contextualizing “The Workers in the Vineyard” in *Pearl*, we can see that this parable comes closer than the medieval exegetical tradition to synthesizing the two strands of medieval thought on the obscurity or clarity of parables. “The Workers in the Vineyard” is at once an aid for the simple, functioning by bringing heavenly truths ‘down to earth’ and also a stumbling block for the recalcitrant insofar as its explanation of heavenly truths is, from an earthly perspective, paradoxical and alarming. Even its function as a stumbling block, however, is not purely negative. Rather, the example of the dreamer shows us the pedagogical possibilities of stumbling. For a listener who is

tempted to subsume any lesson to his own preconceived notions, a shock of the kind offered by the parable of “The Workers” can serve to interrupt interpretive complacency.¹³⁸

“The Workers in the Vineyard” seems to be part of a larger strategy to confront and convert an interlocutor who is initially dull-witted and ill-willed. Because it is a lively narrative, it engages the emotions and the mind follows. Because it is a narrative designed to be scandalous, it awakens the mind—particularly the hostile mind—to the radical character of the revelation that it offers. But a challenge for this interpretation is that “The Workers” is not immediately effectual in changing the dreamer’s mind or heart. The dreamer’s immediate response to “The Workers” is displeasure and disbelief. Whereas the lesson of the parable is that God—to human advantage—mitigates justice with mercy, the dreamer is offended by what he sees as an offense to justice:

‘Me þynk þy tale vnresounable;
Goddez ryzt is redy and euermore rert,
Oþer holy wryt is bot a fable.
In sauter is sayd a verce ouerte
Þat spekez a poynt determynable:
“Þou quytez vchon as hys desserte,
Þou hyze Kyng ay pertermynable” (590-96).

The dreamer has indeed recognized the radical character of the maiden’s argument: he recognizes that he disagrees with her. This shock, however, does not persuade him to change his mind. Rather, it seems to alienate him further. If it is the case that the parable is a pedagogical tool chosen with the dreamer’s particular needs in mind, then why does it fail to persuade him? Of course, even the best pedagogy will be ineffective without the cooperation of the learner’s will. The case of the dreamer, however, provides a more vexing puzzle insofar as he is finally reconciled to the lessons his vision has afforded him, but in a manner

so abrupt that it is hard to parse the process of conversion. In order to trace the importance of “The Workers” as a pedagogical device in the dreamer’s conversion, it is useful to consider the terms in which the dreamer finally phrases his reconciliation to hope.

Following her retelling of the parable of “The Workers” and the dreamer’s frustrated response, the maiden launches into an extended disquisition on the relation of justice to righteousness and grace. When the dreamer reenters the discussion, he has abandoned his outrage at what he perceives as the unjust preferment of the Pearl-Maiden over others. But his misunderstanding of the nature of her status remains uncorrected: she has been preferred over all others as the bride of the Lamb, he reasons. The maiden next offers a visual representation of her status in the form of a vision of the New Jerusalem, where she appears as one of a multitude of brides of the Lamb as described in the Book of Revelation (1095-1104; 1145-49). Even in the midst of this vision, however, the dreamer’s perspective remains uncorrected, for rather than understand the vision’s lesson, that heavenly reward is equal for a diverse multitude, the dreamer is inspired by the beauty of the vision to fall back on his possessive desire to be reunited with his Pearl (1153-60). Thus, when he attempts to cross the river—an action which he has been told is not permitted before he dies (318-24)—he is expelled from the dream and reawakens in the ‘erber’ where he first lost his pearl (1167-73). This final expulsion, like the maiden’s earlier rebuke and the shocking character of “The Workers,” is a moment in which the dreamer’s expectations and hopes are rebuffed. One final time, the dreamer experiences the reality of the maiden’s advice: “Deme Dryzty, euer Hym adyte;/Of þe way a fore ne wyl He wryþe” (349-50). The power of the dreamer’s will has limits

which cannot be mitigated. The dreamer fails to form the world in his image just as he has previously failed to make the Pearl-Maiden's views conform to his limited opinions.

This final experience of running up against the limits of his power and of his person seems to be the most immediately transformative experience for the dreamer in the poem. Though his sorrow and distress continue after his awakening, his attitude is fundamentally changed, for he abandons his possessiveness, surrendering his pearl to the pleasure of the high Prince (1188). This action of surrender again recalls "The Pearl of Great Price." If the Pearl-Maiden is, for the dreamer, one of the "good pearls" but not properly the singular "Pearl of Great Price," then the process of turning his attention to the "Pearl of Great Price" necessarily involves selling all that he has; that is, ceasing jealously to wish to possess the Pearl-Maiden, or to value her above all else.

The dreamer acknowledges that he would have been wise to conform his will to the high Prince during his vision; he might even have been granted to know more about God's mysteries if he had been obedient (1189-94). The experience of rebuff, then, is effectual in demonstrating to the dreamer the impossibility of his initial position, and results in changes to his mind and heart. In the light of this final resolution, the slow-burning effects of "The Workers in the Vineyard" on the dreamer's perspective become clear. In the poem's final stanza, the dreamer returns significantly to certain key terms from the parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard"¹³⁹ in conceptualizing his new life as a servant of Christ:

To pay þe Prince oþer sete sazte
Hit is ful eþe to þe god Krystyn;
For I haf founden Hym, boþe day and nazte,

A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin.
Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laste,
For pyty of my perle enclyin,
And syþen to God I hit bytaste,
In Krystez dere blessyng and myn,
Þat in þe forme of bred and wyn
Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye.
He gef vus to be His homly hyne
Ande precious perlez vnto His pay (1201-12).

In addition to reprising and transforming the language of courtliness and of preciousness from the first stanza and the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price," the final stanza also notably reprises the terms of relationship which link lord and workers in the parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard." The dreamer, in positioning himself as Christ's servant, or "hyne,"¹⁴⁰ takes on the task of laboring the vineyard, despite his old complaint that one who labors long in the vineyard, as he is doing, is ill-recompensed. When he calls God "a Lorde" and "a frende," he gives substance to his change of heart. In the parable, the master of the vineyard is habitually called the 'lorde.' It is the lord himself who terms one of his disgruntled laborers "frende" (558), in language which originates in Matthew's account (20.13). By calling this man a friend, the lord suggests that the man's complaint arises from a faulty understanding of the lord's motives, which are fundamentally friendly toward all of his servants, whether they arrived early or late. No one is getting short-changed. In pairing the concept of lordship with that of friendship, both of which originate in the parable of "The Workers," the dreamer at once acknowledges God's authority and God's fundamental benevolence, which, of course, makes His authority much easier to swallow. Faith in this attitude of friendship between God and God's servants transforms the purpose of parabolic paradox. If one trusts in the benevolence of God, the paradox of "The Workers in the Vineyard" serves not to baffle and scandalize,

but to give a positive account of the unlikeness of the earthly to the heavenly. Thus the parable speaks to two audiences, both insiders whose initial attitude of trust allows them to glean a positive message from it, and those hostile to it, who, in the experience of confronting something that scandalizes them, are shown the limits of their perspectives. The experience of the dreamer shows that this moment of hostility, of scandal, or of rebuff can in fact be preliminary to a transformation of perspective. Thus, "The Workers in the Vineyard," originally a stumbling-block to the dreamer, now becomes the metaphorical framework for his understanding of the task of Christian life. The dreamer has moved from a position of opposition to the parable to a position of friendship with it. Confrontation has led to transformation.

Implications for Cleanness and Patience: Righteous and Unrighteous Interpretation

The idea presented in *Pearl's* portrayal of the dreamer, that understanding requires preliminary righteousness, is repeated in all of the other poems of the manuscript. To reprise the previous chapter's concern with insides and outsides, preliminary righteousness is the key to the ability to penetrate beyond externals and discern interior realities. In *Cleanness'* account of Abraham, Lot, and Sodom, characters reveal their interior dispositions by their ability to perceive and respond appropriately to God and His messengers. Abraham recognizes the Godhead of his three visitors upon seeing them at a distance and approaches them with deference and the offer of hospitality (606-20).¹⁴¹ Similarly, Lot, observing the entry of two beautiful young men into Sodom, correctly reads their appearance as a sign that they are angels (788-96), greets them humbly, and offers them appropriate hospitality (797-810). Lot's neighbors, however,

confronted with the same vision of angelic beauty, fail to understand that these visitors are divine or powerful. Thus, they react to the visitors in a manner which is as unintelligent as it is wicked, seeking to rape them (841-44). In order to disperse this unruly mob, the angels blind them (885-88), making physically manifest the internal reality of these men's lack of perception.¹⁴²

In *Cleanness'* story of Belshazzar and the temple vessels, Belshazzar's inability to read the writing on the wall represents and arises from his inability or unwillingness to distinguish the sacred from the profane. His worship of idols (1340-48), his elevation of concubines to the status of ladies (1349-52), and his misuse of the temple vessels for carousing (1425-36) all serve to show that wickedness amounts precisely to misperception and misuse. The link between righteousness and right perception becomes all the more explicit in this moment insofar as righteousness is shown to be of a piece with realistic perception. Just as in *Pearl* the dreamer's idiosyncratic reading of the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price" shows his inability to see beyond himself, so does Belshazzar's distortion of categories to suit his own desires lead to his inability to understand the writing on the wall, a message which does not conform to his self-constructed world. By contrast, Daniel is a figure of a righteous reader.¹⁴³ When called upon to interpret the mysterious writing, Daniel makes the case that Nabugodenezar's remarkable power arose from his understanding that God was the source of all power (1643-56). Though Daniel frames his argument in terms of God's favor—Nabugodenezar flourished because God was on his side—the poem's earlier accounts of the relation of preliminary understanding and righteousness to the ability to discern particular truths offers an additional possibility. Perhaps Nabugodenezar is able to maintain his power because his outlook on the world,

based in an understanding of God's power, is realistic and hence insightful. By this reasoning, we might reframe our conclusions this way: understanding fails when it does not account for the foundational reality of God and God's power.

Patience is in many ways a counterpoint to *Cleanness*,¹⁴⁴ presenting sin as a matter of farce rather than as a matter of deathly seriousness, and representing God as forbearing rather than as the executor of immediate judgment. But though its tone is different, on the subject of righteous and unrighteous interpretation, its message is similar. Jonah, unworthy prophet that he is, is unable to respond appropriately to God's command even though it is whispered in his ear (63-64). Jonah, rendered 'unglad' by the command to go to Nineveh, decides to escape God by heading off in another direction (85-88). In this attempt at sinful rebellion, Jonah's perception is poor and his actions are ridiculous. As the narrator remarks, quoting Psalm 93 (AV 94), Jonah is a fool to think that he who made ears will not hear, and he who made eyes will not see (123-24). Again in the case of Jonah, unrighteousness prevents perceptiveness.¹⁴⁵

Implications for Cleanness and Patience: Rebuff as Pedagogy

Pearl makes the case that rebuff, shock, and the confrontation with paradox are opportunities for conversion in those to whom reason would not speak. Since seeing well demands the preliminary right orientation of the will, rebuff attacks a person at the level of affect, seeking the conversion of the will. *Cleanness* contains many instances of rebuff and shock, but those who run up against God's will seldom get the opportunity to correct their perspectives. For the antediluvians, the Sodomites, and Belshazzar and his court, sin calls forth annihilation and perverse wills are rendered permanent by the immediacy of

judgment. But though rough treatment has little educational value for the victims of God's judgment in *Cleanness*, the poem's potential effect on its hearer's complacency is significant—it is a resonant warning against disobedience, arguing that the hearer should repent now because he may not get another chance. The obfuscation involved in the parable of "The Wedding Feast" has a limitedly pedagogical character, insofar as it seems designed to convey the message of God's ineffability. This is in itself a positive truth, though perhaps a truth of limited practical applicability. One character in *Cleanness*, however, who has the opportunity to repent as the result of receiving a rebuke from God is Nabugodenezar. Because of Nabugodenezar's prideful blasphemy, God causes him to become like a beast, deprived of his reason and living in the wild (1657-86). Nabugodenezar is restored to his throne after seven years when he realizes "who wrozt alle myztes / And cowþe vche kyndam tokerue and keuer when Hym lyked" (1699-1708). In this, he is rather like the dreamer in *Pearl*, who is deprived of his reason insofar as he is forced to learn that reason as he understands it will not avail to explain the hierarchy of heaven. Like the dreamer, Nabugodenezar is transformed by the experience of encountering his limits into a faithful interpreter. Thus, though *Cleanness'* lessons aim frequently to interrupt complacency without replacing it with another positive value, the possibly transformative character of the operation of shock which *Cleanness* carries out over and over again, linguistically, parabolically, and through images of violent judgment, is at least once displayed in the text.

In *Patience*, too, shock and distress can perform a teaching function. The narrator articulates this principle when Jonah repents of his rebellion in the belly of the whale: "Now he knawez Hym in care þat coupe not in sele" (296). When

Jonah once again backslides into anger at God, resenting that God has not carried through on the destruction of Nineveh (413-28), such another moment of rough treatment is necessary to bring him around. Thus, God causes a woodbine to grow under which Jonah happily shelters himself (443-64). The next day, however, God causes a worm to destroy the woodbine (464-68), illustrating to Jonah in miniature how He would feel if He were to destroy His handiwork, the people of Nineveh (495-527). Regardless of Jonah's response to God's argument, which the text does not record, God's purpose in this instance is overtly to teach, and his method is to lull Jonah into comfort with excessive generosity, only to snatch away that comfort abruptly. This is indeed very like the experience of reading "The Workers in the Vineyard."

Conclusion

The gospel parables in *Pearl*, along with their contextualization in the story of the dreamer and his beloved child-cum-queen of heaven make and use two valuable points about the function of parables. First, in order to be understood, the parables require preliminary righteousness. Second, when they do confound an unrighteous interpreter, the parables do not exclude simply, but also force the reader or hearer uncomfortably up against the limits of his understanding, seeking to jostle him out of his interpretive rut. Misinterpretation is not the end of the road; parables open up opportunities for understanding by stating in stark terms the extent of their radicalism. The mysteriousness of God as articulated in *Cleanness* is not overcome or negated by the glimmerings of understanding presented in *Pearl*. Rather, the very fact of ineffability is a large part of the parabolic lesson, working as it does through analogy, inclusive of not

only sameness but also of difference. But *Pearl* offers glimmers of hope beyond the scope of *Cleanness* both for conversion and for the ability to understand God's will. The former occurs through the administration of parabolic shock. The latter depends upon the ability to seek an ultimate point of reference beyond the self. Self-abnegation is the beginning of wisdom.¹⁴⁶

The poet of the *Pearl*-manuscript shows himself in *Pearl* and *Cleanness* to be a deeply sophisticated interpreter of the parables. The above study of *Cleanness* has demonstrated that the poet is willing to take seriously the most radical sense in which the parabolic form brings into doubt the very possibility of mediated meaning. The poet anticipates the most extreme of modern commentators, such as Crossan and Kermode, who suggest that the objectives of the parables are pure aporia or the endless deferral of meaning. In *Pearl*, however, the poet blends medieval interpretive traditions with additional insights of his own, offering a response *avant-la-lettre* to these modern accounts. In suggesting, with Ricoeur and Wright, that shock can be pedagogical, he shows deep epistemological insight. From the tradition of commentary, he draws the notion that the understanding depends upon the right orientation of the will. Contra the typical medieval allegorical perspective, however, he attends minutely to the literal aspects of the parables, taking them seriously as stories rather than only as vehicles for further allegorical meaning. This perspective is in sympathy with aspects of the modern tradition, represented at their the best by Snodgrass' insistence that the parables be taken on their own terms without the importation of foreign logics or allegories upon them (3-4). In attending to the literal, the poet illuminates all manner of paradoxes, but also reflects upon the usefulness of paradoxes for offering 'outsiders' a way 'in.'

If misunderstanding of heavenly matters is part of the shock tactic that eventually leads a reader to deeper understanding, then the unique value of fiction in teaching about heavenly matters is evident. This is one of the premises upon which the parables of the *Pearl* manuscript function. *Pearl* is itself also a case in point. Part of the poem's theological strength is the fact that it delays the right answers, opening questions which are difficult to answer, and encouraging the reader to sympathize with the dreamer, even if we will eventually understand that he has been mistaken. Stanbury rightly points out in the introduction to her edition of *Pearl* that the poem sets in motion a series of "'category mistakes'" in which the reader and the dreamer are both complicit (4). Like the dreamer, we struggle to understand the nature of the pearl maiden: is she a precious gem? Is she a child or a woman? In what sense is she a queen of heaven? And how can it be that one whom the dreamer last saw as a little child can exceed him in wisdom, knowledge, and maturity? In struggling to understand *Pearl's* fluid symbols and language, we encounter similar problems to the dreamer. We can sympathize, too, with the grief which causes the dreamer's will to harden against heavenly comfort. If we are honest with ourselves, we too might succumb to grief in a similar situation. Thus, we too may participate in the motion from lack of understanding to a desire to understand. Fiction, unlike philosophy or doctrine, paradoxically aids the understanding by frustrating it: in delaying or eliding the appearance of the "right answer," fiction allows its hearer or reader to wrestle with truth not yet fully understood.

CHAPTER FIVE

The *Pearl*-Manuscript on Courtesy: the Integrity of the Other and the Self in the Process of Right Reading

In chapter three, I discussed the difficulty of the movement from explicit story to implicit meaning in the parable of “The Wedding Feast”. In chapter four, I suggested a solution to this problem illustrated by the contextualized retelling of the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard”: righteousness necessarily precedes right reading. This answer is not entirely satisfactory, however, insofar as it obscures the possibility of conversion. Where is the entry point to right reading if one is unrighteous? The pedagogical value of a parable’s paradoxes goes some way toward answering this objection. Parables are not simply designed to be decoded by privileged insiders, but rather also to effect conversion by making the hearer realize that he has misunderstood, not only the answers, but even the questions. Nevertheless, there remains something unsatisfactory about this solution insofar as it, like many of the moments of destruction described in *Cleanness*, seems simply to annihilate the subjective perspective of the human person. Good interpretation means obedience to God, and the content of that obedience is beside the point. That is to say, the content of *interpretation*, too, is beside the point: what matters is simply obedience qua obedience. Once this lesson is learned, the shell of image can be discarded insofar as the truth it expressed was purely negative. Pyotr Spyra captures something of this attitude toward the *Pearl*-Manuscript when he suggests that the only tenable human response to the epistemological gap between God and humanity is

“patient acceptance.” The dreamer’s moment of joy at the very conclusion of *Pearl*, says Spyra, is not presaged by anything that comes before it, and is possible only through Christ (156). Though this perspective on the manuscript does not render the reader completely powerless or passive—openness to Christ’s transformative reality is necessary—it does suggest that receptivity is the extent of the human participation in divine mysteries. Individual humanity, thus, would seem simply to be subsumed into the larger reality of divinity.¹⁴⁷

The poems of the *Pearl*-Manuscript do much, however, to suggest that obedience to God does not entail the total eclipse of human singularity, nor indeed need it end in an impenetrably monologic discourse of the kind J.J. Anderson finds in *Cleanness* (8; 84-86). By its virtuosic use of the image of the pearl in conjunction with the parable of “The Pearl of Great Price,” *Pearl* shows that obedience and humility in the face of God’s mystery leads to a kind of freedom: obedience is the prerequisite to right perception, but right perception in turn is the prerequisite to fruitful, individual creative participation. *Pearl*’s use of the concept of courtesy offers images which embody this lesson. Before turning to *Pearl*’s explicit treatment of courtesy as an appropriate metaphor for human participation in the ineffable, however, we will do well to turn to the final poem in the manuscript, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereinafter *Gawain*). Its more extended account of courtesy, though not explicitly concerned with the human relation to the divine, offers an analogous and applicable lesson through an exploration of human courtesy. The discussion of courtesy offered by *Gawain* is illuminated by a consideration of the parabolic method of welcome and rebuff. In turn, it reveals that active response is the fruitful reaction to the dualities of welcome and rebuff offered both by parables and by human life. Ultimately,

Gawain suggests that true courtesy requires two elements: genuine openness to the Other and a kind of reflection on self and Other which exists somewhere in the space between awareness and wariness.¹⁴⁸ These two elements are in a sense two sides of the same coin: openness, to be in fact genuine, must account for the possibility that the Other may be an enemy or a judge, but is certainly not the same as oneself. Thus, to consider the Other the same as oneself is to commit the error either of egotism or of inappropriate self-abnegation. The dreamer in *Pearl* is initially guilty of the former, but the latter is also a danger. The true practitioner of courtesy is aware of difference; that is to say, open to the possibility of paradox, disappointment, and surprise along with friendship.

Through a series of images which reprise the parabolic concern with insides and outsides, the *Pearl*-manuscript discusses the nature of the self as both self-contained and as relational. Concluding with respect to language, metaphor and story what it also concludes with respect to the human person in relation to others both human and divine, the poems argue that an alertness which engages actively with the Other, always aware of the possibility of surprise, allows for the preservation of the individual and her freedom at the same time that it allows her to see the Other, be changed by the Other, and, where appropriate, be obedient to the Other.

The Pentangle, Camelot, and Hautdesert: Courtesy, Openness, and Wariness

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, though it does not engage in overt retellings of or meditations on the Bible, reiterates the other poems' interest in the relation of interpretation to moral behavior,¹⁴⁹ considering these themes in the context of an Arthurian hero's careful navigation of his purported field of

expertise, courtesy. Gawain must decide between an account of courtesy as self-contained righteousness and charm and an account of courtesy as cautious openness to the stranger. On the horns of this dilemma, *Gawain* reprises the lessons of the parables recounted in *Cleanness* and *Pearl*. The reader concludes that the proper human response to the challenge of the Other—whether a parable or a Green Knight—is critical openness. This is the true definition of courtesy.¹⁵⁰ Courtesy thus understood is both an ethic and a hermeneutic. When we return from the ethical-interpretive realm of *Gawain* to the more overtly linguistic-ethical-interpretive realm of *Pearl*, we see that, here too, images of courtesy to dilate upon the process of right reading. It is through its meditation on courtesy that the poems reveal that openness to the Other, and to the quintessential Other, God, does not destroy the integrity of the self. Rather, courtesy creates new space for interpretive and creative freedom insofar as it reveals the way in which one's self is not simply coextensive with the Other. The apparent *discourtesy* of the manuscript's parables serves the larger cause of revealing the Other as such, and, paradoxically, reveals the self contrastively in the same moment.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem about the knight of King Arthur's court most renowned for his courtesy. Of all the knights of the court, Gawain manages the most creditable response to the uncouth challenge offered by the Green Knight, bravely interceding so that King Arthur need not take up the Green Knight's challenge and exchange blows with a battle axe (339-61). Gawain allows his king to retain his honor without risking the loss of his head. Later, when Gawain arrives at a distant and mysterious castle in his quest to find the Green Knight, he discovers that his reputation precedes him. Though he

knows nothing of his hosts, they are very familiar with his reputation as the most courteous of knights (901-27). Gawain's response to the Green Knight's challenge, as well as the actions which intervene between his dealing the Green Knight a blow on New Year's Day and receiving a blow in return a year-and-a-day thereafter, are in the end revealed to be a test of Gawain's virtue.

The fact of this test, though not its nature, is explicit in the Green Knight's original challenge, for he rejects Arthur's hospitality, saying that he has come to Camelot, not for a social call,

Bot for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hyze
And þy burz and þy burnes best ar holden,
Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
þe wyztest and worþyest of þe worldes kynde,
Preue for to play wyth in oþer pure laykez,
And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp—
And þat hatz wayned me hider, iwyis, at þis tyme (258-64).

The Green Knight comes to submit the court at Camelot to a test of its purported courage and courtesy. Later, after Gawain's reckoning, the virtues which have been under scrutiny are framed differently both by Gawain and by the Green Knight. He has failed, they variously assert, in upholding his "trawþe" (2348) or "lewté" (2366),¹⁵¹ and in falling prey to "cowarddyse and couetyse boþe!" (2374).¹⁵² Though the virtue of courtesy has dropped out of the equation by the poem's end, the original foregrounding of courtesy in the Green Knight's challenge as well as Gawain's particular claim to the virtue of courtesy justify an investigation of the nature of Gawain's courtesy over the course of the poem.¹⁵³ Finally, in the image of the pentangle, Gawain's virtue is framed as a single unity of which the parts are mutually interdependent. Thus, if his final failure may be framed as a lack of honesty, courage, and generosity, this does not preclude the relation of these failings also to a failure in courtesy.

More depth of insight into Gawain's account of virtue can be achieved by a discussion of Gawain's shield, which features, on the outside, the highly significant pentangle, and on the inside, an image of the Virgin Mary. The pentangle¹⁵⁴ on Gawain's shield is a five-pointed star composed of five lines, each of which passes over one of the others and under another. Thus, the narrator recounts, the English call this symbol 'the endless knot.' The pentangle is a sign developed by Solomon, the narrator explains, which, because of the interconnection of its five lines, signifies "trawþe," (625-30). The interdependence of the sides of the pentangle, then, is important in its account of virtue: the virtues depend upon each other and are related to each other: none is complete without the others.¹⁵⁵ The five-ness of the pentangle has a fivefold significance, indicating the reputation for perfection¹⁵⁶ which Gawain holds with respect to his five senses,¹⁵⁷ five fingers, faith in the five wounds of Christ, courage arising from the five joys of Mary,¹⁵⁸ and excellence in five virtues (640-55).

The five virtues, the last pentad to be discussed, are enumerated individually in a way that none of the other groups of five are. Since the Green Knight's aim is to test Camelot's moral virtue, this set of five has special significance for the story. The five virtues are "fraunchyse and felazschyp forbe al pyng," "clannes," "cortaysye," and "pit , þat passez alle poyntez" (652-54). The import of this particular assortment of virtues is to emphasize the virtues which relate most directly to community.¹⁵⁹ Good and appropriate relations with one's peers are emphasized ("felazschyp"). The ambiguous "pit " might possibly mean good and appropriate relations with one's social inferiors (if it is translated as 'pity' or 'compassion') or with one's most definitive superior, God (if it is translated as 'piety'). "[F]raunchyse" and "cortaysye," too, are explicitly

relational virtues. “[C]lannes” alone suggests virtue as an exercise in personal preservation, but insofar as one refrains from defiling others in the project of remaining oneself undefiled, a communal element is present. Virtue is a project of relationship according to the pentangle. The interconnection of the different elements of the pentangle as well as the centrality of courtesy to the pentangle’s account of virtue are both highlighted by the relational character of the pentangle’s virtues. All five virtues are necessary for a complete practice of courtesy, if courtesy is taken to incorporate good and appropriate relations with all.¹⁶⁰

An ambiguity exists, however, in the image of the pentangle, which might be taken to illustrate two contrasting accounts of virtue. The pentangle with its five points is shaped like a human person, with five extremities of head, legs and arms.¹⁶¹ The pentangle is a fitting counterpart for the image of the Virgin Mary inside the shield: she is another account, embodied rather than symbolic, of the perfection of the human being. Thus, the shield’s account of the human person should be taken as in some important sense comprehensive. Whereas the pentangle virtues emphasize the ways in which the human person is and should be outward-looking, the overall symbolic meaning of the pentangle indicates that a human person is also a finite, self-contained entity, discrete from others. The wholeness of the pentangle is emphasized by the same means as its outward-reaching character, both in the course of a discussion of the interrelation of the various points it represents:

Now alle þese fyue syþez forsoþe were fetled on þis knyzt
And vchone halched in oþer, þat non ende hade
And fyched vpon fyue poyntez þat fayld neuer,
Ne samned neuer in no syde, ne sundred nouþer,

Withouten ende at any noke oquere fynde,
Where euer þe gomen bygan or glod to an ende (655-61).

In saying that the pentangle is without beginning or end, the narrator clearly means that all of the excellences which it symbolizes are interrelated, and cannot be separated. The suggestion that the pentangle is 'endless,' however, also raises the contrasting possibility that the symbol has a character of infinitude. There is a paradox in the statement that this symbol is both complete and endless,¹⁶² but a paradox which itself reveals something about the human person. To take one side of the paradox, there is an integrity to the wholeness of an individual person. The parts of this whole cannot be sundered from one another, and there is an important sense in which the person is a self-contained reality. The Christian doctrine of the eternal soul similarly affirms the integrity of the individual person in himself. On the other hand, however, the interior infinitude of the human person has a naturally outward-looking character: if a person is 'endless,' it is not only because he is a whole made of interrelated parts, but also because of his ability to confront that which is beyond himself: his ability to reach out beyond the point where the self 'ends.' This second half of the paradox is less obvious in the form of the pentangle, but more so in the five virtues which it highlights. The contrast is epitomized also in the pentangle's single overarching significance: it is a symbol of "trawþe." If "trawþe" means integrity, then it has an objective, independent sense. If, however, "trawþe" is conceived as loyalty, either to a person or to a promise, then it has a relational character, and will vary depending upon circumstances.¹⁶³ Integrity and loyalty are ideally coincident where the object of loyalty is worthy, but these two meanings of "trawþe" nevertheless suggest two distinct directions which an account of virtue

might take. “Trawþe,” like the details of the pentangle which represents it, points both in the direction of self-contained meaning and in the direction of virtue as relationship.

In summation, the pentangle, taken in its two aspects as a complete form and as a fivefold set of excellences and objects of reverence, points in two directions, both of which reveal an important fact about the human person. The five virtues of the pentangle, as well as the interrelation of all of the points of the pentangle, suggest primarily the relational character of a human person, while the form of the pentangle taken as a whole suggests primarily the self-contained wholeness of the human person. By its special emphasis on the virtues amongst the five sets of five, the pentangle articulates the relational character of virtue undertaken in the human sphere. But one would also be remiss to ignore the self—that is to say, the preservation of one’s individual virtue—in an account of virtue insofar as the integrity of the whole is not easy to maintain, depending upon the delicate balancing of the parts.¹⁶⁴

The image of the pentangle is thus obliquely connected to *Gawain’s* musings upon defensive fortifications and their penetrability. The poem’s opening evocation of Troy indicates the importance of walls: without them, or when they fail, “[þ]e bor3” may be “brittened and brent to brondez and askez” (2). Excessive openness is dangerous. This issue arises again almost immediately as the court at Camelot struggles to find the appropriate method of dealing with an uncouth, uninvited guest. The story opens upon a young King Arthur’s court in the midst of Christmas revelry. The presentation of the court is largely idealized—it is filled with the “most kyd kny3tez vnder Krystes Seluen,” “þe louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden,” and “þe comlokest kyng” (51-53). The

courtiers are in “her first age” (54), and their revels give the general impression of youthful high spirits, only ever so faintly tinged with censure when the festivities are described as “rechles merþes” (40) and Arthur is characterized as a slightly hyperactive young monarch, “sumquat childgered” (86) with a “brayn wylde” (89).¹⁶⁵ The court’s New Year’s feast is interrupted, however, when a strange man, at once obviously a knight, good looking and well attired (141-46), and also obviously supernatural—for he seems “[h]alf-etayn” and he is *green* (140;147-50)—barges into the hall on horseback and demands, in as discourteous a manner as possible,¹⁶⁶ a Christmas game. The Green Knight wears no armor, and carries in one hand a holly branch (206). These, he says, are tokens of his peaceful intentions (265-71). Rather undermining his claim to peacefulness, however, is the fact that he carries a huge battle-axe in his other hand (208-13), and the game which he proposes is an exchange of blows: a knight of Camelot may strike him first, and he will offer a blow in return a year-and-a-day hence (285-98).

The poem’s opening reference to the fall of Troy throws light upon the action of the poem’s first fitt. The youthful joy of Arthur’s court is indeed largely commendable, but the evidence that it lacks something of mature prudence is not limited to its explicit account of the feast and characterization of Arthur. The Green Knight is able to gain entrance to the banquet hall, battle axe in hand, apparently without throwing a punch. Literally, this indicates that Arthur has a problem with his guard. Figuratively, it indicates that Arthur’s court is too open to intrusions from the outside; that it has no notion that it, like Troy, could be brought to nothing by a hostile force from without. When his challenge is greeted

with silence, the Green Knight mocks Camelot for failing to embody its reputation for excellence:

‘What, is þis Arþures hous,’ quop þe habel þenne,
‘Pat al þe rous rennes of þur3 ryalmes so mony?
Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes?
Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyzes speche,
For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed’ (309-15).

Camelot has not recognized that the virtues which it represents require remaining on guard—anticipating those things which might threaten it in order to be prepared for their advent. This is not to say that the nobles assembled at Camelot are wrong to celebrate. Rather, they ought simply to post a literal guard at their gates and a metaphorical guard upon their minds such that their virtue is not forgotten in the midst of their revelry.¹⁶⁷

The walls of Camelot are too easily breached and the virtue of its court too easily called into question, but the poem also offers an image of a court which is the inverse of Camelot in this respect. Hautdesert, the mysterious castle at which Gawain spends Christmas on his way to find the Green Knight, offers an exterior aspect which reflects a far deeper understanding of the importance of walls than does Camelot. The castle, viewed initially from Gawain’s perspective on the outside, is extensively fortified and seems deliberately closed against outsiders. The narrator lingers on these fortifications: the huge palisade, the snugly closed drawbridge and gates, the double ditch, the “wonderly depe” moat, and the soaring, sturdy walls (769-70; 781-93).¹⁶⁸ These impressive outerworks do not transparently bespeak welcome. Unlike Camelot, Hautdesert is prepared to meet intrusions from the outside and to beat back the infriendly.

Once one is inside, however, each court presents a contrast to its exterior fortifications. The court at Hautdesert offers Sir Gawain an exceedingly warm welcome. The very porter who answers the gate assures Gawain of his welcome before he has even confirmed with his lord that Gawain *is* in fact welcome. “[P]urely I trowee,” he says “That ze be, wyze, welcum to wone quyle yow lykez” (813-14).¹⁶⁹ The porter’s promise is confirmed by the lord, who goes so far as to say, essentially, ‘what’s mine is yours’: ““Ze ar welcum to welde, as yow lykez/ Ðat here is; al is yowre awen to haue at yowre wylle/ And welde”” (835-37). Subsequently, Gawain is magnificently and generously fêted and invited to stay longer than the other guests (1022-74).

Camelot does not offer so warm a welcome to its strange guest, the Green Knight, as its open gates promised. The Green Knight’s churlishness accounts for the court’s reaction, but it does not completely excuse it. In addition to his threateningly large appearance and his battle-axe, the Green Knight also insultingly claims to be unable to tell the king from the rest of the court (223-27). The court, confronted with this apparition, is reduced to silence, not completely out of fear, the narrator claims, but also in part out of courtesy that dictates that it is Arthur’s place to speak (241-49). Arthur at length rises to the challenge of welcoming this strange intruder, inviting him to alight and join the feast (250-55). The Green Knight’s churlishness continues, however, as he refuses the invitation, offers further insults, and proposes his Christmas ‘game’ (256-300). Faced with the challenge to hospitality of a large, uncouth green man on horseback who seeks to play a beheading game, Arthur’s court is at a loss, and continues to respond with silence (301-02). Arthur is shamed into taking up the challenge, and

Gawain intervenes, offering himself so that his king will not be forced to take this risk (316-71).

Thusfar, the court at Camelot has shown itself to be somewhat lacking in resourcefulness when it comes to dealing with a 'guest' who does not conform to its preconceptions. The courtiers' silence indicates their bewilderment as well as their fear. But no one has done anything especially inhospitable, and indeed, Arthur actively—if belatedly—offers the Green Knight welcome (250-55). Gawain's participation in the Green Knight's game, however, shows how a lack of resourcefulness can be directly related to distinctly inhospitable behavior. The Green Knight has baited his trap cunningly. Arthur himself points out to Gawain that if Gawain strikes the first blow well, he need not fear the Green Knight's return stroke (372-74). The Green Knight, in preparation to receive the blow, pulls aside his hair and bends over so that Gawain can get a clean crack at his neck (417-20). Gawain falls prey to the temptation to do the obvious and strike off the Green Knight's head with the axe, though neither the weapon to be used nor the nature or severity of the blow he is to deliver is specified in the terms of their agreement. The courtiers of Camelot subsequently show their true attitude toward their guest, and the gross immaturity which has erstwhile been merely hinted at, kicking the disembodied head around like a soccer ball (427-28). The Green Knight's torso, however, remains standing, recovers his head, and rides away, after reminding Gawain of his promise to seek out the Green Knight and receive his return blow in a year and a day (430-59).

The Green Knight's entry into Camelot and the ill-clad guest's entry into the feast in *Cleanness'* parable of "The Wedding Feast" are structurally similar. In each of these cases, an invitation to a feast is broadly extended. The breadth of

the invitation is explicit in the case of "The Wedding Feast" and implicit at Camelot because entry is possible for all comers. Someone in each case, however, behaves inappropriately at a feast, and the host must intervene. In the case of Arthur's court, however, the violence of the intervention is inappropriate, whereas in the case of "The Wedding Feast," the identification of the host with God suggests that the expulsion of the guest in dirty garments is appropriate, even if inscrutable. The difference between these two feasts is that the host in "The Wedding Feast" has deliberately invited all manner of strange folk into his hall, and he has the interpretive capacities to distinguish the strange-but-righteous from the strange-and-unrighteous. Arthur, having fallen backwards into the necessity of judgment on the strange, is unprepared to meet the interpretive challenge of the Green Knight. Arthur shows that his notion of courtesy is undeveloped because he is unable to decide whether the Green Knight should be treated as a guest or an enemy. Worse, in his uncertainty, Arthur does both, initially treating the Green Knight as a friend, then advising Gawain to respond to his challenge with violence. The host in the parable, then, recognizes that he does something exceptional and difficult when he opens his hall to all. The difficulty of this openness, however, is balanced by the fact that the host has the capacity to act decisively and appropriately if his hospitality is abused. Because Arthur takes openness as simply a matter of course, without recognizing its radical character, he cannot meet the challenge of the radicality which his own actions have provoked.

The portraits of hospitality as exercised at Camelot and at Hautdesert directly contrast each other. Camelot's gates appear to be open wide, and this suggests that King Arthur considers his court to be completely open and

welcoming. Such unqualified welcome, however, is necessarily a delusion insofar as one is extending a welcome even to the hostile. The poem's initial image of Troy, burnt to the ground because it allowed enemies to enter, is a warning against the potential ravages that can be perpetrated by an outsider. Indeed, the arrival of the Green Knight, who is not even an outright enemy but only a character whose allegiances and intentions are ambiguous, demonstrates that the court at Camelot is simply mistaken if it believes that it is truly offering an unqualified welcome. In fact, the court's welcome of this stranger contains a latent threat which is realized when Gawain chops off his head. Of course, Arthur is right to perceive an element of threat in the Green Knight's appearance and challenge, and it is the Green Knight's own uncouth behavior and challenge which brings about Gawain's aggression. But the reality of the threats posed by outsiders ought to cause Camelot to fortify itself against such intrusions in the first place rather than deal with such intrusions with aggression of a kind inappropriately applied to guests. In opening wide its gates, Camelot does not truly offer welcome to every comer, but rather, assumes that every comer is a well-wisher, and somehow fundamentally similar to its own knights and ladies. Camelot's open gates deny or ignore the possibility of an Other; one who would be truly different from its courtiers and thus potentially (though not necessarily) a threat. Camelot's hostility to such an Other is also evident in its eventual response to the Green Knight's intrusion. Having once allowed the Green Knight into their midst, the courtiers at Camelot are eventually goaded into attempting to kill him—completely to neutralize and destroy that which is different from themselves. The ironic truth about Camelot's apparent openness is that it is actually supremely closed—closed, first, even to the possibility of a guest unlike

its own members. Because of this conceptual narrowness, Camelot is also forced into an aggressive posture when confronted with a guest who defies its expectations. The eventual effect of its failure to recognize the possibility of difference is its attempt to eliminate such difference when it appears.¹⁷⁰

Contrastingly, Hautdesert's fortified exterior acknowledges the reality of otherness and the threats it poses. Its fortifications mitigate against intrusions from outside, and the subsequent need inappropriately to combine hospitality with aggression. By combining exterior fortifications with the possibility of a prompt and effusive welcome to strangers who request entry, Hautdesert is more genuinely open than Camelot, although it is apparently more closed.¹⁷¹ The court at Hautdesert also shows itself to be more interested than the court at Camelot in learning about its guests and from its guests. On the night of his arrival, Gawain is tactfully questioned until he reveals his identity and allegiance to Arthur (901-02). The lord soon inquires and learns of Gawain what quest brings him to the castle (1046-67). When they discover that their guest is Gawain, the courtiers at Hautdesert are delighted at the prospect of learning courteous speech from listening to him converse (915-27).

The inquisitiveness of the courtiers at Hautdesert may occasionally seem barbed: as soon as he enters the castle, the folk within are quick to divest him of his horse (822-23), helmet (826-27), sword and shield (828).¹⁷² Gawain is next taken to his room and "dispoyled" (860) of his clothing.¹⁷³ It is, of course, natural that Gawain should be disarmed and offered a fresh set of clothes upon entering the castle, both for the safety of those within and for his own comfort. These moments in which he is stripped of his defenses, however, emphasize the fact that being a guest is a risky business in the same way that being a host is. This

ritual stripping is in any case a less aggressive response to a guest than chopping his head off. The host-guest relationship involves of necessity a great deal of vulnerability. Hautdesert does better than Camelot because it recognizes that a little bit of inquiry and a little bit of literal and figurative stripping of its guest is an option to be preferred to a lack of inquiry followed by the necessity of violence. Hautdesert's very wariness of outsiders indicates that it has made conceptual space within its walls for those who are different from its own members. Hautdesert takes welcome more seriously than Camelot in that it does not extend a welcome if it cannot live up to the duties of welcoming a particular guest. Further, welcome, once extended, means not only hospitality, but also active interest in one's guest and what one might learn from him. Hautdesert is open to the possibility that some virtue beyond its own may be manifest in a guest. Its attitude toward the unfamiliar, then, incorporates the conceptual possibility that what is strange may be threatening, but by the same token, acknowledges the possibility of encountering a new kind of virtue in the encounter with the strange.

A digression is necessary here concerning the hidden intentions of at least some members of the court at Hautdesert. Gawain will in the end discover that his host at Hautdesert and the Green Knight are one and the same. His stay at Hautdesert, which he had considered an interlude in the midst of his search for his challenger, has in fact been a test, determinative of the nature of the blow he will receive from the Green Knight. Is it possible, then, to consider the court at Hautdesert truly courteous and hospitable insofar as some of its members—at the very least, Bertilak, his wife, and their co-conspirator, Morgan—hide their true intentions from Gawain?¹⁷⁴ First, insofar as the veneer of complete openness

turns out to mask hostility in the case of Camelot, the contrastingly reserved attitude of the lord and lady of Hautdesert is to some extent justified. If welcoming a guest meant sharing all of one's secrets with them, welcome would never be offered. It is in recognizing the necessity of reserve that welcome becomes possible. Further, the relationship of Gawain to Bertilak is usefully illuminated by a return to the pedagogical method of parables, which Bertilak imitates. The potential of a parable to effect conversion depends on the surprise inherent in its reversals. When the Pearl-maiden speaks to the dreamer in a difficult parable, she speaks to him from the position of a benevolent teacher, and her aim is to disturb him deeply enough that he will be forced to reconsider his received notions. Similarly, Bertilak and his wife aim to shock Gawain by playing out for him the disturbing implications of his own account of courtesy, and thus causing him to reconsider it.¹⁷⁵ If the concealment and even the temptation which occur at Hautdesert are not part of a malicious trick,¹⁷⁶ but are pedagogically motivated, they begin to seem more compatible with a broadly-conceived notion of courtesy. Finally (and this point I will develop at length below),¹⁷⁷ it is conceivable that so much remains hidden from Gawain during his stay at Hautdesert simply because he does not ask. The Green Knight critiques Gawain's account of courtesy on the grounds that Gawain is incurious and ultimately uninterested in others. His courtesy is a superficial concern with good manners which fails to recognize that good manners should be the visible manifestation of good will. The hidden intentions of the court at Hautdesert, then, are part of the test which is put to Gawain; he fails this part of the test insofar as he fails to discern even the existence of these hidden intentions.

Gawain's Quest: Courtesy as Action and Reaction

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's meditations upon courts and the walls that enclose them offer the reader a chance to consider the necessity for a community of balancing welcome with wariness.¹⁷⁸ Insofar as a castle is also an image of a human person,¹⁷⁹ the poem's castles dovetail with the image of the pentangle to suggest that this balance of welcome and wariness should also be a central part of the ethical reasoning of the individual. A consideration of Gawain and his quest will shed some light on whether or not Gawain gives sufficient consideration to this balancing act in his approach to morality.

Gawain dutifully sets out on All Souls' Day to keep his agreement with the Green Knight (536; 566), and travels in the wilderness until Christmas Eve, when, after praying that he find a place to attend Christmas mass, he catches sight of a magnificent castle (733-67). He is promptly admitted and welcomed to this castle, and here celebrates Christmas in good courtly fashion. When he is preparing to leave and continue his quest for the Green Knight, the lord of the castle tells Gawain that the Green Knight dwells nearby, and insists that Gawain spend the remainder of the time until New Year's at the castle (1068-78). The lord proposes an exchange-of-winnings game: he will go hunting, Gawain can stay at the castle, and at the end of each day, he and Gawain will exchange whatever they have 'won' that day (1092-1111). As Gawain lies abed the next morning, the lady of the castle enters his chamber and playfully traps him in bed, demanding that he teach her about courtly love. Gawain responds with the utmost courtesy, assiduously ignoring the sexual overtones of the lady's overtures, and escapes the situation having exchanged with the lady only a kiss (1178-1308). This kiss he duly passes on to the lord that evening as his portion of the exchange of

winnings (1385-90). A similar scenario ensues the following day (1469-1557; 1637-40). On the third day, which is the day before Gawain's appointment with the Green Knight, the lady, having failed to seduce Gawain physically, offers him a love token. When he refuses a ring, she offers him instead a belt, which, she says, will protect its wearer from death. Gawain, mindful of his coming encounter with the Green Knight, accepts the belt, goes to confession and is shriven, but does not give the belt to the lord, as their game requires (1731-1884; 1934-37). Gawain leaves the castle and rides to meet the Green Knight (2004-76). The Green Knight swings at Gawain's neck twice without touching him, then, on the third blow, leaves a shallow gash (2259-2314). He reveals that he is the lord of the castle, named Bertilak, that he arranged the seduction test, and that Gawain has received the cut on his neck because he was dishonest in keeping the lady's belt when he should have returned it to the lord. His fault, according to the Green Knight, is forgivable because it was motivated by his love of life; therefore the Green Knight gave him only a slight blow (2338-68; 2343-45). Gawain rides back to Camelot, in his view completely disgraced, wearing the belt as a sign of his failure (2485-88; 2505-09). His good-humored but imperceptive fellow-knights, however, think his adventure has been a success, and start wearing belts similar to Gawain's as signs of the renown of the Round Table (2513-22).

Gawain is renowned as the knight most well versed in the art of courtesy. He ought to be an exemplar of courtesy, and indeed, with the notable exception of keeping the lady's belt when he should have returned it to the lord, Gawain does everything by the book. He keeps his word and seeks out the Green Knight to receive his return blow, cheerfully and cleverly enters into the festive atmosphere of Hautdesert at Christmastime (for example, 1312-18), offers all of

the requisite compliments to the lady of Hautdesert and her mysterious elderly companion (970-76), and finally walks the necessary fine line between chastity and courtesy, emerging from his three temptations by the lady with both his virtue and his charm intact. Indeed, the Green Knight excuses Gawain's failing in taking the garter as slight (2366-68). Ultimately, however, the Green Knight's test has required of Gawain more than simply acting 'by the book'. From the first fitt, the Green Knight has repeatedly tempted Gawain to do the obvious thing and to dispense with serious cogitation on the nature of the challenge which he has been facing. The key to complete success in the face of the Green Knight's challenge, however, is not simply to fit an old reaction to a new circumstance, but rather to face the unfamiliar with a curious and nimble mind. Gawain should have known to be on his guard at Hautdesert, and thus should not have fallen into the lady's trap of offering him the belt. Further, he may well have had it within his power to discover the identity of his host and of the Green Knight, and by that means also to avoid falling into the trap of the belt. Gawain's failure has not been a failure of the flesh only, but also a failure of the mind.¹⁸⁰ He has been cowardly, not just in accepting the belt for fear of death, but also in embracing a concept of courtesy rendered both defensive and selfish by its unwillingness to engage with an Other.

Beginning in the first fitt, Gawain makes a series of small interpretive errors which seem insignificant individually, but when considered corporately, paint a picture not only of interpretive failure but also of moral failure. It scarcely occurs to the reader to blame Gawain for his response to the Green Knight's challenge, yet certain small details make his first interaction with the Green Knight seem ill-considered. He is not obligated by the terms of the challenge to

strike off the Green Knight's head. The rules of the game stipulate only that he "strike a strok" in exchange, later, "for anoþer" (287) delivered by the Green Knight; thus, he would seem to be free to give only a token blow. Furthermore, the Green Knight never explicitly states that the axe he carries is the weapon with which the blow must be struck:

If any so hardy in þis hous holdez hymselfen,
Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
þat dar stifly strike a strok for anoþer,
I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,
þis ax, þat is heué innogh, to hondele as hym lyketh,
And I schal bide the fyrst bur as bare as I sitte.
If any freke be so felle to fonde þat I telle,
Lepe lyztly to me and lach þis weppen—
I quit-clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his awen—
And I schal stonde hym a strok, stif on þis flet,
Ellez þou wyl dist me þe dom to dele hym anoþer
Barlay (285-96).

The Green Knight alludes to the axe, not as the weapon, but only as the *prize* he will give to the man who takes up his challenge. The Green Knight's challenge takes on a riddling character: why could not Gawain strike the Green Knight, not with the axe he carries, but with the holly bob?¹⁸¹ A sharp wit and a bit of creativity on Gawain's part, then, could turn the exchange of blows into the harmless "gomen" (283) which the Green Knight claims it is.

Even were Gawain to realize that he could deliver a token blow or a blow with the holly bob, an element of threat remains in the Green Knight's challenge. What is to prevent the Green Knight from striking a lethal blow with a lethal weapon, even if Gawain chooses not to? Gawain is apparently left with a choice either to neutralize the threat to his life immediately or to strike a gentler blow and count on the Green Knight's good will and sense of fairness later on. Were he listening attentively, however, Gawain would see that the Green Knight to

some extent allays even this fear. The Green Knight makes an oblique suggestion that he will strike a blow similar to the one Gawain strikes when he restates their agreement, that he will “foch þe [, Gawain,] such wages / As þou deles me today” (396-97). Gawain can perhaps be forgiven for missing this subtlety, however, insofar as it is stated somewhat indefinitely, and appended to the rules of the game long after the game is initially introduced. This significant phrase aside, striking off the Green Knight’s head does seem to be the prudent course insofar as it is likely to remove the unpleasant necessity of receiving a blow in return. It is also the course of action to which the Green Knight invites Gawain by presenting his bare neck for the blow (417-20). The Green Knight’s eagerness to have his head removed, however, presents Gawain with another opportunity to ponder whether such a course of action is wise—especially given his challenger’s unusual color and the related possibility of unusual faculties. But Gawain instead draws a direct line between problem and solution and blocks out the static. Killing a guest at dinner is normally condemnable, but since both Arthur (372-74) and the Green Knight (417-20) tacitly assent to this course of action, it seems impossible to derive anything but the faintest whiff of disapprobation for Gawain from this incident. Only as the poem progresses does it become clear that Gawain’s response to the Green Knight’s challenge is paradigmatic of his subsequent interactions.

The narrative further illustrates Gawain’s incuriosity by his recurrent failure to discover the names of those he encounters.¹⁸² When Gawain accepts the Green Knight’s challenge, the Green Knight lays out the terms of the contest with legalistic thoroughness. He begins by requesting to know Gawain’s name: “‘Fyrst I epe þe, hapel, how þat þou hattes / Þat þou me telle truly, as I tryst may’” (379-

80). Gawain responds truthfully with his name, as the Green Knight has requested. Gawain, upon learning that he must seek out the Green Knight in order to receive his blow in return, similarly requests that the Green Knight reveal his name:

‘Where schulde I wale þe?’ quop Gauan. ‘Where is þy place?
I wot neuer where þou wonyes, bi Hym þat me wrozt,
Ne I know not þe, knyzt, þy cort ne þi name.
Bot teche me truly þerto and telle me howe þou hattes,
And I schal ware alle my wyt to wynne me þeder—
And þat I swere þe for soþe and by my seker trawep’ (398-403).

Gawain’s inquiry into the Green Knight’s name and affiliation is motivated by practicality, as well it might be: he is initially concerned with the question of location—*where* will he find the Green Knight—not with the question of name.

The Green Knight defers Gawain’s request to know his name and home. He will reveal “my hous and my home and myn owen nome” (408), he says, after Gawain has struck his blow. If he does not reveal these things after the blow is struck, says the Green Knight, Gawain will be released from his promise to seek out the Green Knight’s blow in return (410-11). This promise designedly reinforces the apparent inevitability of the outcome for which Gawain already wishes. If the Green Knight is dead, and thus unable to tell Gawain his name, then Gawain need not fear receiving a blow in return nor worry about how he is to find his challenger. After the blow has been struck, however, the disembodied head of the Green Knight duly reveals the requisite information about name and home—after a fashion: “‘Þe Knyzt of þe Grene Chapel men knowen me mony; / Forþi me for to fynde, if þou fraystez, faylez þou neuer’” (454-55).¹⁸³ The Green Knight has not quite done what he promised. Rather than reveal his ‘owen nome,’ his house and home, he reveals to Gawain a title (not a name) and a

'home' which are pseudonymous and veiled. Furthermore, the Green Knight does not even quite seem to be telling the truth when he says that many men know him as the Knight of the Green Chapel. Gawain will discover on his journey to find his adversary that almost no one has heard of such a man (703-08).

The oblique nature of the Green Knight's revelation of house and home is evident in retrospect, but it is also discernible in the moment. The Green Knight has essentially revealed *only* a place at which he may be found—the Green Chapel—and *no* name. Further, he admits that the title he reveals to Gawain is the one by which *many* men know him, but an unspoken possible corollary to this statement is that *some* men know him by a different name. He has also revealed the instrumental truth rather than the whole truth. The information he has given Gawain is *sufficient* that Gawain may find him: "'Forþi me for to fynde, if þou fraystez, faylez þou neuer'" (455). Again, the unspoken second half of this statement is that the Green Knight might have said more, but sticks to only that which is necessary. Interestingly, in foregrounding location rather than name and in revealing the instrumental truth rather than the whole truth, the Green Knight is repeating the preoccupations expressed by Gawain when Gawain initially asked for his name. Gawain's interest in the Green Knight did not really require a name, but only the means whereby the Green Knight might be found.

Gawain, evidently satisfied with the information he has received, does not question the Knight further about his name or home. No doubt this is partly because he is overcome by the shock of the Green Knight's ability to retain his vitality with head detached from torso. It would be difficult to blame Gawain for failing to insist on the precise terms of his agreement with the Green Knight,

given the circumstances. Nevertheless, the seeds of a pattern are beginning to become clear even at the conclusion of the first fitt. Gawain does not shrink from delivering to a guest a blow which he believes will be deadly, and he expresses no interest in the guest's singular person, affiliation, or name, except insofar as this knowledge is necessary for the fulfillment of the challenge which has been posed to him. Gawain's actions in this first section are reactive, incurious, and predictable. Even his initial acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge is a reaction to the fact that Arthur accepts it first. It is difficult to imagine Gawain doing otherwise than he does in the circumstances, but then again, insofar as he is meant to be the quintessence of courtesy, and insofar as his emblem of virtue, the pentangle, requires perfection, it is not inappropriate to judge him by a high standard. All of these early failures of insight, precision, and imagination become more significant in light of Gawain's later actions.

Gawain is welcomed to Hautdesert with generosity and curiosity. In quick succession, he is welcomed, disarmed, undressed, sumptuously re-dressed, fed, and tactfully questioned about his identity and quest (813-907; 1046-67). Inquiry naturally accompanies hospitality, and the courtiers seem genuinely interested to learn from and about their guest (915-23). Gawain's attitude toward his hosts contrasts notably with their curiosity of spirit. Though the courtiers have quickly discovered his name, Gawain does not reciprocate. Gawain studies his host, noting carefully his imposing physique and noble bearing (842-49), but makes no attempt to discover his name.¹⁸⁴ Perhaps, one might object, Gawain learns the lord's name but this is simply not recorded in the text. We know that Gawain is in fact ignorant of the lord's name, however, because later, Gawain follows up on the revelation that the lord and the Green Knight are one and the same by finally

inquiring of him his name (2443-45). Gawain also fails to inquire after the names of the lady of the castle and her mysterious elderly companion. The elder lady, the Green Knight will later reveal, is Morgan le Fay, Gawain's aunt, Arthur's half-sister, and a notable adversary of Arthur's court (2446-66). Had Gawain known this highly significant piece of information, he would perhaps have suspected that there was more to Hautdesert than met the eye.

Gawain's failure to discover such basic information as the names of his hosts and significant members of their court solidifies an account of his character which has erstwhile seemed speculative and judgmental. Gawain, and thus, it would seem, the account of courtesy of which Gawain is the ideal, is not interested in other people. At Hautdesert, he rises to his reputation by engaging in polite banter (for example, 970-76; 1010-15), feasting (for example, 995-1019) and game-playing (for example, 1024-26). But his failure to ascertain any names suggests that his 'courtesy' is undertaken out of concern for his reputation, not out of any sense of genuine openness or desire for friendship.

Gawain may feel that he requires no introductions to these people, since they are so obviously 'just like him.' The lord of the manor encourages this fallacious notion when he tells Gawain,

'Ȝe ar welcum¹⁸⁵ to welde, as yow lykez,
Pat here is; al is yowre awen to haue at yowre wylle
And welde''' (836-37).¹⁸⁶

If, however, Gawain does feel that the castle and its inhabitants are simply 'his own' in the sense that they are mirrors of his personality and courtly concerns, he is mistaken in not recognizing that the castle is part of the Green Knight's test for him.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, to take an interest in another only because he or she is just like

oneself is really only an elaborate form of self-love: one is interested in one's reflection as presented in the other. The courtiers at Hautdesert do not assume that Gawain is fundamentally similar to them, but instead make inquiries of him which serve at once the causes of friendship and caution. Gawain's failure to reciprocate shows that he is uninterested in the former and unconcerned about the latter. Like Camelot's, Gawain's veneer of courtesy and openness masks his fundamental failure to encounter an Other with anything but hostility. Gawain can respond with friendliness only to those whom he perceives as similar to himself. His apparent courtesy and openness with members of the court at Hautdesert is revealed as simply self-love and conceit by his complete failure to reciprocate any of their curiosity.

Apart from the motif of (not) seeking after names, Gawain also exhibits a kind of incurious sloth when the lady of the castle attempts to seduce him.¹⁸⁸ The lady offers Gawain the opportunity to take his own implicit view of his relationship with the court at Hautdesert to its logical conclusion. Her test for Gawain concerns the nature of courtesy: Gawain's courtesy, not just his fidelity, is under scrutiny.¹⁸⁹ Gawain responds in the way we have come to expect him to: by the book, but unimaginatively, and hence, with a subtle lack of grace. Indeed, in his encounters with the lady of the house, Gawain's courtesy seems, not a positive virtue akin to kindness, friendship, or generosity, but rather a technique of politeness useful for getting out of uncomfortable situations and avoiding sin (1013).

The nature of the seduction test invites Gawain to reconsider the literal terms of lord's generous welcome—is it the case, in fact, that one can ever truly say "what's mine is yours"? Gawain, accepting the welcome offered by a

mysterious court, has acted as though his surroundings were coextensive with himself—as if he might ignore and deny the mystery around him, resting content in the idea that his new acquaintances are simply extensions of his own ego. He has taken the lord literally at his word. The lady's advances, by clarifying the implications of his view, implicitly ask Gawain to reconsider this position: "'Ȝe ar welcum to my cors,'"¹⁹⁰ she says,

'Yowre awen won to wale,
Me behouez of fyne force
Your seruant be, and schale' (1237-40).

Reprising her husband's language, "Ȝe ar welcum" and "yowre awen,"¹⁹¹ the lady offers Gawain the opportunity to understand that the lord's welcome was a temptation to which he has already succumbed; a test which he has already failed. Gawain's person is not coextensive with the lord any more than Hautdesert is coextensive with Camelot. Consistently to think otherwise is to hold such foolish views as that one should treat one's host's wife as one's own. In the same way that the Green Knight's entry into Camelot revealed that Camelot's apparent openness was insincere, so too does the lady's lewd invitation show that complete openness or generosity between a host and guest is neither real nor good.

As usual, Gawain's response to the lady's invitation and implicit challenge is not so much bad as lukewarm and uninspiring. If he were to hear the critique implicit in her offer, he ought to become more alert to his surroundings, more aware of the things he does not know, and more inquiring. Instead, Gawain continues in his complacency. Having once been surprised in his bed, Gawain takes no measures to prevent this happening a second and third

time. He does not get up early in order to prevent being surprised in bed (1469; 1686-87; 1731-32; 1742-56). He does not bar the door. Indeed, between seduction attempts, Gawain blithely continues to enjoy himself with the ladies of the castle, apparently undisturbed by the lady's advances and unconcerned about how to avoid them (1311-18; 1558-60). If he does not sleep with the lady, it is partly because he knows this would be wrong (1773-75), but partly also because he is not interested in lovemaking. His upcoming meeting with the Green Knight, the narrator tells us, has decreased his interest in love (1284-87). Though this indifference to the lady's wiles protects Gawain from active sin, it also seems emblematic of Gawain's blameable self-love. He is so far removed from interest in his hostess that he is not attracted to her even though she is more beautiful than Guinevere (945).

Gawain's fault amounts to a lack of initiative.¹⁹² Instead of being an active moral agent, Gawain allows events to wash over him. The extent of his virtue is to respond to challenges that are put to him; to rise (barely) to the occasion. At Hautdesert, Gawain ought to recognize that he is being denuded of his defenses. He ought to recognize that the welcome he receives is not simply welcome. This is the case not only because, as he will discover, the lord and lady of Hautdesert are testing his virtue, but also simply insofar as welcome is never simply welcome.¹⁹³ Gawain does not do justice to Bertilak unless he recognizes that he may also be the Green Knight. One does not do justice to any host unless one understands that he may also be a judge, an enemy, or, to put it in its most general terms, someone very different from oneself. To say this is not to make a negative judgment upon hosts: a friend can only *truly be* a friend if he or she is different from oneself. If a friend is simply an 'other self,' then friendship

collapses into self-love. Gawain shows that he is concerned only with his own comfort when he fails to make the most basic of inquiries about his hosts. Bertilak tempts Gawain into seeing a fundamental identity between himself and Gawain when he makes the potent statement that “al is yowre awen.” Gawain takes to this idea, to which he is already inclined, though he stops short of following this logic to its conclusion in that he does not sleep with Bertilak’s wife. He is, however, quick to forget about the well-fortified exterior of Bertilak’s castle and the menace it implicitly bespeaks. Welcome provides us the opportunity to be open to an Other; to judge ourselves by their standards insofar as we can discover them. *True* courtesy, then, means an *active* confrontation with an Other; an ability to dwell in the paradox that one and the same person may be both host and judge, both friend and enemy. Gawain falls short of the ideal of virtue represented on the pentangle, failing to understand that virtue is primarily relationally, and only secondarily about the integrity of the self.¹⁹⁴ The intensity and duration of his shame at his failure, however, indicate that not all hope is lost for Gawain. The Green Knight penetrates Gawain’s complacency by surprising him: neither Hautdesert nor his confrontation with the Green Knight is what Gawain had believed it to be. Gawain now wears as a sign of his failure a belt which he previously took to be a defensive fortification simply. But he now understands that the belt is a defense against sin because it is a reminder. The belt is not a wall; it is an invitation to stay awake, combining the need for openness with the need for wariness.

There is an unmistakable structural likeness between Gawain’s welcome to Hautdesert and the parables of “The Wedding Feast”¹⁹⁵ and “The Workers in the Vineyard”. Each involves a welcome of apparently limitless generosity into

an enclosed space, followed by the revelation that one has misunderstood the nature of the welcome. Because *Gawain's* story is recounted in far more detail, it fills in many of the vexing gaps in the parable of "The Wedding Feast." The eviction of the guest in dirty garments from the feast is abrupt and unanticipated. But Gawain's attitude toward his hosts at Hautdesert casts retrospective light upon "The Wedding Feast": clearly Gawain has not performed his portion of the work necessary to be a good guest, and the fault of the guest in dirty garments seems similar. Likewise, the workers in the vineyard are not awake to the possibility that their employer's designs may exceed their expectations, just as Gawain fails to be alert to his surroundings because he has closed his eyes to surprises. The reproduction of the parabolic technique of welcome followed by rebuff in *Gawain* suggests that, just as interpretive correctness depends upon moral uprightness in the interpretation of parables, so does the interconnection of the moral and the interpretive realms abide beyond the sphere of parables alone. The lesson of this nexus of parables and story for the interpretation of parables, on the other hand, is not that the interpretive walls of parables are too high to be scaled or the interior of the castle too deceptive to be understood. Rather, the parables are like Hautdesert: one must request entry, and once inside, one must be prepared to continue to work to see one's host on his terms rather than on one's own. Further, one's ability to understanding what is required in a given situation depends upon the application of creativity and attention to it.

Meditating on the nature of moral action in Gawain's case also recalls another theme of parables articulated particularly in *Cleanness*. A spectrum of modern interpreters of the parables, including Dodd, Dupont, Kermode, and

Snodgrass,¹⁹⁶ agree that the parables of Jesus are critically concerned with the imminence of judgment and the necessity of action in light of the anticipated judgment. *Cleanness* suggests, alarmingly, that while judgment is real and serious, it is very difficult to discern what sort of action is appropriate in light of this judgment. *Patience* approaches the same issue from a different angle, showcasing the effectual action of the Ninevites when faced with judgment. Though the judge in *Gawain* is different, the imminence of judgment and the need to live up to this judgment in the poem connect *Gawain* at once to the manuscript broadly and to the parabolic concerns of the manuscript in particular. Gawain is ever aware that his day of reckoning is near, but he misunderstands the nature of the test that he is to undergo. He is shriven of his sins at Hautdesert before setting out to meet the Green Knight (1876-84), only to discover when he meets the Green Knight that he did not even know which sins he needed to confess. If the nature of the test were truly opaque, then *Gawain* would offer a perspective similar to *Cleanness*: that judgment is real but that the appropriate preparation for judgment is well nigh indiscernible. *Gawain* suggests through its protagonist's interpretive sleepiness, however, that alertness and willed initiative would have illuminated Gawain's test for him. A truly courteous approach to Gawain's adventures, incorporating careful thought, openness to the possibility of surprise, and, interestingly, greater boldness in speech and action, would have allowed Gawain to navigate his test more wisely.

Pearl: *Heavenly Courtesy, Freedom, and the Self in the New Jerusalem*

The paradigm of courtesy that animates *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* illuminates and shows the significance of images of courtesy in *Pearl*. 'Cortaysye'

is the link-word in section eight of *Pearl*, used first by the dreamer. He is trying to understand how it is possible that the Pearl-Maiden should be queen of heaven when he knows that this title belongs to Mary. He expresses his doubts about the Pearl-Maiden's claim by describing Mary's uniqueness:

'Now, for synglerty o hyr dousour,
We calle hyr Fenyx of Arraby,
Pat fereles fleze of hyr Fasor—
Lyk to þe quen of cortaysye' (429-32).

For the dreamer, Mary's unique perfection is her relevant characteristic, and the one that inflects her other virtues, such as her courtesy. This is 'courtesy' taken in its most literally 'courtly' sense: Mary is 'courteous' in that she is the sovereign of a court.

The Pearl-Maiden, however, adopts the diction of courtesy, explaining how, without denying the Virgin's singular place in the heavenly kingdom, the Virgin's very courtesy is what carves out a place beside her for all of the saved.

'Pat emperise al heuenez hatz—
And vrþe and helle—in her bayly;
Of erytage zet non wyl ho chace,
For ho is quen of cortaysye.

'The court of þe kyndom of God alyue
Hatz a property in hytself beyng:
Alle þat may þerinne aryue
Of alle þe reme is quen oþer kyng,
And neuer oþer zet schal depyue,
Bot vchon fayn of oþerez hafyng,
And wolde her corounez wern worþe þo fyue,
If possyble were her mendyng' (441-52).

Courtesy, says the Pearl-Maiden, is indeed characteristic of the Virgin Mary. But its very character is to reject jealousy and to rejoice in the good that is given to all comers. Courtesy, then, is relational, requiring openness and genuine good will. This is one side of the courtesy lauded in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Yet for

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pure openness and complete lack of self-regard would mean self-immolation. This is, in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an earthly truth insofar as a person, like Troy, is liable to destruction by the hostile. But it should also be, logically speaking, a heavenly truth, for in the presence of God, human selfhood ought to melt into that which exceeds it incalculably in every respect. Yet the Pearl-Maiden, continuing to use the example of the Virgin Mary, explains that the sovereignty of all of the saved does not mitigate the great sovereignty, “ouer vus ful hyze” (454), of the Virgin. The saved are not simply enfolded into God, nor even into a single unified mass with each other, but each retains her singularity in the midst of their shared sovereignty and concord. The integrity of the pentangle is preserved in both its aspects of wholeness and of outward-looking virtue. Fittingly, Gawain’s shield, too, takes the Virgin Mary as emblematic of this account of virtue.

The Pearl-Maiden goes on to use another image which explains the heavenly court, not just with respect to its human members, but also in relation to the divine. Here, the relevant image is the body of Christ:

‘Of cortaysye, as saytz Saynt Poule,
Al arn we membrez of Jesu Kryst:
As heued and arme and legg and naule
Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste
Ryzt so is vch a Krysten sawle
A longande lym to þe Mayster of myste’ (457-60).

Courtesy entails participation in a court and fealty to a lord. This participation and fealty in turn grant a paradoxical equality by virtue of membership in something greater than oneself—an elevation of individual personality effected only by acceptance of the hierarchy. This elevation does not eclipse particularity,

according to this image, for the different souls form different parts of the body of Christ.

Pearl's use of the image of a pearl, anchored in "The Pearl of Great Price," offers further reflections upon the concept of courtesy.¹⁹⁷ Polyvalence ill used by the dreamer shows, as chapter three has suggested, that interpretation requires preliminary humility; humility which in *Gawain* correlates to openness to an Other. But polyvalence well used in *Pearl* shows that humble interpretation allows the reassertion of individual agency. The willfulness which has been a stumbling block for the dreamer becomes, in his transformed perspective, the agency which allows him to offer his particular perspective for the communication of divine mysteries. In "The Wedding Feast" as told in *Cleanness*, agency is problematized along with interpretation. Even the host's servants have trouble exercising their own wills in service to the host: their instincts are often wrong regarding who should be invited to the feast and in what order they should be seated. The dreamer in *Pearl* has a series of similar experiences: the maiden rebukes him repeatedly for linguistic faux-pas which show that he has not understood her. In his interpretation of the critical image of the pearl, however, his perspective develops. Even at the poem's outset, the dreamer's interpretive stance with respect to "The Pearl of Great Price" has something to recommend it, though it is in other ways flawed. By the poem's end, however, the dreamer is able to do what the Pearl-Maiden has been doing all along; namely, to exercise his linguistic creativity in the service of his faith, extrapolating upon the image of the pearl in order to feed his devotion and to develop his understanding.

When the dreamer enters into the wordplay required by the poem's concatenating form,¹⁹⁸ he often reveals his inappropriate and idiosyncratic interpretive stance by the way he uses link words. In section four, the pearl maiden critiques the dreamer's limited capacity for discernment, making particular use of the section's link word, 'deme.' The dreamer is blameworthy, she says, if he proudly refuses to trust in anything which he cannot discover by his own reason (301-12), trusting only in "þat hys one skyl may dem" (312). Since the dreamer has claimed that he intends to live with the pearl maiden in the paradisaal land across the river which separates them (283-88), she next asks him whether he judges ('deme') that he has spoken rightly (313-14): should he not have asked permission to cross the river rather than asserting that he will do so (315-16)? Finally, she explains, God only allows ('deme') those people to cross the river who have passed through death (318-24). The dreamer responds unreasonably, accusing the pearl maiden of unjustly excluding him; an exclusion which she has just attributed to God's justice, not her own will: "'Demez þou me,' quop I, 'my swete, / To dol agayn? Þenne I dowyne'" (325-26). Whereas the pearl maiden, in her use of 'deme,' has sometimes attributed agency to the dreamer, asking him to consider whether he has spoken rightly, the dreamer's use of 'deme' makes him a helpless victim of her cruelty. In his very use of this word signifying 'judgment,' the dreamer has shown the severely limited nature of his own judgment and understanding. The Pearl-Maiden is in fact inviting the dreamer to greater freedom: if his judgments were better aligned with reality, he would better be able to see that he has the power to escape despair. The dreamer, however, ironically denies his own agency at the same time that he is in fact

exercising a problematic agency, setting his own sense of justice up in contradistinction to God's.

The dreamer also has a tendency to get caught up in the beauty of language to the detriment of its meaning. In the maiden's account of the pearl of great price, she calls this pearl both "mascellez" ["spotless"] (732) and "makellez" ["peerless"] (733). Soon thereafter, the dreamer, having learned that the maiden is a bride of Christ, calls her "A makelez may and maskellez" (780), intoxicated by the beauty of a language which can represent verbally the connection of purity and superlative excellence. The maiden is quick to correct this error, explaining that although she is 'maskellez,' spotless, she is one of a hundred and forty-four thousand brides of Christ: by no means matchless, nor claiming any special place for herself above any of the other brides (781-86). The dreamer's inordinate love for the pearl maiden causes him to identify her thoughtlessly with the singular pearl of great price, as he has done many times before. In so doing, he obstructs his ability to see the way in which human concepts of rank are inappropriate in the heavenly context. When the dreamer commits linguistic gaffes, he is doing something analogous to the marshal and the steward in *Cleanness'* "The Wedding Feast." He is attempting a poetic interpretive move in imitation of the Pearl-Maiden, whereas the marshal and the steward attempt the same procedure in imitation of the host. But each fails to give the correct content to the form laid down by his superior.

With the image of the pearl, however, the dreamer meets with better success, even initially. In the dreamer's reading of the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price," discussed in chapter three, above,¹⁹⁹ he correctly discerns that the titular pearl of great price signifies that which is most precious. Thus, he uses the

image of the pearl of great price to signify that which *he* considers most precious: his dead daughter. The dreamer's longing for something beyond his grasp represents a good sentiment from the perspective of the poem, even if the object of his longing is misplaced. The proliferation of pearls in the dreamer's vision, thus, seems like an accommodation of divine truth to the dreamer's singular imagination. Just as the merchant in the biblical parable sets out to find good pearls only to be diverted by the discovery of a pearl which is unquantifiably greater than the rest, so too does the great volume of pearls which the dreamer encounters in his vision suggest that there are many *good* pearls, but that to distinguish the many from the one pearl of great price requires further discernment. The dreamer, then, is not wrong to call his Pearl-Maiden a precious pearl. His vision affirms this interpretation: in the court of the heavenly Jerusalem, despite the similarity of their heavenly reward, individuals can still be recognized in the crowd (1147). Like Dante's Beatrice, the dreamer's Pearl herself is the one who intercedes for the dreamer so that he may be granted a vision of the New Jerusalem (967-68). While the dreamer's love of the Pearl-Maiden is mis-ordered and imperfect in kind, it is in fact also that which creates the space for the dreamer's conversion insofar as it creates in him love and longing.

The parable of "The Pearl of Great Price," however, also offers a counterpoint to the affirmation of diverse human loves. The merchant, originally in search of "good pearls," sells all that he has in order to buy the pearl of great price (Mt 13:46). This suggests that all other loves must be abandoned so that a person may properly enter into the love of God. *Pearl* takes up this notion insofar as the dreamer's love of his Pearl-maiden must change in kind. The dreamer's desire to possess the Pearl-maiden dogs his attempts to be reconciled with her

and to understand her state in heaven. It also brings him close to despair, for he is not permitted to be physically reunited with her or to dwell with her the way that he did before. Thus he must abandon his possessiveness of the Pearl-maiden in order to free himself to love the true Pearl of Great Price better; an objective which he achieves by the poem's end, when he commends his Pearl-maiden to God. Love of the Pearl of Great Price, then, must be primary and must transform lesser loves, but does not destroy them per se. Thus the poem's affirmation of lesser loves is not precisely at odds with its foregrounding of "The Pearl of Great Price." This Saint Jerome affirms, commenting upon an allegorical account of "The Pearl of Great Price," wherein the 'good pearls' are the law and the prophets and the singular pearl is the revelation of Christ. The merchant, says Jerome, is like Paul, who upon finding the savior, counts the old mysteries and observances "as dung,"²⁰⁰ "[n]ot that the finding of a new pearl is the condemnation of the old pearls, but that in comparison to that, all other pearls are worthless" (*Catena Aurea* I.II.513). Like the law and the prophets, lesser goods maintain their goodness in view of the revelation of Christ. Their worthlessness is comparative, not innate.

The transformation of the dreamer's love, and thus of his ability to enter with humility into a willed engagement with the divine, is only finally effected by the moments of parabolic paradox and negation created by the dreamer's expulsion from the vision primarily, but also by retrospective reflection upon the parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard." The method of the transformation illustrates the movement of humility followed by freedom.²⁰¹ Upon awakening, the dreamer is sorrowful to have been cast out of his vision (1177-78). He responds to his sorrow this time, however, not with despair or indignation, but

with resignation: “Now al be to þat Pryncez paye,” he says to himself (1176). He abandons his former possessive approach to the Pearl-Maiden, proclaiming himself, in these final stanzas, happy simply to know that she is happy and pleasing to the high Prince (1185-88).²⁰² He also undertakes this resignation actively, willingly giving up his pearl to God with his blessing: “to God I hit bytaste, / In Krystez dere blessing and myn” (1207-08).

This entry into obedience and resignation allows the dreamer, subsequently, to gain new insight into the symbolic register that had so frequently led him astray in the past. The final lines of the poem are a tour de force of allusion, drawing together a group of images which, though disparate, are mutually illuminating:

Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laste,
For pyty of my perle enclyin,
And syþen to God I hit bytaste,
In Krystez dere blessing and myn,
Pat in þe forme of bred and wyn
þe preste vus schewez vch a daye.
He gef vus to be His homly hyne
And precious perlez vnto His paye (1205-1212).²⁰³

The final line of the poem is largely a repetition of the first line. But whereas the pearl signified in the first line of the poem was the dreamer’s lost pearl alone, the dreamer is here able to see how the image of the pearl is more broadly applicable than he had imagined. The dreamer has imagined that obedience to God—entailing as it does his separation from his Pearl-Maiden—will make him less free. In fact, however, the dreamer has been at fault as much for his rigidity in the use of images as for his overly free use of images. His narrow application of the parable of “The Pearl of Great Price” to his daughter, for example, shows not his freedom, but rather his imprisonment within his own narrow perspective. If

he could so much as attempt to see things from a perspective as large as God's, his interpretive landscape would be infinitely freer.²⁰⁴ Thus, the dreamer's interpretation of the image of the pearl in the poem's final stanza is at once far broader than the first line allows, and also more appropriate. Furthermore, the dreamer has found the world reaffirmed in his submission to the will of God: he suggests that all servants of God are "precious perlez" pleasing to God (1212). Thus, once he admits that no mortal creature, not even his own precious one, is the Pearl of Great Price, he is free once again to see that *all* of God's servants are in fact precious. The dreamer also places this multitude of pearls obliquely in the context of the superlative pearl in this passage by referencing the form of the round, white host.²⁰⁵

This final stanza also recalls the parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard" in its affirmation that God's servants are "homly hyne." The dreamer has become reconciled to the lesson of the parable, for he sees that the believer's role as humble 'hyne' can coexist with his role as precious pearl; the dreamer now trusts that the penny which is offered as a reward for good service is not paltry but generous, consistent with the soul's exalted destiny. Images and paradigms which previously limited the dreamer's perspective now serve to broaden it; to bring together things which the dreamer had not believed congruent. He now sees the reality of Christ in the appearance of bread and wine (1208-09); he sees the congruence in himself of the seemingly disparate images of the humble servant and the exalted pearl (1211-12). All of these associations are rooted in the relationship with God, which itself presents another such surprising juxtaposition: "I haf founden Hym, boþe day and nazte, / A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin" (1203-04). Only once the Prince is acknowledged as God and

Lord does his aspect as friend emerge. Humility must precede understanding, but when once it has, not only understanding but willed affection, understanding, and hence agency follow.

Poetry and the Ineffable: Critical Approaches

The approach to interpretation detailed above vindicates the use of figurative language, including parables, for the discussion of the ineffable. Whereas some modern scholars, like Kermode, suggest that multivalence exposes the arbitrariness of authoritative meaning (27), the *Pearl* poet uses linguistic multivalence as a means of discussing the freedom of the faithful interpreter. One might make an apophatic argument that all images ultimately fail to capture the glory of God. The *Pearl* manuscript's use of parabolic paradox affirms this notion after a fashion while also affirming the value of images.²⁰⁶ For paradox shows that an image holds in tension both similarity to and difference from the thing which it represents. Paradox draws particular attention to the characteristics of an image which Paul Ricoeur believes constitute the dialectic of meaning in a metaphor. The work of metaphor, says Paul Ricoeur, is a work of resemblance, "the logical category corresponding to the predicative operation in which 'approximation' (bringing close) meets the resistance of 'being distant'" (*Rule of Metaphor* 196). Thus, insofar as the *Pearl*-manuscript's parables upend expectations, they show at once that the kingdom of God is familiar in resembling an earthly phenomenon and unfamiliar in upending earthly expectations. Similarly, the multivalent image of the pearl, used well by the Pearl-maiden, and used sometimes well and sometimes poorly by the dreamer, illuminates the relation of human love to divine love—human subjectivity can

become authorized to speak about the divine. But insofar as the image of the pearl is given many meanings in proximity to each other, it is also revealed that none of the meanings are sufficient. Similarly, when the pearl of great price is associated with the lamb and with the Eucharist, mystery is reaffirmed in the identification of these diverse images with each other. Ricoeur continues, explaining that in metaphor, "'same' and 'different' are not just mixed together; they also remain opposed. Through this specific trait, enigma lives on in the heart of metaphor. In metaphor, 'the same' operates *in spite of* 'the different'" (196). The inescapable difference which resides at the heart of metaphor makes it an eminently appropriate vehicle for a discussion of the divine which does not resort to idolatry.

Cristina Maria Cervone notes a similar reliance on poetic language to express the ineffable in a number of works of the *Pearl*-poet's near contemporaries Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, and William Langland, among others. Where abstraction meets particularization, she argues, the "'other-speaking'" nature of metaphor becomes clear:

Here the specificity of words—their very quiddity—thickens abstraction. Surprising junctures of the material intangibly confect the immaterial, deliberately calling attention to language's capacity to express more than it says, and to do so in pleasurable ways. These works entice readers to notice, ruminate over, delight in and wonder at the capaciousness of metaphor, at how a figure may express more than the sum of its parts (4-5).

Focusing on the use of metaphorical strategies for the discussion of the mystery of the hypostatic union, Cervone notes a pattern of distancing achieved through metaphor which in turn points toward the mystery at the heart of the incarnation:

Writers momentarily reverse 'the Word made flesh' to render Christ's body in figure as something other than a human body, such as a plant, for instance, or words on a page. The fleeting, transitory reversal calls attention to the cognitive shift involved in understanding the metaphor. In wrestling with the problem of ineffability, medieval writers paradoxically engage a sort of *supereffability*, which I define as an understanding of sacred fullness enacted through form. A scriptural model for such supereffability may be found precisely in that Johannine expression of metaphor-that-is-more-than-metaphor, "the Word made flesh" (5).

The *Pearl*-poet, then, is not alone amongst his contemporaries in recognizing the capacity of metaphor, and especially of surprising metaphor, to speak of things by indirection²⁷ which cannot be spoken about directly.

The *Pearl*-poet posits a further analogy between the relation of a hearer to a parable and the relation of the human person to an Other. This analogy is clearest from a reading of *Gawain* inflected by a consideration of the manuscript's parables, but once recognized, is visible across the manuscript. An appropriate approach to an Other, whether this Other is one's child, whom one believed quintessentially familiar, an unfamiliar host or guest, or the Lord himself, requires alertness, good will, and openness to the possibility of being surprised. In the language of the *Catena Aurea*, it requires humility and righteousness. In the poems' discussion of interpretation and poetic creation, conditioned by the reality of God, we draw closer to God and to meaning through obedience, retaining as a gift of God our own individuality and with it our ability to participate actively in the divine life. Thus, human beings can be living metaphors in their relation to the transcendent, at once obedient images of God and also themselves in particularity. The paradox at the heart of the relationship is the coexistence of lordship and individuality, but the theoretical possibility of this paradox is made clearest by the analogy to metaphor. Just as the poet holds

in delicate tension the image of the pearl and the concept of salvation, so are we called to hold in delicate tension our conformity to the Divine life and our irreducible particularity. Ineffability persists in the tension between 'same' and 'different,' but it is a productive tension. The figurative, poetic form of the *Pearl*-poet's works, then, mimics their message.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript make a hermeneutic argument based upon the pedagogical method of parables. The parabolic concern to show the difference between everydayness and the Kingdom of God is manifested most intensely in *Cleanness*, and with various levels of intensity in the other poems. By highlighting or creating such difference in the parables he retells, the *Pearl*-poet anticipates an important element of the modern study of parables. The parabolic contention that righteousness and insight are intimately linked, similarly, is foregrounded in *Pearl* and makes appearances in the other poems. This argument in the poems reflects an important facet of the hermeneutics of parables as explored by medieval exegetes; namely, that understanding parables depends upon an initial disposition. In exploring the parabolic phenomenon of welcome and rebuff as a pedagogical technique, the *Pearl*-manuscript gives a capacious account of Divine mercy, suggesting that even those who exclude themselves from understanding divine truth by their unrighteousness or their willfulness may still be converted if they are presented with their misunderstanding by means of a shock sufficiently forceful. All of these hermeneutic musings of the *Pearl*-manuscript are taken up substantively in the manuscript's biblical parables. From thence, these parabolic lessons reverberate outward.

The difference between the earthly and the heavenly forms the substance of the misunderstanding between the Pearl-Maiden and the dreamer in *Pearl*. The link between disposition and understanding is discussed in *Cleanness*,

Patience, and *Pearl* through images of righteous characters able to read visual and lexical signs well and fruitfully when unrighteous characters are unable to understand, or misinterpret to disastrous consequence. All is not lost for such poor interpreters, however, for the parabolic method is as much intervention as it is rejection. God awakens Jonah, the *Pearl*-Maiden awakens the dreamer, and the Green Knight awakens Gawain from their complacency by a method of welcome and rebuff.

Parables emphasize the immediacy of God's judgment, and thus also the need for appropriate action in the face of this judgment. The nature of this action, *Pearl* and *Gawain* suggest, is to begin in humble and attentive openness and to pass therefrom to creative and attentive engagement with the Other.

The implications of the lens of parable applied to the *Pearl*-manuscript are not limited to arguments: the poems' pervasive imagery of enclosure speaks to the dialectic between inside and outside which features prominently in Jesus' account of the parabolic method. In *Cleanness*, the poet shows the interpretive difficulty illustrated by the instability of the relationship of insides to outsides, whereas *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* investigate the porousness of the boundary between 'outsider' and 'insider.' Furthermore, foregrounding the manuscript's parables allows repeated patterns of plot to emerge—such as the likeness of "The Wedding Feast" to Gawain's reception at Hautdesert—shedding new light on the meaning of those episodes which are not obviously parabolic.

Finally, in reflecting on parables' use in the *Pearl*-manuscript, the reader can come to a fuller understanding of the value of poetry for a discussion of the ineffable. The diversity of image points in two ways toward the divine: first, by the association of the capaciousness of multivalence and metaphor with the

greatness of God, and second, by the necessary and obvious difference between God and any and all of the images with which He may be represented.

The overarching effect of reading the *Pearl*-manuscript through its engagement with parable is the recognition of the depth of the poems' involvement with the difficulties, rewards, and necessity of interpretation. Interpretation, in fact, is necessarily linked for the poems to moral action insofar as righteousness precedes perceptiveness, and perceptiveness in turn is necessary for the kind of creativity demanded of a moral actor confronted with the problem of dealing morally with that which he does not fully understand. A holistic account of the manuscript which places parables front-and-center reveals how very many of the poem's most central themes and images relate to parables. It offers a new account of manuscript unity, taking up the notions of interpretation, enclosure, inclusion and exclusion in order to form an elegantly patterned whole, holding in delicate balance the necessity of understanding and the appropriateness of awe in the face of the divine.

The study of the interpretation of parables intersects with some of the most provocative questions raised in twentieth-century biblical hermeneutics and literary theory. Behind the question of how to read lies a more basic concern with the nature of knowing. The *Pearl*-poet sees in parables the presence of this fundamental question, and makes it the challenge of his manuscript. The seriousness of the challenge is nowhere brushed aside—the first shall be last, the poems argue, in insight as well as in reward. Nevertheless, the poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript discern a middle way between easy certainties and darkness. Poetry, itself analogous to parable, is a singularly appropriate vehicle for understanding because it reproduces tensions inherent in human knowing. In

the flowering forth of a complex metaphor, the difference between signs and things is foregrounded alongside the insightful capaciousness of language. At a time when our understanding of the relationship between faith and reason is bifurcated between extreme skepticism and dogmatism, the *Pearl*-poet offers a vision which honors the complexities of each, remaining open to both faith and reason as ways of knowing.

NOTES

¹ I omit *Saint Erkenwald* from my discussion because its ties to the four poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript are circumstantial and fairly weak. While it shares an approximate date and dialect with the poems of the *Pearl*-Manuscript, it does not appear in the same manuscript, and is not now generally held to be the work of the same poet (Andrew & Waldron 8).

² On these themes, see Derek Brewer, Charlotte Gross, Elizabeth Keiser, James Milroy, J.W. Nicholls, and Sarah Stanbury's "The Body and the City in *Pearl*."

³ cf. pp. 7-11, below

⁴ Insofar as one can affirm that the poems of the *Pearl*-Manuscript are the work of a single author and that the author's original text is substantially reproduced in the manuscript, it is largely on the internal evidence of shared themes and ideas and shared excellence and intricacy of poetic form and imagery. The manuscript of the poems is not a holograph, since it contains a great many small scribal errors (Edwards 199), but has nevertheless been copied with some care (Edwards 197). The manuscript shows evidence of erasure and correction (Edwards 197). The four poems of the manuscript appear also to have been conceived by the scribe as a set, since the distinct poems do not align with distinct quire boundaries (Edwards 197). The fact that the four poems were copied together in the case of this manuscript, however, does not necessarily indicate a shared origin.

⁵ The primary source of the poet's engagement with the text of the Bible is the Vulgate itself. Much of the text of *Patience* and *Cleanness* is Biblical paraphrase sourced from the Latin Vulgate (Newhauser 257-58). That some of the poet's insights into his Biblical texts are related to their proclamation in a liturgical context is borne out by explicit references to the mass. To introduce his paraphrase of the Beatitudes in *Patience*, for example, the narrator explains: "I herde on a halyday, at a hyze masse, / How Mathew melede þat his Mayster His meyny con teche" (9-10). Similarly, to introduce the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in *Pearl*, the Pearl-Maiden says: "As Mathew meleze in your messe" (497).

⁶ For other arguments that the *Pearl*-manuscript presents positions dialectically, see J.J. Anderson (6-10) and Pyotr Spyra.

⁷ Similarly, J. Stephen Russell argues that the purpose of *Pearl* is to show the inefficacy of its own discourse.

⁸ Sandra Pierson Prior presents a similar argument.

⁹ Other scholars who argue that the manuscript emphasizes both continuity and disjunction include Charlotte Gross, Teresa P. Tinkle, Mary Raschko, Jim Rhodes (*Poetry Does Theology*), A.C. Spearing (“The *Gawain*-poet’s sense of an ending”; “Purity and Danger”), and Teresa P. Tinkle.

¹⁰ For variations on this argument, see David Aers, Josephine Bloomfield and A.C. Spearing (*Dream-Poetry*).

¹¹ For similar arguments emphasizing courtesy and its role in understanding God’s justice, see Elizabeth Keiser and James Milroy. Charlotte Gross, too, suggests that courtesy is a unifying theme in the manuscript, but in her estimation, the enigmatic concept of courtesy does not demystify the heavenly realm; rather, it indicates both the proximity and the distance between the heavenly and earthly realms.

¹² Similarly, Sarah Stanbury uses the word ‘parable’ in a loose sense to mean all of the Old Testament narratives contained in *Cleanness* (*Seeing* 50-66). The standard allegorical reading of the book of Jonah at the time of the *Pearl*-poet equated Jonah’s time in the belly of the whale with Christ’s descent into hell. The *Pearl*-poet assents to this allegorical meaning, referring to the whale’s belly as “warlowes guttez”—the devil’s guts (258). The poet draws a further parallel between Christ and Jonah when Jonah imagines himself crucified by the Ninevites for bringing them the unwelcome tidings of God’s wrath (96). Thus, much of the characterization of Jonah arises from noting the similarities and differences between this reluctant prophet and Christ. While in this respect the *Pearl*-poet sees allegory in the story of Jonah, Kelly and Irwin’s contention that the poem is also an allegory for the contemplative life seems strained.

¹³ For example, at the conclusion of the parable of “The Two Sons,” Jesus asks: “Which of the two did the father’s will?” (Mt. 21.31)

¹⁴ Jane Lecklider, however, is not so shy: she suggests the broad relevance, among others, of the work of John Chrysostom and of Nicholas’ Postillas on the manuscript (27-30).

¹⁵ This selection of authors is admittedly incomplete and impressionistic. Apart from the reasons for their selection adduced above, some were suggested by mentors and colleagues as particularly useful, the work of Klyne R. Snodgrass was selected because of its encyclopedic nature, and some I discovered in the course of reading the work of other scholars. I have endeavored to base my readings of the parables of the *Pearl*-Manuscript on a more solid base than simply snippets of exegesis. To the extent that I have omitted an important perspective or author on parables, however, the fault is my own.

¹⁶ cf. Harry Austryn Wolfson 71; Snodgrass 4

¹⁷ Another account of the fourfold method appears in Dante’s letter to Cangrande della Scala. A concise example of the use of the fourfold method as

applied to Scripture appears in paragraph seven: Psalm 113's reference to Israel going out from Egypt refers, literally, to the escape of the Israelites from Egypt at the time of Moses, allegorically, to our redemption by Christ, tropologically to the conversion of the soul from sin to a state of grace, and anagogically to the escape of the soul from the corruption of the world to the blessedness of heaven. The purpose of this letter is to offer a key to the allegorical interpretation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The fact that Dante's vernacular masterpiece evokes the fourfold allegorical method is one example among many of the wide cultural currency of the practice of writing and reading allegorically in the Middle Ages. For a detailed account and spirited defense of the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, see Henri de Lubac's *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Beryl Smalley's *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, especially 1-26, also offers many useful characterizations of the allegorical method, of which she is more critical than de Lubac. With respect to the use of the allegorical method on parables, Warren S. Kissinger's *The Parables of Jesus* catalogues accounts of specific parables offered by many of the fathers, Bede, and Thomas Aquinas (1-44).

¹⁸ cf. Wolfson 69. Thus, the word 'allegory' as I employ it hereafter is shorthand for all of the figurative levels of exegesis posited by medieval exegetes. It has been useful to use the term 'allegory' rather than 'spiritual meaning' because modern exegetes of the parables typically employ the former term. I use it, then, for the sake of consistency in my discussions of both time periods.

¹⁹ For example, see Snodgrass (4)

²⁰ As Wailes points out (*Medieval Allegories* 4), in the Vulgate, Matthew and Mark call the parable of the Sower a *parabola* (Mt. 13:3; Mk 4:2), but Luke calls it a *similitudo* (Lk 8:4) as well as a *parabola* (Lk. 8:9). Thus, the distinctions between these terms were insignificant from the perspective of Western medieval scholars, for whom the Vulgate was the standard text. In the Greek original, however, all of these passages use the term *parabolē*.

²¹ For example, Jesus' explanation of the parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:19-23; Mk. 4:15-20; Lk. 8:11-15)

²² for an alternate list, see Joachim Jeremias (20)

²³ Snodgrass has three very helpful appendices which detail the uses of *mashal* and *parabolē* in the OT, NT, and Septuagint (567-75).

²⁴ The Latin Vulgate, the standard translation of the Bible in the Middle Ages, generally translates *parabolē* as *parabola* or *similitudo*.

²⁵ cf. Jeremias 247-48

²⁶ This passage is based on Isaiah 6.9.

²⁷ I quote from the Vulgate. The translation is that of the Douay-Rheims. I have chosen to use the Vulgate rather than a modern English translation from the Greek—thus, to use the authoritative text from the perspective of the Middle Ages rather than the present day—because the precise wording of this passage is frequently at issue for the medieval interpreters I will investigate, whereas many of the modern interpreters I will investigate reject this passage as partially or wholly inauthentic to the historical Jesus. Other modern interpreters are interested in this passage, but the precise wording is not typically so much at issue for them as for the medieval tradition.

²⁸ cf. pp. 27-29, below

²⁹ Stephen L. Wailes' work on this passage brought this significant diction to my attention ("Why Parables?" 45). In the analogous passage, Matthew uses the verb *loquor* ("to speak") (13:3).

³⁰ Cf. also *Glossa ordinaria super Marci evangelium* 368 & 439. Citations from the *Gloss* on Matthew and Mark are by paragraph number. Where the *Gloss* or Nicholas of Lyra's *Postillas* repeat an idea presented in the *Catena*, I cite the *Catena* and cross-reference the *Gloss* or *Postillas*. This practice is adopted so that my summary can offer a fuller sense of the breadth of influence of a given idea without adding unduly to the length of my text.

³¹ "sine parabola autem non loquebatur eis" (Mark 4.34)

³² Cf. Nicholas of Lyra's *Postillae*, cited from the *Bibliorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria*, 5.234. References to the *Postillae* are to the volume and column numbers in this edition of the *Gloss*. Nicholas echoes Jerome's ideas closely thusfar, but rather than concluding, with Jerome, that the parables are ultimately accessible to the crowd's understanding if they are willing to apply their minds, he suggests that those things spoken plainly are accessible to the crowd, but that those things spoken in parables are meant to be secrets from the crowd, directly accessible only to the disciples. For Nicholas' sense of the Church's role in the interpretation of parables, see note 57, below.

³³ cf. *Glossa ordinaria super Matthei evangelium* 2504-06

³⁴ This may be inferred from the fact that, in the chapter previous to this incident, his mother and brothers are said to be outside, and thereby separated from him (Matthew 12.46-47; Mark 3.31-32).

³⁵ cf. Nicholas 5.233-34

³⁶ cf. Nicholas 5.234

³⁷ Cf. also *Glossa super Marc.* 364; *Glossa super Mat.* 2498. The *Gloss* also extracts a similar train of thought allegorically from the parable of the sower:

where the text has 'A sower went out,' the *Glossa* allegorizes that Jesus 'went out' from the Jews to the Gentiles (*Glossa super Marc.* 369; *Glossa super Mat.* 2507).

³⁸ for Bede, the unfaithful (*Glossa super Marc.* 367); see also *Glossa super Mat.* 2501

³⁹ The fact that Jesus, from his position in the boat, is closer to the swelling waves than to the crowd on the seashore could imply that parables are a pedagogical method which is particularly *appropriate* to the reprobate. Though this idea might seem unduly to stretch Rabanus' allegory, it seems conceivable insofar as other scholars concur that parables' very obscurity can have a pedagogical value. For an account of the pedagogical value of obscurity according to other medieval commentators, see pages 40-41.

⁴⁰ cf. *Glossa super Marc.* 368, where this idea is attributed to Jerome; *Glossa super Mat.* 2502-03

⁴¹ cf. Wailes, "Why Parables?" 43

⁴² cf. Remigius of Auxerre (*Catena Aurea* 1.486); *Glossa super Marc.* 395

⁴³ It is worth noting that medieval commentators do not typically argue *either* that parables are obscure *or* that parables are transparent. Rather, they tend to divide Jesus' audience members into two camps—those who understand, and those who do not. Bede's arguments, above, are a case in point.

⁴⁴ cf. Rabanus Maurus, *Catena Aurea* 1.486

⁴⁵ Nicholas of Lyra observes that, if the parable of the sower is understood as an allegory for Christ's preaching of the Word, the fact that only a quarter of the seed is sown in good soil suggests that only a quarter of Christ's audience understands his teaching (5.234-35).

⁴⁶ cf. Nicholas 5.240

⁴⁷ cf. Matthew 13.19

⁴⁸ cf. *Glossa super Marc.* 405

⁴⁹ cf. Rabanus Maurus, *Catena Aurea* 1.482-83; *Glossa super Mat.* 2512

⁵⁰ cf. Nicholas 5.235

⁵¹ cf. Rabanus Maurus, *Catena Aurea* 1.482-83

⁵² cf. *Glossa Super Mat.* 2518

⁵³ cf. *Glossa Super Mat.* 2521

⁵⁴ Matthew 13.11-17; Mark 4.11-12; Luke 8.10

⁵⁵ cf., for example, John 9.16

⁵⁶ “But,” continues Chrysostom, “he speaks in parables not for this reason only, but to make his sayings plainer, and fix them more fully in the memory, by bringing things before the eyes” (*St. Matthew* 481). This curious argument suggests that parables do two things at once: make meaning at once clearer by means of vivid imagery and less clear to the unwilling. This argument synthesizes the two strands of the tradition—parable as homely teaching device and parable as obscure—but the success of the synthesis is problematic. It is difficult to see how a parable could be a straightforward, homely simile, different from its meaning only in the way that it brings invisible truths “before the eyes” while simultaneously remaining obscure from the Pharisees, a group of sophisticated literary interpreters, lacking only the desire to understand charitably.

⁵⁷ cf. also *Glossa super Mat.* 2552

⁵⁸ cf. above, p. 28

⁵⁹ cf. Wailes, “Why Parables?” 50

⁶⁰ Nicholas, too, suggests that parables’ obscurity has a pedagogical purpose: he argues that the opacity of the parables forces the crowd to turn to the apostles for enlightenment, and thus lays the foundation for the teaching authority of the Church (5.236-37; 5.521-23). This position is somewhat anomalous insofar as its explanation for the crowd’s blindness and the disciples’ sight is institutional rather than psychological and moral. In fact, however, the disciples’ institutional authority is related to their faith and moral assent to Christ’s teaching. Those excluded are “vulgaribus turbis, vel etiam Phari[s]æis incredulis” (5.237). Although Nicholas asserts that the crowd is excluded because of its lack of institutional authority, he also notes that the Pharisees are excluded for their lack of belief.

⁶¹ pp. 21-23

⁶² p. 37

⁶³ Translations from Dupont are my own.

⁶⁴ Crossan is in dialogue with Paul Ricoeur on this point. For more on Ricoeur, see pp. 51-55, below.

⁶⁵ It is worth noting that before turning to his interpretation of particular parables, Crossan attempts a reconstruction of these parables as he believes they were spoken by the historical Jesus.

⁶⁶ On this and on several other points, Robert W. Funk's argument is similar to Ricoeur's. Of realism, Funk says: "Distortions of everydayness, exaggerated realism, distended concreteness, incompatible elements—often subtly drawn—are what prohibit the parable from coming to rest in the literal sense; yet these very factors call attention to the literal all the more. [...] It is the interplay between, or the concomitance of, the literal and the metaphorical that makes the two reciprocally revelatory. The literal and the metaphorical meanings of the parable have to be grasped concomitantly" (158).

⁶⁷ Ricoeur singles out Jülicher's treatment of parables as problematic in the sense that Jülicher's attempt to reduce parables to ethical generalizations stems, Ricoeur claims, from an inappropriate comparison of Jesus' parables to the Greek *parabolē* rather than the Hebrew *maschal* (91).

⁶⁸ cf. Funk 134-35

⁶⁹ that is, "the extravagance, the paradox, the hyperbole" (125)

⁷⁰ Ricoeur's point regarding metaphor as expressive of both sameness and difference resembles Erich Przywara's account of the *analogia entis*, an account which Przywara traces through its origins in the history of thought; most notably, for the purposes of this project, through Thomas Aquinas. With regard to the role of analogy in human knowledge, John R. Betz describes Przywara's account of Aquinas thus: "analogy functions to strike an important balance between univocity and equivocity, i.e., pure identity and pure ambiguity of meaning" (39).

⁷¹ A. C. Spearing presents a similar argument, but suggests that the analogy of physical to moral uncleanness is natural and appropriate (*The Gawain-Poet* 51-52).

⁷² In suggesting that *Cleanness* is centrally concerned with interpretation, I am following Sarah Stanbury, who argues that the poem depicts the historical development of the human ability to read visual signs (*Seeing* 42-43), David Wallace, who suggests that *Cleanness* is about the necessity of continuous interpretation and reinterpretation in light of God's transcendence (100), and Monica Brzezinski Potkay, who highlights the linguistic aspect of *Cleanness'* concern for interpretation. Just as cleanness is associated with fecundity (over and against sterile sexual acts) in *Cleanness*, Potkay argues, so too is 'clean' or appropriate language effectual where 'unclean' language is ineffectual. Scholars who focus their arguments about *Cleanness* around the parable of "The Wedding Feast" include Mary Raschko, who surveys Middle English sermonic literature and concludes that *Cleanness* takes a novel approach to the Gospel parables which form the basis of "The Wedding Feast." *Cleanness'* version, she argues, heightens the text's paradoxes in order to paint a dynamic picture of the tension between God's justice and mercy. Earl G. Schreiber argues that the parable is foundational to the structure of *Cleanness* insofar as it is the moral upon which the later exempla dilate. Schreiber also points to the guest in dirty garments'

inability to answer the host's accusations as emblematic of later failures of language associated with unrighteousness in the poem. John T. Irwin and T.D. Kelly argue for the importance of the parable and the parabolic form to *Cleanness*, suggesting that a parable is an "exoteric embodiment of the esoteric;" an initial proclamation to all followed by the audience's self-selection into those who listen and those who refuse to listen (257-59). Thus the link between the Old Testament stories and the parable in *Cleanness* is in the eschatological idea that "many are called but few are chosen," which itself is a reflection of the parabolic form. Both parables and sacraments are effective signs, Irwin and Kelly argue, effecting what they describe; thus they are a natural thematic pairing, and both are prominent in *Cleanness*. Finally, S.L. Clark and Julian Wasserman, as discussed above, consider *Cleanness'* parable central to its meaning insofar as the poem is about the division of the clean from the unclean—divisions elsewhere figured in the poem by images of cities, enclosures, and containers.

⁷³ I adopt the titles of these Gospel parables from Stephen Wailes' *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (5), who in turn adopts his from Joachim Jeremias, but modifies them for the Medieval context.

⁷⁴ cf. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 38

⁷⁵ cf. a discussion of this literature in relation to *Cleanness'* retelling, below, pp. 66-69

⁷⁶ Snodgrass, following R. Bauckham, points out that refusing an invitation to the wedding of a king's son is not so much a personal slight as a political gesture "tantamount to insurrection." This explains the king's extreme response, but, for Snodgrass, does "not remove the harshness of the parable" (318-19).

⁷⁷ Cf. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories* (155 & 162). Wailes considers the conflation of the two parables in *Cleanness* curious, and likely an innovation of the poet (38-39), given the consensus amongst exegetes of the distinction between the two.

⁷⁸ Cf. Wailes 155. For an account of the detailed allegories associated with these parables in the medieval tradition, see Wailes 153-66. In light of these detailed allegories, *Cleanness'* retelling of the parables is notable for its realism and lack of concern for allegory. Indeed, as I suggest below, the modifications it makes to the parables in fact problematize the application of allegory, showing the originality of the poet's account. Such a departure from tradition seems purposeful.

⁷⁹ Mary Raschko reaches this conclusion in her study of the two surviving Middle English gospel harmonies, *Oon of Foure* and *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, as well as in the devotional texts the *Southern Passion* and *Book to a Mother*. Of particular significance are the gospel harmonies, both of which retain a separate account of each of the parables (30). Jane Lecklider, however, notes that a

minority view, held by Victor of Capua and Peter the Chanter, did acknowledge the possibility of the two parables' conflation (28).

⁸⁰ It does not follow for Snodgrass, however, that the parable is inauthentic to Jesus or inscrutable; only that its tone is typically Matthean: "More than the other Gospels Matthew consistently reminds his readers that the unlimited grace of the kingdom always brings with it unlimited demand" (320-21).

⁸¹ "omnes quos invenerunt malos et bonos"

⁸² "vocate ad nuptias" (22:9)

⁸³ "introduc huc" (14.21)

⁸⁴ "conpelle intrare" (14.23)

⁸⁵ cf. Anderson 95

⁸⁶ cf. Anderson 94; Irwin and Kelly 238. Mary Raschko notes that the ill-dressed guest is thrown into the dungeon rather than cast outside the gates, as he is in the corresponding passage from Matthew. She concludes that a sort of rehabilitative punishment is intended by the host in *Cleanness*, and takes this as an instance of the host's mercy, designed to upset the audience's expectations (69). This interpretation stretches credibility in my view insofar as the dungeon and the punishment are described using many of the terms traditionally associated with Hell. In the dungeon, "doel euer dwellez" (158), for example, and there is "gryspyng harde / Of tepe" (159-60).

⁸⁷ These dual emphases of the parable recall N.T. Wright's contention that the themes of the parables are "welcome and warning" (176; cf. pp. 44-45, above).

⁸⁸ that is to say, the 'proud' or 'fierce,' the 'one-eyed,' and those who are 'both blind and stumbling cripples'

⁸⁹ that is, 'hillsides,' 'ridges,' or perhaps 'banks' (of streams)

⁹⁰ witness the use of a similar phrase earlier in the same chapter of Luke: "the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind" (14:13)

⁹¹ Cf. W.A. Davenport, who notes the difficulties posed by the fusing of Matthew and Luke, and characterizes the host's behavior as "inhospitable, unfair and contradictory." He goes on to point out the heightened tension between the allegorical and the literal levels of the story as retold in *Cleanness*: "The suggestion that peasants and tramps in 'gorstez and grevez' should have a clean garment handy in case somebody forced them to go to a wedding is an idea one can only accept if one abandons the literal fable and translates the garment into its allegorical equivalent, but the poet, by being realistic and dramatic, does not encourage one to make this desperate breach of decorum" (82-83).

⁹² In defense of the ill-clad guest on this point, however, this admonition to appropriate dress is articulated explicitly only in the case of the original invitees (54), not of the second and third round of guests.

⁹³ The literal element of this image is also important. The outcasts invited to the banquet in fact represent literal outcasts from the community. The inclusion of outcasts at the feast reflects Jesus' message that those considered unclean by virtue of disease and physical deformity (cf. Leviticus 12-13) will also be redeemed.

⁹⁴ cf. Wallace 99; Raschko 61

⁹⁵ cf. pp. 71-72, above

⁹⁶ I present Andrew and Waldron's suggested emendation of this line. The manuscript reads "a segge soerly" for "as segges serly."

⁹⁷ I must extend gratitude to David Wallace for the influence of his article, "*Cleanness and the Terms of Terror*," on this chapter as a whole, but in particular on this section and the one that follows. My thoughts concerning many of the specific points I raise in this section are dilations of his work.

⁹⁸ In a similar passage, the victims of the flood look to God for help, only to find that "His mercy watz passed / And alle His pyté departed fro peple þat He hated" (395). I do not foreground this passage, however, because although it is possible that it is the human victims of the flood who are crying out to God, it seems more likely that it is animals, not humans, who look to God in this passage in their time of need (387-396).

⁹⁹ *Cleanness* makes much of the fact that this process of discerning insides from outsides is much less simple from a human perspective. cf. pp. 91-98, below

¹⁰⁰ The story of Lot's wife disobediently salting the angels' food appears to have its origin in any one of a number of Hebrew sources, but perhaps most likely in the *Genesis Rabba*. O.F. Emerson observes that the story seems to be absent from Latin exegetical sources, from Old French sources, and from a number of Old and Middle English texts that might conceivably have dealt with it, including the *Cursor Mundi*, the mystery plays, and the *Travels of Mandeville*; thus it seems possible that the poet was familiar with the Hebrew sources (373-75).

¹⁰¹ Indeed, Lawrence Clopper argues that *Cleanness'* treatment of Genesis is insistently literal, and that this is the source of the poem's supposedly anthropomorphic portrayal of God ("The God of the *Gawain-Poet*" 4-5).

¹⁰² Andrew and Waldron gloss *wyk* as 'difficult' in this context. This is plausible, but perhaps we need not be blind to the second possible meaning of

this word, 'wicked.' This may be another instance of a particular choice in diction being designed to unsettle the reader's complacency.

¹⁰³ cf. Wallace: "The whole poem presents constant, seemingly random shifts in the relationship between outward appearance and inner truth; the meaning of any specific symbol is rarely self-evident" (97). Cf. also Morse, who suggests that the poem's focus on both physical enclosures and on distinctions between the insides and outsides of *people* are part of its discussion of the vessels of God, both literal and spiritual.

¹⁰⁴ The theme of insides and outsides is of persistent interest to the *Pearl*-poet. It is intimately related to the manuscript's use of parables, which are distinguished by their necessarily latent meanings, and it is a theme to which this study will return repeatedly. In *Pearl*, the dreamer's status as an outsider with respect to the New Jerusalem indicates his status as an outsider in the interpretation of parables and other difficult heavenly concepts. Thus, his exclusion is pedagogical, designed to make physically manifest to him the reality of his interpretive angle (cf. chapter four, below). Bertilak's castle, in *Sir Gawain*, is externally forbidding but internally welcoming—thus, it is a kind of image of a parable: impenetrable to an outsider but welcoming to an insider. Gawain ought to attend to both exterior and interior in forming his judgment on the nature of the welcome he receives from Bertilak and his court (cf. chapter five, below). Jonah, in *Patience*, finds himself in a series of enclosures, including the belly of the ship, the belly of the whale, and the enclosure formed by the woodbine, then destroyed at God's command by the worm. The first two of these enclosures seem to match Jonah's emotional and intellectual state of benighted rebellion, thus suggesting that exteriors accurately represent their interiors. The story of the woodbine reproduces the movement of welcome and rebuff which is also exemplified in "The Wedding Feast" (cf. pp. 141-42, below). On the texts' discussions of enclosures, see Stanbury, "Space." Others who connect the text's discussions of enclosures to the parabolic form include Clark and Wasserman and Irwin and Kelly.

¹⁰⁵ The fault of the Sodomites involves hypocrisy, not because they are breaking any explicit obligation to God, but because they are traitors against 'kynde,' or nature (698; 709).

¹⁰⁶ One might argue contrarily, however, that the poetic form of *Cleanness*, not the content of the stories it tells, is the beautiful aspect of the poem.

¹⁰⁷ Pyotr Spyra offers a vibrant insight into this use of ambiguous signs, drawing on Stanbury's argument in *Seeing the Gawain-Poet* that *Cleanness* is an account of the eras of providential history. This is true, says Spyra, but the optimist progressivism thus forwarded is mitigated by human sin: "as the time of Christ and the era of divine grace approach, men develop their interpretive faculties, but [the poet] always indicates that the need to do so, and the abundance of signs that actually require interpretation springs from the ever-widening gulf between man and God, bridged only by the coming of Christ and

the Word-become-flesh. He thus underscores the causal relationship between sin and the semiotic character of reality" (25).

¹⁰⁸ Though I address *Cleanness* first and *Pearl* second, it is worth noting that the manuscript order in which the poems appear is the opposite: first *Pearl*, then *Cleanness*. My arguments with respect to these two poems do not depend on their manuscript order. I might equally have written, first, about the synthetic perspective offered by *Pearl*, and second, about the way in which the reader is warned against complacency by the somber perspective of *Cleanness*. It seemed best to me, however, for the sake of the reader's interest, to allow the argument to unfold in stages, beginning with the partial view of *Cleanness* so as to be able to offer fresh material in framing *Pearl* as a corrective to *Cleanness*.

¹⁰⁹ In Cotton Nero A.x., none of the poems are titled.

¹¹⁰ Braeger (110-11), Mitchell (108-09), Raschko (26-121), and Thorpe (27-72) also note the positive pedagogical effect of parabolic paradox in the manuscript.

¹¹¹ The Douay-Rheims has "a penny." The New Revised Standard Version offers "the usual daily wage." Both of these are glosses on the Greek "denarius."

¹¹² Snodgrass, while concurring with this statement, suggests that the pedagogical thrust of the parable is to warn against envy (376)—this aligns it with the story of the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

¹¹³ The allegorical meaning that the Pearl-maiden gives to the parable is a deviation from the standard tradition, associating those called at the eleventh hour with those who die in childhood rather than with those converted in old age. Even the poet's use of allegory, then, is significantly original. Bogdanos suggests that this adjustment of the tradition is purposeful and meaningful, illustrating God's disregard for the notion of time (96; cf. also Putter 174).

¹¹⁴ This is not to say, however, that the Pearl-Maiden disregards the allegorical significances of the parable; indeed, her lesson depends upon the association of herself with the latecomers to the vineyard and of the dreamer with the early arrivals. For further accounts of the ways in which the text makes use of the fourfold sense of Scripture, see Beal (27-28), Clopper ("Pearl and the Consolation of Scripture" 233-34), and Robertson (160-61). Elsewhere, however, Clopper also points out that the *Pearl*-Poet makes a pattern of sticking to the literal sense when an allegorical interpretation might have the effect of smoothing out the discomfort evoked by a passage. Thus, the poet's account of the God of Genesis is insistently literal even when the literal reading tends to anthropomorphism ("The God of the *Gawain*-Poet" 4-6).

¹¹⁵ For other accounts of the emphasis on paradox or illogic in the Pearl-Maiden's retelling of "The Workers in the Vineyard," see Anderson (43-45), Davenport (44-45), Mitchell (101-09), Putter (171-75), Raschko (73-121), and Rhodes ("The Dreamer Redeemed" 135-37). For a consonant view, that the

workers view their wage as a matter of rights while the lord wishes them rather to frame it as a matter of gift, see Harper (433-36). For the opposite view, see Spearing, who argues that the maiden emphasizes the physical, earthly aspects of the parable so as to show that symbols “provide the means of bridging the gap between heavenly and earthly understanding” (*The Gawain Poet* 160-61). For a quite different approach, see Bowers, who considers the parable to be a comment upon the state of labor relations in the poet’s day (41-49).

¹¹⁶ That is, Christ.

¹¹⁷ The concatenation is twice broken in the course of the poem—once at lines 612-13 and once at lines 720-21.

¹¹⁸ cf. p. 52, above

¹¹⁹ cf. p. 45, above

¹²⁰ cf. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 101-02

¹²¹ The penny, allegorically, represents salvation (cf. *Catena Aurea* 1.ii.680), and thus in fact has a character of limitlessness. This is, of course, why the workers receive equal wages: the lord cannot in fact give more to those who arrived early because he has already given them the ultimate reward. But the fact that the ultimate reward is figured by the very limited monetary value of a penny serves to make the early-risers’ misunderstanding more relatable and to emphasizes the parable’s attempt to offend.

¹²² The influence of the parable of “The Pearl of Great Price” on images of pearls in *Pearl* has not received so in-depth a treatment as it deserves (Though Andrew and Waldron do suggest that the explicit account of “The Pearl of Great Price” is foreshadowed in the dreamer’s discussion of his own ‘precious pearl’ (n. to ll. 729-39)). A number of important accounts suggest that “The Pearl of Great Price” is a guiding metaphor over the poem’s pearl imagery, but none to my knowledge has sufficiently explored this idea in its specifics. A. C. Spearing, for example, considers “The Pearl of Great Price” to bear a significant relation to the rest of the poem’s pearl-imagery—the reader ought to recognize a glimmer of insight in the dreamer insofar as he uses the image of the pearl in a similar way to the Maiden (*The Gawain-Poet* 160-62). Spearing avoids further dilation of specific pearl images in relation to “The Pearl of Great Price,” however, arguing that the “poetry works not by distinction but by fusion” (162). Earl suggests that the pearl image is derived from “The Pearl of Great Price,’ but the significance of this insight is limited to a consideration of references to Saint Margaret (3-8). Bogdanos points out the scriptural symbolism of pearls along with their medieval social context, arguing that the multivalence of the image in *Pearl* reflects a multifaceted tradition (14-19), but places no special priority upon “The Pearl of Great Price” as opposed to other contexts. Robertson explores the connection between the Pearl-Maiden and the pearl on her breast by way of the

parable and of Psalm 14 (158-60), but does not discuss how the dreamer's perspective limits his use of the image of the pearl.

¹²³ For a further discussion of freedom in relation to the image of the one precious pearl, see chapter five, below, pp. 179-83.

¹²⁴ On the use of the parable of "The Buried Treasure" in *Pearl*, see Beal (48).

¹²⁵ *Catena Aurea* 2.74; 3.269. cf. p. 32, above

¹²⁶ Commentators who note the way in which the dreamer's and the Pearl-Maiden's distinct points-of-view (whether literal or figurative) and elucidate their differences include Clopper, "The God of the *Gawain* Poet" (1-18), Gross (79), Milroy (195-208), Spearing (*The Gawain-Poet* 126-27), and Stanbury ("Space and Visual Hermeneutics in the *Gawain-Poet* 480-82). On the dreamer's self-regarding interpretive stance, see Willan (65-69).

¹²⁷ Similarly, Gatta argues that the maiden's coldness to her father does not constitute "an indiscriminate repudiation of natural love," especially since she herself is his guide on the path to God. Rather, it is an attempt to refine and redirect the dreamer's love (247).

¹²⁸ This position is also expressed by medieval exegetes, in particular Chrysostom (cf. pp. 30-35, above). For more on the relation of will to interpretation in *Pearl*, see Clopper ("Pearl and the Consolation of Scripture" 238) and Garrison (302-22).

¹²⁹ Sarah Stanbury offers a related remark concerning *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, arguing that the variety of perspectives figured by the various gazes described in the poem give polyvalence to its scenes (*Seeing* 96-98).

¹³⁰ Several commentators argue that the dreamer's fault amounts to an inappropriate and selfish possessiveness directed toward the maiden (Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 121; McDaniel 73; Willan 65-69) or to an unwillingness to acknowledge the maiden's subjectivity quite apart from himself (Aers 63-64). Ann Wood argues from medieval exegetical treatments of "The Workers in the Vineyard" that the fault of the early-comers to the vineyard, including the dreamer, is envy (9-11). This conforms also to Snodgrass' account of the rhetorical purpose of "The Workers" (376; cf. p. 107, above), and shows the particular appropriateness of the parable, not just to the dreamer's situation, but also to his state of mind.

¹³¹ To what end does the Pearl Maiden modify Matthew's text to make the parable of the vineyard more earthy, and to emphasize labor and the passage of time? Peter C. Braeger notes that the details in *Pearl's* retelling of the parable of the vineyard raise problems and complexities for its interpretation, and concludes that the poem aims to keep its audience members in a state of waiting, like the dreamer, for their eventual heavenly reward (104-11). Lynn Staley

Johnson, too, suggests a connection between temporal details and impending heavenly reward, arguing that the setting of the parable, probably in September, indicates the proximity of the judgment and the need for repentance (“The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour” 8). Helen Barr suggests that the changes to the Biblical text connect *Pearl* to the economic realities of fourteenth century England, specifically, to the labor shortage which was causing laborers to reevaluate the price of their hire. Thus the lord’s refusal to pay wages commensurate with the amount of time worked is an affront to the laborers’ sense of justice. The laborers’ complaint, for Barr, “makes human economic sense,” and the parable unsurprisingly fails to persuade the dreamer (105-06). Ad Putter, too, argues that the pearl maiden’s minute focus on the time the laborers spend working indicates the incommensurability of revelation with any earthly sense of justice: the workers are in for a “nasty surprise” when they discover that their remuneration will not be proportionate to their labor and time (172). The dreamer fails to understand the maiden, for Putter, not because he is unreasonable, but rather because he lacks faith in an inscrutable system of heavenly reward (175). There is, however, an obvious objection to the perspective that the lord of the vineyard fails to conform to an earthly standard of justice. Though the dreamer does, indeed, think the maiden’s tale “vnresounable” (590), yet the lord of the vineyard has given to all of his workers a fair wage, and to some of them, more than is fair (Mitchell 104). The lord cannot be faulted for his cheapness; rather, he is guilty only of a seemingly senseless generosity.

¹³² Scholars who do not believe that the dreamer undergoes a conversion, or that his conversion is tinged with bitterness and resentment, include Aers (69-70), Anderson (71-72), Bogdanos (142-44), and Willan (63-64). Scholars who take his conversion to be genuine include Johnson (*The Voice of the Gawain-Poet* 146-48) and Rhodes (“The Dreamer Redeemed” 140-42).

¹³³ The Maiden also objects at this juncture to the dreamer’s epistemology, which he has expressed as based in sight.

¹³⁴ Andrew and Waldron gloss this slightly obscure passage as “your speech escaped before you thought.”

¹³⁵ Aers (63-64) and Gatta (247) argue that the maiden’s rebukes and chilliness toward the dreamer serve a pedagogical function.

¹³⁶ Thus, also, Ricoeur (cf. p. 52, above) and Wright (cf. p. 45, above)

¹³⁷ cf. Clopper: “*Pearl* describes a kind of progression toward knowledge of the deity by means of a system of analogies [...] However, the river, which bounds the Maiden’s anagogic and apocalyptic language, signals a dislocation so vast that certain questions can neither be raised nor answered. The imagination can pursue God to a revelation that God is Other without finally comprehending the nature of his otherness” (“The God of the *Gawain*-poet” 13). Stephen Russell presents a contrasting view, that the very purpose of *Pearl* is to show the

inefficacy of its discourse, and that this wholly aporetic perspective is not tempered by effective analogies (159-74).

¹³⁸ Blanch and Wasserman note a similar function in the manuscript's portrayal of miracles: "the 'meruayle' [is] a deliberately transrational sign, the function of which represents paradoxically the beginning of true understanding" (10; cf. 45-64).

¹³⁹ Cf. Ackerman, who notes also an association between the Eucharist as described in this final section and the penny of the vineyard parable. This connection appears also in a widely-circulated thirteenth-century didactic treatise, *Le Somme des Vices et des Vertues* ("The Pearl Maiden and the Penny" 620-22). Borroff (164-66), Marti (92-93), and Spearing ("The Gawain-Poet's Sense of an Ending" 214-15) also observe significant imagistic links between the final stanza and "The Workers in the Vineyard."

¹⁴⁰ cf. the use of the term "hyne" in the parable, at line 505, and in reflection upon the parable at 632. In the first instance, it is unclear whether by "hyne" is signified those who are about to be hired as day laborers, or else the habitual servants of the Lord. At 632, the Pearl-Maiden is connecting the language of the parable to the particular case of those who die young. Through baptism, she explains, these children are brought into the vineyard (626-27). When they die shortly thereafter, having done no ill (through lack of opportunity), "[p]e gentyle Lorde þenne payez Hys hyne" (629-32). In this instance, then, the 'hyne' are the day laborers.

¹⁴¹ Sarah Stanbury notes that many of these accounts of accurate perception have a visual character: conceptual understanding leads to the ability to interpret literal perception (*Seeing* 43).

¹⁴² The reactions of Saré and Lot's wife to these two groups of divine guests are more complex than their husbands' or the Sodomites', since both combine external hospitality with some degree of private disbelief or contempt. Neither are these episodes so explicitly tied to perception as the above. It is never clear whether Saré recognizes the divinity of her guests. Saré doubts her guests' promise (654-56), but does not seem disrespectful of their persons, per se. Lot's wife seems not to recognize that her guests are angels insofar as she holds them in contempt, calling them "vnsaueré hyne" (822), but perhaps her disrespect arises from defiance ("dyspyt" (821)), not from ignorance. Since Saré is only rebuked whereas Lot's wife is punished, part of the interpretive challenge is to distinguish between their respective actions. The distinction seems to be that, whereas Saré is disbelieving, Lot's wife's action of salting the angels' food (825-26) is worse because it is actively disobedient and inhospitable.

¹⁴³ Cf. Blanch & Wasserman, who also note the specifically linguistic nature of Belshazzar's failure and of Daniel's success (16-17).

¹⁴⁴ cf. Anderson (126-27); Prior (72)

¹⁴⁵ *Patience* also reprises images of insides and outsides so prominent in *Cleanness*. The use of these images is one area in which *Patience* is indeed a counterpoint to *Cleanness*, for in *Patience*, insides and outsides typically accord with each other or seek to. When Jonah is in the belly of the ship, the ship is harried by God as though Jonah's bad behavior radiates out into the vessel which contains him; when he is cast out, the ocean and the ship return to their habitual calm. Conversely, the belly of the whale, traditionally a representation of Hell (cf. Andrew and Waldron's note to line 258 of the poem), is an apt lodging for Jonah in his state of rebellion, but once he has repented (281-88; 313-36), he is spewed forth from a container no longer appropriate to him (337-40; cf. note 100, above). Stanbury also notes the symbolic appropriateness of the containers in *Patience*, for they prevent Jonah from exercising his physical faculty of sight, just as he has been unwilling or unable to exercise his faculties of mental perception ("Space and Visual Hermeneutics in the *Gawain-Poet*" 484).

The larger question of why *Patience*'s argument is at odds with *Cleanness*' is worthy of further consideration. In my view, *Cleanness*' skepticism regarding the intelligibility of God's will is not the poet's final stance on the issue. *Patience* presents a God whose intentions are clear and clearly communicated because *Cleanness* taken alone might simply cause despair. Taken together, the two poems present a more balanced perspective. It is useful for the poet to separate out these two perspectives on human and divine judgment, however, since it shows that he has considered the most extreme positions (God's will and the appropriate response are transparent; God's will and the appropriate response are indiscernible) on an issue about which he in the end attempts a middle way.

¹⁴⁶ cf. Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," which suggests a similar point. The shock of paradox invites an attitude of holy fear toward the One who exceeds and confounds every expectation. This is the flip side of self-abnegation; that which makes sense of the turn away from the self as the source of meaning.

¹⁴⁷ Eugene Vance suggests that *Pearl* engages a similar issue, posing the Platonic question of how multiplicity can be taken up into a singular Form of perfection, and responding by elaborating a theory of Platonic participation (131).

¹⁴⁸ For a counterpoint to this broad account of courtesy, see Brewer, who argues that courtesy, in *Gawain*, means primarily courteous speech (67).

¹⁴⁹ Other scholars who argue that *Gawain* concerns interpretation primarily or at least importantly include Kathleen M. Ashley, Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman, Robert W. Hanning, John Plummer, and Pyotr Spyra.

¹⁵⁰ Thus, I am in disagreement with, for example, Derek Brewer, who argues of the bedroom scenes in *Gawain* that "[t]he deliberate emphasis on 'love-talking' is unmistakable. It is equally clear here that the concept of courtesy is narrowed from what it was in *Patience*, *Cleanness*, and *Pearl*, and even from the earlier part of the poem, where it comes close to being identified with the whole

chivalric way of life" (70). Though it is true that Gawain misunderstands the breadth of the concept of courtesy and thus believes himself to be acting courteously in attending to the forms of 'love-talking,' I argue that the broader definition of courtesy present in the other poems, especially *Pearl*, ought precisely to inflect Gawain's thinking. The Medieval notion of courtesy extends far beyond simply politeness or etiquette. Indeed, Jonathan Nicholls, in his study of courtesy books and the *Pearl*-poet, argues that notions of courtesy originated in monasteries, and were not far removed from the Christian concepts of charity and grace. He observes: "Respect, deference, and politeness towards someone, are essential to a notion of living in charity with them" (22). Thus, to suggest that courtesy for the *Pearl*-poet requires a certain disposition of selflessness and genuine regard for the other, not simply an observance of the forms of politeness, is very much in the spirit of the courtesy books which codified courteous behavior in the poet's milieu.

¹⁵¹ The semantic range of these words includes 'integrity,' 'righteousness,' and 'loyalty.' cf. Gerald Morgan ("Significance of the Pentangle" 772)

¹⁵² Scholars who examine in detail the nature of Gawain's fault include Alice F. Blackwell, Karen Cherewatuk, Michael Foley, and David Farley Hills.

¹⁵³ cf. Nicholls (112-38)

¹⁵⁴ Scholars give diverse accounts of the pentangle's meaning as well as its significance. For Richard Hamilton Green and for Stephanie J. Hollis, it indicates Gawain's self-understanding as the perfection of knighthood (though for Green this perfection is tinged with ambiguity by the reference to Solomon). For Morgan, it "defines for us the moral limits within which our imaginations are to operate" ("Significance of the Pentangle" 782)—that is to say, the picture of virtue offered is contextual, not totalizing. N.M. Davis argues that the mathematical proportionality of the image of the pentangle suggests an Aristotelian account of moral virtue, concerned with balance and proportion ("Gawain's Rationalist Pentangle"). Thomas Farrell argues that the perfect regularity of the form of the pentangle illustrates the idealized character of the virtues it symbolizes in contradistinction to the messiness of reality. Thus, he suggests, it is the code of knighthood represented by the pentangle which fails the Green Knight's test; Gawain is not personally culpable (22-23; 28-29).

¹⁵⁵ On the interconnection of the moral virtues in scholastic theology, see Fr. David N. Beauregard (146-50), J.A. Burrow (49-50), and Morgan (*Idea of Righteousness* 82-83).

¹⁵⁶ The pentangle represents, not Gawain's actualized virtue per se, but rather his reputation for virtue: "For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþez, / Gawan watz for gode *knawen*" (633, italics added; cf. Hollis 273). Thus, in suggesting that Gawain's notion of courtesy is basically flawed, I do not contradict this passage.

¹⁵⁷ literally, “fyue wyttez” (640). R.W. Ackerman’s argument that the “fyue wyttez” be interpreted as the five senses (“Gawain’s Shield”) has been influential, but it is not universally accepted. Peter Whiteford argues, on the contrary, that this pentad signifies the ‘gostli’ wits. Philippa Hardman may perhaps be seen to offer oblique support for Whiteford’s position as well, since she sees a cognitive virtue in another apparently physical pentad, Gawain’s five fingers. This pentad, she says, should be interpreted according to the tradition of the mnemonic hand: it represents Gawain’s memory. If Whiteford and Hardman are correct in arguing that the five fingers and five wits represent intellectual virtues rather than physical ones, their arguments lend support to my contention that the appropriate exercise of the moral virtues depends upon active intellectual engagement.

¹⁵⁸ On the connection of the five joys to the five sorrows, see Norman Davis’ notes to the second edition of Tolkien and Gordon’s *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (94) and Cherewatuk (18-19).

¹⁵⁹ cf. Derek Brewer (68); Burrow (47); Davis (93); Morgan (“Significance of the Pentangle” 775); Nicholls (112-14)

¹⁶⁰ Brewer says that the meaning of all of the virtues on the pentangle is reducible to courtesy (68). Norman Davis, in his revision of the Tolkien and Gordon edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, also notes the great breadth of the idea of ‘courtesy,’ suggesting that many of the pentangle virtues might be incorporated into it (95). Morgan, on the other hand, suggests that courtesy as it appears on Gawain’s shield should be understood in its restricted sense of ‘politeness’ or ‘good manners’ rather than in a broader sense (“Significance of the Pentangle” 777-78).

¹⁶¹ I owe this insight to my student, Dylan Grant. Marti discusses the traditional association of the pentangle with the human form (159). Morgan similarly suggests that the pentangle represents the human soul because of the analogy of the human soul to a pentagon in Dante’s *Convivio* and Saint Thomas’ *Summa Theologiae*, both of which find their ultimate source in Aristotle’s *De Anima* (“Significance of the Pentangle” 772-73).

¹⁶² Cf. Ross Gilbert Arthur (*Medieval Sign Theory* 36; *Shield as Signum* 222-24); Spyra 113. Arthur argues that the pentangle suggests both God figured as Truth and the faith of the human person which makes him an image of God. Spyra takes this paradox of the pentangle as illustrative of finitude and infinitude per se; thus of both the analogy and discontinuity between the human and the divine.

¹⁶³ On the various Middle English meanings of ‘trawþe,’ see Burrow (42-44) and Morgan (*Idea of Righteousness* 84-86; “Significance of the Pentangle” 772).

¹⁶⁴ Anderson argues that Gawain wears his virtue, as he wears his shield, as something external to him (on this point cf. also Hanning 17 & Hollis 273-74).

For a contrasting view, see Jill Mann (243-59). Anderson suggests that Gawain is interested in merely “social virtue” as opposed to moral or spiritual virtue (181). Gawain is indeed pleasant and skillful in navigating social situations—this is what Anderson calls “social virtue.” But the pentangle shows that the social arena is the space also for serious moral action; for example, “pité” and “fraunchyse” are virtues at once necessarily relational and deeply moral. Anderson is right, as I will discuss below (184-201), that Gawain’s approach to the “social virtues” lacks moral seriousness, but it is Gawain’s approach which is superficial. The “social virtues” should not be judged unserious because of Gawain’s failure to distinguish them from superficial pleasantness. Anderson believes that Gawain never rises to the challenge of inwardness. My point is related but not identical: I do not believe that Gawain ever attempts to rise to the challenge of *another’s* inwardness—he is not open to being changed by an encounter with an Other.

¹⁶⁵ Scholars who suggest that Camelot is entirely idealized in the early lines of the poem include Morgan (*Idea of Righteousness* 54-59) and Nicholls (117-21). Those who, on the contrary, suggest that a subtle note of censure is injected into the description of the court and of Arthur include Burrow (7-8) and Green (128-29).

¹⁶⁶ On the Green Knight’s various deliberate breaches of courtesy, see Nicholls (118-23).

¹⁶⁷ Camelot resembles a number of cities in the manuscript which are confronted with mysterious or alien guests. The reaction of each city to its strange guest is a decisive moment. The Ninevites recognize the seriousness of Jonah’s prophecy, change their ways promptly, and are spared God’s wrath. The Sodomites, on the other hand, fail to recognize the divine otherness of their angelic guests, respond with their customary violence, and are promptly smitten. Belshazzar’s inability to read the message of the mysterious hand signifies Babylon’s corruption and presages its fall. In light of these other successes and failures of welcome, Camelot’s discourtesy to the Green Knight seems all the more significant.

¹⁶⁸ The castle is modern from a fourteenth-century perspective, incorporating many architectural features which would have been very much in accord with the tastes of the period (Thompson 125). On the impressiveness of the castle’s defensive fortifications and the analogy of the castle to Gawain’s armor, see Hanning (8). Ackerman argues that this description of Hautdesert owes much to an established tradition also evident in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Roman de Perceval* and to some extent based on Saint John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in Apocalypse. One of the relevant elements of this nexus of comparisons is that the castle’s decorative features are discussed along with its defensive features (whereas simply a description of defensive features is more typical of romances) (“Castle Hautdesert” 4-7). Thus, one might reasonably ask whether the defensive fortifications of Hautdesert are really meant to bear the symbolic weight with which I imbue them. Ackerman also notes, however, that mysteriousness is a

prominent feature of the Fisher King's castle, the analogue to Hautdesert in *Perceval* ("Castle Hautdesert" 4-7). Thus, though the conventional nature of the scene somewhat mitigates the threat inherent in the description of the castle as a military fortification, it does not excuse Gawain's complacency: he ought to recognize that he is being presented with an interpretive puzzle.

¹⁶⁹ Nicholls points out that the warm greeting which Gawain receives from the porter is typical of romance. Similarly, once inside the gates, Gawain alights from his horse, is divested of his armor, undressed and re-dressed in new garments, and given a meal in his chamber. All of these actions are typical of the polite reception of a knight in romances. *Gawain's* modification of the tradition is a matter of scale: Gawain's welcome is meticulously courteous and the castle to which he arrives is sumptuous (125-27); cf. also Prior (114)

¹⁷⁰ Such a failure to account for difference and such hostility to difference represents a failure to live up to the Christian notion, advanced by Augustine and widely held, that insofar as monstrous creatures are human (rational and mortal animals), they are descended of Adam and created intentionally by the perfect God (Augustine, *City of God* XVI.8). Thus, they are fundamentally good (Augustine, *City of God* XI.16 & 22) and participate in beauty: God "has the wisdom to weave the beauty of the whole design out of the constituent parts, in their likeness and diversity. The observer who cannot view the whole is offended by what seems the deformity of a part, since he does not know how it fits in, or how it is related to the rest" (Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.8). Furthermore, monstrous individuals and races are potential Christians, to whom the Apostles are called to preach the Gospel (Wittkower 176).

¹⁷¹ Stanbury notes this curious dialectic of fortification and accessibility (*Seeing* 107-08).

¹⁷² These are generic conventions, but this fact does not divest them of their significance. Cf. note 168, above.

¹⁷³ This suggestive word was brought to my attention by Kimberly Jack at the 2014 Southeastern Medieval Association conference. The *OED* records this word meaning 'to strip of clothes,' both with and without the connotation of violence (definitions 3.a. and 3.b., respectively).

¹⁷⁴ Bonnie Lander concurs that Hautdesert need not be viewed as the negation of Camelot—as an immoral actor which opposes itself to Gawain's moral chivalric code. Rather, Lander argues, Camelot and Hautdesert partake of the same chivalric code. Camelot accepts chivalry naïvely, as a matter of faith, but Hautdesert shows a deeper commitment to discovering the moral implications of chivalry insofar as it submits this code to earnest interrogation (44-47).

¹⁷⁵ cf. pp. 173-75, below

¹⁷⁶ I do not take at face value the Green Knight's revelation that the entire ruse has been the product of Morgan la Fée's malice. If the aim of the plot was, as he claims, to kill Guinevere through terror (2452-62), then it completely missed its mark in fitt 1, and this motive does nothing to explain the action of fitts 2-4. The passage on Morgan's motives, however, also suggests that she intended to test the Round Table and to see whether its reputation was warranted (2456-58). This testing I believe is undertaken in a spirit of benevolence, at least on the part of Bertilak if not of Morgan. For an alternate view and an account of the scholarship surrounding Morgan's role in the poem, see Twomey ("Morgain La Fée" 93-94).

¹⁷⁷ cf. pp. 171-72, below

¹⁷⁸ Blanch and Wasserman discuss this necessary balance linguistically, suggesting that the manuscript deals with this difficulty by arguing that the king is the arbiter of both fixity of linguistic meaning and linguistic renewal (17).

¹⁷⁹ This is a common metaphor, used, for example, in the *Roman de la Rose* and Grosseteste's *Chasteau D'Amour*.

¹⁸⁰ Plummer notes, similarly, that the entire court at Camelot fails to 'read' the Green Knight insofar as they are reduced to silence when he appears, and Arthur believes he has come to fight. The Green Knight's challenge, says Plummer, is not only about courage, but also about interpretation—the ability of members of the court to appropriately modify their behavior in light of the linguistic and physical signs which contextualize their actions. It is in respect to his linguistic and courteous excellence that Gawain is the ideal of knighthood (198-202).

¹⁸¹ Manish Sharma provides an exhaustive list of the scholars who have noted the ambiguity in the Green Knight's challenge (168-70). Cf. also Blanch & Wasserman (105)

¹⁸² Plummer notes that naming (along with making promises) is a prominent kind of language in *Gawain*, deserving particular consideration (208).

¹⁸³ On the mysteriousness of these instructions, see Burrow (27).

¹⁸⁴ Burrow notes that it is not a given in romances that a knight should reveal his name; it is a sign of Gawain's courtesy that he does so readily in response to his attendants' discreet inquiries (cf. also Nicholls 211-12). Nevertheless (as Burrow also notes), knowing Gawain's name gives Bertilak and the court at Hautdesert a distinct advantage over him (58-60). Thus it remains true that, were Gawain more alert, he would recognize the wisdom of making his own tactful inquiries. Nicholls' investigation of other romances shows that there would have been nothing inappropriate about Gawain asking to know the lord's name after giving his own (122 & 128).

¹⁸⁵ Gawain's foolishness in accepting the lord's welcome at face value is underscored by the similar welcome to the Green Chapel which Gawain receives later from the Green Knight (2240). That the Green Knight should offer such a welcome shows that welcome by its very nature is an invitation into a strange place (and in this case a threatening place).

¹⁸⁶ cf. Burrow's second chapter, particularly the following: the author's "plan required that Gawain should be 'disarmed', metaphorically as well as literally, before being submitted to his crucial tests; and this disarming of the hero required that the castle should seem to him to be another Camelot" (56). Further, "members of the household reflect back at him his own values a little distorted, as it were a slightly lopsided pentangle" (63). Similarly, though Nicholls argues that it would be inappropriate to censure Gawain for feeling at ease at Hautdesert, he also notes that this places him quite thoroughly in Bertilak's power (128-29). For Nicholls, Gawain's passivity—for example, that he agrees to Bertilak's suggestion and stays home rather than going hunting—is necessitated by his having accepted Bertilak's hospitality (130-31).

¹⁸⁷ Ad Putter points out that the narrative itself colludes in its misinterpretation by presenting Gawain's stay at Hautdesert as an unrelated episode rather than as an integral part of the story of the Green Knight, as well as by pointedly refusing to pass judgment on Gawain accepting the Lady's gift of the girdle. The narrator, in this account, plays with the audience's generic expectations in order to point to the difficulty of navigating Gawain's world. Even the seasons and the course of history are presented in *Gawain*, not as patterned and thus predictable, but as eliciting wonder (70-82). This move by the narrator is similar to the Green Knight's trickery in presenting his neck for the axe: he implicitly suggests that Gawain 'read' his challenge in a different way than its words most narrowly suggest. Anderson, similarly, reads trickery into Bertilak's attempt to lull Gawain into complacency at Hautdesert (191; cf. also Hanning 22-23). The question arising, however, from the repeated process of misdirection engaged in by both the text and its characters, is whether Gawain (or the reader) nevertheless remains responsible for his misreadings. I contend that he does because the opportunities for inquiry which Gawain misses taking are so many as to obtrude upon the consciousness of the reader. Furthermore, as Putter himself points out, *Gawain* does not rest easily within the genre of romance, but incorporates all manner of realistic detail normally extraneous to the genre; for example, the poem charts Gawain's route specifically over the countryside of England and Wales (48-49). Thus, Gawain's behavior cannot be excused on the grounds that he is simply 'following the rules' of the genre or the situation in which he finds himself. Gawain is not in an ordinary romance. Thus, when his apparently 'ordinary' behavior seems to fall short of the demands of the situation, he ought to be able to exceed the generic, just as the situation does.

¹⁸⁸ Spyra (52-58) and Plummer (204-05) argue that Gawain's failure amounts to treating simply as 'things' objects, such as the lady's girdle, the axe and the holly bob, which are in fact also acting as signs. Thus what I have been

discussing as selfish incuriosity can also usefully be regarded as *interpretive* laziness.

¹⁸⁹ For the more usual position, that Gawain's failure is *solely* infidelity arising from fear for his life, see Morgan ("Significance of the Pentangle" 782).

¹⁹⁰ This line is not quite so sexually charged in Middle English as it seems to the modern reader. Davis, in his notes to the Tolkien and Gordon edition, notes from Old French and Middle English sources the use of 'cors' to mean 'self,' not 'body' (108-09). Burrow, too, suggests that this is an idiomatic expression indicating welcome; thus that the lady's invitation is suggestive, but not lewd (80-82). Nicholls, though he claims to disagree with Burrow, argues much the same point, that the ambiguity of the line is critical to its interpretation (137).

¹⁹¹ Nicholls notes the similarity of the lady's welcome to the lord's, but concludes that the lady's offer seems more innocent because of the similarity (137).

¹⁹² Blanch and Wasserman make a similar point about the court at Camelot when they note that it is characterized by silence. Gawain's unnecessary violence toward the Green Knight, they note, is also designed to halt discourse (20-21). Even at Camelot, then, Gawain's actions are designed to bring the need for active engagement to an end.

¹⁹³ This is signified also, Plummer points out, by the duality of holly-bough and axe and of the old and young woman (202).

¹⁹⁴ Davis suggests that the five virtues enumerated on the pentangle do not connect as fully as they should to the story which follows: "pité," "fraunchyse," and "felaßschyp" in particular, he says, are included in the pentangle in order rather to fill out the form than the content (95). If Gawain's failure in "trawthe," however, comes about because of his failure fully to enter into virtue as a relational project, then the connection between the pentangle-virtues and the story which follows is elucidated.

¹⁹⁵ cf. Nicholls 117

¹⁹⁶ cf. chapter two, above

¹⁹⁷ for more on *Pearl's* use of "The Pearl of Great Price," cf. chapter four, above, pp. 116-25

¹⁹⁸ for the details of which, see p. 110

¹⁹⁹ cf. pp. 116-19

²⁰⁰ cf. Philippians 3:8

²⁰¹ Klyne R. Snodgrass remarks, regarding the parable of “The Pearl of Great Price,” that the similitude to the Kingdom applies, not just to the precious pearl, but in fact to the action of the whole parable. Thus, the parable suggests that the Kingdom is realized in the *actions* of those who seek after it. This is relevant to *Pearl*’s suggestion that agency can follow upon obedience (242; 251-52).

²⁰² Cf. above, p. 137

²⁰³ I discuss this passage in chapter 3, above, pp. 137-39, in relation to its allusions to “The Workers in the Vineyard.” The *Pearl*-poet’s work, however, very frequently bears rereading from different angles; a fact which is attested by the poet’s own frequent return to themes and images which have appeared before.

²⁰⁴ This account of freedom has its roots in Augustine; specifically in the dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*. According to Saint Augustine, God’s eternal law states that it is just for all things to be perfectly ordered (1.6). In a human being perfectly ordered, the mind is the governing faculty (1.8). Failing to obey God’s eternal law is its own punishment insofar as it is the failure of the mind to rule the person. When the person is ruled, rather, by inordinate desire, his or her mind is enslaved to inordinate desire; hence the person is less free and also less happy (1.11). Concomitantly, the mind cannot be forced by externals to be a slave to inordinate desire because those things superior to the mind are too just to enslave the mind and those things inferior to the mind are too weak (1.10-11). Thus, to reiterate, the person who obeys God’s law by making his or her mind the governing faculty is free precisely to the extent that he or she is obedient to God. The freedom herein discussed is distinct from a ‘freedom’ defined as autonomy or freedom from external constraint. A complication of Augustine’s position arises from the fact that Augustine holds that all good things are gifts from God (2.19); thus that a good inclination of the will, too, is God’s gift (cf. Stump 167). This seems to call into question the notion that good actions are undertaken freely: it would seem, rather, that God, not the human will, is the source of these actions. Nevertheless, in the context of *Pearl*, the dreamer’s existential perspective is considerably broadened by the correction of his myopic love through his perception of the Lamb, an infinitely greater object of love.

²⁰⁵cf. Marie Borroff’s association of the poem’s various images of circles, including pearls and the Eucharist, with each other (164-66)

²⁰⁶ Cf. Theodore Bogdanos’ contention that *Pearl* emphasizes both dissimilar similitude and incarnational symbol (6; 11). Likewise, Teresa P. Reed argues that *Pearl*’s use of metaphor shows a consciousness of the fact that “metaphors work only by preserving a sense of difference both within and beyond the establishment of metaphorical likeness” (134).

²⁰⁷ as Cervone would have it, “*per speculum in aenigmate*” (Cervone 19; 1 Corinthians 13:12)

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