The Light of Life

Essays in Honour of
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The Discourse of Fairyland in the Dream Vision of the Middle English *Pearl*

The Middle English poem *Pearl* is a mixture of a number of genres. Opening like an elegy, with its initial stanzas heavily indebted to courtly love poetry, it proceeds towards a dream vision that launches into a theological debate concluded by an eschatological vision of the city of New Jerusalem. *Pearl* is obviously a religious poem, but, as Ad Putter has observed, the kind of religious and dreamscape imagery it contains, based on biblical sources, may also have influenced the writers of medieval romances such as *Sir Orfeo* or *Thomas of Erceldoune* in the construction of their secular otherworlds (2007: 237–41). The two romances in question are tales of fairy encounters, and the following article aims to identify major areas of convergence with the genre of fairy romance in *Pearl*. It is important to note that *Pearl* is the manuscript companion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, itself a fairy-themed text, but while the numerous interconnections between the two poems have already been explored by critics in much detail, the question of the general indebtedness of *Pearl* to the notion of fairy otherworlds is still largely uncharted territory.

The thesis put forward by Putter is fairly straightforward and suggests that writers of medieval romance took inspiration from visions of Christian afterlife to craft their otherworldly realms. Indeed, reading the description of the fairy castle in *Sir Orfeo* one can easily notice its similarity to

the vision of New Jerusalem and its multi-tiered gemstone construction as outlined in chapter 21 of the biblical Book of Revelation:

> Amidde the lond a castel he sighe,
> Riche & real & wonder heighe:
> Al the vt-mast wal
> Was clere & schine as cristal;
> An hundred tours ther were about,
> Desigelich & bataild stout;
> The butras com out of the diche
> Of rede gold y-arched riche;
> The vousour was auowed al
> Of ich maner diuers aumal.
> With-in ther wer wide wones,
> Al of precious stones;
> The werst piler on to biholde
> Was al of burnist gold.
> Al that lond was euer light,
> For when it schuld be therk & night,
> The riche stones light gonne
> As bright as doth at none the sonne.
> No man may telle, no thenche in thought,
> The riche werk that ther was wrought. (ll. 355–374)[1]

The crystalline character, dazzling brightness and general luminosity of the fairy castle is a feature of not just the towering construction but also of the landscape that surrounds it. In Putter's words, all this looks "suspiciously like heaven" (2007: 239). The passage has also been scrutinized by Aisling Byrne, who points to several levels of direct linkage to the original biblical description. Apart from the "continual brightness of the surrounding country […] which parallels the absence of night in the biblical account" (2016: 95)[2], and the use of the imagery of precious

[1] The text of *Sir Orfeo* is that of the Auchinleck manuscript. The letter "thorn" has been replaced with "th," and the letter "yogh" with "gh."

[2] Cf. Revelation 21:23–25.

stones[3], she also points to "the sheer size of the city"[4] and the fact that while its walls are made of gemstones, the city as such has a glass-like quality to it (95)[5].

The same imagery is to be found in *Pearl* in its description of the city of New Jerusalem, within the dream vision experienced by the text's narrator. It would appear that both religious and secular texts drew on biblical material in this respect, and both secular otherworlds and visions of Christian afterlife were sometimes described with the use of almost identical imagery, with Byrne (2016: 68-106) providing a number of convincing examples both from the English and Irish literary tradition. Putter explains the rationale underlying this parallelism in the following manner:

> Of course, the writers of chivalric romances were not in the business of describing the religious otherworld, but they nevertheless make common cause with the writers of otherworld visions in one important respect. Romance writers, too, had to find ways of making their fictional world "other", supremely beautiful, or supremely perilous, and in their attempt to create an imaginary world surpassing normal expectations they frequently gave it a touch of otherwordliness. (2007: 238)

As Byrne rightly points out, the immediate source for these writers need not always have been the Book of Revelation. Some literary descriptions may just as well have taken inspiration from the source of the New Testament author, namely the Book of Ezekiel and its description of Eden, also rich in gemstone imagery[6], and in some cases the direct source could have been altogether extrabiblical. It is certainly plausible that medieval literary adaptations of biblical material, such as the vision of the New Jerusalem in *Pearl*, provided additional incentive to romance authors in

3 Cf. Revelation 21:19–21.
4 Cf. Revelation 21:16–17.
5 Cf. Revelation 21:18, 21:21.
6 Cf. Ezekiel 28:13.

shaping their secular otherworlds – and *vice versa* – and could serve as direct inspiration.

I do not wish to dwell on the minutiae of the parallelisms between the *Orfeo* castle and the heavenly city in *Pearl*, suggesting instead that it would be worthwhile to re-examine the exact nature and direction of influences of this kind, not only in a purely literary context but also with a view to the broader cultural dimension of the dialogism of the two categories of otherworlds. To begin with, the clear-cut character of the division into on the one hand religious visions of the afterlife and on the other hand secular romances about the otherworld seems to be more of a modern critical template imposed onto source materials than a genuine medieval distinction: "the two genres often sit side by side in medieval codices, sharing the same metrical forms; and both were read for entertainment" (Putter 2007: 237). Putter eventually concludes that "it is doubtful whether medieval writers made any clear conceptual distinction between romances and otherworld visions" (238), mentioning as a good example of such conflations a manuscript companion of *Sir Orfeo*, the Auchinleck *Owayne Miles*. While both Putter and Byrne attempt to trace the chain of possible literary influences and the literary evolution of the story found in *Owayne Miles*, much can be gained from looking beyond literature, as in Richard Firth Green's recent book *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*.

Green's study addresses directly the medieval notions of the otherworld, putting forward a controversial thesis: the rise of the idea of purgatory, Green claims, coincides with the beginning of the process of the demonization of fairies and may have been a crucial part of the latter's agenda. The overall theme of the book is the demonization of fairies and other forms of reaction and cultural dialogue between on the one hand popular culture[7], imbued with fairy-related elements, and on the other hand elite church culture inimical to any such notions. Green suggests that one of the most

[7] For Green, popular culture involves not just the lower classes but also some members of the secular elite who participate in it. Therefore popular culture is for him opposed primarily to elite church culture, rather than to elite culture in general.

consequential of such cultural interactions may have included introducing the idea of purgatory for it to supplant well-entrenched popular beliefs about a kind of fairy otherworld that could not be identified with either heaven or hell, or at least "sedulously promot[ing] it as a corrective to it" (2016: 191). Green is well aware of the magnitude of his claims and admits that obviously "for some medievalists [this] idea […] will seem a travesty" (191), but he does provide compelling and well-documented evidence for his case. It is instructive to refer to some of his examples in detail. First of all, he cites the *Anecdotes historiques* of Etienne de Bourbon, a thirteenth-century French Dominican preacher and historian, who reports on an accidental visit to purgatory by a servant looking for his master's horse in the Sicilian mountains[8]. The man meets a gatekeeper who warns him not to eat any food once he passes the gate – a typical fairy taboo (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 75) – and finds himself in "a large and populous city" presided upon by a prince and his retinue, all of which makes this purgatory intriguingly similar to folkloric fairyland. Green then looks at "medieval reports of purgatory's main entrance – on Station Island in the Irish lake of Lough Derg" (2016: 180). He points to *Visiones Georgii*, a text which "purport[s] to record the experiences of a Hungarian knight George Grissaphan, who visited Lough Derg in 1353" (181), in which the main character encounters not just a cavalcade of knights-at-arms[9] but also a female figure of extraordinary beauty, "wearing a splendid crown bedecked with jewels", who tempts him with a vision of ruling over this realm together (181) in the manner of a seductive fairy queen[10].

The upshot of Green's examples seems to be that from its very inception there was something fairy-like to the idea of purgatory in European culture. Indeed, Byrne identifies in the most influential of medieval texts

8 Green provides two earlier versions of the same story that contain the fairy elements but do not mention purgatory. He thus argues in favour of the chronological and ideological primacy of fairyland over purgatory.

9 Green refers to this folkloric motif as the "fairy horde" and distinguishes it from the related "fairy hunt" (2016: 172).

10 For more on the paradigmatic seductiveness of fairy queens in medieval romance, see Cooper (2004: 211–16).

that speak of Lough Derg, *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, some elements that align it with medieval romance, a genre appropriate to handle tales of *aventure* among the fairies[11]. Among these, chief is the "chivalric ethos" (Byrne 2016: 80) of the *Tractatus*, with "almost all of the descriptions of Owein" – the tale's protagonist – being "couched in terms that emphasize his knightly calling" (80). At the same time, Byrne makes it clear that the author of the text betrays no signs of trying to create "a text that might be considered in any way fictional; rather he is at great pains to establish the narrative's historicity and authenticity" (77). Later adaptations of the Owein story are much more romance-inflected. Marie de France's version openly states that it translates the *Tractatus* into "romanz" form (Byrne 2016: 82) and makes use of the discourse of *aventure*, and in the Auchinleck *Owayne Miles* eventually too "tract has become romance" (Edward Foster, quoted in Byrne 2016: 84). Byrne's chronological account (from the original *Tractatus* through Marie's *L'Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* to the Auchinleck version) is generally in agreement with Putter's idea of romance authors freely adapting visions of religious afterlife and seeing no significant distinction between the two genres. Green, however, goes much further than this in his claims, suggesting that while the *Tractatus* contains elements of romance that later writers would expand and capitalize on, these are not so much germs of romance discourse (although they may facilitate later romance adaptations of the story) but suppressed elements of popular culture of a non-Christian nature onto which the theological edifice of purgatory was imposed – not altogether in a seamless and successfully occlusive way.

Green's book takes issue with most literary studies of fairies in medieval romance in that it takes as its starting point the assumption that romance fairies are not just a narrative device but above all a reflection of genuine popular belief (2016: 33–34)[12]. It is with this in mind that he

[11] Michael J. Bennett suggests that a possible inspiration for the Pearl-Poet in writing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may have been a visit at the royal court of the errant knight Ramon de Perelhos, who was welcomed by king Richard II and aided in his quest to reach Lough Derg (2007: 88).

[12] For critics who analyze fairies as an intratextual phenomenon only, see Wade (2011) and Byrne (2016).

cites Etienne de Bourbon, *Visiones Georgii* and other purgatorial visions, such as *Visio Ludovico de Francia* (c. 1360), where we find purgatory teeming with dancing teenage girls of extraordinary beauty (reminiscent of "The Wife of Bath's Tale") who freely offer Louis of France "delicious dishes, untold wealth, and of course sex" (182) in the manner of fairy ladies such as the one in Marie de France's *Lanval*. One issue requires clarification here, however. The *Tractatus* and later texts in the same tradition provide accounts of journeys not just through purgatory but also through the earthly paradise (Byrne 2016: 75), and while the former is presented as an infernal realm, it is the splendour of the latter that usually served as inspiration for romance authors (79). The *Orfeo*-author, however, clearly draws on both: Orfeo is first overwhelmed by the crystalline landscape and comments that *Bi al thing him think that it is* / *the proude court of Paradis* (ll. 375–76), but later he finds himself faced with a grimly menacing tableau of half-dead, half-alive bodies at the fairy king's castle, arrested in movement and vaguely reminiscent of both the tortures and the limbo quality of purgatory. Green suggests that fairyland formed the conceptual basis and inspiration for the construction of both purgatory and the earthly paradise (2016: 185–86), both places being characterized by liminality, that is serving as threshold spaces for those journeying on to heaven or hell. While the medieval Church clarified its position on the issue, with "the First Council of Lyon in 1245 and the Second Council in 1274 stat[ing] that souls needed only to pass through Purgatory, not through any further location, before entering Heaven" (Byrne 2016: 70), the idea and imagery of the earthly paradise continued to exert an influence on romance authors, *Sir Orfeo* being here a case in point alongside *Owayne Miles*.

If one assumes that it was indeed popular beliefs about fairy otherworlds that provided the basis – or at least a degree of inspiration – for the notions of purgatory and earthly paradise by virtue of being assimilated by religious discourse, then fairy- or romance-related elements in literary visions of the Christian afterlife may be present even where no direct literary influence is to be observed. With this in mind, I will now turn to *Pearl* to trace its indebtedness to the aesthetic and structure of

fairy romance – whether this should be derived directly from literary romance (a possibility suggested by the literature-oriented studies of Putter and Byrne) or originate from popular belief via its appropriation by theology (as outlined by Green). The first thing to be observed is that ventures into purgatory or the earthly paradise are to be differentiated from journeys to heaven or hell in that they take place in the flesh. As Byrne notes, speaking of the former two, "Owein is allowed access to both, but he is excluded from Heaven and Hell as long as he is alive" (2016: 77). While the dream vision in *Pearl* is ostensibly presented by the narrator as spiritual in nature – *Fro spot my spyryt ther sprang in space; / My body on balke ther bod in sweven* (ll. 61–62) – the Dreamer faces challenges of a clearly physical nature during the vision. He wishes to cross the river that divides the dreamscape in two but fails to find a suitable ford, with the passage becoming more and more dangerous on the way (ll. 150–54), and he actually attempts to swim to the other side toward the end of the vision (ll. 1153–64); a painful sense of bodily detachment from the Pearl Maiden that subtends his longing is yet another element highlighting the bodily dimensions of this vision. Of course in itself this may only indicate that *Pearl* is indebted to the discourse of the earthly paradise seen as a liminal space leading to heaven proper, but Green's observations make it possible to identify here direct links to fairy belief and the literary tradition inspired by it:

> fairyland is often conceived of as being a kind of peripheral zone or hinterland surrounding a central nucleus, usually a castle, and […] journeys to fairyland thus entail three stages: 1) an initial crossing of the boundary between the fairy world and that of mortals; 2) a perilous journey through an uncanny territory; and 3) a second crossing into the fairy heartland. (2016: 187)

Green identifies this pattern in the Reinbrun episode of *Guy of Warwick* and in *Thomas of Erceldoune* (187), but one may also add to the list Marie's *Lanval*, where the encounter with the fairy lady also has two stages, with Lanval first meeting her two handmaidens and only later being taken to her pavilion. In *Pearl*, too, we deal with an initial crossing into the

dreamscape, followed by a journey explicitly described as perilous – *Bot wothes mo iwysse ther ware* (l. 151) – and then a second crossing into the walled city of New Jerusalem, though the final stage is here rendered as purely spiritual, with the embodied spirit of the Dreamer remaining by the river bank.

The fairy lady's female servants in *Lanval* are thus the equivalent of the Pearl Maiden in that they take the function of a guide to the protagonist whose role is to bring him to the heartland of the otherworld and to the authority figure presiding over the place which in various tales functions as a castle, a city, or a pavilion. The Pearl Maiden also bears striking resemblance to the mysterious fairy-like figure from *The Vision of Edmund Leversedge*, an account of a near-death experience from 1465 cited by Green. Struck by pestilence and abandoned by his friends, Leversedge finds his soul taken by a good angel *into a grett playn valey, where was nother mone ne sonne ne stere that gaffe any light* (85), among crowds of devils whose stylish dress makes them resemble, according to Green, "the elegant denizens of the fairy world" (190), and there he meets *a woman of longe stature, the fayrest in fayrness* […]*, the most mekest in cowntenaunce and speche; and as the snowe excedith the bewate of alle women in whittness, in lyke wise excedith that blissid woman and lady al other women* (94)[13]. The women wears a white kerchief and a gold crown, and "she gives Leversedge's soul an (unconsciously ironic) out-of-body experience" (Green 2016: 191): *Sho showid my saule also the towne and wallis of Oxforth, wyth the ryvers and medeues pertei*[*ni*]*ng therto* (95), which is then followed by her predictions of the future. The analogies between Leversgedge's experience and *Pearl* include the appearance of the female figure, a spiritual vision of a walled city with a particular focus on rivers[14], and a prophecy of the future – the eschatological future in the case of *Pearl*.

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[13] The letter "thorn" in the original text has been replaced with "th," and the letter "yogh" with "gh."

[14] Fairy ladies are often met by rivers or streams – the motif may manifest itself in different ways in particular narratives but usually involves running water. The best-known

Such beautiful ladies encountered by heroes of medieval romance are sometimes taken, mistakenly, for the Blessed Virgin Mary. The words used to describe Leversedge's guide certainly warrant such an interpretation, although "the fact that she refers to the Virgin in the third person suggests that she is not herself Mary" (Green 2016: 191). In *Thomas of Erceldoune*, the lady who appears on a saddle *stefly sett with precyous stones* / […] *stones of Oryente, grete plente* (ll. 51, 53)[15] is also believed by Thomas to be the Virgin Mary and has to set things straight when he addresses her as the Mother of Christ (75-92). Green also points to the early fourteenth-century *Roman d'Ogier*, where the protagonist finds himself in Avalon – "near the castle of Avalon which is just this side of the earthly paradise" (Green 2016: 186) – only to encounter a mysterious lady in white whom he takes to be the Virgin Mary; the women is revealed to be none other than Morgan le Fay herself. In *Pearl*, the Maiden's identification with the Queen of Heaven (ll. 413–15), a position the Dreamer can only relate to Mary, and his incredulity at the idea that anyone may supplant Mary and take her crown (l. 427), seem to create a similar aura of confusion concerning the identity of the Maiden, even if the mistaken identification is never made in the proper sense.

The Dreamer's desire to stay in the crystalline realm, although fiercely dismissed by the Maiden, may also have presented itself as a reasonable option to the readers of *Pearl* for a reason closely connected with the discourse of fairyland. It is interesting to note that in *Roman d'Ogier* the inhabitants of the castle of Avalon include *Enoc & helye*, that is Enoch and Elijah (Green 2016: 186). Green traces the same tradition to the English mystery cycles, where in *The Chester play of the Antichrist* Enoch and Elijah appear on stage and explain they actually come from paradise, where they have lived in the flesh; he views the play's use of their appearance as related to the motif of the eventual return of King Arthur from Avalon

examples include Marie de France's *Lanval*, the Old French Breton lay of *Graelent* (with the lady bathing in the fountain), and the ballad of Tam Lin (where the gender roles are inverted but the encounter significantly takes place by a well).

15 The version referred to throughout the article is that of Thornton MS.

(ll. 143–44). Since "the prophet Helyas and his companion Enock were celebrated for never having died" (Green 2016: 143), the Dreamer's mistake in *Pearl* is only that he fails to see a qualitative difference between the two banks of the river, and it would appear that the side of the river he finds himself on may well accommodate mortals for a lengthy period of time. Another connection between the poem and fairy discourse is the idea of an otherworld dazzling with brightness but having no celestial sources of light, which finds its reflection in lines 1043–44 of *Pearl*: *Such lyght ther lemed in alle the strates* / *Hem nedde nawther sunne ne mone*. The motif occurs in *Sir Orfeo* – fairyland is there entered through a cave and thus subterranean – and is also easily traceable to a number of fairy-themed folkloric sources, earning fairies the name of "the lychnobious people" (Henderson and Cowan 2011: 14). Finally, there is also the issue of the heterochronia associated with visiting fairy realms. A motif well attested both in folklore (Briggs 2002: 123–25) and medieval literature (Green 2016: 191–93), timewarp usually plays a role in the narrative at the point when the human character leaves the otherworld and finds that much more time has passed in his world than he has experienced while venturing beyond it (Cross 2008: 163ff). The sudden and altogether unexpected change of heart in the Dreamer and his total submission to Christ voiced only several lines after he attempted to swim across the river in mad pursuit of his beloved girl may also have something to do with a difference in the flow of time between the world of the dream and that of the garden where the action of the poem begins.

Another major insight into the possible relationship of *Pearl* with the folkloric and literary fairy tradition may be gained by reflecting upon the historical and anthropological work of the English historian Emma Wilby. In two important volumes Wilby elaborates on the idea of fairy shamanism that she believes persisted throughout the medieval and early modern periods and underlies much of the historico-cultural evidence for the belief in human trafficking with fairies. Wilby contends that the descriptions of fairies and their activities that circulated in late medieval and early modern culture were being fed into not just by earlier stories of the same sort but also by accounts of the shamanistic visionary experi-

ence of the so-called cunning folk, that is local magic practitioners, which continually reinforced popular fairy belief (2005: 146–48, 2010: 275–82). Whatever one thinks about the validity of Wilby's claims with regard to the actual survival of fairy-oriented shamanistic practices well into the late seventeenth century, it seems reasonable to assume that at least in a portion of tales of fairy encounters it should be possible to discern elements originating from the structure of shamanistic visionary experience. In the remainder of the article I will argue that the context of fairy shamanism may be of use in the critical appreciation of the dream vision in *Pearl*.

Shamanism can be defined as "the inducing of trance", usually in order to treat disease or solve community problems, leading to an entry into a spirit world where the shaman effects a change in the real world by interacting with the vision's spirit-like, though often embodied, beings (Stutley 2003: 2); in the case of fairy shamanism, the beings one interacts with are fairies. According to Johan Reinhard, "the shaman is in a non-ordinary psychic state which in some cases means not a loss of consciousness but rather an altered state of consciousness" (quoted in Stutley 2003: 28), and the experience is akin to mysticism, since just like the latter the visionary experience leads to an "escape from one's own rational and definite position" (Stutley 2003: 28). Emma Wilby makes much of the notion of the "subtle body" and its role in the history of Western culture, arguing that early man's

> observations that in dream and vision people and places were not restricted by the physical limitations of normal waking existence […] gave birth to the idea that although they resembled waking life phenomena, the beings who lived in this parallel reality possessed a supernatural status, that is, they were "spirits", and the dimension they inhabited were "spirit worlds". His observation that when he entered this world, he too was freed of these restrictions, gave birth to the idea that a part of the human being can detach itself from the body and enter the spirit worlds and that when it does so, it possesses the same powers as the spirits themselves (this separable part being defined as the spirit or soul). His observation that sometimes, during dreams and visions, he seemed to inhabit some kind of corporeal form, gave rise to the idea that the separable soul is, or can clothe

> itself, in supra-physical or "subtle" form of similar substance and properties to those possessed by spirits. (2010: 249)

Wilby follows a number of historians in arguing that "beliefs surrounding 'subtle bodies' that can 'detach from, leave, or during trance be sent by its owner […]' persisted throughout medieval and early modern Europe on both an elite and popular level" (2010: 291). Since the use of actual dream mechanics and aesthetics in the oneiricism of *Pearl* as well as other medieval dream visions has already been noted by scholars (Gardner 1975: 10), one may wonder whether it is also possible to identify in the text some elements modelled on the phenomenology of shamanistic visionary experience.

The contrastive juxtaposition of the flowery garden and the crystalline landscape, which has often been read as representing the "tension between the Platonic duality of world and idea" (Stern quoted in Hoffman 1970: 89), or time and timelessness, may in fact also be a reflection of a staple element of shamanistic visions, namely inversion:

> The underworld is regarded as an inverted image of this world; thus the rivers flow back to their source, grave offerings are placed upside down so they will be the right way up in the underworld; or, if broken, will become intact again. (Stutley 2003: 34)

Tree-trunks blue like indigo (ll. 75–76), silver leaves (l. 77), pearls constituting the gravel by the river (ll. 81–82) and banks of beryl rather than mud (ll. 109–10) all seem to follow this general principle, and the dreamscape is in effect an inversion of the transience of the garden in terms of imagery. Additionally, despite its distinctly Christian context of divine vision, the spiritual body of the Dreamer in the eschatological vision of *Pearl* may be read as a "subtle body" with no essential contradiction or confusion of orders:

> A variety of notions concerning "spiritual bodies" can be found in both Testaments (being notably discussed by St Paul) and they subsequently emerged particularly strongly in theologies of resurrection.

> In some hands these Christian speculations could come very close to tribal notions of subtle bodies. (Wilby 2010: 291)

Since such subtle bodies often exhibit supra-normal abilities (Wilby 2010: 291) such as flight or general hypermobility, the stasis of the Dreamer in the face of his overwhelming desire to cross the river emerges as particularly ironic. Instead of the ability to negotiate physical boundaries at will, the narrator in *Pearl* stops short of ever crossing the river, and instead of supra-sensory perception that characterizes visionary experience he remains spiritually and intellectually blind throughout the vision, as the Maiden often reminds him. The use of the mechanics of shamanistic visionary experience appears to serve the function of highlighting the epistemological deficiencies of the human mind in the face of God and pushing the irony of the Dreamer's expectations to join the Maiden in heaven to its extreme. All in all, the general outline of the story, so similar to *The Vision of Edmund Leversedge*, may be read when set against the latter as, in some aspects at least, an idiosyncratic Christian reformulation of the fairy shamanism of popular culture.

Richard Firth Green's exploration of the significance of fairy belief for late-medieval popular culture and religiosity has opened numerous new paths that await scholarly exploration. If *Pearl* is indeed considerably indebted to this dimension of popular culture, its relationship with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* certainly requires fresh critical scrutiny and warrants re-examination. The mixture and enmeshing of the religious and the secular in the texts of MS Cotton Nero A.x, in turn, emerges as both a structural principle of the poems that informs their intertextual relationships and a fundamental thematic concern of *Pearl*, which through its dream vision attempts to tackle precisely this problem – that of the nature of the connection between the earthly and divine spheres of existence. The discourse of fairyland appears to play a crucial role in this endeavour.

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