

John Builds a Great New Wall: The Oriental Object of *Pearl*

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Professor Coley, of English 433, course *Literary Labyrinth: The Middle English Pearl*. The assignment asked students to meet with the professor to discuss research interests to draft a conference paper on *Pearl*, which would ideally develop throughout the term into a final paper with active feedback from peers and the professor of the seminar. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

This paper explores the ways in which the Middle English *Pearl* poem remembers the crusades, imagines and objectifies the Orient, and transforms the historical reality of its socioeconomic, political and cultural contexts into the verses of the Occident's Early Modern xenophobia and xenophilia that still speak loudly to our present moment.

Everyone is so afraid of death,
but the real sufis just laugh:
nothing tyrannizes their hearts.
What strikes the oyster shell doesn't damage the pearl.¹

As in the spiritual verses of the celebrated Sufi poet, theologian, and jurist of the 13th century, Rumi of Greater Iran, the pearl is a symbol of beauty, of purity. But it is also one of economy, of politics. When shift our attention to medieval England, we are again greeted by the pearl, but in a much different light to that of our Persian poet. The Pearl Poet is contended by many scholars to have

¹ Helminski, *Rumi--daylight: A daybook of spiritual guidance*, (Shambhala Publications, 1994) I, 3495-6.

hailed from Cheshire, and to have composed their poem during the reign of Richard II of England.² Bowers comments on how in this period England explored the ethereal vision of the East that was the object of their contemporaries' fascination.³ It is thus I argue that the Pearl Poet evokes the memories of the crusades, the fantasy of the Orient, and the allure of its gems to create their poetic *Pearl* as an Oriental object, a symbol of the intricate interplay of both the xenophobia and xenophilia that permeated Europe's medieval imaginary and hence the reality of its future.

To begin, it was at the Council of Clermont in France in 1095 that Pope Urban II delivered his speech to incite the first crusade, to take back the Holy Lands of Jerusalem from the *Saracens*, Muslims, using words filled with religious fanaticism, words that would be a battle cry still used by Christian, white supremacists, such as the Ku Klux Klan, to this very day: *Deus Vult*—"God wills it."⁴ Each crusade would bring with it vital artefacts and cultural phenomena that would shape the Occident in ways unimaginable.⁵ Indeed, the Oriental object we

² Bowers John M, 'Pearl in Its Royal Setting: Ricardian Poetry Revisited,' (*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1995) pp. 111–55.

³ It follows the largely popular chivalric dream vision genre of medieval France and its *Roman de la Rose*.

⁴ Britannica editors, "Urban II," (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, inc., www.britannica.com/biography/Urban-II, Accessed 22 Nov. 2024). A series of crusades into the Orient soon followed, fuelled by various papal incentives, such as the *bullā cruciata*, the crusading bull that granted certain privileges to those who took part in a crusade, like indulgences: remissions for the penance of sins.

⁵ Atil, Esin, et al. *Islamic Metalwork in the Freer Gallery of Art*. (The Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1985) pp. 137–43., Mack, Rosamond E. *From Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) pp. 263–74., Lull, Ramón., and Mark D. Johnston, *Ramon Llull's New Rhetoric: Text and Translation of Llull's Rhetorica Nova* (Hermagoras Press, 1994) pp. xi–xii., Hassan, Ahmad Y. Al, and Donald R. HILL, *Islamic Technology*, (Cambridge University Press 1986) p. 153., Tannahill, Reay, *Food in History*, (Penguin, 1988) 243–5. One need only look at the art, the metalwork and silk textiles syncretising Christian and Islamic motifs, the Hindi-Arabic numerals brought forth by Fibonacci's book *Liber Abaci* detailing his studies with a Muslim tutor in Algeria, intellectuals like Ramon Llull and Averroes engaging in translation and dialogues between Greek,

will focus on in this paper will be the precious stones brought back, among them the pearl.

The shadows of the crusades seem to haunt the poem in several ways. With his letter, *Un Epistre au Roi Richart*,⁶ Phillipe de Mézières of the Order of the Passion of Christ of France demonstrates the political valence of the crusades: how indeed one of its “objects[s]” is the “Orient,” how the “valiant” chivalry of “Christendom” seeks a kind of proto-colonial “conquest of the Holy Land.” Bowers builds an intertextual argument with these writings for *Pearl*.⁷ “Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye”⁸ takes on a whole new meaning in this light, a meaning that speaks to the plural in “prynces,” as well as their “paye[s]” in the French sense, the countries uniting in solidarity for the common goal of the pearl “Oute of” the “Oryente”,⁹ the promise of Eastern riches easing their conflict—all which politically pleases. The old warring states may thus draw a new kingdom of peace from the very Bible itself.

*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*¹⁰ provides a fitting sketch of medieval Europe’s conception of the Orient. The ostensible English Knight outlines the

Arabic and Latin, the Venetian glassware incorporating crucial techniques, technology, and expertise from Syria that allowed them to monopolise the European glass industry (Ahmed al-Hassan and Donald Hill 153), the sugar, the spices, even the macaroni and pasta of Italy being drawn from the Durum wheat of the Near East. The list goes on.

⁶ Norako, 9.

⁷ Bowers John M, 130., Bowers John M, 133. He speaks of the political tension between France and England amidst the 100-year war, when the daughter of Charles VI, Isabella, would be suggested to Richard II in marriage alongside a crusade with the two countries in concert, incentivising a detente in their relations.

⁸ Pearl Poet, *Pearl*, ed. Sarah Stanbury (Published for TEAMS by Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), line 1.

⁹ Pearl Poet, line 3.

¹⁰ Mandeville John, *The Book of John Mandeville*, ed. C. David Benson and Tamarah Kohanski, *Middle English Text Series*, metseditions.org/read/9ZjE8gETR1PQSa9EpiV2lzs6MWvybXRK#f2454. Accessed 11 Dec. 2024., Norako, 6. A travelogue that started to circulate around the mid-1350s, it could very well prove contemporaneous with the Pearl Poet in considering the Ricardian thesis. It perhaps is not insignificant that Christopher Columbus held a copy of this as he sailed

islands of India divided by “the gret floodes that cometh out / of Paradis.”¹¹ Indeed, the medieval *Mappa Mundi* manifests in his conception, with Paradise as an actual place you can visit, at the top of the world, just beyond the—at this point—mythical status of India in the European imaginary. It is in this kind of Oriental locus on the *Mappa Mundi* that the jeweller contemplates the 144,000 brides the maiden reveals to him in the New Jerusalem.¹²

The exotic, marvellous, and even feminine aspects of *Pearl*'s lexicon are elements identified in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.¹³ The consequent characterisation of the Far East as something of an unadulterated, untouched, and unreachable innocence and value: one that is too weak, too uncivilised, too childlike to look after itself, that needs the help of Chrystendom to protect its Paradise, is what follows. Thus, the *xenophilia* of *Pearl* becomes fixated on the Oriental object. For indeed, India, *Anglicus regales*, is “an eeste country in Asia . . . [and] amonge alle cuntries and londes of þe worlde Inde is [þe moste and] moste riche, moste myȝty . . . so amonge alle londes Inde is moste wonderful.”¹⁴ Importantly, he specifies that the “[m]ost noble margarites comen oute of Ynde and oute of þe olde Britayne, as it is yseyde.”¹⁵ This marks a strange movement, indeed of a rather Mandevillian *chose estrange*, as the traveller seeks to please with the polysemic

off to the “New World,” since, as Norako points out, it was a part of his plan to use the gold he would have gleaned from India to finance a new crusade in Jerusalem.

¹¹ Mandeville, lines 2395–6.

¹² Mandeville, lines 1095–1100.

¹³ Said Edward, (London: Penguin, 1977), 138.

¹⁴ Bartholomaeus and John, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus de Proprietatibus Rerum; a Critical Text. 2*, (Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 769–70. He describes all that would have been immense marvels to the *Occidental* eye: the wild beasts, the “vnicornes,” “dragouns,” and “gryffouns;” the beautiful, “gentille wommen;” the abundance of people of different colours, sizes and shapes; and, indeed, the gemstones in overplus.

¹⁵ Bartholomaeus and John, 857

estrange of Anglo-Norman French’s “foreign/strange,”¹⁶ a movement shifting the colonial past of “old Britayne,” where the noblest pearls were found, where the Germanic tribes had originally moved in their diasporic project, to a new locus: that of the mythical *Inde*.

In his translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, John Trevisa investigates the nature of both pearls and the Orient in the medieval Occidental imaginary. The pearl “is chief of alle white precieuse stones . . . cleere, bryght, and rounde”¹⁷—all terms that comport with what the Pearl Poet describes as of “smothe” “sydes”¹⁸ that is “whyte” at “honde, at sydes, at overture.”¹⁹ Such adjectives suggest an infantine figure: perhaps indicated by the Pearl Poet’s “faunt.”²⁰ This hints not only to the “childlike” aspect of Orientalist tropes, but also channels the exotic and sensual feminisation of the pearl. Such is the object of the possessive jeweller, of the Occidental procurer, one who not only marvels at the precious gemstones of the Orient, but also at the precious, mysterious, and in Trevisa’s words, “gentille” women. The jeweller sings of the Pearl Maiden: “a mayden of menske full debonere,” whose “fayr face” and “figure fyn” drives the jeweller’s “lyste.”²¹ “Debonere,” in this Middle English context denoting “gentle, gracious, mild, and submissive”²² derives from the French *de bon aire*, literally “of good race.”²³ In this way, the jeweller suggests a racial undertone to his romanticisation of the Pearl Maiden’s beauty.²⁴

¹⁶ Mandeville, Jean De, and Iain Macleod Higgins. *The Book of John Mandeville: With Related Texts*, (Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 15.

¹⁷ Etymonline editors. “Margarita (n).” *Etymology*, www.etymonline.com/word/Margarita. Accessed 21 Nov. 2024., Anglicus and Trevisa, 856. The word *Maragarita* is for “pearl” in Latin, via Middle Persian.

¹⁸ Pearl Poet, line 6.

¹⁹ Pearl Poet, line 218.

²⁰ Pearl Poet, line 161.

²¹ Pearl Poet, lines 169–73.

²² MED, “debonere.”

²³ Etymonline Editors. “Debonair (Adj).” *Etymology*, www.etymonline.com/word/debonair#etymonline_v_827. Accessed 21 Nov. 2024.

²⁴ Pearl Poet, line 184., National Museum of Stockholm. The term is significant, too, in its original use being for “thoroughbred” hawks, just as the jeweller

Then, as we enter this Paradise, the Holy Lands, we see through the Occidental eye of the jeweller an apocalyptic scene apropos of the wall of the New Jerusalem, an account that makes a supposed mistake in the list of Oriental gemstones of what is written in the scripture of apostle John. He names “jasper,” “saffer,” “calsydoyne,” “emeraude,” “sardonyse,” “aghtthe,” “topayse,” “crysopase,” “jacyngh,” “amatyst” all successively and accurately, with the sole exception of substituting the “sardyis” in the “sexte” position for the “rybé.”²⁵ How could the jeweller afford to make such a mistake? The nature of the “rybé,” the ruby, in Europe’s medieval fantasy becomes important to answer this question.

Indeed, Mandeville speaks to this striking image of the ruby in his apocalyptic account of India.²⁶ While speaking of the country, he claims that it is under the rule of a Christian emperor by the name of “Prester John.”²⁷ He then describes the steps to John’s throne.²⁸ Strikingly, he emphasises the same stone that the jeweller does in their account of New Jerusalem’s walls, describing “two pomelles of goolde all rounde, and eyther of tho hath two / charbocles gret and large that shyneth ryght cleer uppon the nyght.”²⁹ “Carbuncle” is another Latinate

imagines himself “as hende as hawk in halle,” a famed animal in the Orient associated with sportive hunting, a hunting companion that would also be popularised in Europe through the Crusades.

²⁵ Pearl Poet, lines 998–1018

²⁶ Riddy, “Jewels in Pearl,” 50. Riddy mentions that the ruby had been described in a 15th century lapidary as having “vertu above all other precios stones,” with a kind of royal charisma so potent that “he that cometh bereth it amonge other men, all they shul do him honour and grace.”

²⁷ Mandeville and Higgins, 160. A name that is perhaps not incidental, in considering the Apostle John’s apocalyptic shades that he goes on to evoke.

²⁸ Mandeville, ed. Benson and Kohanski, line 2454., Mandeville, ed. Benson and Kohanski, line 2448., Mandeville and Higgins, 163. He describes its composition of the precious stones “mastyk,” “cristal,” “jaspe,” “amethyst,” “sardyn”—specified earlier in the medieval English text—“cornelian,” “chrysolite,” and of course, with both the steps and throne being adorned with “large orient pearls.”

²⁹ Mandeville, ed. Benson and Kohanski, lines 2446–7., Mandeville, ed. Benson and Kohanski, lines 2149–52. Not only does he emphasise the carbuncle here, but also with the Great Chan in China where he claims to have served in his army. “And he hath in his chambre,” he recounts, “a pyler of / goold, in which is a rube and a charbocle which is a foot long, and that geveth / lyght all nyght to all the chambre. And he hath many other precious stones and / rubeys, but that is the grettest and the beste.”

term for the red ruby. The torch-like motif of the stone serves to indicate the Eastern light it projects, a sort of marvellous spectacle all too familiar to the audience of Mandeville and thus the Pearl Poet.

Verily, the crusades proved a violent enterprise. As the colour of blood, the red could indicate a kind of trauma that would be engendered by Richard II losing his knights, by the thousands of deaths of the children's crusade,³⁰ by the beheading of 2000 Muslims at The Massacre at Ayyadieh at the hands of Richard the Lionheart during the third crusade of 1191.³¹ They exhibited battlefields streaked in blood red, right down to the cross of St. George: the political symbol of England traditionally associated with the crusades. This is a symbol that was even adopted by the Mézières and his Order of the Passion of Christ, alongside the Lamb of God that also manifests in the poem,³² something of spiritual concern for the jeweller as he wrestles in his liminal space occupying the urban mercantile class and being employed by the aristocracy.³³

Today, the pearl, as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, has literally become synonymous with the word "Orient."³⁴ This Cosmopolitan fascination arising in the Middle Ages would ultimately come to inspire the verses of Shakespeare, someone for whom India and prosperity were one and the same:

“ . . . Today the French,
All clinquant, all in gold, like heathen gods,
Shone down the English, and tomorrow they
Made Britain India: every man that stood

³⁰ Dickson Gary, "Children's Crusade." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/event/Childrens-Crusade, Accessed 22 Nov. 2024).

³¹ Runciman Steven, *A History of the Crusades. Volume III: The Kingdom of Acre and the Later Crusades*, (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 53–5.

³² Bowers, pp. 130–4.

³³ Riddy, pp. 149–50.

³⁴ OED editors, *Oxford English Dictionary*, (www.oed.com/. Accessed 11 Dec. 2024), "Orient."

Shown like a mine,”³⁵

someone who would be transformed into an imperial tool for the British East India Company. How this marvellment would translate, this *xenophilia*, the great Paradise that the West “re-presents” of the East,³⁶ from the wildest imaginations of these storytellers—even of Mandeville—into a great crime, a crime that would carry over to the English crown’s Early Modern World, to its colonial enterprise in India that would draw trillions of dollars,³⁷ a crime that transpired when England decided the world was its oyster.

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³⁵ Shakespeare William, *Henry VIII*, ed. Barbara Mowat, et al. (Folger Shakespeare Library, <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/Henry%20VIII> [accessed October 30, 2024]), I.1.24–38.

³⁶ Said, 177.

³⁷ Hickel Jason, “How Britain Stole \$45 Trillion from India,” (*Al Jazeera*, 19 Dec. 2018)

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