2006

The subversive techniques of the Gawain-poet in the M.S. Cotton Nero A.x

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.9kpr-kxzs>
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THE SUBVERSIVE TECHNIQUES OF THE *GAWAIN*-POET
IN THE M.S. COTTON NERO A.X.

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jacquelyn Rose Hendricks

May 2006

UMI Number: 1436911

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04/06/06

ABSTRACT

THE SUBVERSIVE TECHNIQUES OF THE *GAWAIN*-POET IN THE M.S. COTTON NERO A.X.

by Jacquelyn Rose Hendricks

The anonymous *Gawain*-poet, whose only known works are the four poems of the MS Cotton Nero A.x., uses subversive techniques to comment on the political situation in late fourteenth-century England. The poet chooses to use a dialect spoken in the Northwest-Midlands region of England, far from the political center in London, which labels the poet as voice of the outsider and the common man. In each of the four poems of the manuscript – *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – the *Gawain*-poet expresses a subtle dissenting voice against unrestrained authority and merciless authority figures. Aspects of the poems linking them to Kings Edward III and Richard II indicate that the *Gawain*-poet aimed his dissention specifically at the English monarchy.

Dedicated to the memory of my father,

Dr. William L. Hendricks,

who always supported me

in my academic endeavors.

Also dedicated to

Dr. Edward I. Condren,

whose passion for the *Gawain*-poems

inspired my own love for them.

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Introduction

The poems in MS Cotton Nero A.x. have been the subject of a great deal of scholarship in the modern era of literary study. The four poems contained in the manuscript, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, have been discussed individually and as a whole, with analyses of their structure, content, dialect, and authorship. The setting of the poems, particularly the history of the Northwest-Midlands region, has also drawn considerable attention. Recent literary scholars have drawn upon the work of such historians as Michael J. Bennett, whose book *Community, Class, and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society In the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* explores the poet's regional history. John Bowers recently examined the poems through a historical lens in his 2001 book *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II*, specifically looking at political allusions in the poems and identifying them with events in Richard II's reign.

Despite these larger studies, most of the court-related history has been limited to discussions on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The overtly religious nature of the other three poems has limited the amount of political discussion associated with them. Examining the political aspects of the four poems, however, is important for gaining an understanding of them. The *Gawain*-poet employs subtle techniques in his storytelling to subvert authority. A clear dissatisfaction and disillusionment with authority can be found in each poem. The poet takes liberties with Biblical retellings and with the character

interaction in the poems of his invention. Despite the differences in content and character, there is a common political purpose among the four poems: to criticize perceived notions of authority. Furthermore, the poet's subversions target the monarchy, and often one can see clear inferences to the reigns of Edward III and Richard II. The chapters following this introduction examine the poet's subversive strategy, exhibiting the poet's dissenting voice.

The Northwest-Midlands Dialect: Subversion through Language

One of the most distinctive features of the MS Cotton Nero A.x. is its Northwest-Midlands dialect. Since the content of the poems proves that the poet was aware of literature outside of the Northwest-Midlands area, there must be an underlying reason for using a regional dialect instead of French, Latin, or a London dialect of English. The people of the Northwest-Midlands region were historically subject to conquest and colonization, and were often ruled by a distant authority. For the poet, therefore, the Northwest-Midlands dialect is an "outside" dialect and the voice of the ruled. This regional dialect distances the poet from the authority figures of the London court and allows him to comment on authority from the "ruled" perspective.

During the late fourteenth century, the English began to have a political impact on the Norman-French culture that had, since their conquest, dominated English life and affairs. The English language began to be used in the courts and to be spoken by members of the aristocracy. The poet's use of Northwest-Midlands English not only ensured that he would be understood (Richard II was known to converse in the dialect),

but also allowed him to characterize his poetry with an “outside” flavor. This flavor is also apparent in his use of Old English alliterative tradition, which was out of fashion in London’s literary circles. The “outsider” nature of the Northwest-Midlands dialect aids the poet’s subversion of authority. His poems can be understood by those in authority, but their distinct characteristics represent a minority culture group whose voice will not be subdued by their conquerors.

Pearl

The poem *Pearl* is full of paradox. The poem seems to be instructing its readers to eschew earthly possessions and worship God to attain an afterlife in heaven. Simultaneously, however, the poem focuses heavily on jewels, finery, and status. The pearl-maiden is made a queen and bride of Christ when she arrives in heaven, but she is one of 144,000 queens, suggesting that every female who arrives in heaven becomes a queen. The dreamer is subject to this barrage of confusing information, asking questions in an effort to understand the illogical construction of New Jerusalem. Ultimately, after being bombarded with images that inflame his desire, the dreamer attempts to become part of the elite group in New Jerusalem, but is denied access.

The hypocrisies highlighted by the dreamer’s and pearl-maiden’s conversations, combined with the dreamer’s exclusion from Christ’s elect in New Jerusalem, are the poet’s subversive methods. The process of election is shown to be illogical. Likewise, the clear hierarchy established in New Jerusalem questions the idea of equality in heaven after death. The vision of New Jerusalem also has clear ties to Richard II. By attacking

the logic of the hierarchy, and the election of its members, the poet aims his criticism at one of Richard II's ruling philosophies: the divine right of kings.

Cleanness

The subject matter of *Cleanness* – Biblical episodes that depict three moments when God decides to destroy large groups of people for behaving impurely – gives the poet opportunity to flex his creative muscles. Multiple scholars have noticed that the poet keeps fairly close to the Vulgate's versions of Noah's flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar's feast. Occasionally, however, the poet uses poetic license to emphasize certain moments in the Biblical stories, particularly moments of suffering by the victims of God's wrath. By embellishing such moments, the poet inspires a substantial emotional reaction in the reader. Throughout *Cleanness*, God is depicted as unmerciful, impatient, and, sometimes, unintelligent. The poet's depiction of God questions the typical Christian view of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving. Additional criticisms of other authority figures in the poem indicate that the poet's criticism is not intended for God, but rather those who attempt to be "gods on earth": members of the ruling authority. By disguising his subversion of authority figures in a Biblical retelling, the poet can express dissent against authority figures who rule oppressively.

Patience

The subversion in *Patience* is similar to *Cleanness*. Again, the poet presents a retelling of a Biblical story. This poem requires an examination of the differences between the story of Jonah as told by the Vulgate and the poet. In his version, the poet emphasizes the great lengths to which God will go to enforce his will. God is characterized as merciless and cruel; He is willing to put innocent victims in jeopardy to force Jonah to be obedient.

As in *Cleanness*, the negative characterization of God comments subversively on earthly authorities who enforce their will at all costs. The character of the narrator, who opens and closes the poem with his own negative experiences with authority, illustrates the unfortunate lot of those subject to another's rule. His own experiences, which he ties to the experiences of Jonah, force him to practice patience because his ruler's will must be obeyed despite its oppressive nature. The consequence of being subject to such a style of rule is disillusionment with the authority figure.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

In the final poem of the manuscript, the poet turns to the romance genre to subvert authority through his treatment of King Arthur and Gawain. The entrance of the Green Knight into Arthur's court begins a series of moments that question King Arthur's rule. At court, the Green Knight undermines the king's authority by disrupting the established hierarchy. Gawain journeys from Camelot to meet the Green Knight to both fulfill the terms of the Christmas beheading game and uphold the power of King Arthur's

monarchy in “*contrayez straunge*” (713). When Gawain fails to uphold his promises to Bertilak at Hautdesert and the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, Gawain’s actions reflect negatively on Arthur because the established reputation of the Knights of the Round Table cannot be upheld.

Historical events surrounding the Northwest-Midlands area at the time the poems were written suggest that the poet was using subversive criticism of Arthur to comment on the political situation in London. Events such as Edward III’s Scottish campaigns directly impacted the region, often negatively, as locals would have been witness to the King’s cruelty towards the Scots. Ties between Edward III and the Arthur of the poem, as well as ties between Edward III and Richard II, indicate that the tradition of English monarchy – from the legendary to the real-life late fourteenth century – has been colored by authority figures who do not live up to their potential.

Despite the wide diversity of poetic subjects in the MS Cotton Nero A.x., the poet’s subtle moments of subversion are a common thread through all four poems. The poet is clearly representing the voice of a colonized people by using an outside dialect and questioning authority via the poems’ content. Exposing the poet’s subversion of the English monarchy should inspire a new way of looking at the poems, contradicting the traditional assumptions that the poems are like-minded with the authoritative institutions of the time.

The Northwest-Midlands Dialect

While the MS Cotton Nero A.x. is packed with features that render it unique, the poet's use of the Northwest-Midlands dialect is one of the most distinctive aspects of the poems. During the late fourteenth century, England was home to many dialects of Middle English, which linguists have concluded exhibited "by far the greatest diversity in written language of any period before or since" (Milroy 3). From this plethora of Middle English dialects, the poet selects a dialect of English that is spoken far from the metropolitan center of London, one that represents the voice of a group of people whose lives and culture would have been different from those in London. This dialect choice is particularly unusual in light of the poems' contents, which indicate that the poet had intimate knowledge of courtly life. It is possible, of course, that the poet was writing for a local patron and intended his poetry to remain in the Northwest-Midlands region, but is unlikely because the area lacked an aristocratic elite and had a long history of colonization and conquest (Bennett, *Community* 9-10). Why, then, would the poet choose to write in a dialect so remote? Why not write in the London dialect of English, which was becoming more accepted in official settings (Fisher 82-83)? Why not choose Latin or French, the more widely known languages of the day? The answer to these questions is that the dialect serves his purposes because it is an "outside" dialect, which allows the poet to distance himself from the authority figures of the London court. It represents the voice of the ruled, not that of the rulers. By applying the theory of minor

literature to the poems, the intricacies of the Northwest-Midlands dialect, and the history of the Northwest-Midlands region that renders it an area often subject to conquest and the assertion of an extra-regional authority, one can see how the use of this “outside” dialect might be considered subversive.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in “Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,” insist upon a strong political focus for literature written by representatives of minority groups. This focus on political content contrasts with major literatures that focus on “the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on)” (Deleuze and Guattari 1598). I will discuss the “political program” of each of the manuscript’s poems in detail in their respective chapters, but there is clear evidence that the political content focuses on the relationship of authority figures with their subordinates, and the poet’s subtle criticisms of these authority figures. Deleuze and Guittari assert that this type of literature should function as a force of action or protest by the people the author represents (Deleuze and Guattari 1599). While the revolutionary force is not overt in the poems of the MS Cotton Nero A.x., the *Gawain*-poet expresses the voice of the common person who is subject to a distant authority. In *Pearl* there is the dreamer who grumbles when he is denied entry into heaven’s hierarchical New Jerusalem. In *Cleanness*, the poet gives voice to the victims of God’s wrath, expressing their pleas for mercy. In *Patience*, the narrator and Jonah represent a reluctant acceptance of the will imposed by an authority figure. And, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the people of Hautdesert – an outlying castle in a region similar to the Cheshire/Lancashire area – and the Green Knight undermine the

authority of King Arthur in distant Camelot. The political program within these voices may not be overt in the poems, but they are subversive nevertheless.

The greatest evidence that the poet was aware of the London dialect of English is in the conclusion by critics that he was intimately involved in the London court. Details within the poems indicate that the poet “had been an observer at close range of the best society of his time and knew its manners and habits so thoroughly that he was at ease when he used them in fiction” (Gerould 32). Michael Bennett argues that

the works reveal both a close knowledge of the aristocratic culture of the time, and a deep immersion in the worlds of chivalry and courtesy. The poet is an insider, a courtier’s courtier, adding complexity and refinement to issues of faith and honour, and points of ethics and etiquette. Moreover he assumes a courtly audience. In his descriptions of aristocratic and courtly life, he does not seek to impress or presume to educate the people for whom he wrote. Indeed in his account of Gawain’s quest he adopts, to a surprising degree, the view-point of the royal court rather than the baronial household (“Historical” 81).

The poet could not have been such a close observer of courtly society without being at home with London English. Additionally, Bennett, Bowers, and others have tied many details within the poems to specific characteristics of the royal courts under Richard II and Edward III, which I will discuss later in this chapter and in the chapters on *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

There is also evidence to indicate that the poet knew both French and Latin, languages widely known and used at court in London. First, to indicate the poet could read French, there is the oft-cited allusion to the *Roman de la Rose* in *Cleanness*:

*For Clopyngnel in þe compass of his clene Rose,
þer he expounez a speche to hym þat spede wolde
Of a lady to be loued: ‘Loke to hir sone
Of wich beryng þat ho be, and wych ho best louyes,
And be ryst such in vch a borze of body and of dedes,*

*And fol3 þe fet of þat fere þat þou fre haldes;
 And if þou wyrkkes on þis wyse, þaz ho wyk were,
 Hir schal lyke þat layk þat lyknes hir tylle' (1057-1064).¹*

This passage indicates that the poet knew French, and the poet's word choices throughout the works demonstrate that the poet was aware of a regional French dialect. These language choices indicate that

the Pearl Poet was familiar enough with certain "French" words, in forms and senses specific to dialects of southwestern France, that he may well have lived there for some time: *torres* "towering clouds" (*Pearl* 875, *Cleanness* 951), *enbaned* "machicolated" (*SGGK* 790), and *Toulouse* "Toulouse" (*SGGK* 78, *Cleanness* 1108) (Revard 6-7)

While the Cheshire and Aquitaine regions were very distant from each other, travel between these areas would not have been surprising because "many soldier-administrators, from the 1320s into the fifteenth century, served royal, princely, and noble masters *both* in southwestern France *and* in Cheshire" (Revard 7). Furthermore,

any poet dwelling in or more than casually connected to a courtly household [. . .] would have had to be fluent in French of some kind; and, if that poet were also a cleric either secular or monastic, as the Pearl Poet surely was, he must have been equally fluent in Latin (Revard 7-8).

Chaucer, Gower, and Trevisa – contemporaries of the *Gawain*-poet – all knew French and Latin. Based on the critical examinations of the poet's language, and the linguistic skills of his contemporaries, one can conclude that the poet had the linguistic capability to make a choice when writing his poems.

The role of English had been changing during the late fourteenth century, giving the language more prominence in English politics. In 1362, Parliament was addressed in English for the first time, and later that year Parliament decreed that "all legal proceedings had to be carried on in English because the litigants could not understand

French” (Fisher 83). English also was known at court. Richard II commissioned Gower’s English *Confessio Amantis*, and his foreign-born queen, Anne of Bohemia, acquired the English language (McKnight 8). Dissenting religious tracts also began appearing in English as well. John Wyclif, who established the Lollard movement (which was considered heretical), was largely left alone by authorities when he wrote in Latin. When he began writing in English, however, “the opposition to him became more determined and repressive” because his dissention could reach a larger group of people, and could reach the layman (Blake, “Introduction” 19). In light of Wyclif’s case, the political impact of the *Gawain*-poet’s use of English is greater. Not only has English been strengthened politically in Parliament and at court, but also in reaching the masses.

The use of the Old English alliterative tradition by the poet is another unique feature that aids in distancing the poems from London. Evidence shows that the use of the alliterative genre was out of fashion for mainstream literature. The poet not only used an “outside” dialect, therefore, but also an “outside” genre. Examinations of Chaucer’s vocabulary have noted that his writing featured “the use of many words of French or Latin origin and the employment of rhetorical figures” (Blake, “Literary” 524). Chaucer’s writing style indicates that “the alliterative words and compounds [usually deriving from Old English style] had fallen out of use” (Blake, “Literary” 524-525). Chaucer even regionalizes alliterative style in the prologue to the Parson’s tale when he says “But trusteth wel I am a Southern man, / I kan nat geste rom ram ruf by letter” (Chaucer “Parson’s Tale” 42-43), thus indicating that such a style is distinctly northern and not of

London. The marketing strategy used by early publisher William Caxton further indicates that alliterative style was unpopular with his courtly clientele:

He does not refer to alliterative style as such, but he divides his audience into what may be termed courtly and non-courtly groups. The alliterative style was non-courtly in so far as it represented the old-fashioned style which had been characteristic of the whole country at one time (Blake, "Literary" 525).

Chaucer's association of alliterative style with a particular region that is not his own, and Caxton's perception that alliterative style is non-courtly, emphasize the "commonness" and "outside" feel of the *Gawain*-poet's use of the style.

The history of the Cheshire/Lancashire region reinforces the subversive political impact of the poet's choice of an "outside" dialect. The area that is home to the *Gawain*-poet, or at least his dialect, was far-flung from the cosmopolitan life of London; it "seems to have been only sparsely populated," and the "Cheshire and the north-west Midlands in general constituted an intrinsically poor corner of the realm" (Bennett, "Literary achievement" 66). During the fourteenth century, the region lacked an aristocratic elite, and local members of the gentry were undistinguished (66). In addition, "there is no evidence that courts were ever held" in the area (66). This lack of an aristocratic presence may have been a result of the turbulent nature of the region. The Cheshire/Lancashire area was subject to colonialization beginning with the Romans who "had built forts at Chester and Manchester, cut roads across the Pennines to York, valued the salt-springs of Cheshire and the lead-mines of the Peak district" (Bennett, "Historical" 72). Their residence was followed by the Angles who "settled in the more fertile valleys, and brought the heavy soils under the plough" (72).

Around the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, and for the following two centuries, the area became “a frontier zone, economically, politically and culturally” (Bennett, “Historical” 73). Edward I, during his conquest of Wales, attempted to transform and assimilate the region with the rest of England, but despite his efforts “the region continued to have a reputation, as befitted a frontier, for turbulence” (73). The tendency for instability in the area, and the regular border disputes that made it so, resulted in making military accomplishments and soldiery a common profession for the people of the region. The Cheshire/Lancashire area was important, therefore, for military recruiting: “the region was looked to as a recruiting-ground in the conquest and settlement of Wales, in the Irish colony and, later, in the Hundred Years’ War” (73). Furthermore,

there can be little doubt as to the great importance of military service in the lives of Cheshire men in the later middle ages. The strategic position of Cheshire on the Welsh border, the relative importance of the pastoral element in its rural economy, the palatinate status of the country and its tenure by such martial-minded royal earls as Edward I, the Black Prince and Henry V, all contributed to the building up of a formidable military tradition in the region (Bennett, “Literary achievement” 71).

Edward III recruited heavily from the area for his Scottish campaigns, which I will elaborate on in the chapter on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and his son, the Black Prince, used the region “as a major recruiting-ground for men-at-arms and archers” (Bennett, “Literary achievement” 70) for his various military exploits.

Like his father, the Black Prince, and grandfather, Edward III, Richard II drew from the Cheshire/Lancashire region for soldiers. When he took the English throne at the young age of eleven following the death of his grandfather, Richard II’s reign was not

secure, particularly in the face of John of Gaunt, his uncle, who was very powerful and capable of taking the crown for himself. Seeing the strength of John of Gaunt's Lancastrian retinue in Richard II's Scottish expedition of 1385 "prompted [the king] to look to the military resources of his own palatinate of Chester" (Bennett, "Historical" 83), beginning a long relationship between the king and the soldiers of the region. In 1387 and 1397, Richard II raised armies from the area to "overawe his baronial opposition" (Bennett, "Literary achievement" 70). In 1387, this meant recruiting soldiers for "the abortive Radcot Bridge campaign," which caused the region to play "a major role in the turbulent politics of the reign" (71). Despite the turbulence of Richard II's reign and its impact on the people of the Northwest Midlands, war helped to support their local economy. When Richard II attempted to achieve peace with France with his marriage to Isabelle, as John Bowers notes, "Cheshire's prosperity as a military community, indeed its very sense of regional identity, was threatened" (*Politics* 186). This inspired a small uprising in Cheshire in 1393 directed against the peace negotiations with France (Bennett, "Literary achievement" 71).

Despite this local agitation, Richard II continued to draw heavily from the region. Bennett notes that "from 1397 to 1399 over seven hundred and fifty Cheshire knights and archers provided Richard II with a powerful bodyguard and lent the king the military support vital to his absolutist policies" ("Literary achievement" 71). The king's association with the men of the Northwest-Midlands was great. He always had Cheshire men in his attendance, and he granted "annuities to some seventy odd knights and gentlemen from Cheshire, and quite a number more from Lancashire" (Bennett,

“Historical” 86). He also made several visits to the region during his reign. Most noteworthy were his visits for Christmas and New Year of 1397-8 and 1398-9, both of which included spectacular celebrations, including daily tournaments, opulent feasts, and lavish gifts for guests (87).

Richard II is known to be the first of the Norman kings to use English regularly, and his familiarity with the Cheshire men who surrounded him resulted in his familiarity with their specific regional dialect as well. Bennett notes that “there is evidence that the [Cheshire] vernacular was acceptable in the king’s company,” and cites a particular episode of its occurrence: “The Kenilworth chronicler made a specific point of recording that the Cheshire retainers addressed Richard II familiarly as ‘Dycun’, and chatted to him in their *maternal lingua*, their native dialect” (“Literary achievement” 83). This episode counters the previous scholarly belief that the Northwest-Midlands dialect would be “too provincial for anyone but a Cheshire native to comprehend” (Bowers, *Politics* 75).

In addition to spending time with the Cheshire natives, Richard II devoted himself to improving his mind. Bennett notes that “he certainly had a range of bookish interests,” and commissioned the work of multiple poets, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and others (*Richard II* 43). Among these literary interests were a fascination with courtly love and romance, and the apocalyptic visions of St. John, both of which figure heavily in the poems of the manuscript. Richard II’s passion for literary and intellectual pursuits bolsters the possibility that the *Gawain*-poet may have been present in his court at some time. If indeed he was present, the poet’s criticisms of authority are likely aimed at a much higher level than a local member of the Cheshire/Lancashire gentry.

Even if the *Gawain*-poet was not present in the court of Richard II, his presence in London is not unlikely. By the second half of the fourteenth century, a flood of people from the Cheshire area were migrating to London to seek employment or an education (Bennett, "Literary achievement" 73). Like the Cheshire military men recruited by Richard II, there is no doubt that these immigrants brought with them their Northwest-Midlands culture and dialect. For that reason, "given the themes and concerns of some of the works [in the manuscript] it is not impossible that they were written outside the northwest Midlands, for an expatriate audience" (Bennett, "Historical" 80). For the expatriates who found themselves in or near the king's court, coming to London would give them an intimate view of how the colonizing and warring behavior of Richard II, his grandfather, and those kings that came before him, impacted their people. Watching Richard II's turbulent and ultimately unsuccessful reign would have given the *Gawain*-poet plenty of material with which to question his methods of rule, especially considering the king's exalted view of his position and attempts to promote a "cult of English kingship" (Bennett, *Richard II* 26-27).

In her article "Public Poetry and Richard II," Anne Middleton gives her understanding of the purpose of poetry during the late fourteenth century:

In brief terms, poetry was to be a 'common voice' to serve the 'common good.' The realized presence of the poetic speaker in this literature became a stylistic means of expressing that purpose, and it produced a new kind of experientially based didactic poetry (95).

The works of the *Gawain*-poet express the common voice. Using the voice of the court outsider, whose homeland has been subject to constant rule from a distant authority, gives the poet the ability to subtly question authority in his poetry. He has taken English,

which at the time had only recently become a language of the court, and molded it for his own rebellious purposes. His criticisms represent the history and experience of his people.

¹ For as Clopinel claims in his courtly *Romance Of the Rose*, any reader who's wrenched with desire To be loved by a lady, must "look to her ways, Must behold the habits she happens to use, And in everything imitate actions she takes." He adds: "Look to that loved one to learn of her ways; If you do this, no doubt, though disdainful at first, She will love you at last. So be like her in all."

Pearl

The first of the four poems in the Cotton Nero A.x., called *Pearl*, is about a man who has lost his pearl – typically interpreted as his daughter – then falls asleep and has an elaborate dream. In his dream, he meets his dead daughter who proceeds to tell him that she now resides in heaven as Christ's bride, one of the 144,000 virgins in the apocalyptic vision of Revelation. The man has difficulty understanding how she could be elevated to such a high position, especially since she died before she could learn the rituals of the Church. She attempts to explain, but he never fully understands, and ultimately he awakens when he tries to cross the river to join her in New Jerusalem.

Scholarship of *Pearl* has typically focused on either its religious aspects – particularly in trying to understand what the poet is trying to teach with the poem – or what role of the man's daughter, typically referred to as the pearl-maiden, plays. While scholarship has brought a great deal of understanding to the poem, it still leaves many questions for the reader. For instance, the poem appears to be teaching the dreamer to eschew earthly goods and worship God in order to get to heaven in the afterlife. However, the pearl-maiden uses examples of exchange, wealth, and earthly values – especially by regularly referring to pearls and gemstones – and issues of status and hierarchy to teach this lesson. The finery possessed by the pearl-maiden and her queenly status further complicate the dialogue between her and her father. The materialism and focus on status inherent within the poem highlights class

differences between the common man, represented by the dreamer, and the chosen ones of New Jerusalem, such as the pearl-maiden. These class and wealth issues suggest that the dreamer is attempting to cross into a higher class and exercise some upward mobility. However, those representative of the upper class in the poem force him to stay in his place. The poet uses the hierarchal system of New Jerusalem to allegorize real life medieval class systems. The poet's depiction of the dreamer highlights the problems inherent in the class system, particularly the illogical determination of those who are elevated. The dreamer's confusion about the hierarchical system of New Jerusalem undermines that system. By masking his criticism in the dreamer's confusion, the poet comments subversively on earthly hierarchies.

At the same time, there are many aspects of the poem that allude to King Richard II, indicating that the poet would have been intimately involved in the court, perhaps as part of a wealthy family with ties to the royal family. Ultimately, combining the issues of class with the allusions to the Ricardian monarchy suggests that the poet's commentary is aimed at the king, particularly at Richard II's belief in the divine right of kings.

Throughout the poem there are many references to gemstones. In the beginning of the dream, the dreamer sees "*emerad, saffer, oþer gemme gente / Bat alle þe loze lemed of lyzt*" (118-119)¹ in the banks of the river. Gemstones figure heavily in the description of New Jerusalem, where the dreamer describes the twelve steps in which "*Vch tabelment watz a serlypez ston*" (994),² including one step each adorned with green jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, ruby, chrysolite,

beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and amethyst. The most important gemstone featured in the poem is, of course, the pearl. Pearls were considered very valuable at the time the poet was writing: “in the fourteenth century pearls were highly prized as ornaments of the fashionable” (Spearing, “Symbolic” 6). Felicity Riddy discusses the role of jewels in the poem at great length, noting that “the combination of pearls, sapphires and rubies, set in silver and gold, is frequently found in princely collections of goldsmiths’ work of the fourteenth and fifteenth century” (150). More importantly, Riddy informs us that

Jewels in the Middle Ages were indicators of aristocratic taste, standing and wealth; they were not merely aesthetic but functional. [. . .] as portable goods and symbols of status, jewels are also currency of a slightly different kind: they are objects of exchange, part of the elaborate system of gift-giving and receiving through which networks of power, reciprocity and obligation were maintained (150).

By applying Riddy’s analysis, one can see that the image of jewels in the poem – which begins with the first line, “*Perle plesaunte, to princes paye*” (1)³, indicating both value and status with the jewel – may have caused a fourteenth century reader to expect a poem focusing on upper class wealth, status, and exchange, particularly because the dreamer is longing for a pearl that he lost, trying to regain value that he once possessed.

Pearls are not only decorative within the poem, but they also have key ties to the two main characters. As I mentioned, the dreamer is longing for his lost pearl:

*Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere;
 þurȝ gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.
 I dewyne, fordolke of luf-daungere
 Of þat pryuy perle withouten spot (9-12).⁴*

The dreamer is not an everyday man looking for his pearl; he is a jeweler: “*Fro we in twynne wern towen and twayned, / I haf ben a joylez juelere*” (251-252).⁵ Riddy notes that “jewelers do not own jewels, or at least not permanently: jewels pass through their hands” (154). While Riddy intends to use this comment as a metaphor for the brief time that the dreamer was a father to the little girl, her point is applicable to the notions of “have and have-not” within the poem. As a jeweler and member of the guild class, the dreamer is an outsider to the upper classes; he has access to them, creates finery for them, but is denied entry. This aspect of a jeweler’s profession aids the poet in pointing out the illogic of such a situation; the jeweler can interact with the upper classes, but cannot join them.

The pearl-maiden, however, is clearly given access to the riches and finery associated with New Jerusalem in the poem. She is the valuable commodity that Christ wishes to bring into his upper class community. Plus, by making her female, the poet adds to her identity as an item of exchange. The idea of the pearl-maiden as a commodity begins in the opening lines of the poem where she is first referred to as a thing/a gemstone/a pearl:

*Perle plesaunte, to princes paye
To clanly clos in golde so clere:
Oute of orient, I hardyly saye,
Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.
So rounde, so reken in vche araye,
So small, so smolpe her sydez were;
Queresoeuer I jugged gemmez gaye
I sette hyr sengeley in synglure* (1-8).⁶

“Taken by themselves,” these opening lines “refer to the pearl as a lapidary might, as a literal precious stone, valued by literal earthly princes” (Spearing, “Symbolic” 3).

One hundred fifty lines must pass before the dreamer sees the “*mayden of menske, ful demonere*” (162).⁷ Once the dreamer actually sees her, there are ninety more lines until she speaks. During those intermittent lines, the dreamer describes her in great detail:

*Al bysnande whyt watz hir beau biys,
Vpon at sydez, and bounden bene
Wyth þe myrreste margarys, at my deuysse,
Þat euer I sez zet with myn yzen; [. . .]
A pyzt coroune zet wer þat gyrle
Of marjorys and non oper ston,
Hize pynakled of cler quyt perle,
Wyth flurtd flowrez perfet vpon. [. . .]
Pyzt watz pyned and vche a hemme—
At honed, at sydez, at ouerture—
Wyth white perle and non oper gemme,
And bornyste quyte watz hyr uesture.
Bot a wonder perle withouten wemme
Inmyddez hyr breste watz sette so sure;
A mannez dom mozt malte in hit mesure.
I hope no tong mozt endure
No sauerly saghe say of þat syzt,
So watz hit clene and cler and pure,
Þat precios perle þer hit watz pyzt (197-228).⁸*

The first description of the pearl-maiden returns frequently to her adornments and finery, particularly to all of the pearls that she is wearing. Yet, she is still voiceless. Her humanity is subdued by her objectification as a commodity of value.

The poet suggests that even the pearl-maiden is focused mainly on her finery in the lines immediately prior to her first speech:

*That juel þenne in gemmez gente
Vered vp her vyse with yzen graye,
Set on hyr coroun of perle orient, (253-255).⁹*

Furthermore, when she does speak she refers to herself as a pearl:

For þat þou lestez watz bot a rose

*Þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef;
Now þurȝ kynde of þe kyste þat hyt con close
To a perle of prys hit is put in pref (269-272)¹⁰*

The pearl-maiden is no longer a living creature, like a rose; she is now a valued object of exchange, a pearl.

The idea of the pearl-maiden as an exchanged commodity continues. When using the parable of the pearl of great price to explain how she got an elevated status in heaven, the pearl-maiden compares herself to one of the workers who came late in the day to labor for the lord:

*‘More haf I of joye and blysse hereinne,
Of ladyschyp gret and lyuez blom,
Ðen alle þe wyȝez in þe worlde myȝt wynne
By þe way of ryȝt to aske dome.
Wheþer wlnygh 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 ȝore,
Þat ȝet of hyre nobynk þay nom,
Paraunter noȝt schal to-ȝere more’ (577-588).¹¹*

By comparing herself to one of the laborers, the pearl-maiden suggests that while she is worth the same as the other laborers, she is still an object of value. And, this value is set at the whim of the lord who sits at the top of the hierarchy, who proclaims, when the laborers who worked the whole day try to negotiate for more, “‘*More, weþer louyly is me my gyfte— / To do with myn quatso me lykez?*’” (565-566).¹²

The idea of individuals being exchanged is also echoed when the pearl-maiden explains to the dreamer how he can purchase his own pearl (salvation) from Christ:

*'This makellez perle þat bozt is dere,
 Þe joueler gef fore alle 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, euen inmyddez my breste hit stode:
 My Lorde þe Lombe, þat schede Hys blode,
 He pyzt hit þere in token of pes.
 I rede þe forsake þe worlde wode
 And porchase þy perle maskelles' (733-744)¹³*

Although she encourages the dreamer to become part of the exchange system with Christ, the dreamer's comment immediately following this stanza indicates that he still sees the pearl as representative of her, calling her a pearl and assigning her with a value: "*O maskelez perle in perlez pure, / Þat berez, ' quop I, 'þe perle of prys [. . .] / Breue me, bryzt, quat kyn offys / Berez þe perle so maskellez?*" (745-756).¹⁴ Instead of correcting the dreamer's misinterpretation, she proceeds to explain how Christ acquired her as his bride: "*My makelez Lambe þat al may bete, ' / Quop scho, 'my dere Destyné, Me ches to Hys make, alþaz vnmete'" (757-759).¹⁵ Christ's acquisition of the pearl-maiden makes her another trophy to add to his spectacular New Jerusalem – she becomes one of 144,000 pearls adorning the city.*

While she is but one of many acquired by Christ – a point she tries to reinforce with the dreamer – the pearl-maiden's status is elevated as a bride of Christ and as a queen. When Christ takes her as his bride, he adorns her in finery and crowns her, indicating that she has joined a higher class: "*In Hys blod He wesch my wede on dese, / And coronde clene in vergynté, / And pyzt me in perlez maskellez"*

(766-768).¹⁶ It is no surprise, therefore, that this ritual indicates to the dreamer that she is peerless:

*‘Why maskellez bryd þat bryzt con flambé,
 Þat reiatéz hatz so ryche and ryf,
 Quat kyn þyng may be þat Lambe
 Þat þe wolde wedde vnto Hys vyf?
 Ouer alle oper so hyz þou clambe
 To lede with Hym so ladyly lyf.
 So mony a comly onvunder cambe
 For Kryst han lyued in much stryf,
 And þou con alle þo dere outdryf,
 And fro þat maryag al oper depress,
 Al only þyself so stout and styf,
 A makelez may and maskellez’ (769-780).¹⁷*

The dreamer’s conclusion leads into a discussion of class issues between himself and the pearl-maiden in which he tries to understand how she can be queen while also being one of 144,000 brides of Christ.

Issues of class and status figure heavily throughout the poem, particularly in the conversations between the pearl-maiden and the dreamer. The dreamer is often left more confused as the conversations progress. As she tries to explain her situation, the pearl-maiden establishes a paradoxical sense of hierarchy, where everyone is equal while simultaneously being elevated. The conclusion made by the dreamer when she is made Christ’s bride, cited in lines 769-780 above, seems logical, but she must correct his misinterpretation: “*Bot ‘makelez quene’ þenne sade I not. / Þe Lambes vyuez in blysse we bene, / A hondred and forty þousande flor*” (784-786).¹⁸

This exchange is similar to an earlier conversation about her status in which she explains her experiences since arriving in heaven:

*‘Þow wost wel when þy perle con schede
 I watz ful zong and tender of age;*

*Bot my Lorde þe Lombe þurȝ Hys godhead,
 He toke myself to Hys maryage,
 Corounde me quene in blysse to brede
 In lenghe of dayez þat euer schal wage;
 And sesed in alle Hys heritage
 Hys lef is. I am holy Hysse.
 Hys prese, Hys prys, and Hys parage
 Is rote and grounde of alle my blysse' (411-420).¹⁹*

Calling herself a queen astounds the dreamer because he assumes she is the queen of heaven:

*'Art þou þe quene of heuenez blew,
 Þat al þys worlde schal do honour?
 We leuen on Marye þat grace of grewe,
 Þat ber a barne of vyrgyn flour.
 Þe croune fro hyr quo most remwe
 Bot ho hir passed in sum fauour?' (423-428).²⁰*

Instead of correcting him, the pearl-maiden "*knelande to grounde*" (434)²¹ and begins a prayer honoring Mary before continuing her conversation with the dreamer:

*'Makelez moder and myrrest may,
 Blessed bygynner of vch a grace!
 Þenne ros ho vp and con restay,
 And speke me towarde in þat space:
 'Sir, fele here prochasez and fongez pray,
 Bot supplantorez none withinne þys place;
 Þat emperise al heuenz hatz—
 And vrþe and helle—in her bayly;
 Of erytage zet non wyl ho chace,
 For ho is quen of cortaysye' (435-444).²²*

The pearl-maiden's response to the dreamer's misunderstanding not only contradicts the idea of equality in heaven, but it also indicates that strict adherence to the hierarchy that exists is required – similar to earthly class systems in medieval society. The speed at which the pearl-maiden falls to her knees is so quick that it seems she fears offending her superiors and is attempting to amend the dreamer's apparent

blasphemy. Her prayer clearly indicates that Mary is the female with the highest status, and shortly thereafter she explains Christ's role as head of the body politic in heaven: "*Al arn we membrez of Jesu Kryst: / As heued and arme and legg and naule / Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste*" (458-460).²³ The deference that the pearl-maiden shows to Christ and Mary demonstrates that "on a social level, much of what *Pearl* is 'about' is the necessity of enforcing the hierarchies of class power" (Bowers, *Politics* 30).

Despite her deference to the authorities in heaven, the pearl-maiden is still considered a queen and continues to refer to herself as such. The dreamer disputes her elevation to queen, particularly because she was too young at the time of her death to know basic church rituals:

*'Dow lyfed not two yer in oure bede;
Dow cowþez neuer God nauþer plese ne pray,
Ne neuer nawþer Pater ne Crede—
And quen mad on þe first day!
I may not traw, so God me spede,
Pat God wolde wryþe so wrange away.
Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,
Wer fayr in heuen to halde asstate,
Oþer ellez a lady of lasse array;
Bot a quene!—hit is to dere a date'* (483-492).²⁴

The father's disbelief that she could be queen, but willingness to accept that she could be a countess or duchess, indicates that he is confused by the concept of hierarchy in heaven, but that he recognizes a hierarchy exists there. Further, this confusion highlights the illogic of heaven's hierarchy; so many of them are queens, but all of these queens are equal, and they are all subject to a ruling queen, Mary.

The image of New Jerusalem is a visual image of the hierarchy in heaven for the dreamer. The pearl-maiden “is represented as queen in the court of heaven, and heaven itself – the jeweled landscape, the jeweled city – is associated with the prestige and power of aristocratic luxury” (Riddy 152) In New Jerusalem the issues of aristocratic hierarchy and objectivism come together. Here, Christ can display all of the “pearls” he has acquired:

*So sodanly on a wonder wyse
I watz war of a proressyoun.
Dis noble cite of ryche enpresse
Watz sodanly ful, withouten sommoun,
Of such vergynez in þe same gyse
Þat watz my blysfyl anvunder croun.
And corande wern alle of þe same fasoun,
Depaynt in perlez and wedez qwyte;
In vchonez breste watz bounden boun
Þe blysfyl perle with gret delyt (1095-1104).²⁵*

At the same time, Christ demonstrates that he is the head of the hierarchy that includes these pearl-maidens, plus elders and angels:

*Þe Lombe byfore con proudly passé
Wyth hornes seuen of red golde cler;
As praysed perlez His wedez wasse.
Towarde þe throne [the virgins] trone a tras [. . .]
Þise aldermen, quen He aproched,
Groueleyng to His fete þay felle.
Legyounes of aungelez togeder uoched
Þer kesten ensens of swete smelle (1110-1122).²⁶*

Despite the fact that they are all subordinated to Christ, the finery adorning them all indicates that they are of a higher class. Consequently, “New Jerusalem gives us a hieratic courtly structure, a lost female body transformed, as it were, into a body politic that, while egalitarian in theory, is courtly in practice” (Stanbury, “Body” 40).

The result of New Jerusalem is a larger scale demonstration of the earthly equality/hierarchy paradox in a heavenly setting.

At this point, the dreamer is no longer trying to make sense of the logic of this paradox. Instead, he is drawn in to the vision of New Jerusalem: "*I stod as style as dased quayle / [. . .] So watz I rauyste with glymme pure*" (1085-1088).²⁷ This moment marks the effect that the inundation of materialism has had on the dreamer. Prior to his conversation with the pearl-maiden, the dreamer was curious about crossing the river, but did not attempt to out of fear:

*More and more, and zet wel mare,
Me lyste to se þe broke byzonde,
For if hit watz sayr þer I con fare,
Wel loueloker watz þe fyrre londe.
Abowte me con I stote and stare;
To fynde a forþe faste con I fonde,
Bot wopez mo iwysse þer ware,
Þe fyrre I stalked by þe stronde;
And euer me þoȝt I schulde not wonde
For wo þer welez so wynne wore (145-154).*²⁸

At the end of the poem, when he is ravished by the image of New Jerusalem and all of its material wealth, he loses his sense of caution and tries to cross the river:

*I þoȝt þat nobyng myȝt me dere
To fech me bur and take me halte,
And to start in þe strem schulde non me stere,
To swymme þe remnaunt, þaȝ I þer swalte.
Bot of þat munt I watz bitalt;
When I schulde start in þe strem astraye,
Out of þat caste I watz bycalt:
Hit watz not at my Pryncez paye.*

*Hit payed Hym not þat I so flonc
Ouer meruelous mereȝ, so mad arayd.
Of raas þaȝ I were rasch and ronk,
Ȝet rapely þerinne I watz restayed,
For ryȝt as I sparred vnto þe bonc,*

þat brathþe out of my drem me brayde (1157-1170).²⁹

When he is forcefully awakened from his dream, the dreamer's regret at being unable to cross the river is tainted with greed:

*To þat Pryncez paye hade I ay bente,
And zerned no more þen watz me geuen,
And halden me þer in trwe entent,
As þe perle me prayed þat watz so pryuen,
As helde, drawn to Goddez present,
To mo of His mysterys I hade ben dryuen* (1189-1194).³⁰

The dreamer is regretful because he feels he missed the opportunity to see even more – what he had seen was not enough to satisfy him. At the same time, the transition in the dreamer's terminology for Christ once he attempts to cross the river, from “*Lombe*” to “*Prynce*,” brings more attention to the differences in status between them. It is as if Christ is trying to stunt the dreamer's attempt to join his elite group, essentially thwarting his upward mobility. In the final stanza of the poem, the dreamer professes his acceptance of Christ. His unhappiness when he awakes from the dream “call[s] into question the voluntariness of his decision” (Bullon-Fernandez 44). It seems, therefore, as if the dreamer is accepting his position begrudgingly since he is being forcefully restrained from elevating himself.

The terminology of Christ as “*Prynce*” also reminds the reader of the late fourteenth century monarchy. John Bowers, in *The Politics of Pearl* and “*Pearl* in Its Royal Setting: Ricardian Poetry Revisited,” has discovered many ties between Richard II and his court and certain aspects of the poem. Closely associated with Richard II are the pearls and jewels appearing within the poem. The pearl-maiden's crown is one of the first pieces of jewelry to appear in the poem:

*A pyzt coroune zet wer þat gyrle
 Of marjorys and non oper ston,
 Hise pynakled of cler quyt perle,
 Wyth flurted flowrez perfet vpon (205-208).³¹*

Queen Anne, wife of Richard II, had a very similar crown: “it consists of an elaborate twelve-part circlet from which rise twelve golden lilies with trefoil leaves at the tops and sides, decorated with various gems including the 132 pearls” (Bowers, *Politics* 106). Another pearl linked to Richard II is the large pearl worn on the breast of the pearl-maiden and the rest of the 144,000 virgins. These adornments are similar to badges worn by royal affiliates in the late fourteenth century:

The first item on the agenda for the Cambridge Parliament of 1388 was the abolition of badges (*signes*) assumed since the first year of Edward III’s reign [. . .] so many liveried companies, which had been retained by lesser lords, behaved as criminal gangs disrupting the peace. [. . .] Since the Evasham chronicler reported that the livery of the White Hart was first worn publicly as a royal emblem at the Smithfield tournament of 1390, Richard seems to have been quick to take advantage of his privilege in this regard, eventually creating a private army strong enough to protect him from the sort of threat posed by the Appelants two years earlier. A connection between the White Hart badge and the deer of Macclesfield forest serves as evidence of the royal affection already being shown to Cheshire.

Since badges could be worn only by members of the lord’s *familia*, Richard’s response was to pull larger numbers of men into his household and to bestow life-retaining contracts upon knights not technically members. [. . .] *Pearl*’s description of the 144,000 liveried followers of Lord Lamb, each with her pearl badge, would have provided a divine sanction for an enormous *familia*, by comparison with which Richard’s 750 Cheshire archers might have seemed altogether appropriate for the English king (Bowers, “Royal Setting” 136-137).

The connections between the text and Richard II are convincing on their own, but when combined with the issues of status and materialism that appear in the poem, they seem much stronger. The poet who included these particular details seems to have been intimately aware of aspects of Richard II’s court.

Associations between the poem's allusions to apocalyptic texts recall the king's interest in these texts. The vision of New Jerusalem comes straight from the book of Revelations, written by St. John. During Richard II's reign, many artistic renderings were done of the Apocalypse, including "ninety-six Apocalypse murals painted in Westminster Abbey's Chapterhouse around 1395" (Bowers, *Politics* 88). Among these murals is a depiction of Christ as judge that "merits comparison with the Abbey's monumental portrait of Richard II, which was self-consciously modeled upon the severe and intimidating image of Christ in Majesty" (Bowers, *Politics* 88). In addition to the apocalyptic murals that tie Richard II to Christ and the writings of St. John is the Wilton Diptych. This piece purposely portrays Richard II:

In the left panel the kneeling king is accompanied by the two English royal saints St. Edmund of East Anglia and St. Edward the Confessor. Standing immediately beside the king is his patron, St. John the Baptist, who carries the iconographic lamb that recalls how he had hailed Christ – "*Ecce Agnus Dei*" – as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). The three crowned kings are greeted in the right panel by the Christ Child, who is crowned with the thorns and nails of his Crucifixion [. . .] The Christ Child blesses a red-cross banner, which partly represents the banner of St. George as patron of the Order of the Garter and partly reflects the contemporary drive of men like Philippe de Mézières for a crusade to liberate Jerusalem. The eleven angels surrounding Christ wear the White Hart badges of Richard II's royal livery, which the king himself is also wearing in the left panel. (Bowers, *Politics* 29)

While elements of these two art pieces tie Richard II directly to the vision of New Jerusalem of the poem through allusions to St. John and the hierarchy involving the Lamb/Christ, they also focus on "Richard II's political and personal obsession throughout the 1390s: the sacred status of kingship" (Bowers, *Politics* 29). In the Westminster Abbey's Chapterhouse apocalypse murals, Christ is imagined as Richard II, and in the Wilton Diptych, the White Hart badges indicate that Richard II is a

member of Christ's family. For the poet to make similar allusions in the image of New Jerusalem in *Pearl* indicates that he is implicating Richard II as one who supports the ideas of an exclusive hierarchy like the one in the poem. Since the pearl-maiden describes Christ as the head of the body politic in heaven, and Christ is alluded to as a "Prynce" and "Kyng," one further see how Richard II is tied to the image of Christ in the poem. With this information, one can conclude that the poet is aiming his criticism at Richard II's support of the divine right of kings.

The effect of all of this information – focus on a commodity exchange of valuable objects, a distinct hierarchy, and ties to Richard II's court – lies in the dreamer's reactions as he experiences his vision. He is an outsider looking in at a higher class, wishing to be apart of it, but being left out. The commentary inserted by the poet is negative; the hierarchy is seen as illogical, and the greedy effect that New Jerusalem has on the dreamer further isolates him from the chosen group. By using a jeweler to question the structure of New Jerusalem, the poet gives a critical voice to the common man. The ties to Richard II and his belief in the divine right of kings results in a clear target for this common man's criticism. As Bowers points out, "wherever there is an artistic representation of the court, there is some textual figuration of the power-politics of the court" (Bowers, *Politics* 29). The poet of *Pearl*, through the use of allegory, is able to question the politics of Richard II from the perspective of the common man. While the dreamer may be denied entry into the higher class, his voice will not be quieted by the illogical explanations presented to him.

¹ Soft emeralds, sapphires brilliant –
Lit that lea with lovely light.

² Each stone
Was differently composed thereon

³ Pearl, O pleasure for a Prince

⁴ In a garden green with grass, my cheer
Was lost! It lunged to land O lot!
A lovelorn, longing look I bear
For that precious pearl without a spot.

⁵ “Since forced from you by fate unkind,
I’ve been, indeed, a joyless jeweler.”

⁶ Pearl, O pleasure for a prince,
Enclosed in gold, so clean and clear,
I own that all the orient’s
Fine pearls, though pure, provide no peer
So round, so rich, so wrapped in glints
Of light, so small, so smooth and dear.
In gems that I have judged, no hints
Are seen of her superior.

⁷ Charming, noble maiden (my translation)

⁸ All white she was: a white bouquet
With dearest dress, dainty amice,
And darling pearls. A dear display
Of mounted margeries, [. . .]

She wore a crown, prepared with pearl
Of striking hue: no other stone
But pearly pinnacles awhirl
And flowers finely set. [. . .]

Prepared with pearl, pure filigree
At waist, wrist, and throat she wore.
No other shining stone had she.
But whiter still was what she bore
Upon her breast: a beauteously
Polished pearl! It was so pure
A man might meet eternity
Before he found its like. I’m sure
No man could by himself secure
The words to fit that finely flared
And precious piece; it glowed so pure,
A gem with precious pearls prepared!

⁹ That jewel then, with gems supplied,
Raised up her eyes, aglow and gray,
Replaced her regal crown, inlaid,

¹⁰ For what you lost was but a rose
That flowered and finally failed in time.
But healed within this heavenly house,
And blessed, your beauteous pearl's become.

¹¹ "More merry mirth have I here won,
More bounteous bliss has come to me
Than in the world would anyone
Receive by labor rightfully.
Although the day was nearly done
Before I worked the vine, yet He
Rewarded me at once. Thus none
Was paid before the Lord paid me.
Though others worked more worthily,
And chopped and sweated in their chore,
Yet none received his fief and fee
Nor might for many years or more."

¹² "“Moreover, isn't it my right
To put my pennies where I please?””"

¹³ "This precious pearl, pure and dear,
That jeweler gave his goods to gain;
Like heaven high, it's bright and clear,
The world's Wielder did maintain.
For it is good and gives off cheer;
Its roundness cannot ever wane.
The righteous own it, and sincere;
And long upon my breast it's lain.
My Lord the Lamb, Who once was slain,
Has placed it here to reassure
My peace. Forsake this world insane,
And buy that pearl, precious, pure."

¹⁴ "O precius pearl," said I, "so pure, [. . .]
O say, I plead, what pious place
Do you hold here, my pearl pure?"

¹⁵ "Our Lamb so pure," that pearl said,
"Endeared me to His destiny
As wife, although unwarranted"

¹⁶ "And with His blood washed what I wore.
He crowned me queen in virginity
And robed me in these pearls pure."

¹⁷ "O purest pearl, as bright as flame,
In royalties so rich and rife,
What kind is He, that lofty Lamb
Who took you for His trusted wife?
Higher than others did you here climb
To lead with Him this gracious life,

Though many a dear and worthy dame
 For Christ has lived in lasting strife.
 But all those souls you've soared above;
 Their dear delight you must defer
 When all alone you are His wife.
 A peerless pearl, so precious, pure."

¹⁸ "But *peerless*? No, I said that not!
 We're all dear brides in the Lamb's demesne,
 All hundred forty thousand"

¹⁹ "Now know that when your pearl fled,
 I was too young, of tender age.
 The Lord, our Lamb, through His Godhead,
 Took me in merciful marriage
 And crowned me queen. In bliss we wed.
 For all eternity's endless age
 I hold my Lord's high heritage;
 Forever I am wholly His.
 His love, esteem, and lineage
 Are root and base of all my bliss."

²⁰ "Are you the bride of heaven blue
 Whom people praise without a peer?
 From Mary, we believe, grace grew
 When, but a virgin flower, she bore
 Our Lord. Who wears her crown? In lieu
 Of what? A trait more fine and fair?"

²¹ Kneeled down

²² "O matchless mother, fairest maid,
 Whose great and lofty gift is grace!"
 She prayed and, lifting high her head,
 Deliberately did me address:
 "For piety the pure are paid.
 But no usurpers see this place!
 The empress pure of paradise
 Rules hell and heaven flawlessly,
 And earth, yet does no man disgrace;
 For she is queen of courtesy."

²³ "We crowd united under Christ,
 As arm and leg and lifted head
 Are bound together; this is best."

²⁴ "Not two years old, on bended knee
 You neither learned to praise nor pray
 The Pater or the Creed's decree,
 Yet queen were deigned within a day!
 I can't accept this thoughtlessly!
 If God had deigned you duchess, say,
 Or countess, kind, then, is His way."

Or if God's grace had rendered you
Among the best, I would not bray.
 But *queen*? That's far too dear a due!"

²⁵ So then, before my blissful eyes,
 There formed a crowd. Within that town
 Those precious virgins, each a prize,
 Together went. With great renown
 Each virgin gathered in the guise
 That my pure pearl wore: with crown
 Just as my gentle gem's, and gown
 Of precious pearls, all pure and bright.
 And on each shimmering breast there shone
 A precious pearl of pure delight.

²⁶ Then came the lofty Lamb, displayed
 In precious pearls, each pure and clear,
 And seven golden horns. Arrayed,
 Those virgins formed an accolade [. . .]

For when the lofty Lamb drew near
 The elders at His feet all fell.
 Fine angels came, each casting clear
 And strong incense of sweetest smell.

²⁷ I stood as still as startled quail. [. . .]
 With radiance was I ravished, pure!

²⁸ More and more and ever more
 I pined and longed to penetrate
 That fine and fresh abode. For fair
 As was my side, far fairer yet
 Did seem that sweet, opposing shore.
 I searched to find a ford to let
 Me cross. But the more I searched the more
 Great dangers daunted me. Despite
 My yearning for that place, sheer fright
 Had hold of me;

²⁹ And thinking nothing would deny
 My way, I swelled with silly pride,
 And vainly, madly, vowed to try
 To swim that stream although I died
 Before I crossed that river wide!
 Before I reached such ecstasies,
 A beckoning told me to bide:
 My plan did not my true Prince please.

Displeased that I should have the gall
 To cross that stream, my steps He stayed.
 Although I heeded not that call,
 My walk was wondrously delayed;
 For when I reached that river all

My dream did flit away and fade!

³⁰ Had I to please that Prince been bent,
Not craved more than was granted me,
But stood there, still, obedient
To my pure pearl's true decree,
I might have been shown there still more mystery.

³¹ She wore a crown, prepared with pearl
Of striking hue: no other stone
But pearly pinnacles awhirl
And flowers finely set.

Cleanness

The poem known as *Cleanness*, sometimes called *Purity*, is typically viewed as a homiletic poem constructed of a series of Biblical *exempla* whose purpose was to teach readers the importance of spiritual cleanness. This poem has often been considered by scholars to be weakest of the poems in the manuscript because it is “diffuse, long-winded, and digressive” (Finch 28). However, the poem does more than assemble and translate from the Vulgate a handful of Biblical stories in order to instruct an English-speaking audience in the way to live a clean life. Monica Potkay points out that “the work never defines what it means by the term ‘*clannesse*’” (99). The scholarly community has attempted to fill the void left by the poet and, based upon the content of the poem, try to define “*clannesse*.” They have conjectured that the poet is discussing cleanness of speech (Potkay 99), the sin of “*untrawþe*” (Twomey 117), a lack of “*kynde*” (Glenn 77), and more. However, considering the poem’s title was not given by the poet but rather by later editors (Finch 1), the focus on determining what is clean or not clean within the poem seems misguided. Perhaps, instead, it is important to examine the perspective that the poet takes on the Biblical stories he retells, particularly in those moments when he departs from the content of his source text, the Vulgate Bible. The poet’s embellishment and expansion of Biblical episodes increases the reader’s sympathy toward the people subject to God’s punishment within the poem. Simultaneously, the poet depicts God in such a way as to cause the reader to question God’s typical characterization as

omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving. By creating sympathy for God's victims and antipathy for God's character, as well as for other authority figures in the poem, the poet is able to comment negatively on an oppressive style of rule that lacks mercy.

The poet establishes a negative tone early in the poem. Following his translation of the sixth beatitude (“*Be habel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre, / For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere*” (27-28)¹), the poet “begins at once to develop the theme of the clean of heart conversely through an extended consideration of the impure [. . .] the doom awaiting the impure is consistently stressed [. . .] this observation helps to establish the negative context of the poem and to explain the long, elaborate digressions in terms of negative definition” (O’Bryan 16). This negative context is immediately apparent when examining the first of the three major Biblical episodes retold in the poem: Noah and the flood. Like Genesis 6, the poet begins the retelling of the flood story with God’s anger at man’s sin on earth. The Vulgate describes God’s decision to wipe out mankind in Genesis 6:7: “*delebo inquit hominem quem creavi a facie terrae ab homine usque ad animantia a reptili usque ad volucres caeli paenitet enim me fecisse eos.*”²

When the poet rewrites this speech, he infuses God with passion and furor:

*‘Me forþynkez ful much þat euer I mon made,
Bot I schal delyuer and do away þat doten on þis molde,
And fleme out of þe folde al þat flesch werez,
Fro þe burne to þe best, fro bryddez to fyschez;
Al schal down and be ded and dryuen out of erþe
Þat euer I sette saule inne; and sore hit Me rwez
Þat euer I made hem Myself; bot if I may herafter,
I schal wayte to be war her wrenches to kepe’* (285-292)³

The subsequent verses in the Vulgate’s Genesis 6:13 read: “*dixit ad Noe finis universae carnis venit coram me repleta est terra iniquitate a facie eorum et ego disperdam eos*

cum terra”⁴ In the poem, God’s passionate reaction continues when he goes to Noah to inform him of his plans to flood earth, telling him “*Be gore perof Me hatz greued and be glette nwyed. / I schal strenkle My distresse, and strye al togeder, / Boþe ledez and londe and alle þat lyf habbez*” (306-308)⁵. While the poet does not lengthen the Bible verse, he gives God an emotional reaction to the actions of men on earth. God’s motivation for destruction is personal as He is offended by the filth of men; God is ultimately attempting to dispel His distress at the situation. God’s final speech to Noah prior to the flood includes His description of His plan. The Biblical speech reads: “*adhuc enim et post dies septem ego pluam super terram quadraginta diebus et quadraginta noctibus et delebo omnem substantiam quam feci de superficie terrae.*”⁶ The corresponding text in the poem reads: “*Fro seuen dayez ben seyed I sende out bylyue / Such a towthane ryge þat rayne schal swyþe / Ðat schal wasch alle þe worlde of werkez of fylþe*” (353-355)⁷. The God of the poem animates nature with his rage, bringing a rainfall whose purpose is to cleanse the earth of filth. Unlike the Vulgate text, the poet infuses God with passion and rage in each of God’s three speeches to Noah in *Cleanness*. His decision to drown the world is clearly driven by His emotions. While the Vulgate mentions only once, in Genesis 6:7, God’s personal regret at making man, the poet shows God referring to His emotions and His disgust at man’s actions four times. The God of the poem is a God who makes decisions during moments of passion, not a God who is wise and thoughtful in decision-making.

The negative characterization of God is reinforced by the description of the flood victims succumbing to God’s destruction:

For when þe water of þe welkyn with þe worlde mette,
 Alle þat deth mozt dryze drowned þerinne.
 Þer watz moon for to make when meschaf was cnowen,
 Þat nozt dowed bot þe deth in þe depe stremez;
 Water wylger ay wax, wonez þat stryede,
 Hurlled into vch hous, hent þat þer dowelled.
 Fyrst feng to þe flyzt alle þat fle myzt;
 Vuche burde with her barne þe byggyng þay leuez
 And bowed to þe hyz bonk þer brentest hit wern,
 And heterly to þe hyze hyllez þay haled on faste.
 Bot al watz nedlez her note, for neuer cowþe stynt
 Þe roze raynande ryg, þe raykande wawez,
 Er vch bopom watz brurdful to þe bonkez eggez,
 And vche a dale so depe þat demmed at þe brynkez.
 Þe moste mountaynez on mor þenne watz no more dryze,
 And þeron flocked þe folke, for ferde of þe wrake.
 Syþen þe wylde of þe wode on þe water flette;
 Summe swymmed þeron þat saue himself trawed,
 Summe styze to a stud and stared to þe heuen,
 Rwly with a loud rurd rored for drede.
 Harez, herttez also, to þe hyze runnen;
 Bukkez, bausenez, and bulez to þe bonkkez hyzed;
 And alle cryed for care to þe Kyng of heuen,
 Recouerer of þe Creator þay cryed vchone,
 Þat amounted þe mase His mercy watz passed,
 And alle His pyté departed fro peple þat He hated.
 Bi þat þe flod to her fete flozed and waxed,
 Þen vche a segge sez wel þat synk hym byhoued.
 Frendez fellen in fere and fapmed togeder,
 To dryz her delful destine and dyzen alle samen;
 Luf lokez to luf and his leue takez,
 For to ende alle at onez and for euer twynne. (371-402)⁸

The suffering of the flood victims is wholly absent from the Vulgate; it does not give any perspective of the flood from outside of the ark. The poet's adding such a significant passage can only mean that he wishes to draw the reader's attention to it. The poet paints a very sympathetic picture of the people God had previously deemed so sinful and filthy that they must be destroyed: "these people do not hurl defiance at heaven's silence to their pleas for rescue. [. . .] they use their last moments to affirm their human

relationships [. . .] with tragic awareness of the permanence of the impending separation” (Calabrese and Eliason 253). Also, “although they merited punishment through their disregard of God’s laws, in death they regained dignity. The poet describes their final actions in such a way that we must pity their destruction” (Vitto 12). The reader’s pity is significant because it calls into question the fairness of God’s punishment, particularly because the flood victims beg for mercy. This questioning further supports the poet’s negative characterization of God. As His people cry out, God refuses to save the “*peple þat He hated*” (396).⁹ This image of God hating his creation recalls the angry God described earlier in the poem, strongly contradicting the concept of an all-loving God who would send Christ to save humanity.

Even when God promises to Noah that he will never wipe out all of humanity again, the poet continues to show God in a negative light. The first half of God’s promise never to wipe out all living things again is fairly similar in both the Vulgate and the poem. The text of the Vulgate reads: “*odoratusque est Dominus odorem suavitatis et ait ad eum nequaquam ultra maledicam terrae propter homines sensus enim et cogitatio humani cordis in malum prona sunt ab adolescentia sua non igitur ultra percutiam omnem animantem sicut feci*” (Genesis 8:21).¹⁰ Similarly, the poet writes:

“Now, Noe, no more nel I neuer wary
 Alle þe mukel mayny on molde for no mannez synnez,
 For I se wel þat hit is soothe þat alle seggez wyttez
 To vnþryfte arn alle þrawen with þost of her herttez,
 And ay hatz ben, and wyl be zet” (513-517)¹¹

It is important to note, however, “one remarkable omission in the Pearl Poet’s recounting of the Flood is the lack of any reference to the rainbow, which in Genesis God says is the

‘sign of the covenant’ between him and all living creatures” (Prior, *Revisited* 59). By leaving out the rainbow, a “favorite sign of God’s love for both Jews and Christians” (Prior, *Revisited* 59), but leaving in God’s perspective that men are prone to sin and evildoing, the poet shows that God lacks love for his creation. Plus, if God knows that men are unable to be fixed, why wipe them out in the first place? Furthermore, as the poet transitions out of the flood story and into the next Biblical retelling, he comments “*Lo! Suche a wrakful wo for wlatsum dedez / Parformed þe hyze Fader on folke þat He made*” (541-542)¹², which again accentuates God’s tendency to react suddenly and negatively. Clearly an all-loving God, particularly the Christian God who will ultimately send his Christ as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind, who is aware of man’s predisposition to sin would not have destroyed humanity unless He were reacting to His rage.

The subtle commentary found in the poet’s omissions, revisions, and additions to the Vulgate continue in the next of the three major *exempla*: Sodom and Gomorrah. Like his retelling of the flood, the poet begins this story by highlighting a characteristic of God that contradicts the Christian understanding of God as omniscient and all loving. When God is on his way to Sodom and Gomorrah in the poem, he visits briefly with Abraham, telling him his plans. The differences between the poet’s retelling and the Vulgate are few. The Vulgate reads “*dixit itaque Dominus clamor Sodomorum et Gomorrae multiplicatus est et peccatum earum adgravatum est nimis descendam et videbo utrum clamorem qui venit ad me opere conpleverint an non est ita ut sciam*” (Genesis 18:20-21).¹³ The poet’s version reads: “*The grete soun of Sodamas synkkez in Myn erez / And þe*

gult of Gomorre garez Me to wrath. / I schal lyzt into þat led and loke Myselfuen / If þay haf don as þe dyne dryuez on lofte" (689-692)¹⁴. Both texts note that God must see the sins of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah for Himself – which would contradict the idea of an omniscient God – but the contexts are slightly different. The poet embellishes his version by characterizing God as full of rage, as if God is blinded by his anger at the thought that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah would be committing unclean sins and, therefore, must verify in person the facts of the situation. Thus, the poet is once again depicting God as reacting with negative passion.

God's behavior, combined with His mercilessness for those defying His law, leads to a role reversal for Abraham and God. Abraham, taking the position of guide and teacher, attempts to direct his pupil God, who is currently lacking in mercy or sympathy for man, to calm His rage and think before destroying a group of people. The retelling by the poet is similar to the original Vulgate version of Abraham's and God's conversation, resulting in Abraham's convincing God to save Lot and his family. The most distinct difference between the two texts occurs when God departs from Abraham's home to go to Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Vulgate, it is an inconsequential moment: "*abiitque Dóminus, postquam cessávit loqui ad Ábraham et ille revérsus est in locum suum*" (Genesis 18:33).¹⁵ In the poem, Abraham reacts emotionally to the punishment that God is about to dole out: "*Þen he wendez his way, wepande for care, / Towarde þe mere of Mambre, mornande for sorewe; / And þere in longyng al nyzt he lengez in wones*" (777-779)¹⁶. Abraham's sorrow indicates his disappointment in God's plans. Later, after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham's distrust in God's promise to spare Lot is

evident when the narrator remarks that “*Abraham ful erly watz vp on þe morne, / þat alle nazt much niye hade nomen in his hert, / Al in longing for Loth leyen in a wache* (1001-1003)¹⁷. Abraham’s emotional moments, both his sorrow following his earlier conversation with God and his fear for the life of Lot, show Abraham losing faith in God. The scene at Abraham’s and Sara’s home prior to God’s wrath on Sodom and Gomorrah includes the moment when Sarah laughs at the idea that she and Abraham will have a son. God chastises her for her laughter, saying “*Hopez ho ozt may be harde My hondez to work? / And zet I avow verayly þe avaunt þat I made*” (663-664)¹⁸. This scene demonstrates that “Sarah’s contact with the divine is limited to derision and then denial” (Vitto 14). One can also observe “faithlessness embodied in her scornful laugh” (Twomey 124). Both Abraham and Sarah react emotionally to God’s words, and both of these reactions betray their doubts about God. Their crises of faith degrade God’s character even further. Not only does God react violently to His anger, but His behavior also causes the man whom He has entrusted to be the father of his chosen people to doubt Him.

When Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction takes place in the poem, the poet embellishes the story with a similar, but less heart-wrenching, tactic to the one he uses with the victims’ perspective in the Flood story. The Vulgate’s version of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is very matter of fact: “*igitur Dominus pluit super Sodomam et Gomorram sulphur et ignem a Domino de caelo et subvertit civitates has et omnem circa regionem universos habitatores urbium et cuncta terrae virentia*” (Genesis 19:24-25).¹⁹ The poet, however, is much more dramatic:

*Be grete God in His greme bygynnez on lofte
 To waken wederez so wylde; þe wyndez He callez, [. . .]
 Of felle flaunkes of fyr and flakes of soufre,
 Al in smolderande smoke smachande ful ille,
 Swe aboute Sodamas and hit sydez alle,
 Gorde to Gomorra, þat þe grounde laused, [. . .]
 And ferly flayed þat folk þat in þose fees lenged.
 For when þat þe Helle herde þe houndez of heuen,
 He watz ferlyly fayn, vnfolded bylyue [. . .]
 Rydelles wern þo grete rowtes of renkkes withinne,
 When þay wern war of þe wrake þat no wyze achaped;
 Such a zomerly zarm of zellyng þer rysed,
 Þerof clattered þe cloudes, þat Kryst myzt haf rawþe (947-972).²⁰*

As in the Flood retelling, the poet adds to the Biblical version to garner the reader's sympathy for the victims, suggesting that "*Kryst myzt haf rawþe*" (972).²¹ Through this suggestion, the poet portrays a God who is so merciless that even Christ is disgusted with His actions.

The poet continues to enhance the suffering of God's victims in the third major retelling: the story of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. The Vulgate describes Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Judea very briefly, without focusing on the victims of his annexation of the city: "*anno tertio regni Ioachim regis Iuda venit Nabuchodonosor rex Babylonis Hierusalem et obsedit eam*" (Daniel 1:1).²² The poet embellishes this siege considerably, particularly with regard to the suffering of the people within the city. Prior to their surrender, the people are seen starving: "*Faste fayled hem þe fode, enfamined monie; / Be hote hunger wythinne hert hem wel sarre*" (1193-1194).²³ The people suffer even more pitifully at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar once he enters the city:

*Nabizardan nozt forþy nolde not spare,
 Bot bede al to þe bronde vnder bare egge;
 Þay slowen of swettest semlych burdes,
 Baped barnes in blod and her brayn spylled;*

*Prestes and prelates þay pressed to deþe,
 Wyues and wenches her wombs tocoruen,
 Þat her bowels outburst aboute þe diches,
 And al watz carfully kylde þat þay cach myzt
 And alle þat swypped, vnswolzed of þe sworde kene,
 Þay wer caged and kast on capeles al bare,
 Festned fetters to her fete vnder fole wombs
 And broþely brozt to Babyloyn þer bale to suffer (1245-1256).²⁴*

Just as with the Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah scenes, the poet creates sympathy for the victims. However, in this case, God is not the only one at fault. The poet explains that the King of Judea is also blameworthy:

*Now se, so þe Souerayn set hatz His wrake:
 Nas hit not for Nabugo ne his noble nauþer
 Þat oþer [King of Judea] depryued watz of pryde with paynes stronge,
 Bot for his beryng so bade again his blyþe Lorde (1225-1228).²⁵*

Until this point in the poem, God has been the sole focus of the poet's subtle commentary. Once the poet implicates a second authority figure in the suffering of the masses, the poet shows he is criticizing authority figures who rule irresponsibly, not questioning the Christian idea of God.

Cindy Vitto has suggested that "*Cleanness* combines the concepts of heavenly and earthy order through the imagery of feudalism, with God himself serving as the head of the hierarchy" (5). Vitto sees God "as a feudal figure – that is, as a monarch and the head of a huge but well-managed household" (7). The poet's use of courtly terms when referring to God bolsters Vitto's argument – He is referred to as "Kyng" or "Souerayn." One passage in particular emphasizes terminology referring to God as like the head of a feudal hierarchy:

*Forþy war þe now, wyze þat worschyp desires
 In His comlych courte þat Kyng is of blysse,*

*In þe fylþe of þe flesch þat þou be founden neuer, [. . .]
 On spec of a spote may spede to mysse
 Of þe syzte of þe Souerayn þat syttez so hyze;
 For þat schewe me schale in þo schyre howsez,
 As þe beryl bornyst byhouez be clene, [. . .]
 Syþen þe Souerayn in sete so sore forþost
 Þat euer He man vpoin molde maerked to lyuy
 For he in fylþe watz fallen, felly He uenged,
 Quen fourferde alle þe flesch þat He formed hade. (545-560)²⁶*

By both describing God as the head of a feudal-like hierarchy and commenting negatively on God's actions as merciless, the poet subtly asserts that a ruler should not behave oppressively or cruelly, especially if such actions exploit the common man.

The idea that the poet is taking earthly authority to task, rather than commenting on God, is indicated in other examples of authority figures in the poem. The poem opens and closes with negative examples of human authority figures. The opening of the poem includes a retelling of a parable from Matthew in which a lord invites all of the local people to a feast in his home. While this parable initially seems to be a comment on the importance of cleanliness, the poet's retelling of it highlights the lord's cruelty. The poet foreshadows the entire episode by summarizing the point of the parable:

*Ben þe harlot with haste helded to þe table,
 With rent cokrez at þe kne and his clutte traschez,
 And his tabarde totorne, and his totez oute,
 Oper ani on of alle þyse, he schulde be halden viter,
 With mony blame ful bygge, a buffet peraunter,
 Hurlled to þe halle dore and harde þeroute schowued,
 And be forboden þat borze to bowe þider neuer,
 On payne of enprysonment and puttyng in stokkez;
 And þus schal he be schent for his schrowde feble,
 Þaz neuer in talle ne in tuch he trespass more.
 And if vnwelcum he were to a wordlych prynce,
 3et hym is þe hyze Kyng harder in heuen (39-50)²⁷*

By previewing the retelling of the parable with the punishment of the unclean dinner guest, the poet highlights the cruelty of the lord who is hosting the dinner since the guest's only fault is being poorly dressed. The lord's cruelty, therefore, undermines his generosity. Further, while the lord seems most kind at moments, such as when he insists "*Be þay fers, be þay feble, forlotez none / Be þay hol, be þay halt, be þay onyzed, / And þaz þay ben boþe blynde and balerande cruppelez, / Þat my hous may holly by halkez by fylled*" (101-104),²⁸ his mistreatment of the dinner guest ultimately shows him to be a hypocrite. When the guest is berated and ousted, the reader is compelled to sympathize with him:

*'How watz þou hardy þis hous for þyn vnhap to neze
In on so ratted a robe and rent at þe sydez?
Pow art a gome vngoderly in þat gown feeble;
Þat watz so prest to aproche my presens hereinne [. . .]'
And talkez to his tormenttoure: 'Takez hym,' he biddez,
'Byndez byhynde, at his bak, boþe two his handez,
And felle fetterez to his fete festenez bylyue;
Stik hym stiffly in stokez, and stekez hym þerafter
Depe in my doungeoun þer doel euer dwellez,
Greuing and gretynge and gryspyng harde
Of tepe tenfully togeder, to teche hym be quoynt' (143-160)²⁹*

As with the depictions of God's wrath in the previously discussed Old Testament episodes, the poet portrays the host as merciless. The poet exemplifies the host's mercilessness by describing the offending dinner guest's reaction to the host's rage: "*Þat oper burne watz abayst of his broþe wordez, / And hurkelez down with his hede, þe vrþe hi biholdez; / He watz so scoumfit of his scylle, lest he skaþe hent, / Þat he ne wist on worde what he warp schulde*" (149-152).³⁰ By focusing on the rage and consequential

cruelty of the individual in a position of power, and contrasting that cruelty with his subjects' fear, the poet characterizes the authority figure negatively.

Cruelty and mercilessness are not the only characteristics of authority figures in the poem. The final section of the poem recounts the Biblical story of Belshezzar's feast. Many critics have struggled with this section, unable to see how it fits with the stories of the Flood and of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the context of authority issues, however, this section fits thematically with the other two. The subject – Belshezzar – is different, but the point – misuse of authority – is the same. The poet takes an almost comic approach to this retelling. When God's hand interrupts the party to write on the wall, Belshezzar looks ridiculous as he "shakes in his boots," so to speak:

*When þat bolde Baltazar blusched to þat neue,
Such a dasande drede dusched to his hert
Þat al flawed his face and fayled þe chere;
Þe stronge strok of þe stoned strayned his joyntes,
His cnes cachches toclose, and cluchches his homes,
And he with plattyng his paumes dispyses his leres,
And romyes as a rad ryth þat rorez for drede (1537-1543).³¹*

Baffled by what has just happened, Belshezzar brings in Daniel to interpret the writing on the wall. Daniel translates, informing him that he is about to lose his kingdom.

However, instead of panicking or attempting to appease God, Belshezzar reacts by turning Daniel into an overdressed idol of worship:

*Þe kyng comaunded anon to clepe þat wyse
In frokkes of fyn cloþ, as forward hit asked;
Þenne sone watz Danyel dubbed in ful dere propor,
And a coler of cler golde kest vmbe his swyre.
Þen watz demed a decree bi þe duk seluen:
Bolde Baltazar bed þat hym bowe schulde
Þe comynes al of Caldé þat to þe kyng longed,
As to þe prynce pryuyest preued þe prydde,*

*Hezest of alle oper saf onelych tweyne,
To boz after Baltazar in borze and in felde. (1741-1750)*³²

The retelling ends with the slaying of Belshezzar, yet his slaying is unlike the other deaths that appear in the poem. In this case, there is no embellishment to garner sympathy from the reader: “*Baltazar in his bed watz beten to deþe, / Þat boþe his blod and his brayn blende on þe cloþes; / The kyng in his cortyn watz kast bi þe heles, / Feryed out bi þe fete and fowle dispysed*” (1787-1790).³³ While it is a very violent death, there is no humanity injected into the character of Belshezzar, such as when the flood victims embraced or poet suggested that Christ would weep for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Throughout the poem, the poet consistently demonstrates that the actions of untempered authority figures lead to the suffering of the common man under their rule. Belshezzar, however, is given the unique opportunity of foreknowledge through Daniel’s interpretation. When he does not react and repent per the advice of Daniel, he loses his power and his life. This conclusion sends the message to readers in a position of authority to read the “writing on the wall” of his poem, showing them that cruel authoritative rule leads to suffering, the loss of power, and the loss of the sympathy of those witnessing such a style of rule. Despite focusing on the metaphor of dressing well before God, the story of Belshezzar undercuts this idea because Daniel seems ridiculously dressed in the finery awarded to him. It is the poet’s subtlety in describing the various outwardly filthy commoners with humanity and sympathy – the dinner guest, the Flood victims, the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Nebuchadnezzar’s victims – that ultimately cause the individual in power to seem tarnished.

¹ "They are blissful and blessed whose breasts are pure;
They will look on our Lord and be light in their hearts!"

(All translations from The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet unless otherwise noted)

² He said: I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, from man even to beasts, from the creeping thing even to the fowls of the air, for it repenteth me that I have made them.

(All translations from the Douay-Rheims translation at www.latinvulgate.com)

³ "That I formed man at first I fiercely regret.
Therefore death, therefore doom, to the doers of sin!
I will lay waste to the lands! All that lives on the earth,
All the bountiful beasts, all the birds and the fish,
Every soul I supplied, every spark of life:
All shall die certain death and be driven from earth!
I am grieved that I gave them life's goodness and shall
Ever warily watch their wicked, foul deeds!"

⁴ He said to Noe: The end of all flesh is come before me, the earth is filled with iniquity through them, and I will destroy them with the earth.

⁵ For foulness and filth have fired My wrath.
I'll assuage with destruction My sharp, stinging rage;
All the provinces, people, will perish at once.

⁶ For yet a while, and after seven days, I will rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights: and I will destroy every substance that I have made, from the face of the earth.

⁷ For seven days hence I will send to the earth
A rushing, harsh rain and a raging, cold storm.
It will wash from the world the works of black filth.

⁸ When the waters washed over the world below,
Every mortal thing met with the meanest of deaths.
There was piteous pleading when the plight was made known
That a death in the deeps was the doom all would have.
That flood overflowed; it forever increased
As it washed away walls, seizing women and men.
Many fled from the flood, tried to find a safe place.
Many women ran wildly with wailing, young babes.
All left the flat lowlands to look for high ground,
Where they ran in a rush while the raging rain fell.
All for naught! For the noisy storm, inevitably,
Went on raging and roaring. Rain rose up until
It had filled the fields and flooded each nook;
Each dale lay deep in the deadly, cold rain.
Though the highest of heights was heavy with rain,
Still the folk there flocked in their fear and their dread.
Afloat on that furious flood were wild beasts;
Some hoped they were heading for high ground, not death.
Some from high places howled to heaven in fear.
Others woefully wailed and whimpered and cried.
To those high places hares and swift harts clambered fast;

With the bucks and the bulls and the badgers they ran.
 In their care they cried out to the King of the sky;
 In their plight they piteously pleaded for aid.
 But confusion increased; the Creator's mercy
 With His pity had passed for the people He loathed.
 When the flood to his feet had finally swelled,
 Each sinner was certain he'd suffer his death.
 In that flood every friend joined a friend to embrace,
 To endure there his doom and to die arm in arm.
 Lovers took leave of their loves; they must part.
 All had ended forever; they would ever be sundered.

⁹ People that he loathed

¹⁰ And the Lord smelled a sweet savour, and said: I will no more curse the earth for the sake of man: for the imagination and thought of man's heart are prone to evil from his youth: therefore I will no more destroy every living soul as I have done.

¹¹ "Now know that I'll never again
 Curse the earth and those on it for any man's sins.
 For I see that men's senses are set upon evil,
 Are to thriftless things thrown by the thoughts in their hearts.
 So they've been, so they'll be.

¹² Oh how awesome the anger, how endless the rage,
 That the Father on folk that He fashioned ordained!

¹³ And the Lord said: The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is multiplied, and their sin is become exceedingly grievous. I will go down and see whether they have done according to the cry that is come to me; or whether it be not so, that I may know.

¹⁴ A great sound comes from Sodom; it sinks in My ears.
 And Gomorrah's meanness moves Me to wrath.
 I am nearing there now and will know for Myself
 If they're really as wretched as rumors suggest.

¹⁵ And the Lord departed, after he had left speaking to Abraham: and Abraham returned to his place.

¹⁶ As he walks on his way, he is weeping in grief;
 Back to Mambre he makes his way, moaning aloud.
 He lay all night long, sadly lingered at home,

¹⁷ Very early was Abraham up the next day.
 Through the night a man never had known such fear;
 Ever waking and waiting he'd worried for Lot.

¹⁸ Does she hold that My hands would find hard any task?
 Still that promise I pledge to uphold.

¹⁹ And the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And he destroyed these cities, and all the country about, all the inhabitants of the cities, and all things that spring from the earth

²⁰ Then God, in His anger, began in the sky
 To awaken the wildest of winds with His call [. . .]
 Sulfur, flaming and fuming, fire in sparks,
 And the stench of a smoke that was smothering all
 Came to Sodom and struck from all sides at that time.
 Gomorrah's ground moved, opened menacingly [. . .]
 The folk were afraid as it fell from the sky.
 For when Hell himself heard the hounds of heaven,
 He was gladdened to glean such a grisly event [. . .]
 Their inhabitants, helpless, were harrowed with fear
 When they saw no escape from destruction and death.
 They clamored and called with such crying laments
 That the clouds were cloven, and Christ would have wept!

²¹ Christ would have wept

²² In the third year of the reign of Joakim, king of Juda, Nabuchodonosor, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem, and beseiged it.

²³ But at last those who lingered so long in that town
 Began failing with fasting. Their food had run out!

²⁴ Thus disaster with zeal Nebuzaradan wrought;
 In his hire he put all to the edge of the sword.
 So they slew there the sweetest and seemliest maids,
 And bashed out the brains of the babies they found.
 Any prelate or priest was pressed to his death.
 The wombs of wenches and wives were ripped out,
 So their bowels about the byways were strewn.
 Whom they captured they cruelly killed on the spot.
 Those allowed to live through the length of the siege
 Were stripped, set astride marching steeds on that day.
 They fettered their feet at the flanks of horses,
 And brought them to bale in Babylon then.

²⁵ Now observe how the Sovereign will seek His revenge!
 It was not for King Nebuchadnezzar at all
 That King Zedechiah [of Judea] was cast down so low,
 But because of his coarse, ugly conduct with God.

²⁶ So beware! If to worship that One you desire,
 And to come to the court of the King of bliss,
 Don't be found in the filth of the flesh, [. . .]
 If they're sporting a speck or a spot they will lose
 Any sight of the Sovereign Who sits upon high.
 Those who come to the court of that King must be pure,
 Must be polished perfectly, pure as a beryl [. . .]
 When the Sovereign Who sits on high sorely repented
 That He'd ever created on earth humankind –
 Which had fallen to filth – He fiercely avenged.

²⁷ If that rogue in a rush came right up to the bench,
 Dressed in wretched old rags and in ripped, filthy hose,
 With his tunic torn and his toes sticking out?
 He'd be ousted for any or all of these things!
 With rebukes he'd be blasted and banished at once;
 He'd be hurled to the hallway, heaved from the court,
 Forbidden to bide there or bother that lord,
 Or be placed in a prison, and put into stocks.
 Thus disgrace he would get for his garments' bad state,
 Though he didn't do damage in deed or in word.
 If he were so unwelcome to that worldly prince,
 God in heaven on high would be harsher by far!

²⁸ Whether feeble or fierce, they will find open arms.
 Be they wan, one-eyed wastrels or wondrously fit,
 Be they halting or hale, healthy or sick –
 I would crowd my court with their company now!

²⁹ "To your woe you arrived at this wedding feast here
 In these rags which are ripped up and rent at the sides!
 You are saucy and insolent, sneaking in here.
 My title you treated with true disregard
 When my place you approached disrespectfully, man!" [. . .]
 This he told to his torturers: "Take him!" he cried,
 "Bailiff, now bind at his back both his hands,
 Fix fast on his feet fetters of iron,
 Stick him in stocks, and stow him away
 In my deepest of dungeons where dwells biting grief,
 Where weeping and woe, endless wailing and pain
 Live together – until he is taught how to dress!"

³⁰ By such fury that fellow was frightened at once;
 He heavily hung down his head to the ground,
 So afraid evil fate would befall him anon
 That he quivered wordlessly, waited in awe.

³¹ Belshazzar stared at that strange, floating hand
 And was stupefied, seized with such sharp, rushing fear
 That his features fell, and his face became pale.
 The strength of that stroke started straining his joints.
 His knees started knocking, as if near to collapse.
 He ripped into rags his rich robes from fear.
 Like a bull he bawled out; he bellowed aloud.

³² Then the king had him clothed in fine cloth, as he'd pledged;
 He had Daniel adorned with a dear, purple coat.
 As agreed, he was given the gayest of robes;
 And a clear, golden collar was clasped on his neck.
 A decree was proclaimed by the king after that;
 Bold Belshezzar insisted each subject – each man
 Who was deemed a Chaldean – to Daniel should bow.
 All should pay him respect as a prince, third in strength

Of Belshezzar's true subjects in city and field.

³³ As he slept King Belshazzar was slain with fierce clubs;
Both his blood and his brains were thus blent on the sheets.
He was hastily hung by his heels and thus
Dragged about to be blasphemed, abused, and disgraced.

Patience

Like *Cleanness*, *Patience* retells of an Old Testament episode in a homiletic style. In this case, the subject is the story of Jonah and the whale. Also similar to *Cleanness* is the interplay between God and man, the authority and the ruled. Typically, critics have interpreted *Patience* as a poem “about the situation of man in a world ordained by God, the proper response to which is called patience” (Wallace 128). Unlike *Cleanness*, *Patience* contains a narrator who infuses his own personal experiences of enduring patience into the opening and closing of the poem. Jonah and the narrator are both dissatisfied with positions in life that force them to be patient. By beginning and ending the poem with a clearly dissatisfied narrator, the poet calls attention to the narrator’s position as “ruled,” just as Jonah is “ruled” by God. As in *Cleanness*, the poet diverges from the original Vulgate source to characterize God as vengeful, violent, and merciless. Both Jonah and the narrator are subject to the rule of an authority figure who behaves with ruthlessness to fulfill his will. The depiction of the suffering of both Jonah and the narrator at the hands of a merciless ruler allows the poet to criticize those in a position of power. Using the case of Jonah as an example, the poet demonstrates how a ruled individual who has inherently been granted a free will, which allows him to choose to run from an authority figure, is denied his choice when the authority figure enforces his own will. This instability calls the traditional hierarchies to question, suggestion the latent political function of the poem.

The poem opens with the narrator asserting himself, subtly alluding to moments in which he demonstrated patience in his life. He begins with a brief summary of the importance of being patient, introducing the thematic purpose of the poem:

*Pacience is a pynt, þaz hit displese oft.
When heuy herttes ben hurt with heþyng oper elles,
Suffraunce may aswagen hem and þe swelme leþe,
For houelles vche a qued and quenches malice;
For quoso suffer cowþe syt, sele wolde folze,
And quo for þro may nozt þole, þe pikker he sufferes. (1-6)¹*

He then opens his personal life up to the reader by hinting at his own suffering: “*Þen is better to abyde þe bur vmbestoundes / Þen ay brow forth my þro, þaz me þynk ylle*” (7-8).² These lines identify the narrator “as a man who has suffered, as he believes unjustly, and who has thus some right to have made the assertions of lines 1-7” (Moorman, “Narrator in *Patience*” 92). Because the narrator introduces his own troubles so early in the poem, it is difficult to determine whether he intends to convince the reader to use patience, or to convince himself to be patient.

The reader learns more about why the narrator suffers shortly thereafter. He discusses the Beatitudes, treating them like courtly ladies who must be appealed to for patronage. He then turns to his relationship with the Beatitudes:

*Bot syn I am put to apoynt þat pouerté hatte,
I schal me poruay pacyence and play me with boþe,
For in þe tyxte þere þyse two arn in teme layde,
Hit arn fettled in on forme, þe forme and þe laste,
And by quest of her quoyntyse enquylen on mede.
And als, in myn vpynyoun, hit arn of on kynde:
For þeras pouert enpresses, þaz mon pyne þynk,
Bot lenge wheresoeuer hir lyst, lyke oper greme;
And þeras pouert enpresses, þaz mon pyne þynk,
Much, maugré his mun, he mot need suffer;
Thus pouerté and pacyence arn nedes playferes.*

Syþen I am sette with hem samen, suffer me byhoues (35-46).³

The reader learns two things: the narrator is poor and, since he associates his poverty with the poverty in the beatitudes, he is among the downtrodden who have – according to the narrator’s perspective – earned the right to be elevated after death.

The small revelations the narrator makes about his condition leave the reader wondering why and how the narrator has been put into his position. The narrator seems reluctant to relate his experiences all at once, creating mystery and intrigue for the reader. When the narrator continues, he finally gives a vague clue to why he is forced to be patient:

*Oþer 3if my lege lorde lyst on lyue me to bidde
Oþer to ryde oþer to renne to Rome in his ernde,
What grayþed me þe grychchyng bot grame more seche?
Much 3if he me ne made, maugref my chekes,
And þenne þrat moste I þole and vnþonk to mede,
Þe had bowed to his bode bongré my hyure (51-56).⁴*

The narrator indicates that the demands of his lord are both at the center of his frustrations and the reason for his poverty and downtrodden position. The narrator’s brief personal anecdotes establish him as one of the “ruled” under a powerful authority. A.C. Spearing agrees, noting that “the case envisaged here involves one man’s power over another [. . .] the lord commands, and his subordinate has no choice but to obey on pain of compulsion and his lord’s displeasure, and therefore might as well do so willingly” (“Subtext” 295). Furthermore, contemporary literature involving journeys to Rome suggests that the task the servant is asked to do by the lord may be immoral. These writings assign a negative association with performing tasks that involve a journey to Rome:

Langland, Wycliffe, Purvey, John Paston II, and the Latin *Romipeta* [. . .] associate 'the journey to Rome with an arduous duty.' But the journey may be more than arduous. *Piers Plowman* 4:128, for example, satirically describes the Pope's method of collecting taxes as having Rome [errand] runners bring in stolen silver from across the seas. If in *Patience* 'liege lorde' refers to a bishop, abbot, or other human master sending stolen silver to Rome, then the narrator's journey would be not only arduous but immoral and corrupting (Vasta 8).

While Vasta's suggestion would be difficult to prove, it makes one wonder if the narrator's reference to a journey to Rome may be suggesting that his lord is asking him to perform tasks that are not only distasteful, but tasks that are also ones which he finds objectionable. If this is the case, the narrator's lord seems cruel as well as powerful.

Once the narrator has introduced the reader to both the theme of the poem and his own personal life position, he turns to the story of Jonah, informing the reader "*Wyl 3e tary a lyttel tyne and tent me a whyle, / I schal wysse you perwyth as holy wryt telles*" (59-60).⁵ The narrator's retelling does not, however, conform exactly to "*holy wryt*." Instead, as in *Cleanness*, the poet embellishes the story to elicit a certain response from the reader. One might conclude that the narrator is untrustworthy since his retelling contradicts his promise to the reader. However, I would argue that the narrator is not trying to be deceitful. Rather, he is simply calling attention to the differences between the Biblical account of Jonah and his own. Just as the narrator inserts himself into the opening of the poem, he uses digressions from the text to include his opinion during the retelling of the Jonah story.

J.A. Burrow notes that "the choice of the story of Jonah and the whale to illustrate the theme of patience is unusual (the standard example was Job)" (34). Critics have found compelling reasons, however, for Jonah's story being appropriate, particularly

because it is similar that of the narrator's: Jonah is subject to the power and will of his ruler, God. Jay Schleusener argues that "the poet who wrote this version of the Jonah story was concerned not so much with the shape of history as with the fact that God is the shaper, that history is [. . .] the working out in time of his plan, his purpose, his will – not man's" (959). A.C. Spearing compares the account of the narrator's relationship with his lord to the story of Jonah: "when the poet proceeds to apply this model [of the subordinate bending to his superior's will] to the relation between God and Jonah, it seems initially as though there, too, only power and obedience were involved" ("Subtext" 295). Myra Stokes also sees parallels between the narrator and Jonah story:

this brief *exemplum* [of the narrator and his lord], in fact, states the main theme of the preceeding verses, and of the succeeding narrative: that God's commands are enforceable. [. . .] It is included to define precisely what 'message' the Jonah story is to have: we are to see it as chiefly illustrative of God's power to enforce compliance with his will and the consequent folly of attempting to resist it (358-359).

The common thread among these three critics is the issue of power relations between the authority and the ruled, particularly the ability of the ruler to enforce his will. It is important to recognize, however, that the poet's depiction of authority figures' enforcing their will results in their appearing cruel and merciless.

There are several moments within the Jonah retelling where the poet depicts human reactions to God. These moments typically show people reacting with fear. First is the moment when Jonah receives his assignment from God. In the Vulgate, Jonah's reactions to the task and his reasoning for running from God are absent:

surge vade in Nineven civitatem grandem et praedica in ea quia ascendit malitia eius coram me et surrexit Iona ut fugeret in Tharsis a facie Domini et descendit

Ioppen et invenit navem euntem in Tharsis et dedit naulum eius et descendit in eam ut iret cum eis in Tharsis a facie Domini (Jonah 1:2-3).⁶

In the poem, Jonah expresses fear at the prospect of fulfilling the assignment, and accuses God of trying to punish him in some way:

*'If I bowe to His bode and bring hem þis tale,
And I be nummen in Nuniue, my nyes beynes:
He telles me þose traytours arn typped schrewes;
I com with þose tyþyngs, þay ta me bylyue,
Pynez me in a pryson, put me in stokkes,
Wryþe me in a warlock, wrast out myn yzen.
Dis is a meruayl message a man for to preche
Amonge enmyes so mony and mansed fendes,
Bot if my gaynlych God such gref to me wolde,
For desert of sum sake þat I slayn were.
At alle peryles,' quop þe prophete, 'I aproche hit no nere.
I wyl me sum oper waye þat He ne wayte after;
I schal tee into Tarce and tary þere a whyle,
And lyztly when I am lest He letes me alone' [. . .]
'Oure Syre syttes,' he says, 'on sege so hyze
In His glowande glorye, and gloumbes ful lyttel
Þaz I be nummen in Nunniue and naked dispoyled,
On rode rwly torent with rybaudes mony.' (75-96)⁷*

The text shows that "Jonah's fear in this first section of the narrative occasionally gives way to other emotions. Jonah is angry at God [. . .] and grumbles against Him" (Hill 108). I would suggest that the anger Jonah feels is a consequence of his fear and mistrust. Jonah fears and mistrusts not the Ninevites, but rather God. Jonah worries that God intends him to suffer physical harm at the hands of the Ninevites. That Jonah feels this way about God indicates that he thinks God is merciless, cruel, and hateful. For God to be perceived so negatively causes the reader to assume God has done other things in the past that would lead people to believe He is a harsh God.

The fearfulness of other characters in the poem supports the characterization of God as merciless and cruel, leading to the suggestion that God has a negative reputation outside of the Hebrew people. The crew aboard the ship that Jonah uses to escape, for instance, blames someone who “*hatz greued his god*” (171) for the storm that is assaulting them. When Jonah confesses to them that “*I am an Ebru, ' quop he, 'of Israyl borne; / Pat Wyz I worchyp, iwysse, pat wrozt all bynges, / [. . .] I haf greued my God and gulty am founden*” (205-210),⁸ the crew’s fear increases: “*Denne such a ferde on hem fel and flayed hem withinne*” (215).⁹ Despite being of a different religion, the crew’s fear of Jonah’s God is clearly so great that they are willing to pray to him, begging him not to punish them for tossing Jonah overboard:

*Fyrst þay prayen to þe Prynce þat prophetes seruen
 Þat He gef hem þe grace to greuen Hym neuer,
 Þat þay in balelez blod þer blenden her handez,
 Þaz þat hæþel wer His þat þay luche hym sone* (225-228)¹⁰

It is important to remember that the ship’s crew appeals to Jonah’s God before they have converted to the Hebrew faith – the conversion itself occurs only after the storm subsides:

*Þer watz louyng on lofte, when þay þe londe wonnen,
 To oure mercyable God, on Moyses wyse,
 With sacrafyse vpset, and solempne vowes,
 And graunted Hym on to be God and graythly non oþer* (237-240).¹¹

The crew’s willingness to abandon their appeals to their own gods, and their prayers asking Jonah’s God not to punish them for harming one of His people, suggest that Jonah’s God is known for merciless vengeance outside of the Hebrew religion.

The Ninevites also react with immense fear when Jonah delivers the prophecy that they will be destroyed. The Ninevites immediately begin a program of penance because

“þe drede of Dryztyn doured in hert” (372).¹² The repentant actions of the people are directed by the King, whose orders are described in the Vulgate as follows:

*Hómines, et juménta, et boves, et pécora non gustent quidquam: nec pascántur, et aquam non bibant. Et operiántur saccis hómines et juménta, et clament ad Dóminum in fortitúdine: et convertátur vir a via sua mala, et ab iniquitáte quæ est in mánibus eórum. Quis scit si convertátur et ignóscat Deus, et revertátur a furóre iræ suæ, et non períbimus? (Jonah 3:7-9)*¹³

While the Vulgate’s version of the orders are rather harsh, they are light by comparison to those given in the poem. The poet adds considerably to the king’s speech, emphasizing the extremes the Ninevites will go to in order to gain God’s mercy. First, the king reacts with wild behavior upon hearing the prophecy:

*His ryche robe he torof of his rigge naked,
And of a hep of askes he hitte in þe myddez.
He askez heterly a hayre and hasped hym vmbe,
Sewed a sekke þerabof, and syked ful colde;
Þer he dased in þat duste, with droppande teres,
Wepande ful wonderly alle his wrange dedes. (379-384)*¹⁴

The king then orders a program of penance for the whole of Nineveh:

*Þenne sayde he to his serjauntes: ‘Samnes yow bilyue;
Do dryue out a decree, demed of mayseluen,
Þat alle þe bodyes þat ben withinne þis borz quyk,
Boþe burnes and bestes, burdez and childer,
Vch prynce, vche prest, and prelates alle,
Alle faste freely for her falce werkes;
Sesez childer of her sok, soghe hem so neuer,
Ne best bite on no brom, ne no bent nauþer,
Passe to no pasture, ne pike non erbes,
Ne non oxe to no hay, ne no horse to water.
Al schal crye, forclemmed, with alle oure clere strenþe;
Þe rurd schal ryse to Hym þat rawþe schal haue’ (385-396)*¹⁵

Malcolm Andrew remarks that the poet “is bold and skillful enough [. . .] to observe the comic absurdity of some penitential situations and behavior” (“Biblical paraphrase” 63-

64). However, the extreme nature of the Ninevites' repentance emphasizes their extreme fear of God, particularly because the king's speech indicates that he knows God only as wrathful – he is unsure that God would choose to be merciful.

Also significant about the king's speech is the king's role as an authority figure. The king gives orders to enforce city-wide fasting, which includes pulling babies from their mothers' breasts, to create a cacophony of suffering for God to hear. The king, therefore, like God and the lord hosting the feast, is yet another example of a ruler who demands his will be enforced even though his will causes suffering for his subjects.

The poet's characterization of God as a harsh ruler is evident in more than just the reactions of the people in the story. Many instances in the poem show God behaving as a disciplinarian, the most obvious being that the purpose of the story is to relate God's desire to punish the Ninevites. God's chosen methods of punishment are revealed in Jonah's prophecy:

*'3et schal forty dayez fully fare to an ende,
And penne schal Niniue be nomen and to nozt worpe;
Truly pis ilk toun schal tylte to grounde;
Vp-so-down schal ze dumpe depe to þe abyme,
To be swolzed swiftly with þe swrt erþe,
And alle þat lyuyes hereinne lose þe swete'* (359-364).¹⁶

Although God is ultimately merciful to the people in the story, He nevertheless goes to extremes when punishing those who disobey His will – particularly Jonah – before granting mercy. Sandra Pierson Prior remarks, “the Lord's power is limited neither by time nor space and, further, [. . .] he can and will do anything to bring about his will. And so Jonah is exposed to a whole range of apocalyptic horrors” (Prior, “Beyond Apocalypse” 344). When Jonah runs away from his assignment to go to Nineveh, God

immediately takes action. The narrator comments that “*þe Welder of wyt þat wot alle þynges, / Þat ay wakes and waytes, at wylle hatz He slyztes*” (129-130),¹⁷ emphasizing his opinion that God insists upon enforcing his will regardless of the consequences. Then, God summons the winds to attack the ship Jonah is aboard:

*‘Ewrus and Aquiloun þat on est sittes
Blowes bope at My bode vpon blo watteres.’
Þenne watz no tom þer bytwene His tale and her dede,
So bayn wer þay boþ two His bone for to wyrk. (133-136)¹⁸*

Although God sends the storm to bring Jonah back in line with His plan, Jonah hardly notices it because he is asleep: “*Onhelde by þe hurrok, for þe heuen wrache, / Slypped vpon a sloumbe-selepe, and sloberande he routes*” (185-186).¹⁹ Instead, the crew – who are essentially innocent bystanders as God exercises his anger upon Jonah – must suffer God’s wrath. Since Jonah’s slumber leaves him unscathed, the effect of God’s storm on the sailors suggests one of two things: that God lacks omniscience, or that He is indeed aware that He is punishing the innocent. The Vulgate version of this moment is summed up in one verse: “*et timuerunt nautae et clamaverunt viri ad deum suum et miserunt vasa quae erant in navi in mare ut adleviaretur ab eis et Iona descendit ad interiora navis et dormiebat sopore gravi*” (Jonah 1:5).²⁰ The poet adds significant details to his retelling of this part of the story, particularly when describing the crew members’ reaction to the storm:

*Þe sayl swayed on þe see, þenne suppe bihoued
Þe coge of þe colde water, and þenne þe cry ryses.
3et coruen þay þe cordes and kest al þeroute;
Mony ladde þer forth lep to laue and to kest –
Scopen out þe scapel water þat fayn scape wolde –
For þe monnes lode neuer so luþer, þe lyf is ay swete. [. . .]
Bot euer watz ilyche loud þe lot of þe wyndes,*

*And euer wroper þe water and wodder þe stremes.
 Den þo wery forwrozt wyst no bote,
 Bot vchon glewed on his god þat gained hym beste (151-164).²¹*

By embellishing this scene, the poet makes the fear and distress of the crewmen much more real, and their situation much more dire. As Edward Vasta notes, “for the sake of divine justice, God will place a chosen servant in danger, and for the sake of that chosen servant, place the innocent in danger” (14). God’s willingness to put the crew at risk during his pursuit of Jonah comes across in the poem as selfish and cruel.

Eventually, though, it is Jonah who suffers the most as God insists upon enforcing his will. When Jonah is swallowed by the whale, the poet describes the whale’s stomach in gruesome terms:

*And þer he festnes þe fete and fathmez aboute,
 And stod v in his stomak þat stank as þe deuel.
 Þer in saym and in sorþe þat sauoured as helle,
 Þer watz bylded his bour þat wyl no bale suffer.
 And þenne he lurkkes and laytes where watz le best,
 In vche a nok of his nauel, bot nowhere he fyndez
 No rest ne recouerer, bot ramel ande myre,
 In wych gut so euer he gotz (273-280).²²*

Immediately following this passage, Jonah prays the first of two prayers in which he confesses that he was wrong for running away. His prayers convince God to let him go. Since the book of Jonah was typically read during the Passion week, the poet’s contemporaries would have interpreted “Jonah’s three days in the belly as a symbol of Christ’s three days in hell” (Andrew, “Jonah and Christ” 232). The conditions described by the poet make Jonah’s three days in the belly more than symbolic; Jonah experiences hell in the whale. This hellish experience in the whale causes Jonah to pray to God. Like

a prisoner being tortured, the only way for Jonah to be set free is to tell his captor what he wants to hear.

Jonah's punishment by God does not end, however, with the whale. When Jonah grumbles because God does not strike down the Ninevites, resulting in Jonah's assumption that he will be viewed as a false prophet, he leaves town to live alone in the wilderness. There, he finds shelter beneath a woodbine and is happy – during the night, however, God destroys the woodbine: *“He slydez on a sloumbe-slep sloghe vnder leues, / Whil God wayned a worme þat wrot vpe þe rote, / And wyddered watz þe woodbynde bi þat þe wyze wakened”* (466-468).²³ Furthermore, God sends a scorching, sunny day to create greater discomfort for Jonah: *“And þen hef vp þe hete and heterly brenned; / Þe warm wynde of þe weste, wertes he swyþez. / Þe man marred on þe molde þat most hym not hyde”* (477-479).²⁴ Jonah's suffering in the heat causes him to cry out at God: *“Bot now I se Þou art sette my solace to reue; / Why ne dyzttez Þou me to dize? I dure to longe”* (487-488).²⁵ At this moment, “Jonah, exasperated as much by mercy as misery, wishes to escape altogether in death [. . .] he is implicitly calling in question the entire plan of God's justice” (Williams 135). God's relentless need to bring Jonah in line with His will results in Jonah's desire to turn away not only from God, but from life itself. Jonah is completely disillusioned. Even when God tries to explain Himself, Jonah does not respond. God may have been merciful by not killing anyone, but He can still be seen as cruel in His treatment of Jonah. Indeed, God might as well have killed him, as Jonah would clearly rather be dead at this point.

The conclusion of the poem follows God's attempt to explain mercy to Jonah, in which He asks the question, "*Why schulde I wrath with hem syþen wyzez wyl torne, / And cum and cnawe Me for Kyng and My carpe leue?*" (518-519).²⁶ Like the moment when God taunts Jonah with the woodbine, God's statement makes Him seem less merciful than He professes. God indicates that His mercy is applicable only to those over whom He rules. He is a ruler who makes conquests, and who destroys what He cannot possess. This idea is strengthened by the fact that God refers to himself as "*Kyng*," indicating that the poet sees God as head of an earthly court-like hierarchical structure.

As noted above, the Jonah of the poem does not respond to the explanation God offers him. Instead, the poem's closing lines are spoken by the narrator:

*Be noȝt so gryndel, godman, bot go forth þy wayes,
Be preue and be pacient in payne and in jove:
For he þat is to rakel to renden his clopez
Mot efte sitte with more vnsounde to sewe hem togeder.
Forþy when pouerté me enpreceþ and paynez innoze
Ful softly with suffraunce saztel me bihouez;
Forþy penaunce and payne topreue hit in syst
Þat pacience is a nobel pynt, þaz hit displese ofte* (524-531).²⁷

For Sandra Pierson Prior, the ending of the poem seems open-ended and the conclusion "lacks finality and is anticlimactic" (343). Jonah's silence, however, is a crucial feature of his falling away from God. Further, these final lines give the narrator an opportunity to lament once more his own situation. The tone of these lines is bitter; one can surmise that the narrator probably did tear up his clothes and sew them back together at one point. Indeed, the narrator is like a student who has misbehaved and is given a writing assignment on patience as his punishment. By ending the poem in this way, the poet

undercuts any redeeming aspects of God's speech on mercy, leaving the reader with only a picture of a narrator suffering through patience that "*displese ofte*."

Myra Stokes writes, "neither the narrator nor Jonah can choose but to *suffer* and 'be poor'; just as they cannot choose whether or not to go to Rome or Nineveh when commanded – only how" (361). I believe Stokes's conclusion is correct. The narrator and Jonah, as well as the other human characters in the poem, are all subject to a powerful authority who will not be contradicted. Using the narrator and Jonah as mouthpieces, the poet comments on the effects of oppressive authoritarian rule and the suffering it causes. By making subtle changes to the Biblical story of Jonah, the poet emphasizes and dramatizes the suffering of those subject to an authority figure determined to have his way at all costs. By portraying God as a punisher and by undercutting His merciful acts at the end of the poem, the poet paints a negative portrait of authority. Jonah and the narrator, representatives of the common man subject to iron rule, are disillusioned by such behavior by their ruler. Their disillusionment costs their authority figure the respect of their subjects despite their obedience.

¹ Patience, though displeasing, is proof of goodwill.
For when hearts are made heavy with hurting of scorn,
Those who suffer such stings will be soothed in the end;
For all meanness she mends, and all malice undoes.
Who endures and indignity duly knows joy;
Who through spite is resentful just suffers the more.

² Thus to bear what is bitter is better for me
Than to gripe or begrudge, though I'm grieved to the heart.

³ Since I'm personally placed by Dame Poverty's side,
I must ply to Dame Patience, and play with them both.

For these two in the text as a team are portrayed,
 In one formula fixed as the first and the last.
 One can win their reward if their wisdom one seeks.
 In life they are linked and alike, I am sure.
 For where Poverty's present, it pleases her well
 To linger at length, if we like it or not.
 When Poverty pinches, complain all you like,
 Willy-nilly you'll know of her nevertheless;
 For playmates Dame Patience and Poverty are.
 I must suffer their sting, since I'm stuck with the two!

⁴ If my lord, as he likes, on a lark sends me off,
 Sends me riding or running to Rome on a chore,
 What would grumbling get me but grief for my pains?
 He would surely insist, though I squabbled and writhed;
 And I'd suffer for sure, when I should have complied
 Without fighting so fiercely the fate of my lot.

⁵ If you linger a little while longer with me,
 I'll recite the whole story as Scripture reports.

⁶ Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach in it: For the wickedness thereof is come up before me.
 And Jonas rose up to flee into Tharsis from the face of the Lord, and he went down to Joppe, and found a
 ship going to Tharsis: and he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them to Tharsis from
 the face of the Lord.

⁷ "If I bow to His bidding and bring them His words,
 And those townspeople take me, my troubles would start!
 He Himself just now said they are sinful, each one;
 If I tender such tidings, they'll take me at once,
 Put me in prison, place me in stocks,
 Confine me in fetters, and fling out my eyes!
 Here's a marvelous message to meet them all with!
 These are fine words to fling amongst foes in that town!
 But my gracious God wants to grieve me, no doubt;
 For some sin He is seeking to slay me right now!
 Despite God, I'll not go near the gates of that town.
 No, I'll wander some way where He won't seek me out.
 I will take off to Tarshish and tarry, unseen;
 I will linger there, lost, and He'll leave me alone." [. . .]
 "Our Lord sits," the man says, "on a seat so high up,
 So aglow in His glory, He'd grieve not at all
 If in Nineveh knaves stripped me naked, and if
 On a cross I were crucified cruelly by thieves!"

⁸ "I am from Israel's land.
 I worship the One Who the world once made, [. . .]
 I brought grief to my God, and am guilty thereof."

⁹ Such a fear befell them all, flayed them within

¹⁰ First they pray to the Prince Whom the prophets obey

That He grant them the grace not to grieve Him if now
In that boat with his blood they should blemish their hands,
Though they harmed one once hailed as His in that way.

¹¹ When they landed they lifted their lauds and their hymns.
In the manner of Moses, to merciful God
They set up a sacrifice, solemnly vowed,
Quit false gods, and granted that God alone reigned.

¹² Fear of God at once gripped them.

¹³ Let neither men nor beasts, oxen nor sheep, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water. And let men and beasts be covered with sackcloth, and cry to the Lord with all their strength, and let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the iniquity that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn, and forgive: and will turn away from his fierce anger, and we shall not perish?

¹⁴ And, right away ripping his robe from his back,
Fell amidst a mound that was made out of ash.
A harsh, biting hair shirt he hastily donned;
He sewed on a sackcloth, sighed in his grief,
And with trickling tears tossed in the dust.
Thus he wondrously wept for his wicked misdeeds,

¹⁵ And said to his servants: "Assemble at once!
First disperse and spread through the city my will
That all bodies that bide in this borough with life –
All the animals, adults, and all that are young,
Every prince, every priest, every prelate as well –
Shall fast as is fit for their false, evil deeds.
Take each babe from the breast, though he bawls out and cries.
Take each beast from the broom sage; he'll bite on no grass,
Nor will pass to a pasture with plants there. And from
Water holes keep the horse, and from hay keep the ox.
We shall howl in the height of our hunger at once;
Thus by Him will be heard every howl of pain!"

¹⁶ "After forty days finally and fully have passed –
Be it known – then to nothing shall Nineveh fall!
For this town shall be taken and torn to the ground;
Upside down you'll be dumped, and deep in the black,
Broken soil you'll swiftly be swallowed at once.
Then will lifeblood be lost from those living herein!"

¹⁷ For the Wielder of wisdom – aware of all things,
Always watchful, awake – has His ways to insist.

¹⁸ "From the east, come, Aquilon; come, Eurus, you winds!
At My bidding now blow on the black, rolling seas!"
When those winds heard these words, neither wasted its time;
They were both to God's bidding obedient, true.

¹⁹ There he huddled and hid; during heaven's great storm

He had slipped into sleep, and he slobbered and snored!

²⁰ And the mariners were afraid, and the men cried to their god: and they cast forth the wares that were in the ship, into the sea, to lighten it of them: and Jonas went down into the inner part of the ship, and fell into a deep sleep.

²¹ With its sail was sent to the sea. The ship drank
 So much sea that the sailors were screaming in fear.
 They cut free the cords, which they cast overboard.
 Many fellows sprang forth in that fast-flooding ship;
 Those who sought to escape madly scooped out the waves –
 For though life may be loathsome, that life is still sweet. [. . .]
 But loud winds went on wailing and whipping about,
 At once the waves on the water increased.
 Then those sailors, despairing of saving themselves,
 Called on gods whom they guessed would best gain them respite;

²² To glean where he's gone, Jonah gropes in the dark.
 So he stood in the stomach, which stank like hell.
 In the fat and the festering filthiness there
 Stood the household of him whom no harm would undo!
 Then he slides about, seeking a shelter somewhere
 In that cavern's dark corners, but cannot there find
 Either respite or rest; only rankness and filth
 Does he glean in those guts.

²³ When he slid into slothful, deep sleep, the Lord
 Sent a worm to lay waste to the woodbine, so that
 When he woke up the woodbine was withered and gone!

²⁴ The beams from above began blazing down heat,
 And the warm, western wind fiercely withered the plants.
 So, exposed to the sun, Jonah suffered the heat;

²⁵ "Now I see You are set on unseating my joy.
 Why not deal me my death? I've endured here too long!"

²⁶ Should I punish a people repentant at last,
 Who have come now to call Me their King and their Lord?

²⁷ Therefore, fight not so fiercely, sir! Follow your path,
 And be proven patient in pain and in joy!
 Because he who in haste very heatedly tears
 At his shirt must in sorrow just sew it again.
 When oppressed, then, by poverty, pains, and ill health,
 I should suffer in silence what sadness I'm due.
 Thus appears, through one's pains and one's penance, the fact:
 Though displeasing, fair patience is proof of goodwill.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Shortly after young Edward III ascended to the throne under the watchful eye of his mother Isabella and her lover Mortimer, he invited a group of knights, squires, and men-at-arms who were preparing to march into Scotland to a Franciscan friary in York. On Trinity Sunday (June 7, 1327), Edward III and his mother elected to hold an evening of entertainment for these men gathered at the friary at this behest. Among this group was a company of at least five hundred men from the Low Countries selected by Sir John of Hainault to assist the English in their Scottish campaigns. Dinner had hardly been consumed when the jovial evening was interrupted by a skirmish outside. A quarrel over a game of dice had erupted between the servants of the Hainaulters and the English archers. The quarrel soon escalated into a full-scale riot, and the Hainaulter knights armed themselves and cleared the streets. According to a Hainaulter who witnessed the episode – Jean le Bel of Liege – the riot and its quelling left 316 Lincolnshire archers and an unknown number of Hainaulters lying dead in the streets (Nicholson 20-21). The Trinity Sunday episode demonstrates the potential for a light-hearted, jovial evening of entertainment to turn into a deadly, violent mess.

A similar descent from light play into deadly serious violence opens *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when the Green Knight punctures the revels of Arthur's court at Camelot. Like the real-life Hainaulters, the fictional Green Knight – a foreigner to the court of Camelot in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – takes an evening of fun and

games and turns it into a serious and violent event. In both cases, joviality collides with reality. In the poem, the Green Knight's entrance disrupts the fun and games of a Christmas celebration. This interruption and the poetic events that follow result in more than just an entertaining and complex Arthurian romance. Here, the poet takes a different approach to addressing authority issues. Instead of Biblical/religious themes or homiletic genres used to subvert authority in *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*, the poet works with Arthurian legend and the romance genre, subverting the expectations of both. Just as Arthur's and Camelot's expectations are subverted by the Green Knight's "*gomen*," so too is the reader's expectation subverted by the poem's progress and conclusions, particularly the failure of Arthur and Gawain to live up to their reputations.

Simultaneously, there seems to be an air of criticism of the English monarchy, particularly of Edward III, subtly woven into the poem. I would suggest that Edward III is a more likely target than Richard II, but, as Sandra Pierson Prior has observed, the kings' reigns were so alike that

The term "Ricardian" is a bit problematic [. . .] For one thing, Edward III reigned for 50 years (1327-77), well past mid century and his influence on English culture and society was powerful enough that much of late fourteenth-century England is at least as "Edwardian" as it is "Ricardian" (*Revisited* 4)

The similarities between the two English kings allow one to conclude that Richard II's reign is, in many ways, a continuation of his grandfather's rule. They both ascended the throne as youths, they were both involved in international conflicts in attempts to define the English borders, and they both believed absolutely that they were divinely ordained to hold their position. Most important for linking them to the poem, they shared a love of chivalry and courtly love.

As the Trinity Sunday episode demonstrates, Edward III was forced to face harsh realities while attempting to enjoy the fun and games that his privileged position afforded him. King Arthur finds himself in a similar situation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Both situations leave their kings and their representatives open to subversive commentary. The poem's content and relation to historical events, particularly elements of the poem that compare to elements of Edward III's reign, such as his interest in chivalry and his Scottish campaigns, clearly contain the poet's subtle critical voice.

The fiction of the poem calls attention to the late medieval reality and the similarities between the poem's Arthur and the real Edward III. The Green Knight insults Arthur and his knights early in the poem, referring to the court of Camelot as a group of "*berdlez chylder*" (280),¹ a sentiment that echoes the poet's description earlier of Arthur as "*sumquat childgered*" (86).² While it is true that Edward III (and Richard II) ascended the throne as a youth, making him a "*berdlez chylde*" when he became king, it is more important to note the inference in these remarks to the king's immaturity and, perhaps, inability to effectively rule. The negativity of these comments about Arthur's youth indicate that

good rulers are imagined as the best of men: mature, decisive, autonomous, independent, reasoned, and adequately passionate about their women and their wars. Bad rulers are, by contrast, boys, women, and feeble old men [. . .] the *Gawain*-poet's emphasis upon Arthur's boyishness can be read to register an alarm for, and certainly alertness to, sovereign ineptitude and court instability. (Ingham 127)

Pointing to the presence of "sovereign ineptitude" in the court of Camelot so early in the poem prepares the reader to be more open to the subversion that continues. The reader joins the people of the court in criticizing Arthur after the Green Knight disrupts the

apparent order of Camelot and Arthur offers Gawain as a “sacrifice” to the Green Knight.

When Gawain leaves Camelot, headed for certain death, the people react with disdain:

*And sayde soply al same segges til oper,
Carande for þat comly, 'Bi Kryst, hit is scape
Þat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in faith, is not eþe.
Warloker to haf wrozt had more wyt bene
And haf dyzt sonder dere a duk to haue worþed.
A lowande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez,
And so had better haf ben þen brined to nozt,
Hadet with an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.
Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
As knyztez in cauelacionz on Crystmasse gomnez?' (673-683)³*

The combination of the literal youth of the poem's Arthur and his ineptitude as a leader allows for comparisons between Edward III and Arthur. Just as Arthur surrounds himself with loyal and obedient knights like Gawain, Edward III had the opportunity to elevate men into his immediate circle who were endeared to him due to the depletion of the nobility (through execution and death by natural causes) (Vickers 148). By surrounding himself with men who were deeply indebted to him and therefore inclined to be sycophantic, Edward III could indulge himself at his whim. As a result, the king found himself plagued with financial woes because of the ever-mounting expenses of war and entertainment. At one point he had to pawn the crown of England, and later he had to hand over Henry of Grosmont and the Earls of Northampton and Warwick as pledges to money-lenders who doubted Edward III's creditworthiness (Prestwich 172). Edward III was devoting to seeking out wars for his own personal amusement, regardless of the interests of his kingdom (Vickers 147). Such self-indulgence also led Edward III to

surround himself with fawning admirers and put himself into debt indicates that he was as “*childgered*” as the poem’s Arthur.

Additional elements of Arthur’s character in the poem parallel the character of Edward III, particularly his interest in chivalric entertainment. Edward III had

prowess in the tournament and [. . .] reputation as a warrior which raised the enthusiasm of chroniclers, who found no British sovereign to compare with him save the romantic Arthur, the soul of chivalry and the master of knightly prowess (Vickers 147).

Chivalry and knightly prowess are some of the most defining characteristics of Edward III. A flourishing of tournament activity coincided with Edward III’s accession (Vale 60). Frequently, these tournaments incorporated dramatic elements, such as knights fighting in disguise. Among these disguises were knights dressed as the Seven Deadly Sins at a tournament in 1362, and knights disguised as the Pope and twelve cardinals in 1343 (Vale 67). Edward III himself was known to participate in tournaments in disguise. In 1334, at the tournament at Dunstable, Edward III disguised himself in the arms of Lionel, a member of Arthur’s Round Table (Vale 68).

The legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table were more than just inspiration for a tournament disguise. Many elements of Edward III’s reign could be considered Arthurian. Based upon records of books in the king’s libraries, Vale concludes that the king and his companions were familiar with the Arthurian romances (Vale 71). Ultimately, Edward III worked to model his court after the court of Arthur. In 1344, he announced that he would build himself a Round Table at Windsor and establish an order of knights in the style of Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table (Carruthers 69). Over the next few years, this idea evolved into the foundation of the Order of the Garter

in 1348. Edward III's interest in Arthurian legend went as far as naming his oldest surviving son Lionel, after one of Arthur's knights.

Like the Arthur of the poem, Edward III was known to throw elaborate events to celebrate Christmas. His celebration of Christmas at Guildford in 1347 is one of the better known accounts of his excessive entertainments. Wardrobe accounts show that the celebrations included eighty tunics and a number of different visors (a head-cover similar to a mask) featuring bearded men, angels with haloes, and women's faces. Also included were head-dresses of legs upside down, and of mountains with rabbits, peacocks, swans, lions, elephants, dragons, and more (Vale 69, Weiss 410). The flimsy nature of the material indicates that these costumes were intended for indoor entertainment, rather than an outdoor tournament, making it likely that these costumes were incorporated into the Christmas festivities (Weiss 410-411).

As one learns more about the personal interests of Edward III it becomes easier to see why the *Gawain*-poet might have used an Arthurian romance set at Christmastime to comment on his reign. One can see the tournament-loving, romance-knowing, and war-waging Edward III in the poem's description of Arthur:

*And also anoþer maner meued him eke
 Vpon such a dere day, er hym deuised were
 Of sum auenturus þyng, an vncouþe tale
 Of sum mayn meruayle þat he myȝt trawe,
 Of alders, of armes, of oþer auenturus;
 Oþer sum segg hym bisoȝt of sum siker knyȝt
 To joyne wyth hym in justyng, in joparde to lay,
 Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,
 As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue. (91-99)⁴*

This early passage draws the reader's attention not only to the poem's Arthur but also to the poem's genre – a romance. As such, they establish an expectation of what should occur in the poem: an adventure for the nobility, a marvel, a foe, etc. These characteristics are what the poem's Arthur demands, and Edward III would have enjoyed. As the poem progresses and the elements of romance appear, the poet uses these elements for commentary as well as entertainment. For example, the passage above challenges the traditional depiction of Arthur; despite his apparent jovial attitude conveyed in that description, this Arthur is selfish and self-indulgent, demanding that the progress of the festivities be delayed until his needs for entertainment are met.

Regional history of the Northwest-Midlands provides contemporary events that allow the romance of the poem to compare to reality, particularly the history of Edward III's repeated quarrels with the Scots. Edward III's trouble with Scotland began only hours after his coronation when, on February 1, 1327, a Scottish force crossed into England and attempted to take the castle of Norham by surprise (Nicholson 15). At the time, Isabella and Mortimer ruled for the fourteen-year-old king. Three years later, however, after successfully removing Isabella and Mortimer from power in 1330, Edward III involved himself directly with Scottish affairs by attempting to place Edward Balliol on the Scottish throne and restore Scottish land to a group of disinherited Englishmen. These political acts led to an invasion of Scotland by Edward Balliol in 1332 (Nicholson 76). Edward Balliol was godson of Edward III's grandfather, Edward I, and son of John Balliol, who had been made king of Scotland by Edward I in 1292, but who had been succeeded by Robert Bruce rather than his own son (Nicholson 71-76). The invasion by

Balliol resulted in a series of violent campaigns into Scotland by Edward III that continued until 1335.

Edward III's dispatching of Balliol to Scotland parallels Arthur's send-off of Gawain to the Green Chapel to receive his blow from the Green Knight. While I do not wish to claim that Gawain is meant to be a depiction of Balliol, there are some distinct similarities between the two. Balliol was a member of the intimate court of the king and among his peer group, almost like a family member. Gawain is a member of Arthur's Knights of the Round Table and is his sister's son. Balliol was sent to Scotland to demonstrate the power of the English monarchy, specifically to reclaim the Scottish throne and property of the English nobility. Gawain is sent on "*a heze ernde [. . .] fro þe wonez*" (1051)⁵ to demonstrate the power of Arthur's rule.

The legends of Arthur and his court seem to have gained renown by the time Gawain arrives at Hautdesert. The people at Hautdesert all have an impression of what it means to be a member of Arthur's Round Table, almost as if they have read the Arthurian romances known to the poet and are now seeing one of those characters come to life. They remark that "*God hatz geuen vus His grace godly forsoþe, / Þat such a gest as Gawan grauntex vus to haue*" (920-921),⁶ and are excited that they may learn something from such an accomplished knight. Since this positive reputation is already etched into the minds of the people of Hautdesert, it is crucial that Gawain maintain this lofty impression to ensure that Arthur will maintain his position of power over this group of people residing in the outer reaches of his realm. If Gawain does not live up to his own reputation, how can the people of Hautdesert be assured that Arthur's reputation is

worthy of respect? Additionally, Gawain carries the burden of Arthurian romance and must fulfill those expectations as well. The purpose of Gawain's journey, therefore, becomes more than just the fulfillment of the agreement with the Green Knight. Like Balliol's going into Scotland, Gawain must uphold the power and reputation of the monarchy. Because Gawain fails to maintain his reputation either as a great lover, or – more importantly – as a man of honor, and because he is Arthur's representative, his failures undermine the power of Arthur's authority.

Hautdesert is clearly described as being very distant from Camelot; Gawain is described as being “*fer floten fro his frendez*” (714)⁷ on a journey that takes almost two months – from All Saints Day until Christmas. Gawain's trek is northward, towards the Scottish border, passing through real-life regions: “*Logres*,” “*Norþe Walez*,” the coast with a view of “*Anglesay*,” “*Holy Hede*,” and “*Wyrle*” (691-701).⁸ As Gawain discovers that the people of these regions “*neuer in her lyue / Day seze neuer no segge þat watz of suche hwez / Of grene*” (706-708),⁹ he continues his journey into the vaguely named “*contrayez straunge*” (713).¹⁰ Gawain's travel through the mysterious, mountainous, foe-filled land of the “*contrayez straunge*” ultimately brings him to Hautdesert. Considering the apparent distance of Gawain's journey, one would expect the inhabitants of Hautdesert to be just as “*straunge*” as the wilderness that surrounds them. However, Hautdesert is quite similar to Camelot (Ingham 119). In fact, Hautdesert is so similar to Camelot that “it appears to offer Gawain a familiar refuge in alien territory” (Clein 95). With this similarity in mind, the transformation of the exotic wilderness into the civilized world of Hautdesert “allude[s] to the problems and pleasures

of an intimate frontier, a borderland between linked, yet also distinct, insular cultures” (Ingham 108). The distance between Hautdesert and Camelot, both literally and culturally, remind the reader of the distance between Scotland and London. Just as Hautdesert resonates with familiarity for Gawain, Scotland during Edward III’s reign is a society both exotic and familiar to the English at court in London. The claims that many English had on Scottish land (one reason that Edward III invaded), and the presence of Edward III’s sister Joan – child bride of the Scottish people’s preferred heir David Bruce – in the Scottish court establish a degree of familiarity with this distant land for the English court. Nevertheless, the country is still foreign and wild, peopled by “crazy” Celts who resisted Anglo-Saxon rule and would not be subdued and controlled by what many characterized as Anglo-Normans.

The wildness of the Scottish, a reputation that had long before been cemented by the construction of Hadrian’s Wall, was suggested in the disorganized, haphazard rebellions against the Edward III’s invasions. The Scottish uprising of 1334 was conducted, at first, by independent groups of Scots. Beginning in Bute, and soon following in Kyle, Annandale, and other locations, small bands of guerrilla fighters rose up against the English. Only because of the prospect of French aid did the Scots attempt to organize themselves under solid leadership (Nicholson 166-167). From the English perspective, bands of Scots rising up against the English armies might have further solidified the Scottish reputation for wildness. The continued evidence of such behavior by the Scots during Edward III’s campaigns would only result in the English further differentiating themselves from the Scots. Simultaneously, though, the Scots are near

neighbors, sharing the same island as the English, making them “the exotic ‘other’ [. . .] as close as kin” (Ingham 108).

Indeed, Edward III’s campaigns in Scotland, and the many previous attempts to subdue Scotland throughout the history of Britain, rendered the Scottish/English border vague and fluid. When the English succeeded in their incursions and installed Edward Balliol on the throne, they reestablished an English authority over the Scottish lands, essentially making them a part of Edward III’s empire. As the Scots fought back, however, and made gains against the English, the power of English authority became unclear and the differences dividing the two countries were made more apparent. Similarly, Gawain’s journey results in a blurring of the borders between Hautdesert and Camelot. Gawain must live up to his reputation as a Knight of the Round Table when he is at Hautdesert in order to maintain Arthur’s authority in this distant land. Each time Gawain fails a test, however, his reputation is tarnished before the people of Hautdesert, which undermines Arthur’s authority. Gawain’s inability to live up to his own legend prevents him from establishing Arthur’s authority, thus making the people of Hautdesert seem to be beyond the reach of Arthur’s realm.

Watching Gawain suffer as he journeys to Hautdesert, and subsequently fail once he arrives, causes the reader to turn her attention back to the individual responsible for putting him into this position: the king. Seeing the suffering of Gawain, who fights a battle of questionable motive, based on a bargain that stems from a Christmas game that did not have to be life threatening had the poem’s Arthur not encouraged him to cheat the bargain and give a fatal blow to the Green Knight – “*Kepe þe, cosyn, ’ quop þe kyng, ’ þat*

pou on kynf sette, / And if pou redez hym ryzt, redly I trowe / Pat pou schal byden þe burpat he schal bede after”” (372-374).¹¹ – causes the reader also to question the authority that put him into that position. That authority appears selfish, tyrannical, and cruel, the result of which is an undermining of the ruling authority due to disgust at the treatment of the king’s people. That point is clearly stated by the people of Camelot who comment thus about the king’s role in what everyone believes will be Gawain’s journey to certain death:

*Al þat sez þat semly syked in hert
And sayde sobly al same segges til oper,
Carande for þat comly, ‘Bi Kryst, hit is scape
Pat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in faith, is not epe. [. . .]
Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
As knyztez in cauelacionz on Crystmasse gomnez?’* (672-683)¹²

The people of the court “clearly regard the loss of Gawain as too high a price to pay for a bit of entertainment at a feast of the sort that Arthur’s initial vow seemed to promise” (Weiss 407).

The Green Knight’s defiance opens the door to allow the people of Camelot to criticize the king. From the moment that the Green Knight first appears in the poem he disrupts the order and authority that Arthur has established at Camelot. Although Arthur seems to conjure the Green Knight when he asks for a story “*Of sum mayn meruayle þat he myzt trawe*” (94),¹³ the Green Knight is a creature the king cannot control. As a rendering of the Celtic “green man” from the north, the Green Knight reminds the reader of the wild Celts who resisted Edward III’s control. The Green Knight’s rhetorical question to the court when no knight steps up to take his challenge – “*What, is þis*

Arpures hous [. . .] Pat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?” (309-310)¹⁴ – immediately takes the reputation of the court to task, opening further opportunity to question Arthur’s ability as a ruler and challenging the poet’s initial description of Arthur as “*þe hendest*” of “*alle þat here bult of Bretaygne kynges*” (24-25).¹⁵ The Green Knight’s “refusal to use the court discourse, the manners and deportment that maintain and identify the distance between the subject and his king” – his direct, glaring gaze and splendor of his dress that rivals Arthur’s exemplify the Green Knight’s refusal to play by Arthur’s rules (Godfrey 72). The Green Knight’s entrance “is not only startling and rude, but a refutation of the court’s image of monarchy as a near-sacred institution” (Godfrey 75). Even after the decapitation, the Green Knight’s head continues to defy royal control: “the severed head ignores Arthur to speak only to Gawain” (Godfrey 78). The Green Knight’s actions in Camelot, which “consistently draw attention to himself and [. . .] refuse that attentiveness to Arthur,” challenge the social and political decorum of the court (Godfrey 78). With the order of the court in upheaval, the people of Camelot have the opportunity rebel as well. Once they are out from under Arthur’s control, they can engage in the subversive act of criticizing Arthur’s willingness to allow Gawain to travel to the Green Knight’s chapel to an almost certain death. When the Green Knight successfully diverts the court’s gaze towards himself and away from Arthur, he empowers the people to follow his example of subversion and defiance. Just as Gawain undermines the authority of Arthur from a distance at Hautdesert, the Green Knight, an outsider in Camelot, subverts Arthur’s power with each of his insults toward the king, his court, or his pre-established order.

Although the Green Knight undermines Arthur's authority, it is Arthur who invites the Green Knight's criticism. By insisting upon indulging his own personal desires for amusement, Arthur opens himself up for the subversive dialogue and behavior of the Green Knight. If Arthur simply had been satisfied with the joyous festivities that were provided during Christmas at Camelot, the poet's initial description of Arthur as "*be hendest*" of "*Bretaygne kynges*" (24-25) might have gone unchallenged. Arthur invites criticism upon himself by being unsatisfied.

The result of the Christmas game is not only a test of Gawain, but also of Arthur and his reputation among his subjects at Hautdesert, which hinges upon Gawain's success. Gawain, however, is anything but a success. He fails in the exchange game with Bertilak when he chooses to keep the lady's gift of the girdle. He fails again at the Green Chapel, flinching under the axe of the Green Knight. Gawain expresses his failures as having "*schränk for schome*" (2371),¹⁶ openly cursing his "*cowarddyse and couetyse bope*" (2374).¹⁷ As a representative of Arthur's court, Gawain's failure is emblematic of Arthur's failure. The representative Arthur has sent to enforce his power in this distant land leaves with the Green Knight laughing after him, still amused at the childish antics of the "*berdlez chylde*" of Arthur's court, reinforcing the idea that Arthur has no power over the Green Knight. The Green Knight defeats the court of Arthur when he outwits Gawain and sends him home to Camelot with his head bowed in shame.

Just as Gawain's failure in the chapel of the Green Knight reflects negatively upon King Arthur, so did the English army's failures reflect negatively on Edward III, whose cruel offensives into Scotland were unsuccessful. Nicholson notes that "the

severity with which Edward ravaged southern Scotland did not have the desired effect. Instead of forcing the Scots to submission, it alienated them and drove them into the arms of the French king” (Nicholson 191). The Scottish people united under the cause of ejecting the English, and the Scots’ appeal to the French led to the outbreak of the Hundred Years’ War with the English on the continent. Indeed, Edward III could not consider the installation of Edward Balliol even a minor success because, by 1340, David Bruce was strong enough to return and take back the Scottish throne (Vickers 154). Edward III’s return to Scotland in 1356 was no victory either, as the violent “scorched earth” strategy employed by the Scots and the mishaps that kept provisions from arriving, resulted in the English troops’ inglorious retreat back to England (Longman 408-409).

Edward III’s failures in Scotland reinforced the limits and weaknesses of his authority over the whole of Britain. The retreats from Scotland in 1335 and 1356 can each be seen as similar to Gawain’s shameful journey back to Camelot. As Arthur used his knight Gawain to assert his authority over Hautdesert, Edward III used his knights to impress his power and authority over Scotland. However, neither was successful. By creating an Arthurian character with aspects so similar to Edward III, the poet comments subversively on the English king’s authority and power. From the defiance of the Green Knight who heaps insults on the king and his court, to the doubts expressed by the members of the court about Arthur, to the failure and shame of Gawain at Hautdesert, one cannot come away from this poem without a tarnished image of Camelot and a sense that Arthur is not quite the “*hendest*” king that the poet initially describes him to be. Instead,

Camelot is just another failed kingdom, earning its place among the other failed kingdoms in the opening of the poem:

*Sipen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
 Þe bor3 brittened and brent to brondez and askez, [. . .]
 Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe,
 With gret bobbaunce þat bur3e he biges vpon gyrst
 And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
 Ticius to Tuskan and tildes bigynnes,
 Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,
 And fer ouer þe French flod, Felix Brutus
 On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
 Wyth wyne (1-15)¹⁸*

The poem does not end, however, with Gawain's shameful march back to Camelot. Instead, the poet describes a homecoming that underscores even more the subversion that is constantly echoed throughout the poem. Gawain returns to Camelot and immediately confesses his shame:

*and ferlyly he telles,
 Biknowez alle þe costes of care þat he hade,
 Þe chaunce of þe chapel, þe chere of þe knyzt,
 Þe luf of þe ladi, þe lace at þe last.
 Þe nirt in þe nek he naken hem schewed
 Þat he last for his vnleute at þe leudes hondes
 For blame
 He tened quen he schulde telle;
 He gromed for gref and grame.
 Þe blod in his face con melle,
 When he hit schulde schewe, for schame.
 'Lo! Lorde,' quop þe leude, and þe lace hondeled,
 'Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek.
 Þis is þe lape and þe losse þat I last haue
 Of couardise and couetyse, þat I haf cast þare;
 Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne.
 And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last;
 For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit,
 For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.' (2494-2512)¹⁹*

Despite Gawain's efforts to honestly admit everything that he had done wrong, he is met with an unexpected reaction: "*alle þe court als / Lazen loude þerat*" (2513-2514).²⁰ The laughter by the people of Camelot invalidates the shame borne by Gawain. All of the criticism of Arthur up to this point is diffused by this collective peal of laughter, undercutting the serious nature of the entire journey. The reader is reminded once again that the whole journey was part of a game. The distress of Gawain seems unfounded to the court; why get so upset over something so insignificant? The threat that Bertilak and Hautdesert may have seemed to pose against Camelot and the Arthur's authority is now seen as negligible. Prior suggests that the inhabitants of Camelot "view [Gawain's adventure] from a courtly context, where laughter and game prevail [. . .] To them Gawain has been on an *aventure*, as it is proper for a knight in a romance; he has returned with a trophy, and, equally important, with a story to tell" (*Revisited* 127). To further contain the subversion, the court takes up Gawain's girdle – one of his badges of shame – as their badge of honor and solidarity with Gawain. The power of the Green Knight now seems minimal when Arthur can simply shrug off the threat to his authority. Arthur's ability to ignore the plight of Gawain and react so carelessly to his near-death experience shows that he is ignorant of the image he is projecting. Arthur's and the court's complete lack of understanding of the seriousness of the situation is clearly a statement of derision by the poet.

At the end of the poem, the reader's attention is called to the issue of language. The final line of the poem, "*Hony Soyt Qui Mal Pence*" (2531), the motto of the Order of the Garter, is in French. The language shift to the motto is significant for containing the

subversion expressed by the poet's use of an "outside" dialect. The French of the motto is the language of the court, and representative of the authority that Arthur encompasses. Because it is the motto for the Order of the Garter, Edward III is invoked in this final line. The establishment of the Order of the Garter was one of the high points of Edward III's reign, contrasting the failures in Scotland that seem to be echoed throughout the poem. One can recall that Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was probably composed to celebrate the Order of the Garter, thus evidencing the lasting importance of this chivalric society founded by Edward III (McDonald 326). That lasting vestige of his reign, however, is comic; the Order of the Garter is as superficial as Arthur's court in the poem.

Despite the containment of the subversion, one cannot ignore the subversive message that is repeated throughout the course of the poem. As Victoria Guerin points out, "medieval literature is meant not only to please but also to instruct" (235). What is the poet trying to teach? Likely written at the end of Edward III's reign or during the reign of Richard II, may have been meant to instruct the young grandson of Edward III. For example, like Edward III, Richard II invaded Scotland early in his reign in 1385, when he was only eighteen (Bennett, *Richard II* 22). Also, the adoption of the girdle at Camelot, while it ties to Edward III's Order of the Garter, also applies to Richard II's use of badges to identify members of his household (Bowers, *Politics* 98). However, if this poem were written well into Richard II's reign, the poet may be observing the similarities between the reigns of the two monarchs, particularly in their penchant for making mistakes.

While this application of the poet's message is purely speculative, the many examples of the subversion of authority within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are clearly apparent. The subversion of Arthur implicit in the poem clearly applies also to the real-life figure of the English king who history has proven to be anything but "*he hendest*."

¹ unbearded youth

² somewhat childish (my translation)

³ With woeful, deep whisperings, one to another,
 "By Christ, it's a crime!" the court sadly said.
 "No peer could replace that prince in our time.
 If with caution he'd chosen a course less final,
 Without a doubt a great duke that dear knight would become,
 In the land a fine leader, a lord of renown.
 That would be for the best. He'll be butchered, though, now,
 By a spirit-man slaughtered; all solely for pride!
 Has a king to such counsel consented before,
 That such contest should count as a Christmastide game?"

⁴ So the king was thus keeping a custom intact:
 On a holiday high as was this he would eat
 Of his food not the first bite before he had heard
 Some adventurous story, both strange and well told,
 Miraculous, marvelous, moving, yet true:
 Of nobility, boldness, betrothal, a tale,
 Or a man there should move forth, a mighty opponent,
 And there join him in jousting, in jeopardy place
 A true life for a life, while allowing his foe
 The favor of fate should that foe win the day.

⁵ A quest, high and urgent

⁶ We've been graced by the goodness of God, to be sure,
 For a guest such as Gawain He has granted us all.

⁷ Riding far from his friends

⁸ Logres, North Wales, Anglesey isles, Holy Head, and Wirral.

⁹ Never in their lives;
 None has seen a man of such a hewe
 Of green (my translation)

¹⁰ Strange lands (my translation)

¹¹ "Take good care, my fair cousin," the king said, "and give
One stroke dealt strongly; for certainly then
You'll endure the dread blow he will deal in turn!"

¹² All who saw that grave scene were sorrowed at heart.
With woeful, deep whisperings, one to another,
"By Christ, it's a crime!" the court sadly said.
"That lord will be lost, whose life is so dear.
No peer could replace that prince in our time. [. . .]
Has a king to such counsel consented before,
That such contest should count as a Christmastide game?"

¹³ Miraculous, marvelous, moving, yet true;

¹⁴ "Is this the court for its courage renowned,
Whose repute is rung through all realms of the land?"

¹⁵ "Kindest, most courteous and fair" of "all the bold kings who in Britain have reigned"

¹⁶ Shrank out of shame

¹⁷ Cowardice, coveting life

¹⁸ Since the siege and assault were ceased before Troy,
Which had broken and burned it to brand and to ash; [. . .]
For to Rome noble Romulus rapidly went,
Where he saw to that city's construction with pride,
Gave the new site his name; it is known for him still.
Having traveled to Tuscany, Ticius built homes;
In Lombardy, Langaberd left great estates.
Felix Brutus fared forth, far across the French sea
To the broad slopes of Britain to build there his realm
So dear.

¹⁹ of his quandaries he told.
He confessed what befell him: his faults and mistakes,
What had chanced at the chapel, the cheer of the knight,
The love of the lady, and, lastly, the belt.
To those nobles the nick on his neck he then showed.
All along his lapse and disloyalty he'd
Proclaim.
He grieved to tell the tale
Behind that badge of blame,
But, blushing, did unveil
His scar, that sign of shame.

"My lord, look!" he said, lifting the lace in his hand.
"Here's the badge of the blame that I bear on my neck.
It's a sign of the shame I deserved in my tryst;
It incarnates my cowardice, coveting life.
This token of treachery, untrustworthiness,

Just as long as I live I'll keep lashed to my breast,
For one's sins when concealed are one's sins nonetheless;
When a trust is mistreated, it's tainted forever."

²⁰ They laughed right out loud

Conclusion

The *Gawain*-poet's subversive techniques provide a common thread that ties together the four distinct poems of the MS Cotton Nero A.x. In *Pearl*, allegory, illogic, and allusions to Richard II allow the voice of the dreamer to become a voice that questions the structure of New Jerusalem that allows individuals to be elevated in a seemingly random fashion. *Cleanness* gives voice to the victims of God's wrath. Their suffering highlights the viciousness of God's punishment. The poet also shows innocent people suffering because of poor decisions by earthly authorities. In *Patience*, the narrator and Jonah demonstrate that only negative results occur when one gets in the way of an authority enforcing his own will. God's torture of Jonah as a means of changing his mind only leads to disillusionment for Jonah. This sentiment is echoed in the narrator's feelings of disillusionment for his own authority figure. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet uses the legendary characters of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table and the romance genre to subvert authority. He places characters that are important symbols of English identity – so important that the real-life English monarchy attempted to mimic them – and has them interface with outsiders. The Green Knight and the people of Hautdesert are representatives of the poet's northern region. Their reactions to the stumbling of Gawain and immaturity of King Arthur tarnish the glorified image of these traditional characters.

On the surface of the poems, the main voices of dissent seem to be too flawed to be rebellious political figures. *Pearl*'s dreamer seems dim-witted and bumbling in his conversations with the pearl-maiden, and foolish when he attempts to cross the river. The victims of God's wrath in *Cleanness* have clearly committed sins that deserve some sort of punishment. Jonah and the narrator in *Patience* are both openly disobedient to their rulers. The Green Knight is a terror, and Bertilak is bewitched by Morgan le Fey. Despite these character flaws, the poet's construction of them ultimately brings the reader to their side. The innocent pearl-maiden, God, Gawain, and King Arthur become blemished, like the knight in *The Canterbury Tales* whose armor should be shining and spotless, but is dirty and rusted in reality. Most remarkable, however, is the reaction by these characters to the subversion they experience: nothing. They are totally oblivious to it. The pearl-maiden, representing the voice of the authority in New Jerusalem, is frustrated and baffled by her father's inability to understand the hierarchical structure and his desire to join her in New Jerusalem. The God of *Cleanness* shows no mercy to mankind. Even the symbol of His mercy – Christ – weeps at the suffering of His victims. In the same poem, Belshezzar ignores the interpretation of the God's message on the wall, resulting in his death. In *Patience*, Jonah's disillusionment and desire to end his life cannot convince God that His methods of pursuing Jonah may have been misguided. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's return to Camelot after learning some harsh lessons about honor and "trawþe" at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel are ignored by Arthur. Instead, he and the other inhabitants of Camelot laugh at Gawain's shame and adorn the symbol of his failures – the green girdle – like a hip new fashion trend. The

failure by the authority figures in the four poems to recognize the subversion further derides them, allowing the subversion to be contained, similar to Greenblatt's demonstration of subversion-containment in Shakespeare.

I believe that the *Gawain*-poet is successful in his construction of these four subversive poems. Without being overt, he is able to give voice to the underrepresented outsider and the common man. Without knowing the poet's history, however, it is impossible to determine what the ultimate intention of his subversive writing was. Clear ties within the poems to the English monarchy indicate that he had the ruling family in mind, and history leaves no doubt that Richard II's reign was a failure. Whether, as Bennett suggests, the poems were written for expatriates of the Northwest-Midlands, or they were written for the king who was fluent in this northern dialect, the poems succeed in speaking with a rebellious political voice for a people historically forced to submit to a looming authority.

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