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Dreaming the Middle Ages

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The multiple landscapes within *Pearl* and Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* preclude realism in their vivid, often fantastical descriptions.[1] This essay will therefore argue that instead of functioning as verisimilitudinous, these landscapes are primarily symbolic, representative of the dreamer-narrator's spiritual or emotional development as well as the texts' wider messages. Specifically, I examine in these texts how otherworld waterscapes, *horti conclusi* and animals are revelatory of emotional and theological truths.

In *Pearl*, the river becomes a symbol of religiosity; most obviously, symbolising knowledge of the divine. This symbolism is indicated as, flowing directly from the heavenly city, ('Bow up towarde thys bornes heved'/'a rever of the trone ther ran outryghte' [ll.974-1055]); the river connects the Dreamer's current location to the spiritual location which can provide the 'bone'[l.916] (heavenly vision) for which he searches.[2] However, the river is also anthropomorphised to embody the traits of the religious figures throughout *Pearl* (Christ, God and the maiden). When the dreamer first encounters the river it is 'Swangeande swete' and 'wyth a rownande rourde raykande aryght' [l.111]. This descriptive sibilance is onomatopoeic for a harmonic force and the adjectives 'swete' and 'rourde' (translated by Armitage as 'murmuring') enhance this affable semantic field.[3] Therefore, the river initially seems reflective of how the dreamer first perceives the maiden - as delicate and benevolent (construed via her hair 'leghe unlapped' [l.214], inciting of 'gladande glory' [l.171]).

1 **All primary text quotes:**

Pearl (*PDF*), on Dreaming in the Middle Ages Moodle Page (2021), pp.1-46;
Chaucer, '*The Book of the Duchess*' in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford:OUP, 1988), pp.329-346. aka *BOD.*

[2]University of Michigan, *The MED* (Michigan: UOM, 2013) <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/ middle- english-dictionary> [LA: 20 May 2021], 'bōn', def.5c.

[3]Armitage, *Pearl: Poetry in Translation*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2016) p.12.

However, when the dreamer later attempts to cross the river, it becomes 'mervelous': 'Hit payed hym not that I so flonc /Over mervelous meres' [l.1165]. Here, Armitage translates 'mervelous' as 'teeming', suggesting the river is metaphoric for the displeasure of Christ (who is 'payed [É] not') when the narrator attempts the crossing.[4] However, a more literal translation for 'mervelous' would be 'marvellous' which the *OED* suggests was synonymic with 'meruiloste', which (being polysemic in the *MED* with 'of Christ') links the river even more directly to religious personage.[5] With either definition, the river becomes an omnipotent force that reflects the will of religious authority: animating to omit the narrator from the heavenly city ('Out of that caste I was bycalt' [l. 1163]). In this animation, the river appears symbolic of the at times cold and removed doctrine projected by *Pearl*'s God, (who forbids - 'schylde' [l.965]- the dreamer from his holy-estate), Christ (who seemingly returns the narrator to his daughter's grave when he 'payed [Christ] not') and the maiden (cooly authoritative in her imperatives 'stynt of thy strot and fyne to flyte'[l.353]). In acknowledging this symbolism, I am not suggesting that the river acts as a literal extension of the will of religious authority, but that the personifying description of the river demonstrates the inferiority of the narrator's spiritual understanding, as bound to tactile objects. The dreamer's narrations transpose his religious encounters onto the surrounding wilderness, thus rendering them digestible to his very physical worldly understandings. This narratorial literality is established from the poem's onset by his focus on the pearl's physical spoiling ('O moul, thou marres a myry juele' [l.23]), demonstrating an inability to comprehend a more spiritual narrative for his loss.

The *Pearl* narrator's use of aquatic imagery to comprehend his spiritual situation is further demonstrated through his similes: 'bredful my braynes' [l.126] and 'My herte was al wyth mysse remorde/ As wallande water gos out of welle' [l.365], he employs

[4]ibid, p.100.

5 *OED Online*, < https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114511?redirectedFrom=marvelous#eid > [LA: 20 May 2021], 'marvellous' def.1; *MED*, 'meruiloste', def.1b.

imagery of turbulent water to communicate his woes. The alliteration in these phrases is onomatopoeic for the flow of water in the labial enunciation, similar to the animation of the river explored above. The dreamer is again using water motif ('bredful' and 'welle') to communicate his spiritual experience, albeit here the pain caused by such experiences, further demonstrating his inability to aptly communicate the ineffability of heaven. Again, the narrator's experiences need to be objectified to be comprehended.

Meanwhile, in *BOD*, water and its surrounding landscapes serve as a tool for genre *amplificatio.* Whilst critics such as Jordan see the cave scene as an 'excrescence', I suggest it acts as a multivalent tool to enhancing the emotions suited to a marital elegy.[6] Most obviously, the details of the water - the adjective 'few' ('save ther were a fewe welles'[l.160]) and the description 'rennynge fro the clyves adoun' [l.161] - emphasise how desolate and dramatic the cave's landscape is. This desolation functions twofold. First, it foreshadows the desolation felt by the Black Knight: the water 'made a dedly slepynge soun' [l.162] whilst the Knight's 'spirites wexen dede' [l.489], anticipating and thereby amplifying the semantic field of grief. Second, the desolate water scape nods to the hybridity of Chaucer's elegy, employing a trope typical of *dits amoureux*: 'a series of juxtaposed but quasi-discrete narratives'.[7] Here, the cave narrative, with its singular form of life (the water), juxtaposes and thereby amplifies the vivacity of the forest scene which is 'gayer than the heven' [l.407]. Furthermore, this integration of a *dits amoureux* trope emphasises the specifically romantic nature of grief in the text (presuming it is an elegy written for John of Gaunt after his wife's death).

Moreover, where the garden is 'heven', Chaucer constructs the cave 'as helle-pit' [l.171]; not only do these nouns emphasise the contrast between the two landscapes, but the 'helle-pit' seems illusory of the underworld in Greek Mythology. Here, I suggest that Chaucer mobilises this mythology: the cave (though nominally Morpheus's cave of sleep) uses the water's adjectives ('dedly slepynge soun') to play on

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*6 Jordan, 'The Compositi*onal Structure of The Book of the Duchess', *TCR,* 9 (1974), p.115.

7 Philips, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.1

the Middle English cultural association of sleep and death, thus rendering the cave also illusory of the Greek underworld. Comparing Chaucer's cave to Ovid's underworld in *Metamorphoses*, it's observed that both take place in 'derke'[l.155] sterile undergrounds and have a sole water source leading from ground-level to the hellish pits; Chaucer even labels the cave a 'rokke ygrave' [l.164].[8] That is not to say that the cave is meant to literally embody the underworld, but instead that in this first location, Chaucer employs images from popular literary landscapes connotative of grief, death, loss and love to emphasise the text's elegiac semantic field.

Interestingly, though the cave and forest in *BOD* may at first appear antithetical, they both employ natural objects as symbols of death and loss. Where for the cave, this was the water and rocks, in the forest scene, the symbol is the 'ook, an huge tree' [l. 447] where the Knight mourns. The oak is symbolically linked to funereality throughout texts such as Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and death in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* (Death is met at the oak).[9] Therefore, Chaucer's tree choice enhances the semantic field of funereal loss in the text, serving to contrast the otherwise 'gaye'[l.407] forest scene. The glade's other trees are similarly symbolic: like the Black Knight who now finds himself uncoupled, they 'stood by hymselve' [l.419]. Here, the forest trees function identically to the river in the cave, as an affective idiom for death and isolation, anticipatory and emphasising of the Knight's grief and loss. Symbols associated with death through the Middle English canon are fluent through both of the *BOD* landscapes, acting similarly to enhance the text's elegiac form.

However, the Knight's interaction with the oak also becomes a tool for integrating other genres into Chaucer's elegy. The parallel between the plights of the *BOD*'s protagonists (the Knight) and Sir Orfeo in the Romance *Sir Orfeo* (circulated a

[8]Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. by A.D.Melville (Oxford:OUP, 2009).

[9]Boccaccio, *Teseida*, (NP) <https://b-ok.cc/book/4272287/4fa818> [LA 20 May 2021]; Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Tale* in *TRC*, p.193.

generation prior) integrates a Romantic sub-genre.[10] This intertextuality is suggested via the Knight's process of mourning: he seeks privacy up a forest path 'litel used'[l.401] under an oak. Similarly, Sir Orfeo retreats into the forest to come to terms with his grief, whereupon he mourns 'hidde in an holwe tre'.[11] Both retreat to the privacy of the forest to mourn a specifically romantic or spousal love. By using similar stagings to grand Romantic tales such as *Sir Orfeo* for retelling John of Gaunt's personal experience, Chaucer elevates and emphasises the intensity of his grief.

Moreover, the emphasis in *BOD* on the glade's privacy - being removed from the hunt and on a path which is so 'litel used' that flowers are growing undisturbed ('with floures fele, faire under fete' [l.400]) - renders the space illusory of a form of *hortus conclusus,* with the enclosing 'grete trees'[l.421] as the walls. The glade's simile 'gayer than the heven'[l.407] strengthens this allusion: the function of Middle English *horti conclusi* being to reflect heaven or Eden.[12] In popular biblical texts of the Middle Ages, the *hortus conclusus* was depicted as an exclusively feminine, often bridal space: 'my spouse is a garden enclosed' (*Song of Songs 4:12*).[13] Therefore, it seems suitable that the mourning knight retires to a form of *hortus conclusus,* which functions symbolically as a figure of the absent wife. This idea is strengthened by the grove's creators 'For both Flora and Zephirus, They two that made floures growe'[l.402]. In Ovid's *Fasti* (Book V) Zephirus kisses Chloris after marriage, transforming her into the immortal goddess of flowering plants, Flora.[14] Assuming Chaucer was aware of this text, it seems plausible that the reference (to a tale of a wife's transcendence to goddess of flora and fauna) can be combined with the understanding of the *hortus conclusus* as symbolising the wifely body to render the glade a form of c*onsolatio* (suggesting that despite the physical loss

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10 *Sir Orfeo,* (NP)<https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.cofc.edu/dist/0/550/Þles/ 2014/09/Orfeo-sniw69.pdf> pp.150-158. [LA 20 May 2021].

11 ibid, l.70.
12 Petroff 'Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature', *TCR*, 16:2 (1981), p.184. [13]*The Holy Bible* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984).

14 Ovid, *Fasti,* ed. by Fraser (Harvard: HUP, 1989).

of Blanche, the wifely figure remains omnipresent in the symbol of the *hortus conclusus*/ glade). This interpretation is strengthened via the similar adjectives and alliteration used to describe White ('so fair, so fresh, so fre' [l.484]) and the glade ('ful softe and swete [...and] faire' [l.400]). To paraphrase Lawlor: 'The Enchanted Garden of French courtly poetry has been, in the profoundest sense "translated"'.[15] I argue that the glade, as reminiscent of both the enchanted garden and *hortus conclusus*, has been translated to symbolise White's (implicitly Blanche of Lancaster's) ascension into an omnipresent, symbolic state. Thus, the glade intends to serve as somewhat consolatory to the grieving Knight, and by extension, John of Gaunt. Unfortunately, the Knight in *BOD* is unconsoled by the *hortus conclusus* as he refuses to look up at his surroundings: 'he heng hys hed adoun'[l.461].

Interestingly, the worldly garden of *Pearl* functions similarly to that in *BOD* with the flora and fauna in the landscape symbolising death; specifically, the flora 'Gilofre, gyngure and gromylyoun' [l.43], whose functions in Middle English funereal processes were to 'embalm or mask the odor of decay'.[16] The semantic field of decay perforates into the rest of garden with the plants being 'blayke and blwe and rede'[l.27], whilst the month 'Augoste'[l.39], as a month of harvest, similarly indicates death through the connotations of "reaping". These non-traditional horticultural images of decay that tarnish the garden of *Pearl* emphasise the ignorance of the dreamer-narrator who is fixated on the physical landscape of the garden and the loss of the pearl to it 'O moul, thou marres a myry juele [...] on huyle ther perle hit trendled doun'[ll.23-41]. This fixation demonstrates the dreamer as obtuse to his beloved's spiritual continuity (like I argue about the Knight who does not look up in *BOD)*. Spiritual continuity in *Pearl* is implied via the day on which the Dreamer mourns: 'the holiday is identified as "Augoste in a hygh seysoun" which must refer to August 15th, the Assumption of the Virgin [...] a

[15]Lawler, 'The Pattern of Consolation in *BOD*', *Speculum*, 31:4 (1956), p.648. [16]Petroff, 'Landscape in *Pearl*', p.183.

celebration of the continuity between heaven and earth'.[17] This spiritual continuity is emphasised by the opening of the poem which Petroff argues is 'dependent upon [É] the *hortus conclusus* in the *Song of Songs*', a space, as clarified previously, connotative of heaven and thereby spiritual continuity.[18] However, at the start of *Pearl*, the narrator cannot distance himself from the literal loss of his pearl into the earth, only observing the surrounding images of death. It is only upon the return to the garden at the end of the text, itself structurally symbolic of a sense of spiritually continuity in its cyclicality, that we see a slight shift in the narrator's perception. He wakes up and describes the garden with the adjective 'wlonk'[l.1171]; in labelling it 'splendid' or 'majestic', the narrator apparently achieves acquiescence, now able to (to a certain extent) appreciate the spiritual dimension of his situation and the garden's positive functions, demonstrated by him then giving blessing to the bread of the harvest and 'sythen to God I [the pearl] bytaghte' [l.1207].[19] Thus, the *hortus conclusus* of *Pearl* acts as a locus for demonstrating the narrator's originally blinkered spirituality, and later its development.

Just as the shift in adjectives describing the garden in *Pearl* demonstrates the narrator's spiritual shortcomings, I suggest the birds in *BOD* function similarly. Described as 'smale foules a gret hep' [l.295] who are 'overal aboute' [l.300], the birds' skittishness foreshadows the narrator's confusion over the symbolic value of the Knight's dialect. For the narrator, the dream world of technicolour which he finds himself in is dazzling and overwhelming: the birds 'affrayed' him, as does the later highly charged emotions of the Knight, on which the narrator admits 'I not how ye myghte have do bet' [l.1044].[20]

Other animals also play a symbolic role in *BOD*. The whelp which the dreamer narrator encounters acts in two symbolic ways: first, to indicate the emotional

17 ibid, p.181.

18 ibid, p.184.

19 *MED*, 'wlonk', def.1c&d.

20 *MED*, 'Affrayed', def.3.

development of the dreamer narrator; and second, as a genre-enhancing tool. To appreciate this, it is presumed that Chaucer was 'well aware of the customary use and significance of dogs on tombs' and their function as a symbol of marital fidelity in the stylistic mourning of Middle English funereal processes.[21] First, the whelp indicates the development of "dreamer-narrator Chaucer", guiding him to the site revelatory of the Black Knight ('hym [the whelp] folwed'[l.397]). As an icon of marital fidelity, the whelp guiding Chaucer to this site of husbandly mourning suggests that Chaucer (here as an author) has been deemed "ready" to enter the genre of marital elegy/*consolatio* which he then does by recording the dream. Second, looking at the records of Blanche of Gaunt's tomb, Hardman clarifies that 'the conventional expectation is that her feet would be resting on dog'.[22] So, Chaucer's use of the dog symbol not only indicates a semantic field of mourning and funereal processes generally but nuances such specifically to the loss of John of Gaunt, furthering the text's consolatory abilities.

The specifically romantic consolation offered by the animals of *BOD* is also observed through the central image of the Hert. The noun puns on the homophone "heart" to link the much sought-after deer to the sought-after (lost) White. This association is strengthened by the use of the stag hunt in Middle English literature as a symbol of a love quest. These parallels serve the *consolatio* genre in suggesting, like the hert who is never found but is nonetheless present (there are 'many an hert'[l.427] in the glade), the Knight's "heart" (White) which he "hunts" for may be closer than expected, perhaps in the form of spiritual omnipresence I suggested earlier.

Meanwhile, animals in *Pearl* act to emphasise the spiritual hierarchy of the heavenly dreamscape. The narrator likens himself to a 'dased quayle' [l.1085] to metaphorise his situational inexpressibility, an analogy which falls into a larger hierarchical structure when Mary is nominalised the 'Fenyx of Arraby' [l.430]. There is an almost comedic contrast between the grandiosity of the eternal, immortal phoenix and

21 Hardman, 'The *BOD* as a Memorial Monument', *TCR*, 28:3 (1994), p.212.

22 ibid.

the humble and very much mortal quail. The aristocratised theology of the *Pearl* dream world is therefore emphasised via bird metaphor; Mary as ‘quen’[l.432] and the narrator as continually obtuse or dumbfounded (specifically observable in the repeated questions of section VIII).

Interestingly, the image of the lamb in *Pearl* also indicates the dreamscape’s heavenly structure. Through the semantic field of innocence that the lamb image canonically suggests, Christ (as ‘meke as lombe’ [l.815]) is linked to the maiden (as a ‘faunt’ [l.161] or child), both sharing an immaculateness: the Christ-Lamb who ‘hade never pechche’[l.841] and the maiden who’s ‘wythouten galle’ [l.189]. This bond between lamb and child is then rendered physical through their marriage ‘me ches to Hys make’ [l.759]. This marriage constructs the maiden’s status as equatable to Mary’s (who is ‘quene of hevenes blwe’[l.422]), lending her doctrine authority.

Acknowledging the text’s numerical and religious structure, the lamb image in *Pearl* lends further veracity to the maiden’s argument. Brewer observes that there is ‘a total of 1,212 lines. Furthermore 12×12=144, and the figure of 144,000 is important as being the number of the Brides of the Lamb mentioned in *Revelations* 14’.[23] In referencing the multiple Brides of the Lamb from the biblical canon, the maiden’s argument of section VIII (that she is one of multiple heavenly queens) is lent subtle veracity. This use of the lamb image in the structure itself also emphasises the highly controlled, cyclical and perfect nature of religion and spirituality as affirmed through the religious authorities of *Pearl*.

The natural world in both these texts are fruitful for their symbolic functions, from the hauntingly unnatural forest of *Pearl* with ‘bolles as blwe’[l.76] to the rest of the ‘bestes’[l.432] in the *BOD* glade, their analytical potential is vast. However, this essay compiles just a few shared entities (waterscapes, *horti conclusi* and animals) to analyse their overarching abilities not only in intertextualising and thereby ratifying their texts,

23 Brewer, *A Companion to the Gawain Poet* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 1997) p.18

but in rendering the ineffable, whether it is grief, loss or confusion, somewhat digestible to a Middle English audience.

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