



Do Pearl, Patience and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight present the same portrait of humanity through their portraits of their protagonists?

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The portrait of humanity which *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* share is a perception that humanity exists in a continuous state of tension, a morally ambiguous zone, between the attempt to be perfect and the inevitable failure of this attempt. For the Dreamer, Jonah and Sir Gawain there exists an immovable standard of perfection – for the Dreamer it is the ways of heaven, exemplified by the pearl-maiden, for Jonah it is God and His mercy and justice, and for Gawain, the utter perfection of the chivalric code, symbolised by the pentangle – and it is by this standard which they are measured. The poet presents a complex portrait of humanity in which humans are engaged in a struggle for moral brilliance; there is at once a clear-sighted perception of the imperfection, perhaps even imperfectability of humankind, and at the same time, a sense that this does not make the attempt at moral perfection any less admirable, or even any less necessary. The portrait of humanity the three protagonists share, then, is one in which moral perfection and moral failure exist in a continuous complex interrelation. In this essay I will examine this portrait of humanity as it relates to two broad areas: firstly, the protagonists' desire for a hidden, private existence, which is denied in all three poems by the demands made by perfect moral standards and secondly, the relationship of the protagonists to the temporal. The conflict between the protagonists' desires of the present moment and their understanding of the future and the unseen exemplifies the tension which exists between the ambivalent morality which the protagonists exhibit and the perfect standards to which they are compared. Through examining the theme of the hidden and private and the protagonists' approaches to temporality, I will examine the portrait of humanity which emerges, in which moral perfection and moral failure are interwoven.

J.A. Burrow suggests that there exists 'a common and characteristic 'image' of human life which is not only recognizably medieval but also recognizably Ricardian...The poems of the Ricardian period project an unheroic image of man.'¹ A.C. Spearing sees a slightly different portrait of humankind emerging in *Patience* and *Sir Gawain*; he argues that 'Man is placed in the context of an all-encompassing power, and to defeat or outwit it he struggles absurdly and in vain. Thus the hero becomes a hero *manqué*, a would-be hero. The heroic or tragic aspiration is everywhere thwarted, and the heroic conception of man is undercut and presented ironically.'² While Burrow suggests that humanity in Ricardian literature is 'unheroic', Spearing suggests that the protagonists of *Patience* and *Sir Gawain* are 'would-be' heroes; they are not merely unheroic, but figures who attempt to be heroic and fail. I want to suggest that this distinction between the heroic and the unheroic is perhaps more ambiguous than this suggests; whilst Gawain, Jonah and the Dreamer certainly exhibit

¹ J.A. Burrow *Ricardian Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1971) p 93-94

² A.C. Spearing 'Patience and the Gawain-Poet' p 307 quoted in Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* p 101

unheroic qualities, in various ways, this is not the entire portrait of humanity which emerges. Rather than complete failure in attaining heroic status, the poems, I would argue, suggest a view of humanity in which perfection and failure exist in continuous tension. This is exemplified neatly in the refrain which begins and ends *Pearl*: ‘Pacience is a poynt, þa3 hit displese ofte.’³ (1) This emphasises at once both the moral value of patience, and humanity’s typical, ambivalent, response to it. The insistence on holding both of these notions together in an uneasy relationship is typical of the portrait of humanity which will emerge through the protagonists in the three poems; moral perfection is occasionally tantalisingly close, but ultimately always out of reach for humankind.

One of the ways in which this dissonance between perfection and imperfection in human nature can be observed is in the tension between the protagonists’ impulse to hide and the openness demanded by standards of perfection. In all three poems all-encompassing perfection renders the attempt to hide irrelevant, yet all three protagonists are characterised by the desire to cling to the idea of the hidden or undisclosed. Ad Putter discusses this idea in relation to *Patience* in terms of a tension between public and private spheres; this can be observed, he suggests, in Jonah’s attempt to create private spaces for himself⁴. One such space is the ‘bour’⁵ (275) he creates in the stomach of the whale, another is underneath the woodbine which God causes to grow over him. In the dialogue between God and Jonah over the woodbine, a tension emerges between Jonah’s desire for something of his own, for a private space to hide, and the power of God, which makes such notions ridiculous. Jonah’s thoughts on the woodbine continuously stress his perception that it belongs to him; he says ‘I keuered me a cumfort þat now is ca3t fro me/ My wodbynde so wlonk þat wered my heued.’ (485-6) Jonah’s words are dominated by his perception of ownership in the repetition of personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ and the possessive ‘my’. This repetition emphasizes Jonah’s – mistaken – belief that he has procured this comfort for himself and suggests that he has taken possession of it as his own, a space that belongs in some sense to him. God’s words to Jonah stress the impossibility of true human hiding places, because everything ultimately belongs to God. The theme of ownership continues, but it is God’s words which are now dominated by ‘my’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine’; talking about the people of Ninevah, he says ‘Fyrst I made hem Myself of materes myn one’ (503) and he calls them ‘My trauayl’ (505). Through the patterning of the language of ownership, the use of words such as ‘my’ and ‘mine’, God and Jonah are contrasted. Jonah’s attempt to claim ownership of a space which is his, in which he can hide, is ultimately proved to be foolhardy by God’s ultimate complete ownership (proved by his destruction of Jonah’s shelter) within which any attempt to cling to a hidden, private place is subject to be destroyed, like the woodbine.

This can be explored further in *Sir Gawain*, where Gawain’s attempt to cling to the hidden and private similarly proves the imperfections of his nature. Where in *Patience* it is God’s overarching power which makes Jonah’s claims to ownership appear feeble, in *Sir Gawain* the chivalric code is the form of perfection which contrasts with Gawain’s more ambivalent behaviour. Derek Pearsall notes the idealism of the chivalric code, which is the standard of perfection Gawain is measured against: ‘Chivalric culture had always been in theory a world in which the public and the private were the same; there was no such thing as privacy’⁶. It follows then, Pearsall argues, that Gawain’s ‘shame is not in the act but in the

³ Pearl in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007) p53 – 110. (All subsequent references to this edition.)

⁴ Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996)

⁵ Patience in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* ed. Andrew and Waldron, p 185-206 (All subsequent references to this edition.)

⁶ Derek Pearsall, ‘Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment’ in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet* ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge: D.S Brewer, 1997) p 358

making public of what he thought was private.’⁷ Although Pearsall notes the stringent standards of the chivalric code demand this negation of the private only ‘in theory’, it is worth noting that the narrator links Gawain strongly to a version of chivalric theory with extraordinarily high standards; the perfection of the pentangle is said to suit Gawain precisely because ‘he watz funden faultlez in his fyue wyttez. And efte he fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres’⁸ (640) This repetition of the same concept in different words – he is ‘faultlez’ and ‘fayled neuer’ – underscores emphatically the perfection of Gawain’s adherence to chivalric standards. If, as Pearsall says, in chivalric culture, ‘the private and the public were the same’, then Gawain’s ‘shame’ as Pearsall puts it is not ‘in the making public of what he thought was private’, but in his observation of this distinction at all, because the narrator leads the reader specifically to associate Gawain with a standard of adherence to the chivalric code which is not just good, but perfect. Therefore, when Gawain receives the girdle his actions are ominous; he hides it. The poet writes that he ‘lays vp þe luf-lace þe lady him ra3t/Hid hit ful holdely þer he hit eft fonde.’ (1874-1875) Christine Chism suggests that the girdle represents a ‘flagrant extrusion of the intimate, (with) its perplexing of salvation with death, honour with shame.’⁹ However I would suggest that the central moral problem of the girdle as represented by the poet is not its ‘flagrant extrusion of the intimate’, but rather the way in which it represents an un-chivalric attempt to hide, to exert a private, or ‘intimate’, zone at all.

This can be usefully compared with the Dreamer’s use of privacy in *Pearl*. On first seeing the pearl-maiden, the Dreamer reveals his deep sorrow over her loss; he asks ‘Art þou my perle þat I haf playned/Regretted by myn one on ny3te?/ Much longeyng haf I for þe layned...Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned.’ (241-244) The Dreamer emphasises here the private nature of his grief; he has suffered ‘by myne one at ny3te’, his ‘longeyng’ has been ‘layned’. What all three protagonists discover, however, is that any recourse to the private is not compatible with perfection. Just as Jonah’s attempts to create a private space are shown to be futile in comparison with God’s ultimate power and just as, in comparison with the chivalric code, any attempt by Gawain to hide is shown to be less than perfect, so the private nature of the Dreamer’s grief is no defence when his attitudes are considered by the perfected maiden. She says, ‘soberly...Sir, 3e haf your tale mysetente’ (257). The word ‘mystente’ here is an interesting choice, because it is difficult to see how the Dreamer can possibly have his tale awry or mistaken; all he has described is his private sorrow. In judging his private emotions in this way, describing them not just as misplaced, but as ‘mystente’, which suggests a fundamental failure to understand the situation, the maiden refuses to accept any mitigation that might have been expected because of the ‘layned’ nature of his sorrow. Rather, as in *Sir Gawain and Patience*, privacy is seen to fundamentally conflict with perfection. In this way then, the poet presents a portrait of humanity in which humans’ desires and emotions, specifically here the desire for privacy, are held in tension.

Ad Putter suggests that in reading *Patience* ‘We are easily inclined to dismiss the idea that God behaves unpleasantly as Jonah’s interpretative error, yet the poet has no hesitation in conceding the experiential reality of this fact. God’s manners in *Patience* are indeed thoroughly off-putting’¹⁰. This seeming harshness of the heavenly is a feature which *Pearl* shares with *Patience*; it could be argued that the maiden in *Pearl* is ‘thoroughly off-putting’ in her censure of the dreamer’s understandable sorrow. However I would argue that ultimately the standards of perfection associated with God and the maiden are not rejected by the poems; instead this ‘unpleasantness’ works to increase the dissonance between perfection

⁷ Pearsall, ‘Courtesy and Chivalry’ p 357

⁸ Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* ed. Andrew and Waldrón p 207-300. (All subsequent references to this edition.)

⁹ Christine Chism *Alliterative Revivals* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002) p 86

¹⁰ Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996) p 136

and humankind. The protagonists' perspectives on privacy emphasise how elusive the goal of perfection is; the seeming harsh attitudes of God and the pearl-maiden similarly suggest the distance between human and perfect understandings of the world. This is further emphasised by the fact that the tension between perfection and the reality of human existence is explored in multiple ways, which reinforces its significance; the primary focus becomes not the 'unpleasantness' of God, but the vagaries of human moral existence.

For example, one of the ways in which the three protagonists portray a shared portrait of humanity as existing in this constant moral tension is in their inability to see past the temporal. In differing ways, the reality of human life in the present takes precedence over the pursuit of perfection for all three of them. This restriction of vision to the merely here and now characterises all three protagonists. At the beginning of *Pearl*, the Dreamer repeatedly describes his pearl as lost; he says 'Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere/þur3 gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.' (8-9) In her response to this speech, however, the maiden takes his notion of the pearl being lost in a garden and turns it on its head. His perspective is shown by her response to be completely wrong in its earth-bound nature. Rather than focussing on the sorrow he experiences in his earthly life, she insists, he should realise the heavenly dimension which life involves. To look at events in this way makes it impossible 'To say your perle is al awaye/ þat is in cofer so comly clente/As in þis gardyn gracious gaye'. (258-260) The pearl, which he has considered 'leste', cannot be 'al awaye', she says, because the garden from her perspective becomes the 'cofer', the chest or casket, which encloses the pearl. The images the two speakers use mirror each other; both talk about the 'gardyn' (260) or 'erbere' (8) and the pearl which is within it. His idea that the pearl is 'leste' within the garden is shown to be false by her argument that she is rather neatly enclosed, 'comly clente', in the garden. In this way, the maiden and the Dreamer are placed, through this engaging with similar imagery, in direct opposition; the perfect understanding of the maiden shows the flaws in the Dreamer's understanding, specifically in his failure to realise that life is not restricted by what can be seen.

In this way, humanity is contrasted with perfection and found wanting; similarly, in both *Sir Gawain and Patience*, one of the chief reasons that the protagonists fall short of their objectives is a concern with their earthly lives in the here and now. In *Patience*, for example, Jonah responds to God's instruction to go to Nineveh with a concern for his earthly life and safety, worrying that the people will 'Pynez me in a prison, put me in stokes/Wryþe me in a warlock, wrast out myn y3en.' (79-80) This description is notably precise, involving four specific scenarios. The rhythm of the lines emphasises this specificity; there is a repetition three times of the pattern of a verb describing something Jonah might have to undergo, followed by 'me', which is altered slightly and emphatically in the fourth situation, becoming 'wrast out myn y3en'. This detail and specificity of these scenarios emphasises Jonah's sense of concern about his own life and the depth with which he has thought about the possibilities for torture he might face. The self-interest of this stance is emphasised a few lines later, when Jonah says that God would not care 'þa3 I be nummen in Nunniue and naked dispoyled/ On rode rwly torent with rybaudes mony.' (95-6) The obvious echoes of Christ's suffering during his crucifixion here work to emphasise Jonah's self interest; Christ did suffer those things Jonah seeks to avoid, and did so in order to benefit mankind. Evoking these echoes here makes Jonah's attitude much more serious than it otherwise would appear; no one wants to have their eyes 'wrast out', or to lose their life, and so perhaps without the echoes of the crucifixion, the reader might sympathise more readily with Jonah's position. However, Jesus becomes here the standard of perfection against which Jonah is measured; where Jesus willingly suffered for others, Jonah's concern is with himself, emphasised by the repeated 'me's, and how to avoid the tortures he imagines.

Similarly, when the lady offers Gawain the girdle, he is convinced to take it purely by the implication that it will help him escape from his meeting with the Green Knight unharmed; ‘hit come to his hert/Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym jugged were/ When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech/My3t he haf slypped to be vnslayn þe sle3t were noble’ (1856-1858). The use of the word ‘juel’ here is reminiscent of the scene earlier in the poem when, as Gawain is dressed in his courtly attire, the poet stresses that the magnificence of the armour he wears is symbolic in some sense of his inner perfection. The band of silk over the neck-guard is ‘embrawdē and bounden with þe best gemmez’ (609) and the band of gold around his head is covered in ‘diamountez a deuys’ (617). The riches of Gawain’s clothes in this episode are symbols of his inner excellence, and reflect his adherence to the courtly code; he is presented as the perfect knight. Gawain thinks - and this is, importantly, represented as Gawain’s own thought process - that the girdle will be a ‘juel’ specifically because it might save his life. This is a completely different type of ‘juel’ to those associated with the perfection of the pentangle, and this contrast works to draw the reader’s attention to the dissonance between Gawain’s earlier perfection, and his present, more ambiguous motives. This effect is amplified by the description of escaping from the chapel with his life as ‘noble’ (1858) here. The chivalric code has been the defining standard of perfection in the poem the mention of nobility here, works as a kind of warning to the reader, to consider just how ‘noble’ his behaviour is, in his determination to save his own life. While his motives may be understandable, using the word ‘noble’, and suggesting the earlier knightly perfection through the word ‘juel’, forces the reader to compare them, not to their own emotions, but to the perfection of the chivalric code. In this way then, the protagonists are all shown to have a concern with the temporal, with the earthly and the here-and-now, which acts as a contrast with the standards of perfection in the poem.

I suggest, therefore, that *Sir Gawain, Pearl* and *Patience* do present a shared portrait of humanity. It is one in which the flawed realities of actual human behaviour are continually contrasted in multiple ways with standards of moral perfection. This can be seen in the way the protagonists cling to the notion of the private, when true moral perfection requires that it be relinquished. It can also be observed in the way the protagonists are concerned with their temporal realities, at the expense of their moral standards. In this way, humanity is portrayed as engaged in a constant struggle for moral perfection, in which perfect standards of morality meet the ambivalent realities of human existence.

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