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JEWELS AND JEWELLERS IN *PEARL*

BY TONY DAVENPORT

No one would deny that the symbolism of jewels is central to *Pearl*, but in recent years a number of critics have based historical, political, economic readings of the poem on literal interpretation of the dreamer as a professional jeweller, a craftsman or merchant. This essay takes a sceptical view of such readings on the basis of the poem's lack of technical vocabulary, the description of jewels here and elsewhere in alliterative poetry in terms of architectural structure and aesthetic effect rather than the process of making and uncertainty that the word 'jeweller' was used in the fourteenth-century with quite that sense ('perrier' being the preferred term in lapidary texts). The various vernacular versions of the fable of the Cock and the Jewel provide a gloss on the terms and attitudes in *Pearl*, as do lapidaries on the poem's conclusion.

The image of a pearl is the literal and metaphorical label by which the poem *Pearl* is identified and the poet has used it as the starting and closing point of a string of jewel references that runs from the idea of the lost gem, through the gleaming stones and metals of the dream world and the pearl-encrusted costume of the Maiden seen in the dream, to the Biblical description of the heavenly Jerusalem with its foundations of precious stones and gates of pearl. Human valuation of jewels is equally a recurrent idea, present from the opening line's reference to a connoisseur-prince, likely to appreciate a particularly well-shaped pearl in a fine setting, through the poet-dreamer's painful treasuring of his human jewel and the comparison of value in the parable of the pearl of great price, to the closing allusion to Christians' opportunity to lead pure lives and so become pearls which may satisfy God. In the course of his exploration of these ideas, the dreamer-narrator refers to himself as a jeweller and uses the word as the basis for the concatenation in the fifth section of the poem: the repetition that this involves explores the significance of the word in relation to the dreamer. As Andrew and Waldron comment:

The concatenation word *jueler(e)* is rich in potential significance... the varied use of the word... draws attention to the contrast between earthly and heavenly values – a distinction which he has yet to learn.¹

The sense in which the dreamer claims to be a jeweller (as former owner of the lost pearl) is given irony by the maiden's use of the word in response, since she gives it a metaphorical application and exposes his failure to deserve the term: he did not own a pearl on earth and is unable to recognise a true pearl

1 *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, eds. M. Andrew and R. Waldron (London, 1978), p. 66.

when he sees one. What he thought was a pearl was only a transitory thing on earth, a rose that withered. Thus the state of being a 'jueler' is one that the dreamer lays claim to but does not earn.

In recent years several critics have taken the references to jewellers more literally as an identification of the narrator as merchant and used this notion as a focal point in readings of the poem which place it within political and economic contexts of the late fourteenth century. Felicity Riddy overlays the poem's concern with mourning and loss with a sense of:

... the merchant's grief for the loss of the jewel he had only temporarily owned, and the craftsman's grief for the destruction of the jewel which he, as jeweller/father had made.²

John M. Bowers and Helen Barr have both gone further in using the trade of jeweller and the function of luxury objects as part of a larger drawing of *Pearl* out of a 'cultural vacuum' into the court and city politics of Richard II's reign.³ Bowers emphasises the growing importance of goldsmiths in the fourteenth century and argues that by portraying the narrator as jeweller the poet identifies him with 'the economic class most likely to oppose the interests of the older landed aristocracy': thus 'social tensions between artisan and patron serve as an almost subliminal subtext in *Pearl*.'⁴ On a different tack Barr explicitly resists the transition from literal to metaphorical meanings.

One of the reasons why the particular of the literal is not disregarded in *Pearl* is that in casting the Dreamer as a jeweller, the poet establishes a material consciousness right at the heart of the poem. By trade, a jeweller deals in gems, and the narrator is hence cast as a mercantile figure concerned with the market value of luxury commodities.⁵

Riddy too, sees the position of jeweller as providing the poet of *Pearl* with a socially engaged narrative voice, very different from the 'marginal figures' of Chaucer's and Langland's dream-narrators. She identifies the word 'jeweller' in fourteenth-century usage as 'one who works with or trades in gems and precious stones', a skilled urban supplier of luxury goods to the wealthy aristocracy.⁶

I am sceptical about some aspects of these arguments, particularly about interpretation of the word *jeweller*. Part of Riddy's supporting evidence is drawn from *Piers Plowman*:

In the A-text of *Piers Plowman*, cited in *MED*, Mede is characterised as 'a Iuweler,/ A Mayden of goode' (Passus II, 87). [sic] This use of 'Iuweler' is translated by *MED* as

2 Felicity Riddy, 'Jewels in *Pearl*', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge, 1997), 143–55 (155).

3 John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge, 2001); Helen Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2001), Chapter 2, 'Pearl – or "The Jeweller's Tale"', 40–62.

4 Both quotations from Bowers, 105.

5 Barr, 43.

6 Riddy, 'Jewels in *Pearl*', 149.

'one who owns or loves jewels', but probably means 'one who deals in jewels', given the criticism of Mede for giving lavish bribes...⁷

As Riddy was doubtless aware, the reading 'Iuweler' is aberrant in this line, occurring only in the copy of the A-text of *Piers Plowman* in the Vernon manuscript; the fairly large number of other manuscripts of the A-text all have some spelling of 'mulier' (*woman*) (in Kane's edition A-text, Passus II, 96⁸), as do all the manuscripts of the B-text in the corresponding passage and all those of the C-text but one, which substitutes 'medeler'. But, in any case, the sense of the passage in which the line appears resists the interpretation Riddy wants to give it. Theology is protesting about the proposed marriage between Fals and Mede on the grounds of disparity between the pair:

'Wel 3e wyt, wernardis, but 3if 3oure wyt faile,
Dat Fals is a faitour [and] feyntles of werkis,
[And] as a bastard yborn of Belsabubbis kynde;
And Mede is a mulere, [a maiden of gode];
She mi3te kisse þe king for cosyn 3if he[o] wolde.' (A-text, II, pp. 93-7)

Theology is actually supporting Mede's claim to high social status: she is a well-born woman of substance and position, unlike the bastard confidence man proposed as husband. On the face of it, the scribe of the Vernon manuscript in substituting 'Iuweler' is saying that the word means 'a rich person, one who possesses goods'. Words substituted in manuscript copying by knowing scribes may often betray awareness of other parts of the text and it may be that in calling Mede a jeweller there is some connection, as Riddy presumes, with the later passage (A-text, Passus III, 20-3) where Mede offers bribes of 'Coupis of clene gold [and] pecis of siluer, Rynges wiþ rubies & richesse manye', but even this does not identify Mede as a trader in the literal sense: she has money and goods which she is willing to use to buy favours—that is, metaphorical, not literal trading.

Neither is the argument that one should understand the narrator in *Pearl* as a professional jeweller, in the sense of artificer, very convincingly supported by the words in the text of the poem itself. Riddy, Bowers and Barr all cite an essay by Marian Campbell in support of their argument,⁹ but one of the things Campbell's discussion forces on one's attention is the absence from *Pearl* of technical language to do with the processes or the tools of jewellery-making. There are no references to 'fining', no hammers, punches and moulds, tongs or files. The inventory of a York goldsmith's workshop quoted by Campbell uses many specialised terms, as, for example, *tryblent* (a tapered mandrel on which rings were made), *patrones* (wooden patterns for clay moulds), *bosselthys* (perhaps a die). The vocabulary of jeweller's techniques in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is dominated

7 Riddy, 149, note 22, repeated by Barr, 42, note II.

8 *Piers Plowman, The A Version*, ed. George Kane (University of London, 1960).

9 Marian Campbell, 'Gold, Silver and Precious Stones', in *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products*, eds John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (London/Rio Grande, 1991), 107-66.

by French expressions, such as *cloisonné*, *champlevé*, *basse taille*, *émail en ronde basse*. In the poem there is virtually no specialised vocabulary of this kind. The setting of a pearl in gold is associated with very general terms, *clos in gold* and *sette*; the virtue of the pearl as a stone is described only in aesthetic and moral terms, as *wythouten spot*, or *wythouten wemme*; more insistent are 'clene and clere and pure' (l. 227), 'wemlez, clene and clere' (l. 737) and so on; the stone is literally *rounde*, *smal*, *smofe*. A pearl is envisaged in a jeweller's box, 'cofer' (l. 259) or 'forser' (l. 263) and the materials with which goldsmiths worked, 'fyldor fyn' (l. 106), 'playn yvore' (l. 178), 'schorne golde schyr' (l. 213), 'brende golde bry3t/As glemande glas burnist broun' (ll. 989-90), variously adorn the dream world, the Maiden and the heavenly city together with the names of the Apocalypse's precious stones, *jasper*, *saffer*, *calsydoyne*, *emerald*, *sardonyse*, *rybe*, *crysohyt*, *beryl*, *topasye*, *crysopase*, *jacynghyt* and *amatyst*. But none of these references draws on the technical jargon of the workshop or a consciousness which suggests an artificer rather than an informed observer. The nearest to a particularised description of jewel settings is that of the coronet or tiara worn by the Maiden:

A py3t coroune 3et wer þat gyrl
Of mariorys and non oþer ston,
Hi3e pynakled of cler quyt perle,
Wyth flurtd flowrez perfet vpon. (205-8)

But even here the poet goes no further into technical terms than *flurtd*, referring to the late fourteenth-century fashion for setting jewels into florets or for elaborating the gold of the outer circle of a brooch or coronet into pierced designs in the shape of flowers.¹⁰ The word conveys the aesthetic effect rather than the process.

There were some very elaborate examples of goldsmiths' work produced in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. An example is the monogram brooch known as the Founder's Jewel, bequeathed to New College, Oxford, by its founder, William of Wykeham in 1404: the two arches of the letter M appear as Gothic niches framed by pierced gold; in the niches appear the Angel Gabriel and Mary, separated by a vase of lilies above which are three pearls; the outer strokes of the letter were originally each adorned by four gems; the Annunciation scene is surmounted by three jewelled lilies separated by two pearls.¹¹ However, there are few passages in English poetry of the period which describe or match such a high degree of exquisite craftsmanship. There is some indication of the taste for highly wrought imitation in the description of the Indian temple in

¹⁰ See J. Anderson Black, *A History of Jewels* (London, 1974), 134-5.

¹¹ See Guido Gregoriotti, *Jewellery Through the Ages* (Milan, 1969), trans. Helen Lawrence, (London, 1970), 164-6. The brooch is pictured in Black, 132. For other examples, see Joan Evans, *History of Jewellery 1100-1870*, 2nd edition (London, 1970); Jenny Stratford, 'The Goldenes Rössl and the French Royal Collections', in *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. Elizabeth M. Tyler (University of York, 2000), 109-33.

The Wars of Alexander,¹² with golden pillars entwined by vines of gold growing grapes of pearl and other gems and subtle mimicry of birds' plumage, but perhaps the most sustained attempt to convey the jeweller's craft is the description of the holy vessels in *Cleanness*:

For þer wer bassynes ful bry3t of brende golde clere,
 Enaumaylde with azer, and eweres of sute;
 Couered cowpes foul elene, as casteles arayed,
 Enbaned vnder batelment, with bantelles quoynt,
 And fylde out in fygyres of ferlyle schappes.
 Þe coperounes of þe couacles þat on þe cuppe reres
 Wer fetysely formed out in fylwoles longe;
 Pinacles py3t þer apert þat profert bitwene,
 And al bolled abof with braunches and leues,
 Pyes and papejays purtrayed withinne,
 As þay prudly hade piked of pomgarnades;
 For alle þe blommes of þe bo3es wer blyknande perles,
 And alle þe fruyt in þo formes of flaumbeande gemmes,
 Ande safyres and sardiners and semely topace,
 Alabaundarynes and amaraunz and amastjised stones,
 Casydoynes and crysolytes and clere rubies,
 Penitotes and pynkardines, ay perles bitwene.
 So trayled and tryfled a-trauerce wer alle,
 Bi vche bekyr and bolle, þe brurdes al vmbe;
 Þe gobelotes of golde grauen aboute,
 Ande fyoles fretted with flores and fleec of golde. (*Cleanness*, 1456–76)¹³

Even here the technical terms are mostly architectural ones (*enbaned*, *bantelles*, *coperounes*, *fywoles*), used to convey the impressive construction of the vessels more than the particular skills by which they were made; only a few past participles refer to processes—*bolled* (embossed), *trayled* (ornamented with a design of trailing branches), *tryfled* (decorated with trefoils), *grauen* (engraved), *fretted* (inlaid)—and some of these are pictorial rather than methodological. The poet clearly thinks that his audience will be most impressed by the multiplicity of the things depicted, magpies and parrots pecking at pomegranates, golden butterflies flitting among the flowers of pearl and fruits of sapphire, ruby and the rest, and does not seek to express the commercial value of the objects, the richness of their market appeal, let alone their workshop production; the presentation is of surfaces not of origins. There is even less interest in *Pearl* in made objects, or the decorative motifs that a craftsman has used; the poet is more apt simply to name the shining materials which the dreamer perceives, or to use craftsman's processes as points of comparison:

As glysnande golde þat man con schere,
 So schon þat schene anvnder schore. (165–6)

12 *The Wars of Alexander*, eds. Hoyt N. Duggan and Thorlac Turville-Petre, EETS SS 10 (Oxford, 1989), ll.3792–3831.

13 Andrew and Waldron, *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 170–1.

Specialisms within the craft of goldsmithing led to distinctions between, for instance, finers, gold-beaters, burnishers, gilders, spanglers, jewellers and mazerers, and such discriminations are the basis for Campbell's statement:

The medieval understanding of the word *jeweller* is problematic, for it seems to mean variously a retailer of goldsmiths' work (including jewellery), a retailer of gemstones, an appraiser of gemstones, and only sometimes the craftsman who worked or set the stones.¹⁴

Riddy and Barr both quote this passage in support of the idea that 'jueller' in *Pearl* may mean a craftsman, but it is a meaning for which the poem gives little warrant. In the early stages of *Pearl* the narrator speaks as owner. The use in the opening stanza of the verbs 'clos' and 'sette' may seem to raise the possibility that the speaker is a craftsman who works with jewels, but the suggestion is balanced by 'Ne proued I neuer her precios pere' (l. 4) and 'Quere-so-euer I jugged gemme3 gaye' (l. 6), both of which sound like the attitudes of a possessor and connoisseur; the main statement in the stanza, 'Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere', presumes both possession and a courtly setting. There is nothing to say that he is not himself the prince to whom such a gem would be pleasing. The second stanza pictures him as a leisured being whose state of life is determined by possession and loss; he is not, it appears, subject to other pressures; there is no hint that he has other jewels, let alone that he is engaged in daily handling of them. What the reader encounters is a solitary owner of fine things and it is further implied in the stanzas that follow that he has the right to stay musing in the 'erbere' where the pearl has gone to ground. He appears to be in control of the area, perhaps the owner, but certainly with free entry to the space which becomes the private place of his 'slepyng-sla3te'. What the poet has projected is the voice of a courtier, even an aristocrat, moving in a country estate or plaisance; there is no flavour of shop, market or city streets.

Uses of the word 'jueler' in *Pearl* are, as mentioned earlier, concentrated in the fifth section where it forms part of the recurrent phrases in final-line refrains and opening-line echoes. It occurs in lines 252, 264-5, 276, 288-9 and 300-301. The various phrases used in these lines, 'joyle3 juelere', 'genty1 jueler', 'ioyful jueler', identify the deprived owner and punctuate the examination of the degree of grace in his acceptance of loss. To ask him to be more perceptive in recognising the maiden's translation from a transitory thing into something of real value if he were 'genty1', is to require him to justify his claim to aristocratic connoisseurship. The first stanza in the section (241-52) is the very opening of the dialogue between dreamer and maiden and the initial effect of the dreamer's speech is the excess of possessiveness that the lines express:

'O perle, quod I, 'in perle3 py3t,
Art þou my perle þat I haf playned,
Regretted by myn one on ny3te?

14 Campbell, 'Gold, Silver and Precious Stones', 151.

Much longeyng haf I for þe layned,
 Syþen into gresse þou me agly3te' (241-5)

The scenes evoked are of lonely night-time regret and the grassy arbour of loss: the contrast is between the dreamer's place of 'del and gret daunger' and the maiden's new abode in paradisaical delight. This is the framework for the introduction of the idea that the dreamer is a 'joyle3 jueler'; since the maiden is identified in the first line of the next stanza as 'That juel', it seems clear that the primary sense of 'jueler' in line 252 is 'jewel-owner' or 'jewel-fancier'. Rather than identifying the dreamer as a bourgeois merchant who brings commercial values to the measuring of spirituality, the word 'jueler' is used to identify a concept through which the maiden ironically exposes the falsity of his claims to noble sensibility. It is not that being a jeweller he lacks the awareness of a gentleman, but that whether or not he is an aristocrat he does not have the valuing powers of a true jeweller. He identifies himself as a 'joyle3 jueler', but she questions whether he is a 'gentyl jueler', and though allowing him the slightly ironic address of 'jueler gente', indicates that if he does not sharpen his perceptions, he does not earn the name at all - 'þou art no kynde jueler'. The presumption of his response, that if he could join her across the water he would be a 'joyful jueler', leads to her throwing the word back contemptuously in his teeth:

'Jueler!', sayde þat gemme clene,
 'Wy borde 3e men? So madde 3e be?' (289-90)

'Call yourself a jeweller!' is the effect of the word here, and in the rest of her speech the maiden explains that even he were capable of justifying his claim on the word, he still could not enter the heavenly world.

Apart from these lines the word 'jueler' is used twice (730, 734) to refer to the parable of the pearl of great price from Matthew 13.45-6, where it stands for the merchant, referred to in the Vulgate (in the dative case) as 'homini negotiatori', 'a man of affairs', whose main attribute is wealth, all of which he would be prepared to give up for the perfect, unflawed pearl. Only here in the poem does the word have an unambiguous literal application to the world of jewel-dealing, but in a context where the jewel is clearly allegorical.

Elsewhere in Middle English texts evidence about jewels and jewellers is suggestive but equally uncertain. It is interesting that in the English versions of the fourteenth-century French 'Lapidary of King Philip' translators talk of 'stones' rather than jewels, though the word 'gem' appears; nor are men who are experts on stones referred to as jewellers. The London Lapidary offers the following introduction to the text:

He þat this boke purchaced sought many Abbayes & clerkis, & spake to many perireres & to many wise dyuinours, for to witte þe auctorite of stones. . . (MS Douce 291, early fifteenth century)¹⁵

15 *English Mediaeval Lapidaries*, eds. Joan Evans and Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS OS 190 (London, 1933), 17. For the origins and background to the English lapidary texts see

The North Midland version, probably from later in the fifteenth century, substitutes 'getherers of precyous stones' and 'many ladys' as the authorities for understanding 'ye meysterys & ye valie & ye vertus of precyous stones';¹⁶ it would seem that it was not a merchant that had to be consulted for the information. God's instructions to Moses about providing the twelve stones of the Apocalypse with a setting do, however, require the expertise of a craftsman, but again it is not a 'jueler' that is to be called on:

And god commanded to moyses þat he shulde take of iche kyndely, & do shape þe twelue stones be crafte of perrere... (London Lapidary)¹⁷

Though *MED* lists *perrere* only in the sense of 'precious stone' or 'gem-cutting'/'jewelry-making', the word looks (particularly in the phrase *many perireres*) like an agent noun ('jeweller'/'jewel-setter').¹⁸ The noun *perry(e)*, 'jewel'/'jewelry', is well attested, appearing in *William of Palerne*, several Chaucer texts and so on, as well as in *Pearl* itself to describe the pearl of great price in the parable (line 730) and to refer collectively to the gems which embellish the heavenly Jerusalem:

De wone3 wythinne enurned ware
Wyth alle kynne3 perré þat mo3t repayre. (1027-8)

Again the North Midland version of the lapidary text differs: God trusts Moses himself to 'sett xii stones... in sum apariall of fyn golde'.¹⁹ The assumption in the writing of this and other lapidaries seems to be that knowledge of fine jewels and their virtues is part of a refined education at some distance from the actual acquisition of the gems.

References to jewels in Middle English poetry, of which there are many, are apt to be using gems as images in relation to particular themes and associations, with burial, for example, the wonder of the world of faerie, the grandeur of temples or the splendour of important characters' apparel.²⁰ However, a few tales involve buying and selling or questions of valuation. An instance is Gower's tale of Adrian and Bardus (*Confessio Amantis*, V, 4937-5162), where the word 'jueler' is used unambiguously for a merchant, when the poor man, Bardus, has been given (as a reward by a serpent) a magic stone which he sells twice (because it keeps returning to his purse); on the first occasion we are told that 'The jueler anon forth fette/The gold and made his paiement.' (*CA*, V, 5086-7); the second time Bardus seeks 'His ston to selle, and he so dede,/And lefte it with his

Joan Evans, *Magical Jewels* (Oxford, 1922); Paul Stüder and Joan Evans (eds), *Anglo-Norman Lapidaries* (Paris, 1924).

16. *English Mediæval Lapidaries*, 38.

17. *English Mediæval Lapidaries*, 17.

18. And, presumably, the origin of Perrier/Perrer(s) as a surname, appropriately that of Alice Perrers, the acquisitive mistress of Edward III.

19. *English Mediæval Lapidaries*, 39.

20. See P. J. Heather, 'Precious Stones in the Middle English Verse of the Fourteenth Century', *Folklore*, 42 (1931), 217-64 and 345-404.

chapman there' (CA, V, 5114-5). Here 'jueler' and 'chapman' appear to be synonymous, but simply as buyers of jewels.

The word 'jueler' does occur more indicatively in Middle English in retellings of the fable of the Cock and the Jewel, and this has relevance to *Pearl* because of the fable's concern with the question of correct valuation. In the first-century fable collection of Phaedrus, which is the ancestor of the medieval 'Romulus' collections, the story was originally of a cockerel finding a pearl (*margarita*) and expressing the opinion: 'If only someone who coveted your value had seen this sight, you would long ago have been restored to your original splendour'.²¹ In perhaps the earliest vernacular version of the Romulus collection made in Britain, Marie de France has her cockerel ponder on the gem he has found in the dunghill in the following terms:

Si un riche hume vus trovast,
 Bien sai ke de or vus aïrnast,
 Si acréüst vostre beauté
 Par l'or, que mut al grant clarté. ('Del cok e de la gemme', 11-14)
 (A rich man finding you, I'm sure/Would have set you in gold most pure;/And
 thus your beauty he'd augment/With gold, so very radiant!)"²²

When Lydgate two hundred years later produced his set of *Isopes Fables*,²³ the theme of which he declares in his opening line as 'Wisdom ys more in prise þen gold in cofers', his cockerel addresses the jewel (a jacynth in this version) thus:

'Who þat knew þy nature & þy kynde,
 All þe proprutees, whyche of the be tolde,
 A jeweller, yef he þe myght fynde,
 Wolde for þy vertues close þe in golde.' (Fable I, 148-51).

This is recognisably the topos which the poet of *Pearl* has adapted in the first stanza of his poem: in this fable/lapidary tradition the association is between a fine gem and a gold setting procured by Marie's 'riche hume', Lydgate's 'jeweller' or the *Pearl*-poet's 'prynce', which may be presumed to be equivalent to one another. Lydgate continues with a direct reference to the lapidary tradition as an authoritative back-up to the idea of the stone's value. However, that value is of little use to a cock and so it is to be left as the business of others:

Late þese merchantis, þat go so ferr & ryde,
 Trete of þy valew, wheþer hit be late or sone,
 Deme how þe cherte came furst in þe mone:
 Of suche mysteryes I take but lytell hede;
 Me lyst nat hewe chyppes aboue myn hede.

21 *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. B. E. Perry, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 278-9.

22 Text and translation from Marie de France, *Fables*, ed. and trans. Harriet Spiegel (University of Toronto Press, 1994), 31-3.

23 *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, Part II, ed. H. N. MacCracken, EETS ES 107 (London, 1934), 566-99.

Precyous stones longen to iewellers

And to princes, when þey lyst wel be seyn: ... (Table I, 164-70)

Is Lydgate here using 'merchantis', 'iewellers' and 'princes' as interchangeable? Is he not rather distinguishing two different actions—while merchants can haggle about prices, it is for jewellers (i.e. jewel owners) and princes to flaunt the handsomeness of the gems? The passage seems to presume a distinction between merchants and jewellers, with the latter belonging to the same class as the noble owners. Lydgate is, in fact, arguing in the fable in favour of placing things in appropriate classes. The common interpretation of this first story in the *Romulus* series, followed by Marie and later by Henryson, is to condemn the cock for his failure to appreciate the value of higher things. But Lydgate instead supports remaining within one's limits:

The cok demyd, to hym hit was more dew
 Small simple grayne, þen stones of hygh renoun,
 Of all tresour chief possessioun.
 Suche as God sent, eche man take at gre,
 Nat prowde with ryches nor groge with pouerte. (Table I, 213-7)

Henryson's interpretation is more severe, though his stance at the opening of the fable is similar, if more powerfully and imaginatively expressed, as the cock pushes away the alien richness of the stone (jasper in this case²⁴).

'O gentill Iasp, O riche and nobill thing,
 Thocht I the fond, thow ganist not for me;
 Thow art ane iouell for ane lord or king.
 It were pitie thow suld in this mydding
 Be buryit thus amang this muke and mold,
 And thow so fair and worth sa mekill gold.' (Henryson, *Moral Fables*, 79-84)²⁵

No jeweller is mentioned here: the gem would be valued by 'grit lordis'; its proper place is a royal tower, a king's crown. Henryson will have none of this hierarchical dutifulness: the jasper, given the rich resonances of its lapidary associations, stands for all knowledge, rejected only by a fool:

This cok, desyrand mair the sempill corne
 Than ony iasp, may till ane fule be peir,
 Quhilk at science makis bot ane moik and scorne,
 And na gude can, als lytill will he leir ... (*Moral Fables*, 141-4)

Though written a hundred years or so later than *Pearl*, Henryson's fable is the Middle English work that comes closest to the terms of the debate between

24 Not with the same sense as modern jasper, but probably green chrysoprase. Henryson took 'jasper' from his source in Walter the Englishman's *De gallo et jaspide* but his reference to a sow in ll146-7 shows that he has Matthew's 'Neither cast ye your pearls before swine' in mind.

25 *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), 6; see note on p. 194 on jewels.

dreamer and maiden. From the striking image of a precious jewel lost in the 'muke and mold' of earth both poets develop a dialogue between two voices, one voice expressing with rhetorical panache the inability to judge value, the other pointedly setting the record straight.

Quha is enemie to science and cunning
 Bot ignorants, that vnderstandis nocht
 Quhilk is sa nobill, sa precious, and sa ding,
 That it may with na eirdlie thing be bocht?
 Weill wer that man, ouer all vther, that mocht
 All his lyfe dayis in perfite studie wair
 To get science, for him neidit na mair...
 Ga seik the iasp, quha will, for thair it lay. (*Moral Fables*, 148-54, 161)

With the focus that the fable provides one can see that one strand in the material of *Pearl* is the theme of correct valuation. The narrator has to learn that what he lost was something of which he judged the value wrongly; he is no more understanding in his lamentation or in his re-discovery of his lost pearl than the cock in its rejection of the impressive jasper.

If the fable provides a perspective for the beginning of the poem, lapidary texts form a commentary on its end. To read *Pearl* alongside a medieval lapidary is to realise that in conceptual terms the climax of the poem should be seen as the description of the heavenly Jerusalem based on its twelve layers of precious stones.

The appocalipse witnesseth vs þat god loued so moche my lord seint John þe euangelist þat he did lede him be his aungel to se þe priuites of paradys; and also be a uision he sigh þe grete paradys as a Cite. There he sigh þe twelue stones that God named. . . (London Lapidary)²⁶

The twelve stones and their virtues and significance form the main material of the shorter lapidary texts. Modern readers tend to find the seventeenth section of *Pearl*, with its refrain line 'In þe Apocalypce þe apostel John', the least effective part of the poem because the poet virtually imports the list of gems and the geometry of the city from Revelations without imaginative transformation of the material into a visual impression or a moment of sublime experience. Also readers who see the poem as the product of an 'aristocratic luxury system', like the elaborate jewels referred to earlier and like the Wilton Diptych,²⁷ look for a distinction between material riches and spiritual value. The poet, however, requires the reader to take the symbolism of precious stones as given. Enough meaning could be generated from the twelve stones to form a whole text and though little but the name of the jewel is used in the version in *Pearl*, the names carry a density of association and are appropriately set in gold, from which the city is constructed in the manner of a vast reliquary:

De bor3 watz al of brende golde bry3t
 As glemande glas burnist broun,

26 *English Mediaeval Lapidaries*, 18.

27 See Riddy, 'Jewels in *Pearl*', 148ff.

Wyth gentyll gemmez anvnder py3t
 Wyth bantelez twelue on basyng boun,
 De foundementez twelue of riche tenoun;
 Vch tabelment watz a serlypez ston . . . (989-94)

As with the description of the holy vessels in *Cleanness*, the nearest to technicalities the poet approaches is to combine architectural vocabulary with visual effects. The jewels are enhanced by the city's wall of jasper and the twelve portals of pearl described in the first stanza of Section XVIII. Interestingly pearls do not rank high in the medieval lapidary hierarchy. It is not one of John's stones and does not appear in the 'Lapidary of King Philip'. However, it does figure in the longer, fifteenth-century Peterborough Lapidary which is the most comprehensive of the surviving Middle English treatises. It is based on Bartholomew's *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, probably in Trevisa's translation, but draws also on a version of King Philip's Lapidary and several Anglo-Norman lapidaries, with occasional borrowings from other reference books.²⁸ The origins of the pearl (i.e. *margarita*) are given as being found in 'cokelis or in mosclys' and its engendering 'of þe dewe of heuen', but the distinguishing features are colour and shape:

And þey ben best wy3t, cler & rownde; & þey han vertu of comfort by al kend þerof; and somme seyne þat þey comforten lymes & membris, for it clenseþ him of superfluite of humours & fasten þe lymes, & helpen a3en þe cordiaclie passioun & a3ens swonyng of hert . . .²⁹

So, against the established divine power of God's twelve stones, the pearl appears a more malleable and flexible image, with a strange origin combining natural processes with a sense of mystery and evanescence, and in its roundness and whiteness providing ideas of perfection of form and purity of colour. The symbolism develops as the pearl in the poem moves from the lost pearl of the narrator's opening grief, based on an illusion of possession, to the found pearl in the vision's gleaming metallic landscape, to the sought pearl of the latter part of the poem, associated with the kingdom of heaven through parable, allegory and quotation. The reader is led to see that God is the great jeweller and that the heavenly city is the apotheosis of jewel lore and virtue. The human protagonist is excluded from the precious enclosure and he has had to learn that his claims on ownership were fragile and that he must give them up; he may try to become a jewel, but 'jeweller'—'that is to dere a date!'

Riddy, Barr, Bowers and others are interested in dragging *Pearl*, as they see it, out of the cloister into the marketplace: their discussions are not, of course, confined to jewellers and jewels, but that is their point of entry into socio-economic readings of the work. Since the argument of the poem is to the effect that the dreamer does not deserve the name 'jeweller', it seems perverse to insist that it is as a jeweller that his identity should be defined. In any case the word

²⁸ *English Mediaeval Lapidaries*, 63ff.

²⁹ *English Mediaeval Lapidaries*, 108.

itself is unreliable as a mercantile label. Insofar as the principles of commerce are part of the poem's subject-matter, they appear, in the persons of the labourers in the vineyard, to be rejected. It distorts the poem to reduce the dreamer's voice to that of a disgruntled artisan, or to gloss the tensions in the work as the rumblings of a class struggle between merchant and aristocrat. The association between precious objects and the public celebration of faith is part of the history of the Christian church: the jewel references in *Pearl* do not so much identify the poem as 'prestige art', in Riddy's phrase, as place it in a well-attested tradition of religious symbolism, which is not exclusive to the reign of Richard II even if some particularly flamboyant art works were created then. The choice of a pearl as the central image leaves the reader uncompromised by the vision of heaven as a treasury. Pearls are formed, not just bought, set and sold, and the poet has by the final line of the poem converted his possessive jewel-owner back into the object itself, a speck in the process of shaping its own spiritual nacre.

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