“Paint A Vulgar Picture”: 1 An Introduction

The woman of *A Disputation Betwyx the Body and Wormes* (Figure 1) lies with her arms folded in prayer on top of her chest. Her head, adorned by a headpiece, rests on a pillow, and her body is draped with ornate clothing. She lies on top of a tomb, decorated with shields and made of what looks like stone. Underneath the tomb is a festering skeleton, covered with the shadowy figures of worms, lizards, and toads. The grin of the skeleton, whose mouth is black behind its barren teeth, is mirrored by the smile of the sleeping woman on top of the tomb.

This depiction, which Caroline Walker Bynum aptly and horrifyingly names a “female body as food for worms,” is a transi tomb, a “popular type of medieval funerary sculpture” in the fifteenth century. Transi tombs, which showed images of clothed, often ornate individuals on top of their decomposing skeletons “contrasted the putrefaction all could expect in the grave with the pleasures and privileges of the world.”

The focus on the dead, shown in contrast to a picture of a living person, seems dreadful—and frankly, disgusting—to the modern reader. But this grimness, as Walker Bynum points out, is not finite: in the “fifteenth-century dialogue” of transi tombs, “the worms do not have the last word. After suffering a decay that parallels Christ’s agony on the cross, Body triumphs in the resurrection.” Transi tombs demonstrate a medieval fixation with the relationship between corporeal finitude and spiritual permanence.

Though some transi images, as Kathleen Cohen notes, focused on the destructive aspect of prideful sin to the human body, not the potential of salvation within human flesh, others combined “traditional symbols of resurrection within the total statement of
the tomb.” Thus transi images were “not used merely as a symbol of death,” but also were “associated with the triumph over death.” At the center of resurrection imagery in a transi depiction is a putrefied body. Bodies of transi tombs are corrupted in their graves on earth so that “Christ, the second Adam, might emerge incorruptible”; therefore describing bodily decay as crucial to spiritual salvation.

*Pearl*, too, focuses on decay of human flesh: the 144,000 dead girls that populate its pages all, like the bodies of the transi tomb images, exist in two places at once: New Jerusalem, and their earthly graves. The poem vividly discusses the decomposition of the girls who follow Christ in New Jerusalem. In this discussion of the earthly body, *Pearl* presents an image of universal salvation: all of the girls, or pearl-maidens, are “clad in clot” (22) in their graves and therefore connected to Christ because of the decay that their bodies suffer. In *Pearl* this re-postulation—decomposition and rot on earth made beautiful in heaven—is accomplished both by the poem’s identification of the bodily putrefaction of the maidens and its further suggestion that that putrefaction parallels Christ’s suffering. Those 144,000 dead girls, re-imagined as graceful Queens of Christ in Heaven, haunt *Pearl*, bringing with them the specter of universal salvation.

“*The Queen is Dead*”:
*Recognizing the Pearl-Maiden’s Grave and Bodily Decomposition*

*Pearl* opens on a grave. The “spot” (37) where the Dreamer lies, moaning and groaning about his lost “perle plesaunte” (1) is the very same “erbere” (9) where that pearl was first lost. The section’s linking line, “‡at precios perle wythouten spotte” (24), emphasizes the physical location of the pearl. But the Dreamer’s fixation on the locality
of his pearl, eventually identified as his two year old daughter, is paired with an equal concern about her physical body: the Dreamer is repeatedly concerned by and interested in what his pearl is doing and feeling. Rather than just reveal the Dreamer’s grief, his opening pleas draw the reader downward, refocusing attention of the poem to what lies underneath the Dreamer’s cries. And what lies underneath is the body of a dead girl, formerly set “sengeley in synglure” (8) by the Dreamer but now “clad in clot” (22). The “spot” (12) where the Dreamer lost his pearl can be understood as a grave through the Dreamer’s continued identification of both real and imagined sights and smells that refer to the decay of a human body. And the maiden’s corporality is present in the text through descriptions of her “color so clad in clot” (22), “rot” (26), and the place “Ꝧer hit doun drof in moldez dunne” (“From Where [the pearl] mixed with molds of dun”) (30).

Returning to the burial ground of his daughter is apparently not unusual for the Dreamer; rather, he stresses that “SyꝦen in Ꝧat spote hit fro [him] sprange” (“Since in that spot it from me fell”) (13) he has often returned, not just to mourn but to look for his daughter. Again, while the section’s linking phrase emphasizes the location of the maiden, it also suggests concern about her physical status. No longer inhabiting a living place on earth, the pearl is “wythouten spotte.” But the Dreamer’s speculation about the way that the earth has marked his pearl with clot suggests that the maiden has, in her grave, been physically spotted. The two senses of spottedness are intertwined. The maiden lacks a spot to interact with the Dreamer on earth, but she also inhabits a new spot, one in the ground, which contributes to marring and changing of her body. A readerly focus on the spottedness of the pearl is supported by her potential death by
bubonic plague.\textsuperscript{11} Bubonic plague “disfigured the bodies of its victims, whether they lived or not.”\textsuperscript{12} Often victims of the plague have blistering “occur around the site of contamination; in severe cases the skin is discoloured by subcutaneous bleeding.”\textsuperscript{13} The disturbing symptoms of bubonic plague bolster the Dreamer’s acute awareness of his daughter’s marring. He worries about the way that the earth “marrez a myry juele” (23) as well as the “clot” covering the “color” of his pearl (22). The Dreamer calls the grave “Per such rychez to rot is runne” (“Where such richness to ruin has run”) (26) and notes the plant growth and “odour” (57) around it, even categorizing the different kinds of blooms covering the grave: “Gilofre,” “gyngure,” “gromylyoun,” and “pyonys” (43-44). This smell also suggests decay and disfigurement: spices were used as a cure for the bubonic plague, and thus the presence of “spysez” (25) at the pearl’s grave again draws attention to the marring, blistering, and disfiguring of the Dreamer’s daughter.

But the Dreamer’s grief over the rotten and marred nature of his pearl is interrupted in some ways by the connection between physical rot and earthly growth. Saying that where “hit down drof in moldez dunne”:

\begin{verbatim}
Of goud vche goude is ay bygonne:
So semly a sede mọt fayly not,
Þat spryngande spycez vp ne sponne
Of þat precios perle wythouten spotte. (33-36)
\end{verbatim}

From good each good is always begun;
To fail to flourish this seed can not,
Since shrubs and spices are purely spun
From that precious pearl without a spot.

It is the positioning of the maiden in “moldez donne” that spurs the springing up of plants. Thus, in this context, the seemliness of the pearl-maiden becomes a seed for
foliage to be nourished. And plants do literally spring from the maiden’s grave: the flowers, plants, and spices described above all thrive on the pearl-maiden’s spot, growing with “ful schyre and schene” (42). It is impossible to miss the connection between rotting human and blooming petal—the Dreamer understands the pearl’s spot not only to be where “moldez dunne,” but where the pearl-maiden is specifically made to rot (26).

As the Dreamer struggles to understand the physical implications of his daughter’s absence, he is troubled by her rot and mar. This worry motivates the Dreamer to fix himself above the pearl’s body, lying on her grave as he worries about her earthly status. Katherine H. Terrell notes the fixation of the Dreamer upon the pearl’s spot, but also that:

Clearly, at this point in the poem the Dreamer conceives of his daughter only as the body in the ground, and thus he finds the process of decomposition and decay to be deeply disturbing.14

Furthermore, the “odour” that the dreamer smells as he sees blooming flowers sprout from his daughter’s grave and imagines the marred exterior of her body causes him to fall into a state of sleep above the pearl-maiden’s grave. Experienced above her burial site, the smell can be understood to be a combination of spices used to cure bubonic plague, flowers blooming above the grave, and the actual smell of rot coming from the pearl’s body. It is this smell that brings the Dreamer into the rest of Pearl: as he sleeps, the Dreamer has a vision of heaven and his daughter, reinvigorated as a pearl-maiden and bride of Christ (414-415). As the Dreamer awakens in New Jerusalem, the “fayrre” (46) scent follows the Dreamer into his vision. He notices the “frech flauorez” (88) of the fruits around him, and though attributed to a different source, the fragrance of the flowers
in New Jerusalem seems much like the fragrance coming from the growth above the pearl-maiden’s grave.

Along with drawing attention to physical putrefaction of the Dreamer’s daughter, fragrance after death was a medieval signifier of sainthood—those who were canonized often were found to have a sweet smell at the moment of their death, and long after the deceased were broken into holy relics scattered throughout churches and cathedrals, pilgrims came to the sites to see the bones and items of the saints and experience their unusual scent. Smell is closely linked not only to human perception, but bodily action; it’s hard to imagine deceased saints smelling sweetly without picturing role that decay plays in that smell. And the sweet decay of saints is a re-postulation of a human problem; when a saint is decayed into a sweet smell, they have transformed: saved by Christ, their body is reconsidered in holy and salvageable terms. Thus the sweet scent that the Dreamer smells—first above his daughter’s grave, then at the entrance to heaven—points the reader both down and up: downwards to the decaying body of the pearl, and upwards to where that body is reconsidered in sweeter terms in heaven.

This reconsideration points to atonement, the theological idea that Christ’s death and resurrection forgives all human sin—including the original sin of Adam and Eve—thus paving the way for human salvation. Salvation, in fact was “wrought for man by the atonement of Christ.” Christ therefore not only forgives sin, but also transforms it: previously sinful bodies are able to experience salvation in heaven. For Julian of Norwich, this possibility of salvation extended to all—Julian’s God shows her that “Adam’s sin was the greatest harm that was ever done, or ever shall be, until the end of
the world,” but that the “glorious atonement” is “incomparably more pleasing to God and
more glorious in saving mankind than Adam’s sin was ever harmful.”18 In this
transformation of original sin into good, God proves that all may be turned into good.

Medieval people were not only fascinated with the possibility of salvation, but
also with the pain that Christ underwent on the cross. Julian experienced this pain of
Christ’s Passion, and also witnessed him bleeding and dying in visions. Her experience
was not unusual. A.C. Spearing writes that in the 12th and 13th centuries:

There was a longing to share imaginatively in the live of the Holy Family
but above all in the experience of Jesus in his Passion. For the desired
feelings to be continually renewed, Christ’s torments had to be evoked in
ever-intensifying detail, to an extent that modern readers of Julian and
other devotional writers may find repellent and even nauseating.19

“Sharing” in Christ’s pain often meant manipulating one’s body. Followers, who tended
to be women, acted out the Passion of Christ, self-flagellated, experienced Christ’s
stigmata, wore hair shirts, and performed countless disturbing mortifications of their own
flesh.20 But what we might think of as torture was meant to bring one closer to Christ. By
“introducing their pained bodies into their devotional practice,” followers “become closer
to understanding Christ’s humanity.”21 In fact this desire to “understand” Christ’s pain
often meant literally feeling Christ’s pain, and stemmed from the medieval idea of
compassion, or co-suffering with Christ. The torments undergone by medieval people
replicated Christ’s pain, thus providing “a route to compassion.”22 For medieval
Christians, Marla Carson argues, “compassion did not entail an obligation to alleviate the
suffering of others; instead, it constituted an obligation to suffer with Christ and the
saints.”23
In *Pearl*, those in New Jerusalem are transformed by Christ from earthly rot to heavenly beauty. Though there is no direct mention of atonement or Christ’s second coming, the prospect of salvation hangs over the text. Julian’s observations of God, which suggest that the divine is able to transform human frailty, is mirrored by the pearl-maidens’ identities in heaven, themselves transformed from their decomposing bodies hidden in the earth. Ultimately, *Pearl* suggests a heaven in which earthly marring and sinfulness is transformed into beauty by God. The maidenly procession in New Jerusalem, in fact, relies on the theory of atonement: not only does the poem point to Christ’s passion when it describes his wound and “delyt” (1141), but the pearl-maidens must have been saved by Christ in order to be granted entrance to New Jerusalem. Additionally, *Pearl*’s close relationship with Revelation ties the poem closely to the idea of atonement, as human sin, Christ’s sacrifice, and their consequences inform Revelation. Though Christ’s second coming is not mentioned in *Pearl*, nor his promise of coming back to Earth, salvation is implied. The pearls that surround the Lamb, each crowned and picked to be his wife (414-415) obviously indicate a saved population.

“Vicar In A Tutu”:
Considering Femininity in Medieval Terms

To properly speak about bodies and bodily actions in a medieval sense, we must define bodies in medieval terms, moving away from 21st-century conceptions of gender, bodily performance, and sexuality. Medieval bodies would appear in different sexualized and gendered terms then bodies in the mainstream consciousness today. All bodies in the Middle Ages were feminized simply because they were bodies: flesh was considered
female, and the matter of children was thought to have come directly from the lining of the mother’s uterus.²⁵ And Christ’s body was feminine too, perhaps especially so. As Caroline Walker Bynum argues:

> Medieval men and women did not take the equation of woman with body merely as the basis for misogyny. They also extrapolated from it to an association of woman with the body or the humanity of Christ. Indeed, they often went so far as to treat Christ’s flesh as female, at least in certain of its salvific functions, especially its bleeding and nurturing.²⁶

Because mothers gave their children all matter, Christ’s matter was understood to have come from his mother, the Virgin Mary. Christ’s body was particularly feminized because it was a wounded body that cared for and fed its followers. Christ’s stigmata, the wounds that his body suffered because of his Passion, are not only signs of suffering and holiness, they also signify the ability to feed a congregation. During devotion of the Eucharist, congregations take Christ’s flesh and blood symbolically through blood and wine offered in mass.²⁷ Moreover, “ecclesia, Christ’s body, was a female personification,”²⁸ and Walker Bynum has shown that in many medieval art pieces, Christ’s stigmata, particularly his side wound, was thought of not only as a representation of the pain that he endured for human sin, but also as humanizing and feminine part of his body because his blood, drunk in mass, was food much like the milk of a mother’s breast.²⁹ Christ’s flesh, in other words, “did womanly things: it bled food and gave birth to new life. If certain key moments in the life of Christ were described by devotional writers as ‘female,’ it is no wonder that women’s physiological processes were given religious significance.”³⁰ Christ was even spoken about as a mother. Julian of Norwich says that
while “God rejoices that he is our father,” he also “rejoices that he is our mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and our soul is his much-loved bride.”

In essence, femininity in the Middle Ages was more expansive than modern ideas about female bodies. If they didn’t experience menstrual bleeding, men were encouraged to bleed with leeches instead, because the feminine shedding of blood was associated with Christ’s bleeding on the cross. Medieval scientists thought that men and woman had the same sex organs, though women’s organs were flipped, and all bodily excrement—blood, sweat, semen, etc.—were thought to be made of the same materials. Though such examples deal with sex, not gender, the flexible medieval attitude towards sex lent itself to a more fluid understanding of gender; since so many parts of the body were similar to each other, parts of the male body could be described as feminine and vice versa. The heteronormative gender binary of the 21st century, therefore, should not be used to define or consider any of the bodies in Pearl, as to do so would be to assume that gender performance and expression has remained stable for seven centuries. Clearly, the medieval consideration of bodily matter as feminine shows this to be untrue. Bodies which we would assume to be male may have been spoken of in either feminine or masculine terms in the Middle Ages. Thus when femininity is discussed in this essay, it is considered in terms of feminine flesh, not restricted to what modern thinkers might recall when thinking of female bodies. By defining femininity in this way, I am not suggesting that there was no medieval conception of womanhood or that women in the Middle Ages were treated equally to men. In contrast, women’s inability to join the priesthood, identifications as weak, position in the home, and general lack of schooling and
literacy\textsuperscript{35} suggest that medieval Europe was very much a patriarchal society and that misogyny was alive and thriving in the 14th century. But while misogynistic ideas and roles were ascribed to medieval woman, medieval considerations of femininity were, as I have shown, attributed to both men and women.

Further, medieval femininity was not solely dependent on ideas of sexual purity or intactness, which stands in contrast to critical responses to \textit{Pearl} contingent on her sexual identity.\textsuperscript{36} Because both Christ and the Church were described as mothers in theology, the medieval sense of motherhood, certainly part of medieval femininity, had more to do with nurturing ability than sexual identification. Though Mary is a virgin mother, other mothers in the Bible are revered and saintly without virgin status. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, gives birth to a lineage of God’s followers and prophets. Even some medieval mystics were mothers before they took vows of solitude.\textsuperscript{37} In fact, Walker Bynum suggests that “Medieval images of the body have less to do with sexuality than with fertility and decay.”\textsuperscript{38} Therefore to properly think about the bodies in \textit{Pearl}, we must stop focusing on maidenly bodies as feminine because of their intact purity and virginity; instead, \textit{Pearl}’s bodies are feminine because of their fleshly matter.

Instead of isolating bodies through binaried divisions of gender and sexuality, one should consider the bodies of \textit{Pearl} through their own terms. In contrast to strict modern (mainstream) conceptions of gender, which tend to work under the assumption that there are only two genders, and that those genders exist in opposition to each other, “medieval thinkers used gender imagery fluidly, not literally.”\textsuperscript{39} And in addition to the feminine matter of body in the Middle Ages, bodies were considered in the terms of suffering and
compassion described previously. Compassion for Christ often included ways in which Christ’s pain was transferred onto mortal flesh; the miraculous appearance of stigmata, overwhelmingly a female miracle, was one way in which Christ’s passion was literally felt and performed by medieval bodies. The Virgin Mary also co-suffered with Christ. Otto G. von Simson describes the way that the Virgin Mary experiences “compassio” for Christ through her excruciating experience of Christ’s pain, noting that in van der Weyden’s depiction of Christ’s descent from the cross, Mary “suffers not only in mind but with her entire being.” Mary, whose body was thought to have supplied all of the matter for Christ, certainly suffers extra. But for all, compassionate suffering was a way in which the body became more divine; to suffer was to feel like Christ.

Eucharistic devotion similarly emphasizes the body. When devoted followers of Christ attend mass and take his body through consecrated wafers, they emphasize his humanity and his motherliness. In the Eucharist was a moment of encounter with that *humanitas Christi* which was such a prominent theme of women’s spirituality. For thirteenth-century women this humanity was, above all, Christ’s physicality, his corporality, his being-in-the-body-ness; Christ’s humanity was Christ’s body and blood.

The Eucharist and attention paid to Christ’s body points to a particularly womanly phenomenon: the Eucharistic miracle. Eucharistic miracles included visions of Christ while receiving the Eucharist, receiving the stigmata while eating, tasting sweetness, blood, or flesh from the consecrated wafer given during mass, and, lastly, miracles regarding the consumption, or lack thereof, food. Walker Bynum notes that “All medieval miracles of surviving on the eucharist alone are female miracles (with one exception). Most are told of adolescent girls.” Though eucharistic miracles sometimes had
undertones of sexual desire, the treatment of the bodies in *Pearl* as wounded bodies rather than desiring bodies, and as queens in heaven, already saved and therefore spiritually stable, points to a different kind of consideration—of their bodies being more like Christ than desiring of him.

**“Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now”: Connection Between Bodily Suffering and Collective Holy Experience**

As the Dreamer peers over a hill to view New Jerusalem in Fitt seventeen of *Pearl*, he sees the city spread out before him, shining with beams of light (981-982). Along the roads of the city winds a “prosessyoun” (1096) of “vergynez” (1099) all wearing the same ornaments and garments as the pearl-maiden (the Dreamer’s daughter), and all “coronde” of “be same fasoun” (1099-1101). There are 144,000 maidens in total, all blissfully following the “Lombe” (1110) and all wearing pearls. Critical examination of this procession has focused on the “vergyn” aspect of the pearl-maidens, postulating that those who follow the Lamb in *Pearl* must, according to the age and intact-ness of the Dreamer’s daughter, be young virgins.45 But readings of this procession focusing on the virginity of Christ’s followers are missing a clear link between all of the followers; as described by the pearl-maiden 240 lines earlier, the girls are all corpses (857) in “cofers” (259). And it is the feminine putrefaction of these bodies—feminine because bodily, bodily because human, and putrefied because of their earthly, rotting status—that forms *Pearl*’s understanding of salvation.

The Dreamer’s vision of New Jerusalem is framed by another vision of heaven: that of John, whose heavenly experience in Revelation is heavily leaned on by the *Pearl-*
poet. Immediately after the Dreamer gains sight of New Jerusalem, he relates it to the biblical vision, saying that what he sees is “As deuysez hit ñe apostel John” (“Its beauty portrayed by the apostle John”) (984). The following stanzas describe New Jerusalem almost exactly as Revelation does, specifying twelve foundations made of precious stones, twelve gates, golden streets, and the cubic shape of the city. What the poet does and does not pull from Revelation is striking. The apocalyptic scenes of terror, absent from Pearl, make way for an exact description of place within New Jerusalem; as the Dreamer looks on, the setting he describes is filled in by a scene of collective prayer.

The Dreamer understands the procession he sees as liturgical. As he describes the throne of the Lamb, noting the “reuer” which runs “outryȝte” (1055) beneath it, the Dreamer astutely recognizes that the followers of Christ in New Jerusalem have no church because “De Almyȝty watz her mynster mete” (“The Almighty was cathedral complete”) (1063). Clearly, because the Dreamer understands that the “Almyȝty” himself is “mynster” for New Jerusalem, he understands, too, that New Jerusalem is entirely a place made for holy service. Further, as the procession of girls, led by the Lamb, glides into the Dreamer’s view, he calls them as “mylde as maydenez seme at mas” (“Mild as maidens sweet at mass”) (1115). Already, the Lamb’s presence in heaven is described in liturgical terms; his throne sits above a river, his heaven is a place for service, unrestricted by churches; and the processional maidens follow him as though they are in mass.

Thus, as the maidens follow the lamb with great “delyt” (1104), they follow communally, as part of not only a procession, but a service. As they march together, they
all share in the same sense of delight. The Lamb, too, shares this delight, though the
Dreamer is surprised to see so, because he bears a wound: “Of His quyte syde His blod
outsprent” (“From his white side streamed a bloody torrent”) (1137). The poet draws
explicit attention to the Lamb’s side-wound, not only describing it, but specifying that it
continues to bleed, and, through the Dreamer, questioning the cause of its bleeding. In
fact the very positioning of the wound is relevant to the reader; out of all Christ’s
stigmata, the *Pearl*-poet’s Christ bleeds from his side, a wound associated with
femininity, feeding, and eucharistic devotion, and specifically connected to comparisons
between Christ and Mary and descriptions of Christ as a mother.47 In fact, the Lamb’s
wound, the “reuer” of New Jerusalem, the great delight of all involved, and the
suggestion of “mass” all point towards descriptions of Christ as a nurturer, and thus the
procession that the Dreamer sees as a devotion of the Eucharist.

Just as the Lamb’s bloody side points towards the Eucharist, the Eucharist points
to collective worship and attention to suffering. As Jennifer Garrison notes, by “arguing
that God himself is the Church and the Lamb himself is the sacrifice, the poem depicts
the heavenly Jerusalem in the terms of the Mass even though it recognizes that those
terms have been superseded.”48 The Lamb, a literal stand-in for Christ’s bodily suffering
during his Passion,49 continues to bleed in New Jerusalem, reminding the reader, and the
Dreamer, of his hurt even while in heaven. Similarly, the maidens that follow him,
beautiful and white like the lamb, are heavenly representations of physically suffering
bodies.
The maidens’ femininity should not be read, as it has been by some as an exclusive vision of heaven. Nicholas Watson argues that the pearl-maiden is given special status in New Jerusalem because of her young, virgin sexual intactness. This special status, Watson says, undermines the work of enduring women of piety by suggesting that the maiden’s “unsullied” sexual innocence is not a product of spiritual work, but simply her age. Though not all are as insistent as Watson, the general consensus around Pearl scholarship is that the maidens’ femininity highlights their sexual identities. Jane Gilbert even suggests that this focus on the sexual extends to the relationship between the Dreamer and his daughter, arguing that the Dreamer was sexually attracted to the pearl-maiden. All this scholarship does is demonstrate a reductive academic interest in the maidens’ bodies, focusing exclusively on the girls’ potential sexual identities. But rather than highlight their virginity, the crowns and pearls of the maidens emphasize their bodiliness. Because medieval ideas of body centered the feminine, and because medieval femininity, especially holy femininity, centered discussions of care-taking and motherliness, the maidens’ bodies, and their marriages to Christ, would have brought forth maternal connections before sexual ones. And the matter of the maidens’ bodies, highlighted by their feminine connection to matter itself, is critical within Pearl. As she instructs the Dreamer about her place in New Jerusalem, the pearl-maiden explains that all who follow Christ in heaven are “worthy” wives (846), and all wives of Christ have “corses” which in “clottez clynge” (857). Here, written explicitly into the text of Pearl, lie the bodies of the Lamb’s followers, marked by the “clottez” of their graves.
The moment is a haunting reminder of the Dreamer’s initial anxiety about his pearl’s body; his worries that she has been marred by the earth (23) have been confirmed by the maiden herself, and his worried hovering over her grave has been validated—his pearl, as well as all the other pearls of the Lamb, do indeed lie as corpses in the dirt. But the pearl-maiden’s disclosure is actually meant to reassure her father: “Alþaȝ” she and all of the other maiden’s lie in graves, the pearl-maiden says, “We þurȝoutly hauen cnawyng; / Of on dethe ful oure hope is drest” (“‘But we, with knowledge full and clear, / See in one death all wrong redressed’”) (859-860). Furthermore, all those who are “corses” and “wyfs” wear “‘spotlez perlez’” (856) on their chests. The spotless pearls, which must, to the Dreamer’s mind, stand in direct contrast to the “clottez” clinging to the maidens’ bodies, mark the followers in heaven, designating them not only as wives of Christ, but those who share in his “‘blysse’” (853). The pearls themselves represent a paradox: though “spotlez,” their shapes are spots, or markers; and though they shine and gleam in heaven, they identify those who, on earth, are rotting away in graves. But while their markers on earth are troubling reminders of human decomposition, their shining pearls in New Jerusalem are beautiful reminders of their marriage to Christ and saved status (846-856). As Christ’s blood on the cross and on the side of his body in New Jerusalem is transformative, indicating the salvation of all human sin, the decomposition of the maidens’ bodies in their graves is transformed in heaven.

The transformation of the Lamb’s followers is emphasized by Pearl’s insistence on the earthly location and decomposition of their bodies. As the pearl-maiden lectures her father about her position within New Jerusalem, she reprimands him for saying that
his “perle is al awaye” (258) when she is really “in cofer so comly clente / As in þis gardyn gracios gaye” (“She in a coffer, snugly in furl, / As in this garden, here to stay”) (259-260). Both locations are integral to the Dreamer’s understanding of his daughter.

Being in the “gardyn” of New Jerusalem does not mean that she is only a holy body, nor that she only exists in the garden of heaven; instead, the pearl-maiden continues to insist upon her earthly location in a “cofer” under the earth—the “erbere” (9) location that

*Pearl* first opens on. Though one of her bodies lies in a coffin, and the other speaks to the Dreamer in New Jerusalem, both are integral to her identity. The maiden further scolds her father’s ignorance of her location by saying:

‘Bot, jueler gentle, if þou shal lose
Ýy joy for a gemme þat þe watz lef,
Me þynk þe put in a mad porpose,
And busyez þe aboute a raysoun bref;
For þat þou lestez watz bot a rose
Þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef;
Now þur3 kynde of þe kyste þat hyt con close
To a perle of prys hit is put in pref.’ (265-272)

‘Now, gentle jeweler, if you shall lose
Your joy for a gem that from you veered,
You apply your mind to maddening views,
And trouble yourself with transience bleared.
The rose you lost, your heavy heart rues,
Flowered and faded, was suddenly seared.
Through this kind of coffer it now ensues
As a pearl of price, forever endeared;’

Not only does the maiden reject her father’s grief over her death, she calls his fixation on her former living status “‘mad’” and urges him to recognize that her “fayled” state is what causes her to be in New Jerusalem, happy and saved. According to the maiden, it is
her wilting body, enclosed in a “kyste,” that causes her to be a “‘perle of prys’” secured in the Lamb’s preference. That the pearl-maiden repeatedly reminds the Dreamer of her grave, as well as the graves of her companions, speaks to the importance of those graves’ locations within Pearl. Furthermore, the maiden repeatedly links her grave’s existence, and therefore her existence within it, to her status in New Jerusalem. Clearly, the maiden wants her father to understand that if she were not buried, she would not be a queen of heaven. This insistence suggests that the pearl-maidens salvation, which positions her within New Jerusalem and close to the Lamb, is possible only through the putrefaction of her flesh. As shown through the transi tomb images, in the Middle Ages rotting flesh indicated the possibility of salvation.

This decomposition is emphasized within Pearl. Watching the procession, Dreamer remarks upon its “swete smelle” (1122); a smell which parallels the scent (45) that the Dreamer obsesses over as we are introduced to him on top of his daughter’s grave. Both these smells, the grave-smell and the procession-smell, simultaneously indicate decomposition and worship. Looking at New Jerusalem, the Dreamer attributes the smell to “ensens” (1122), part of the procession that he sees before him. But the clear indication of smell emanating from the pearl-maiden’s grave suggests that, like the maidens’ spots, the smell of the procession links the heavenly service with earthly presence and rot.

It is the “clot” of their graves, transformed by Christ, that marks the girls in New Jerusalem and that links them to the Lamb. Everyone that the Dreamer sees marching in heaven is marked: the girls by pearls, and the Lamb by blood. Though the pearls of the
girls are distinct from the Lamb’s wound, they mirror his markedness, and all the marks lead to great delight from the congregation. As the pearl-maiden repeatedly turns back to her grave, she insists to the Dreamer that she and the other maidens belong both in New Jerusalem as queens and underneath the earth in their graves. Both forms—marred and spotless—are part of the maidens identities. Further, the mar of the maiden’s graves is replicated in heaven through their chests, marked with pearls. It is thus the marred quality of their earthly bodies, rotting in human graves, which parallels Christ’s suffering. This parallel draws the maiden’s close to Christ, and, through the decomposition of their earthly body, the maidens are granted access to New Jerusalem. The pearl-maidens all rot and smell in the earth, and that rot and smell, translated in New Jerusalem, brings them together as a collective, close to each other and close to the Lamb.

“Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want”:
The Dreamer’s Desire to Experience Collective Worship

As the Dreamer gazes across the river into New Jerusalem, he finds his “lyttel quene” (1147) within the heavenly procession. But as one in a long line of followers marching after the Lamb, the pearl-maiden’s body is part of a larger collective. The procession of maidens, all queens in New Jerusalem (448) points to collective redemption; all the maidens have been saved by the Lamb, all have been crowned and marked, and all celebrate in his presence. In context, the Dreamer’s recognition of his “quene” and subsequent desire to cross the river and be with her must be recognized in part as a desire to celebrate the Lamb. Scholarship on this section has focused on the way that the Dreamer calls the pearl-maiden his own, suggesting that this ownership
demonstrates that the Dreamer is more focused on possessing his daughter than joining with Christ. Though it is his “syȝt” (1151) of the pearl-maiden that spurs the Dreamer “to wade” (1151) across the river, to suggest that his desire to be with the pearl-maiden is independent of her position in New Jerusalem ignores the way that the Dreamer sees and speaks about his daughter. The Dreamer doesn’t see his pearl immediately. Rather, as he climbs a hill to view New Jerusalem, his description is first focused on the “noble cité” (1097) itself, and then on the “prosessyoun” (1096) of maidens. Even when the Dreamer’s eyes move to the procession, he doesn’t immediately identify his daughter among the crowd. Finding the pearl-maiden doesn’t seem to be a first priority for the Dreamer; his vision focuses first on the “gret delyt” (1104) of all the Lamb’s followers, and then on the Lamb himself.

At the Lamb, the Dreamer seems puzzled. He doesn’t understand how both “dylt” (1105) and the Lamb’s wound can adorn one creature. But the Dreamer’s confusion shouldn’t be viewed as willful ignorance or misplaced attention on his part; on the contrary, it’s understandable that the Dreamer would question who “did þat spyt” (1138) causing the Lamb’s side to bleed because the Dreamer’s understanding of the Lamb’s followers is based on their saved identity. The Dreamer sees the maidens only as spotless followers of the Lamb, disconnecting them from their earthly putrefaction or saved identity. He fails to recognize the way that the maiden’s heavenly bodies represent earthly, sinful bodies, and he doesn’t understand the way that the Lamb’s wounds are redemptory. But just as the maidens are, in reality, spotted earthly bodies, the Lamb
signifies the earthly body of Christ, and his wound the earthly wounds of Christ’s Passion.

Thus while the Dreamer’s questions about the Lamb’s wounds point to confusion over the way that earthly beings are redeemed and translated in New Jerusalem, they don’t point to a lack of devotion. Puzzling over the Lamb’s “deylt” at his wounds represents a tradition of theology and writings struggling with understanding atonement and human sin. The Dreamer is asking questions that many had asked before him.

Julian of Norwich, after a vision of Christ’s passion, described Jesus’s passion as something that caused him “such great pleasure that he thinks nothing of his hardship and his bitter suffering and his cruel and shameful death.” But that same vision is meant to reassure Julian’s doubts about Christ—to tell her that he finds “joy,” “delight,” and “endless happiness” from his sacrifice for humans.

The Dreamer’s identification of his “lyttel quene” is thus framed by the Dreamer’s sight of Christ and questions about his pain. And to understand what the Dreamer sees when he finds his daughter in the crowded procession, we must follow his line of sight from the Lamb to his daughter. The Dreamer notes the “glentez gloryous glade” (1144) of the Lamb, then looks “among His meyny schene” (“where his company did convene”) (1145) and sees “How ṣay wyth lyf wern laste and lade” (“A spiritual vibrance sweetly displayed”) (1146). It is through the Lamb’s glorious countenance and the shiny faces of his congregation, laden with spirit, that the Dreamer sees his “lyttel quene / ṣat I wende had standed by me in sclade” (“little queen / That I thought but now I had stood so near”) (1147-1148). Though it is possible that one reason the Dreamer fails to see his daughter
is because he expects her to be near him, the poet specifically frames the Dreamer’s vision of his daughter with the shining faces of group worship. Unlike when she sat speaking to her father alone, the Dreamer now sees his daughter as part of a crowd. And this particular vision is underlined by his understanding of her as a “quene” and his description of her amongst her “ferez” (1150). “Lorde,” the Dreamer says “much of mirþe watz þat ho made / Among her ferez þat watz so quyjt!” (“Lord, much of mirth was what she made / Among her friends; she was so white”) (1149-1150). While the Dreamer was wary to believe the pearl-maiden’s queenly status in New Jerusalem when first conversing with her, fixating on her age instead (473), his identification of her now as a “quene” and recognition of her mirth among her friends points to an understanding both of his daughter’s status in New Jerusalem and her subsequent participation in worship of the Lamb.

While the Dreamer’s earlier descriptions of the maidenly procession made clear that the procession should be viewed in terms of liturgical practice and eucharistic devotion, it is when he sees his daughter in the midst of that procession that the Dreamer truly understands her close proximity to Christ. The Dreamer’s desire to swim across the stream (1160) to the procession of maidens and the Lamb is fueled not only by “luf-longyng” (1152), but also by recognizing the “gret dlyt” (1152) of the congregation. Even if the Dreamer only longed for his daughter, he does not long for her in isolation. Thus we can understand the Dreamer’s movement across the river and towards the procession to be continued by his subsequent turn towards “Krysteʒ dere blessyng” (1208) through liturgical worship.
Jennifer Garrison points out that within *Pearl*, eucharistic devotion “provides a way for the individual subject to practice emotional and spiritual control.”59 And that emotional and spiritual control extends to the Dreamer, who, after seeing his daughter in New Jerusalem, praising the Lamb and joining in collective celebration of him, is in need of spiritual fulfillment and understanding. Some readings of *Pearl* have emphasized the Dreamer’s incompetence by suggesting that he doesn’t really understand what he is turning to when he turns towards the “forme of bred and wyn” (1209) in the last stanza of the poem. Barbara Nolan even goes as far as to attribute the poem’s late turn towards eucharistic devotion to an entirely different narrator, the voice of the author breaking in, essentially, on the jeweler’s stupidity.60 But there is no indication in the text that the ending stanzas in *Pearl* are voiced by a different narrator, and Nolan misses what eucharistic devotion might offer the Dreamer. When the Dreamer turns towards the Eucharist, Garrison suggests, he turns both inward, accepting ritual, and outward, moving towards the community of the mass. Both offer deeper understandings of and relationships with Christ. For the Dreamer, turns towards ritual and community also offer understandings of his daughter in her own holy terms. In context, the Dreamer’s taking of the Eucharist points to the specific community of saved souls in New Jerusalem that he longs for.

The Dreamer’s movement towards eucharistic devotion points to a new awareness of the way that the pearl-maiden’s body is connected to the body of the host. The Dreamer has already seen mass happen in New Jerusalem, as 144,000 followers worship the bleeding Lamb. The blood of the Lamb, which points to the blood of the host in a
eucharistic sense, connects the followers through ritual and worship, but it also connects them in the sense of their bodily identity. Just as the bleeding lamb suffers, the followers mirror that suffering in their graves through their bodily rot. The Dreamer, also with a human body, can participate in that collective celebration of Christ’s suffering when he takes bread and wine at mass. Pearl’s specific focus on the bodiliness of the maidens, and their closeness to Christ in New Jerusalem suggests two conclusions that can be drawn from the poem’s use of eucharistic service: as a collective church service, the Eucharist is one way that the Dreamer can get closer to the wounded body of Christ, the woundedness which enables his daughter and her companions to follow and be close to Christ in heaven; in addition, Pearl’s attention to the Eucharist causes the poem to pay particular attention to a women’s bodies and women’s practices. While salvation in Pearl is open to all, the poem ultimately centers not just femininity through the body, but women through its attention to bodily experiences of Christ. Though all had feminine bodies in the Middle Ages, it was women, excluded from the clergy and associated with Christ’s flesh, who became “Christ’s crucified body in eating Christ’s crucified body.”

“Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One Before”: A Conclusion

Pearl insists upon the bodiliness of the pearl-maiden and all of her companions, repeatedly bringing the Dreamer and the reader to the pearl-maiden’s grave. Not only does the poem start on top of her “spot” (37), the pearl-maiden herself reiterates her bodily identity, both reminding the Dreamer of her grave and bodily putrefaction and suggesting that that putrefaction is what renders her close to Christ. Putrefaction is
pointed to for all of the maidens: over the graves of *Pearl* are smells and growths, and within the coffins are rotting bodies, graphically pictured by the Dreamer.

In New Jerusalem, 144,000 dead maidens pray to and for the Lamb; all follow him in procession; all worship collectively. As the maidens in procession are a picture of collective worship, so too are their bodily identities a picture of collective salvation. Every follower of the Lamb is holy, and the only prerequisite for their holiness is to have a putrefying body in a grave. This reconsideration of salvation as universal—all who have bodies clad in clot may enter heaven—undermines medieval social structures by shifting the terms of salvation away from focuses on money and power.

Salvation in the Middle Ages was meant to be restricted to the rich. In the fourteenth century the “evolving belief that God had given the Church power to forgive sins” emerged. Thus “Bishops claimed the power of the keys, and the ability to bind and loose was conferred through ordination.”⁶² With this power, salvation became a commercial commodity; Bishops sold “pardons” which “rapidly underwent an inflationary cycle that led to their debasement and to multiple abuses related to their sale for monetary gain.”⁶³

Monasteries were similarly prosperous. Though they started on the fringes of society, monasteries moved quickly into the center of society because the Pope relied on them for evangelization and because they were skilled tradespeople and craftsman. In “Chaucer’s England monks continued to wield political and economic power: they occupied numerous seats in the House of Lords and owned considerable land that could not legally be taken away from them.”⁶⁴ And like Bishops, monks earned money by
selling salvation to the laity, nobility, and even ruling monarchs, who “founded and supported monasteries to secure salvation for themselves and a heavenly safeguard for their reigns.” The money that they earned was considerable—Terry Jones notes that monks regularly sat down to 16-course meals on weekly feast days, and consumed 20% of their daily energy intake in alcohol.

As salvation and purity became commercialized, holy women like beguines and mystics who practiced devotion outside of the confines of the church were persecuted. Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake for “Heresy of Free Spirit,” and “Margery Kemp was continually accused of heresy, showing that a semi-religious life (one where piety and devotion are paramount, but no official order is joined) remained suspicious in the eyes of Church hierarchy well into the fifteenth century.”

One reason why these women were so threatening to the Church is that they worshiped without male restriction: some devout women, like Margery Kemp and Marie d’Oignies, were able to secure chaste marriages and leave their husbands, and beguines and anchoresses existed outside of Church organization. These “chaste marriages were not examples that men, particularly clerics, wanted the women to whom they ministered to follow” and other mystic behaviors of ecstatic devotion were similarly threatening to the Church. In fact the ecstasies of medieval mystics have undergone historical delegitimization by being labeled “hysteria,” a pejorative term used almost exclusively for women. One way of thinking about hysteria is class anxiety. The ways that women experienced Christ challenged the social order: medieval miracle and fleshly connection to Christ were both almost singularly felt by women.
Another remarkable way that the experiences of beguines and other holy women challenged the Church was through their personal impact. A fantastic example of Marie d’Oignies influence comes from *The Book of Margery Kempe*: Margery calls Marie her “model” and, like Marie, expressed her piety largely through “cryings and roarings.” Both Marie and Margery—traveling, crying, devout women—were asked to stop their roarings by priests. In Margery’s story, “the priest reads about Marie’s tears and then understands Margery’s.” Not only does this example illustrate the wide reach of Marie’s vitae, writings about her life, the priest’s reconsideration of Margery’s crying also suggests the power of that vitae. And theologies of women like Marie and Margery certainly did “leave the monasteries in which they were written and translated,” reaching audiences who were potentially as affected as Margery’s priest.

*Pearl*, too, challenges the Church’s vision of salvation. The poem’s interest in the bodily putrefaction of the pearl-maidens suggests that it is the body itself that brings one close to Christ; decomposition in the grave, extensively visualized in *Pearl*, is re-imagined in heaven as something beautiful. Likewise, the pain of Christ is redemptory and transformative. Pained bodies in graves mirror the pain of Christ on the cross, thus linking human with divine through compassion. Furthermore, Christ, seen as a maternal and feminine figure, was emphasized as a body through eucharistic service and descriptions of him as serving and caring for his congregation. This, too, suggests universality: rather than see Christ as unattainable or particularly divine, humanistic depictions of him center something that all, even the poor and female have—flesh. Remarkably, at the end of *Pearl*, the Dreamer, who does not seem to be particularly
pious, and certainly does not pay his way through salvation, believes that he will be
saved. And this belief is contingent upon the community that he sees in heaven: a
community made up of young girls. In *Pearl*, everyone is saved—but that suggestion
overwhelmingly benefits those who would not be helped by the medieval Church: poor
people, pagans, and women. A far cry from the image of earned salvation sold by the
Church in the Middle Ages, *Pearl’s* universal depiction of salvation disrupts social order
and undermines the idea that salvation is dependent on money, social status, or even
penance.
(Figure 1). London, British Museum MS 37049, fol. 32v. *A Disputacion Betwyx the Body and Wormes*. 
All section titles taken from The Smiths discography.

See Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). Cohen notes that the creatures pictured in transi images were worms, lizards, and toads (toads were especially used in German imagery). Thus though there is no notation on *A Disputacion Betwyx the Body and Wormes* indicating the species of all of the animals, it is reasonable to assume their identities.


Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, trans., *Pearl*, in *The poems of the Pearl manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. (Devon: University of Exeter Press: 1987). All subsequent citations of *Pearl* will be taken from this translation. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are taken from William Vantuono, trans., *Pearl*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

This theory is outlined in Andrew Breeze, “*Pearl* and the Plague of 1390-1393,” *Neophilologus* 98 (2013), and has garnered much recent attention from the scholarly community.
Breeze, “Pearl and the Plague of 1390-1393,” 340.

Breeze, “Pearl and the Plague,” 340.


Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 187. Walker Bynum notes that the “exuding of sweet-smelling oil after death” is not only a saintly characteristic, but, like other examples of female-specific Catholic miracles, sweet smell after death was more characteristic of women then men.


Carson, Performing Bodies in Pain.
My argument about femininity and body in the medieval ages owes a great deal to Caroline Walker Bynum’s book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, particularly to the chapters entitled “The Female Body and Religious Practice” and “The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A reply to Leo Steinberg.”

In contrast to our current understanding of DNA and conception, medieval thinkers attributed all human matter to eggs, and all spirit to sperm. The idea was that human eggs contained all of necessary materials for babies, and only needed to be filled with spirit before birth. See Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*.


Transgender, non-binary, and third-gender individuals illustrate that individuals may menstruate regardless of their perceived and/or performed gender.

Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*. In her essays regarding femininity and sexuality in the medieval context, Walker Bynum addresses the medieval woman’s role in the home and church. Particular attention is paid to the medieval woman’s own conception of her own “weakness” on page 147. On pages 195-196, Bynum discusses women’s restriction from the clergy and education.
Brown, “Introduction.” Brown writes of the ways that male hagiographers altered and influenced the writings of biographies (or vitae) of medieval female mystics. In doing so, she addresses the medieval woman’s general interaction with and access to written materials and literacy.

Jane Gilbert, “Gender and Sexual Transgression.” In A Companion to the Gawain-Poet, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Great Britain: University of Cambridge, 2007). Gilbert’s argument about Pearl is precarious and problematic because it relies on a reading of the poem in which the jeweler desires his daughter sexually.

Margery Kempe is an example of one female mystic who was able to obtain a chaste marriage in order to further her devotional goals.

Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 182.

Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption.

Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption.


Walker Bynum. Fragmentation and Redemption, 140.

Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 129.

Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption.


Walker Bynum. Fragmentation and Redemption.

Garrison additionally notes that “Since the image of Christ as a lamb draws on sacrificial language, and the poet argues that the presence of the Lamb replaces earthly sacrifice, the ever-bleeding Lamb on his throne is analogous to the consecrated host on the altar” (319).


Watson, “The *Gawain*-Poet as Vernacular Theologian,” 301.

Gilbert, “Gender and Sexual Transgression.”


Of the “‘court of þe kyndom of God’” (445) the pearl-maiden says that “Alle þat may þerinne aryue / Of alle þe reme is quen oþer kyng...” (447-448). The maiden’s inclusion of kings within those who enter New Jerusalem further discredits Watson’s argument, in “The *Gawain*-poet as Vernacular Theologian,” that *Pearl* presents an exclusive image of heaven in which all who are saved are youthful, female virgins.

56 Julian of Norwich is just one example of a theologian who struggled with conceptions of atonement and human sin. Writings or musings about atonement can be found in many of the vitae of 13th century medieval mystics. For a contextual understanding of medieval, female writings about atonement from a modern theologian, see Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000).


58 Modern english translation taken from Borroff, *Pearl*.


60 Nolan, “Pearl: A Fourteenth-Century Vision in August,” 156-204. I can find no textual indication of a difference in narrative voice between stanzas 1-100 and 101 in *Pearl*.

61 Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 146.


63 Bisson, *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*, 61.

64 Bisson, *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*, 81.

65 Bisson, *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*, 77.


