


Mary, *Pearl*, and Sir John Stanley (d. 1414)

María, Pearl y Sir John Stanley (+1414)

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Abstract: *Pearl* is a Middle English dream-poem in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x, of about 1400. It is attributed to the same author as the scriptural poems *Patience* and *Cleanness* and the romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* also found in this manuscript. The four texts provide abundant information on fourteenth-century social life, including religion, particularly for devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Analysis of Marian imagery in *Pearl* and its related poems thus tells us much on the attitudes to Christ's mother of a high-ranking provincial layman of about 1390, especially for her as 'Queen of Heaven' and 'Queen of Courtesy', the latter term denoting the values of court society. Such analysis also tends to confirm attribution on other grounds of the four poems to Sir John Stanley (d. 1414), a magnate and courtier who in the last thirty years of his life dominated the politics of the Lancashire-Cheshire region of north-west England.

Keywords: *Pearl*. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Sir John Stanley (d. 1414). Arthurian Literature. Marian Devotion.

Resumen: *Pearl* es un poema medieval inglés que se conserva en el manuscrito MS Cotton Nero A.x en la British Library de Londres. Fue escrito alrededor del año 1400. Tiene la misma atribución que los poemas escriturales *Patience* y *Cleanness* y el romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, que se hallan en el mismo manuscrito. Los cuatro textos dan mucha información sobre la vida social del siglo catorce, la vida religiosa incluida, sobre todo la devoción a la Virgen. El análisis de la imagen mariana en *Pearl* y en los otros textos dice mucho sobre las actitudes hacia la madre de Cristo de un laico, alto cargo de provincias del año 1390, en especial al considerar a María como «Reina de los cielos» y «Reina de Cortesía», esto es, como símbolo de los valores de la sociedad cortesana. El análisis tal vez confirme, por otras razones, la atribución de los cuatro poemas a Sir John Stanley (m. 1414), político y cortesano que en los últimos treinta años de su vida dominó la vida política de Lancashire y Cheshire en el noreste de Inglaterra.

Palabras clave: *Pearl*. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Sir John Stanley (+1414). Literatura artúrica. Devoción mariana.



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Amongst England's literary mysteries is *Pearl*, a dream-poem of the late fourteenth century. It occurs in the same manuscript as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and is surely by the same unnamed author, regarded (since 1959) as perhaps a wealthy magnate. In 2004 he was identified as possibly Sir John Stanley (d. 1414), who in about 1400 dominated the Cheshire-Lancashire region where these poems were written. Stanley had a career of unfolding success. Born into the minor gentry, he rose fast by marrying an heiress, was a courtier of Richard II and Henry IV, and ended his days as Knight of the Garter and King of the Isle of Man. The modern Earls of Derby descend from him. Of interest here are parallels between the language of his correspondence and that of *Pearl* (as also *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, plus the associated Scriptural poems *Cleanness* and *Patience*). Stanley's choice of words is one of various pieces of evidence for his authorship of *Pearl* and the three other poems, all known solely from a manuscript now in the British Library.

If Sir John Stanley wrote *Pearl* and its fellows, the hypothesis should stand up to attack. Examine the texts point by point, detail by detail, and the case will survive or collapse. If *Pearl* were instead, say, by a monk at Chester or a layman in London, there should be proof of this, demolishing Stanley's claims. Hence this paper. Its subject is one aspect of the poems, their representation of the Virgin Mary, especially in *Pearl*, an elegy for the poet's infant daughter. This last text may date from 1390, when many children (lacking the immunity of older generations) died in a plague epidemic. What follows is thus not just a study of the Virgin. It allows readers to decide whether presentation of her accords with the values (social and political) of a provincial grandee, which is what Stanley was. If it does, it adds to the arguments for him as author. He will be one of that curious band of British knights or aristocrats who were also poets (Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Raleigh, Denham, Rochester, Scott, Byron, Newbolt, Betjeman).

We start over a century ago in Connecticut, with a convenient summary of *Pearl* (in the foreground here, having more material on Mary than its three related texts). The poet owned a precious pearl, but 'let it fall in the grass' and lost it. On the 'high holiday of August' (here Lammastide, not the Assumption) he fell asleep at the place of his loss, and dreamed of a paradisaal landscape. He there saw beyond a river a maiden clothed in white and bedecked with pearls. He recognized her as his missing pearl; their dialogue makes up most the poem. She explains that she is a queen in bliss with Mary, who is 'Phoenix of Araby' and 'Queen of Courtesy'; they inhabit 'the New Jerusalem, the City of God, the site of Peace'. The text ends with the poet's vision of the place and the Lamb of God followed by 'hundreds of thousands of virgins decked in pearls'. Seeing his 'little queen' amongst them, the dreamer tries to plunge into the stream, only to awake. Consoled by what he has seen, he feels certain of his daughter's happiness and

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'commends his Pearl to God's care'. It has been pointed out that, although some three hundred lines of his text derive from Scripture, his attitude is 'not that of the theologian'; while his 'impassioned personal utterance' might well be that of a father, mourning the death of his child¹.

In this strange masterpiece the Blessed Virgin receives special praise. The child declares:

Now, for synglerty [uniqueness] o hyr dousour [sweetness],
We calle hyr Fenyx of Arraby

that, the Arabian Phoenix, 'symbol of peerless perfection'. The metaphor is paralleled in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, another lament for the dead, where Blanche (John of Gaunt's first wife) is styled 'Fenix of Arabye'². She, too, was unique. The image in *Pearl* is a highbrow one. Other views, some of them highly fanciful, were summarized by Oakden, who steered his way between those making a 'minute reconstruction of the poet's life' on the one hand and those who saw the poem as purely allegorical, the maiden (who 'never lived') being a symbol of virginity or the Eucharist or the like³.

A sidelight on that comes from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (associated with Cheshire and its borders), for the text has brief but telling allusions to Mary. Riding through a frozen wilderness, Sir Gawain 'To Mary made his mone' (line 737) or complaint, because he longs to hear mass at Christmas. His prayer is soon answered when he catches sight of a castle. Later, when its chatelaine tries to seduce him, the poet observes 'Gret perile bi-twene hem stod' (1768) and would have meant disaster, had Mary not remembered her knight⁴. The poems show a quiet trust in her power.

Chivalric values, including *cortaysye*, are analysed in an article on romances like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. One learns how *cortaysye* at first meant not just good manners but Christian love and charity, as in showing consideration to social inferiors⁵. Together with remarks on the author as perhaps 'a pious layman' (which yet ignore his familiarity with luxury, implying exalted rank for him) are comments on Mary as *Queen of cortaysye* because 'she represents the ideal itself of Christian behaviour' and therefore possessed a gentleness 'which is the manifestation of divine charity'⁶. That the poet is 'at home in courtly, or at least

¹ Wells, 1916, pp. 579-583.

² Sisam, 1921, pp. 61, 225.

³ Oakden, 1935, pp. 69-76.

⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1940, pp. XVIII-XX, 27, 65.

⁵ Mathew, 1948, pp. 354-362.

⁶ *Pearl*, pp. XXXIII, XLII, 61.



aristocratic, society' is noted elsewhere, together with comment on Mary's *cortaysye*, where the word in *Pearl* is sometimes 'almost a synonym for "grace" (divine favour or condescension)'⁷.

As for the phoenix metaphor, its singularity is shown by medieval German poets, especially Konrad von Würzburg (d. 1287) in his *Die goldene Schmiede*. For them, Mary was not the bird but the pyre. In it (or her), 'the old Phoenix was consumed at the Incarnation, only to rise up with the Saviour's body in a glorified shape'⁸. Yet the English poet was not so daring or extreme. He showed reticence. At this point we mention the proposal that he was 'a man of rank and wealth' who was expert on the court and its refinements, as also war, hunting, Scripture, and even music⁹. A remarkable combination. Analysis is taken further in John Fisher's study of his politics, a paper that repays careful reading. The poet was conservative, even reactionary. With him is 'no overt questioning of the social changes that troubled Langland and Gower'. While the setting of *Piers Plowman* is London (despite allusion to the Malvern Hills), *Pearl* belongs to the 'agrarian aristocracy'. Its central exemplum is the Master of the Vineyard, with his 'arbitrary authority'. Hence the view of Heaven as a court, wherein anyone may be 'quen other [or] kyng' (line 448)¹⁰. It is levelling up, not levelling down. It is the very opposite of the medieval couplet (dear to Marxist historians), 'When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who then was the gentleman?'

Fisher's remarks on *Pearl* show the poet's religion as that of a gentleman, with rather stiff social views, and naturally seeing a royal court and the Court of Heaven as equivalents. After that, some other comments. A Sister of Charity gives the sense of 'Marye that grace of grewe' (line 425) as 'Mary from whom sprang Grace' in the person of her son, Jesus. Because Grace comes from God alone, Mary was not a source of Grace, although she may be a channel of Grace¹¹. Compare (more generally) a passage on *cortaysye* and grace in *Pearl*, where (because she is 'supreme') Mary's 'courtesy is particularly the raining down of grace upon others'¹².

Elsewhere the poem's Marian aspects are soft-peddled. One writer remarks on how the Dreamer compares the Maiden's grave demeanour to that of a duke or earl (line 211), or how the Dreamer says that in Heaven she might be a 'countes' but hardly a 'quene' (lines 489, 492). A countess is the wife of an earl.

⁷ Everett, 1955, pp. 69, 79.

⁸ Hirn, 1958, pp. 209, 374.

⁹ Loomis, 1959.

¹⁰ Fisher, 1961.

¹¹ *The Pearl*, p. 90.

¹² Brewer, 1966.

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The Dreamer naturally constructs the hierarchy of Heaven in aristocratic forms¹³. Another critic rightly lists the poem's many 'feudal terms' (king, queen, empress, court, kingdom, realm), but explains *cortaysye* in rather a secular way as 'freedom from limitation, abundance in goodness', thereafter dismissing biographical approaches to *Pearl* as irrelevant to 'the real problems of the poem'¹⁴. On the contrary. If its author was a magnate known to history, we are less likely to err on what he meant, especially for religion. Compare his knowledge of etiquette, hunting, fortresses, armour, music; while in *Patience* 'he uses with an air of assurance the right terms for the parts of a ship'¹⁵. The word 'assurance' is telling. The poet was perhaps a man used to giving orders, either at sea or from a horse's saddle. He seems more of a man of action than a literary intellectual. He was also surely father to the child addressed; as indicated by the line 'In Krystes dere blessing and myn' (1208), used in Middle English texts 'almost exclusively by parents addressing their children'¹⁶.

A further advance then came from an Oxford scholar, suggesting on the basis of dialect and allusions to the chase that 'Sir John Stanley was the patron of the Gawain-Poet'¹⁷. That Stanley actually was the poet did not occur to him. The hypothesis is yet consistent with the way that a 'deep sense of personal loss' pervades the whole of *Pearl*, implying bereavement at first hand; and (less obviously) that the poet cites the parable of the Vineyard not from the Bible, but from the reading at mass (as proved by lines 497-498):

As Mathew meles [tells] in your messe
In sothfol [truthful] gospel of God almight.

It accords too with the line 'For mote ne spot is non in the [thee]' (764) and mention of 'the terrors of the Black Death'¹⁸. The poet's obsessive use of the word spot is now related to the epidemic of 1390-1392, when skin discoloration was amongst the symptoms. Indications of the author as a pious layman of exalted status also accords with another line in *Pearl* (346):

Braundysch and bray thy brathes breme

¹³ Spearing, 1966.

¹⁴ Kean, 1967, pp. 189, 241-242.

¹⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1967, pp. xxiv-xxv.

¹⁶ Bishop, 1968, pp. 8, 131.

¹⁷ Mathew, 1968, p. 166.

¹⁸ Oakden, 1968.



which is huntsman's language. It means 'Struggle and bray in your extreme agonies' and refers to the anguish of a deer at bay, whether trapped or exhausted, and in either case the victim of the hounds that seize it¹⁹. The author of *Pearl* thought naturally in terms of hunting, even in a religious poem. We here note that Sir John Stanley was for a while responsible for royal forests of Wirral, Delamere, Macclesfield; the last being the location of Ludchurch, a chasm which is the 'Green Chapel' of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. His military service in Aquitaine may be related to maritime matters discussed (with questions of date and authorship) in a standard edition²⁰. As for hunting, one writer does acknowledge the poet's zest for it²¹.

Returning to the Blessed Virgin, we find the notion that the pearl represents her has been dismissed as 'obviously mistaken'²². The poem is not an allegory. We can be sure what she is not. Speculations on the 'hygh seysoun' (line 39) or festival of August have been reviewed in detail²³. This feast likewise had no special link with Mary. It was not the Assumption on 15 August. Reference to it as when 'corne is coruen' (line 40) or cut with sickles is proof of it as Lammas, on 1 August, with consecration of bread made from newly-ripened wheat or barley. It was a Eucharistic feast, not a Marian one. The poet understood this. Most critics do not. Also to be mentioned here are compelling arguments for the Nero manuscript's four poems (*Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) as by one author, not two or more²⁴.

His personality shows even in details. Together with mention of Mary as 'the unique and peerless "Fenyx of Arraby"', or as 'quene of cortaysye', giving 'her grace of her own free choice' and who 'must be approached by her servants humbly, as suppliants', are lines 441-2:

That emperise al heuens hats [hath],
And urthe and helle, in her bayly

with her as Queen of Heaven and beyond, all things being in her *bayly* 'dominion, domain'²⁵. The last word is significant. Its context is hierarchial, even feudal. It points to the poet's firm belief in social order. He thought naturally in terms of power and authority. No surprise, then, to find another commentator writing of

¹⁹ Woolf, 1968, p. 262.

²⁰ *Patience*, pp. 11, 20-23.

²¹ Shepherd, 1970.

²² Spearing, 1970, pp. 10, 135.

²³ Gradon, 1971, p. 201.

²⁴ Vantuono, 1971.

²⁵ Gray, 1972, pp. 56, 85, 103, 251.



him as ‘a surprisingly uncomplicated moralist, and a conservative one as well’, who was ‘surprisingly untroubled’ by Richard II’s troubled reign, and ‘surprisingly accepting and unquestioning’ of orthodox faith and feudal state alike, suggesting ‘a kind of escapism or reaction’²⁶. Implication: a poet at the centre of power (not its margins), and thus with entrenched interests in maintaining the *status quo*.

For a contrast, take the Lollard knights. They used very different language. Fulsome praise of the Virgin was not their line. More characteristic were vehement contempt for the body and violent self-accusation, so that Sir John Cheyne in his will (of before 1422) called himself a ‘false traitor’ to God and spoke of his corpse as ‘wretched stinking carrion’; also typical is lack of funeral pomp, so that Cheyne did not want silk or ‘cloth of gold’ laid on his corpse, but instead cheap russet at ‘fifteen pence’ the yard²⁷. He would have disliked the magnificence evident in *Pearl*. Curious, then, is a remark on Christianity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an ‘ascetic, life-denying system’²⁸. This one might think refuted by Gawain’s prayer to the Virgin, addressed as ‘myldest moder so dere’ (line 754), that he may pass through a wilderness to hear mass for Christmas; a plea answered, for he then catches sight of Hautdesert, the castle where he will stay. One might also prefer remarks on how the Maiden in *Pearl* ‘patiently and beautifully’ explains the nature of God’s grace (a subject in the air since Bradwardine’s *De causa Dei* of 1344), the result being not so much hierarchy as ‘the paradox of equal supremacy’²⁹.

There is a further point. It is extremely likely that the poet, ‘like Chaucer, was influenced by Dante, who was otherwise scarcely read in fourteenth-century England’: he had high-level cultural contacts. He was no obscure clerk. On him as a father mourning an infant daughter, this (as already noted) is clinched by ‘In Krystes dere blessing and myn’ (line 1208), a letter-formula used by parent to child³⁰. So, the poet was no monk or priest. Nor is his text ‘written in alliterative verse’, despite its ‘often heavy alliteration’³¹. The correction is a useful contribution to accounts of the author’s technique³². He was a poet with astonishing artistic gifts.

The above insights on his Marian devotion and attitudes to Grace deserve respect, especially in comparison with remarks by others. One reads that at the

²⁶ Muscatine, 1972, p. 37.

²⁷ McFarlane, 1972, p. 211.

²⁸ Spearing, 1972, p. 41.

²⁹ Medcalf, 1973.

³⁰ Spearing, 1976, pp. 111, 125.

³¹ Pearsall, 1977, p. 172.

³² Turville-Petre, 1977, pp. 66-68.



'imaginative core' of *Pearl* is 'the conversion of the Dreamer from ignorance and resentment' to 'acceptance of divine order'³³. True. But there is more to it than that. Or, again, despite stimulating comments on the author, one may dismiss comment on 'the irrelevancies of autobiographical readings'³⁴. Anything which brings us nearer the author has its merits. Note here an observation on him as a 'purveyor of traditional orthodoxy'³⁵. It is yet more subtle that that, as a comment above on the thought of Bradwardine should imply.

At this point, a shift from theology to nomenclature. The Latin for 'pearl' is *margarita*, borrowed from Greek. Hence the suggestion that in the poem it 'may be hinted at as the Maiden's name'³⁶. Margaret of Antioch, subject of a thirteenth-century English life (investigated by J. R. R. Tolkien and others), was a popular medieval saint; and, if we turn to genealogies of the Stanley family, we find 'Margaret' as a name repeatedly given to their daughters³⁷. It may be that *Pearl* commemorates a Margaret Stanley born in 1388 (three years after her father married Isabel de Lathom), who died of plague in 1390; perhaps on 1 August. The poor child is otherwise unknown to history. But, if the Maiden really was called Margaret Stanley, it adds to the implications of pearls as represented in Scripture³⁸.

Now for a surprise. It concerns the startling lines 289-90:

'Jueler', sayde that gemme clene,
'Wy borde [jest] ye men? So madde ye be!'

The Maiden rebukes the Dreamer in downright terms as a fool; so, likewise, 'does the Virgin Mary in many a Miracle rebuke a sinner.' The poet is not concerned with 'the merely winsome' or 'merely loving and lovable'³⁹. He was made of sterner stuff. The symbolism of pearls is explored elsewhere⁴⁰. There are further remarks on it in a discussion of the poem's structure⁴¹.

Fisher's work on *Pearl* and aristocracy (as shown by the Maiden amongst thousands ranked with Mary) has been cited, if without his insights upon the

³³ *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, p. 36.

³⁴ Davenport, 1978, pp. 2, 51, 216.

³⁵ Coleman, 1981, p. 166.

³⁶ Brewer, 1983, p. 170.

³⁷ Coward, 1983.

³⁸ Fowler, 1984, p. 203.

³⁹ Bennett, 1986, p. 245.

⁴⁰ Kowalik, 1986.

⁴¹ Spearing, 1987, pp. 207-213.

poet's rigid conservatism⁴². Compared with his analysis, much recent criticism appears inconclusive, as with remarks on the Dreamer as displaying 'a degree of Lollard individualism and interpretiveness in his response to the Vineyard parable'⁴³. But his obtuseness need owe nothing to Lollards. Others remark on the Dreamer's 'We calle hyr Fenyx of Arraby' (line 430) that 'we' is exclusive, setting him apart from the 'community of heaven'⁴⁴. This also tells us little. Far better is a study of Richard II's Cheshire links and its suggestion that '*Pearl* was composed in about 1395' and hence near the end of the 'seven quiet years' (1389-96) of Richard's reign⁴⁵. The date is close to the 1390 already referred to. If Margaret Stanley died that year on 1 August, at a time likely for an epidemic, the poem may have been written for her anniversary on 1 August 1391.

After this, more muddled thinking. The question is *Pearl*'s debt to Dante and (especially) Boccaccio's *Olympia*. Parallels with the latter, noted first in 1904, are dismissed as one of literature's 'strange coincidences'. A 'marginal English poet' in the far-away Midlands could know nothing of 'the new literary currents' arriving from Italy⁴⁶. The problem here is obvious. Critics insist on seeing *Pearl* and its three fellows as written by a 'provincial'. Far from London's literary set (they continue), he could know nothing of Italian poetry. Any resemblance (they conclude) must be accidental. What such commentators do not notice is the dazzling sophistication and familiarity with court life that run through the four poems. If, however, we accept their author as Sir John Stanley, a magnate of fabulous wealth, his awareness of Italian poetry (and all other difficulties) at once vanish.

There is another side to this. One may agree (after Fisher) with what one writer terms 'forced submission to the divine will and the suppression of individual freedom' in *Pearl*, as also *Patience* and *Cleanness*. Relevant, too, on the matter of social protest (above all the Peasants' Revolt of 1381) is reference to the 'royal statutes and parliamentary decrees' used to counter agrarian unrest. Quite unconvincing is an assertion on how the Dreamer's slowness on the uptake mirrors the 'peasantry's refusal to renounce competition in an emergent market economy'⁴⁷. The Dreamer is a jeweller. He is not a ploughman. Marxist criticism here breaks down. The poet is spokesman for the landed ruling class, to which

⁴² Vance, 1991.

⁴³ Rhodes, 1994.

⁴⁴ Blanch and Wasserman, 1995, p. 144.

⁴⁵ Bowers, 1995.

⁴⁶ Putter, 1995, p. 192.

⁴⁷ Watkins, 1995.



he belonged. The shortcomings of the Dreamer are religious, not socio-economic.

Returning to the Virgin Mary, we find some striking comments from Derek Pearsall. He thinks Gawain's trust in her is really a sham. Gawain's religion is asserted as perhaps being little more than a superstitious regard for cult objects like 'the green girdle which so swiftly replaces his reliance on the pentangle and the Virgin Mary', as elsewhere in chivalric culture, where 'bishops are wheeled on to preside over certain rituals, and hermits are always on hand to dispense advice'⁴⁸. But, if this were the truth, why should Gawain (almost) succeed in resisting temptation from the lady who enters his bedroom? It subverts any sidelining of his devotion to Mary and the desire for Grace. Preferable is an observation on the poet as a 'vernacular theologian' who wrote *Pearl* and its companions as arguments 'for the spiritual worth of the lay aristocracy'⁴⁹. It is to the point.

Not to the point is the notion of the Dreamer as an actual jeweller, with mercantile values and an insecurity on his social position⁵⁰. The poet's values were other. We recall that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has details on how to disembowel a dead deer. Few jewellers would have much interest in that. Also faulty is a further left-wing study of *Pearl*, with much on cultural history, politics, class, economics, anticlericalism, power, as well as Wat Tyler and John Ball of 1381 and the Peasants' Revolt. It teems with misconceptions. In a paragraph on priests with concubines and families, the author raises the notion of the poet as a cleric; he refers later on to the original de luxe manuscript of *Pearl* as paid for 'a Cheshire courtier of substance' like Sir John Stanley⁵¹. The two statements remain unrelated. So near and so far. The writer does not see that *Pearl* reads like the work of a wealthy layman, and not some cleric.

In 2004 was published a study of features in the MS Cotton Nero poems (reference to toponymy, dialect, hunting, armour, court luxuries, etiquette), offering as conclusion that Sir John Stanley wrote them all⁵². In the same year he appeared elsewhere, but merely as their 'patron'⁵³. Thereafter another minimizing opinion on the religion of *Pearl*, that the Dreamer 'does not seem overjoyed' on learning that his daughter is happy in heaven, and 'seems to have nagging doubts of the truth of his dream', because the answers given 'still seem empty'⁵⁴.

⁴⁸ Pearsall, 1997.

⁴⁹ Watson, 2000.

⁵⁰ Barr, 2000.

⁵¹ Bowers, 2001, pp. 56, 191.

⁵² Breeze, 2004.

⁵³ Cooper, 2004, p. 339.

⁵⁴ Anderson, 2005, pp. 76-77.

If that were true, one wonders why the author bothered to write *Pearl* in the first place.

A further study contains an insight which the writer yet fails to exploit. It concerns knowledge of Italian poetry and specifically of Dante. Chaucer was familiar with Dante's work, following his missions to Italy. The prologue to *Patience* does, however, has a comment on 'travelling to Rome'⁵⁵. Now, Sir John Stanley was a courtier who did military service in France; *Pearl*'s author spoke excellent French. It may be that Stanley visited Italy as a diplomat (although nothing appears in official records), or else (more probably?) had dealings with Italians in London or south-west France who might speak of Dante [See the Postscript]

In an important paper, two Bristol scholars challenge attribution of *Pearl*'s language (as written by the MS Nero scribe) to the Staffordshire-Cheshire border. They conclude that more research is needed before we can be 'truly exact about the dialect of these poems'⁵⁶. In this context may be mentioned a ravine in north-west Staffordshire which was the 'Green Chapel' of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*⁵⁷. Its location is significant. As for Sir John Stanley, his 'extraordinary exploits' (giving him legendary fame) have been placed in a literary context⁵⁸. Nothing on Stanley as himself a poet, however. The hypothesis is yet cited by another⁵⁹. As for the citole and cithern referred to in *Pearl* (line 91), there is a rare comment on them⁶⁰. They deserve more investigation. The instruments were perhaps sophisticated ones. Musicologists could tell us more on them.

Remaining comments will not detain us long. One of them correctly dismisses as 'unlikely' the proposal that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written by a household clerk of Richard II⁶¹. The court had no interest in alliterative verse. Nor does the poem read like the work of a 'clerk'. The ravine of Ludchurch, north Staffordshire, figures again in a survey of the four MS Nero poems⁶². In a chapter on dream-poetry are remarks on *Pearl*'s relation to death and resurrection⁶³. They are timely, because another writer, developing earlier views on how the poet's emphasis on 'spots' refers to symptoms of plague, proposes that the

⁵⁵ Spearing, 2005, p. 172.

⁵⁶ Putter and Stokes, 2007.

⁵⁷ Turville-Petre, 2008.

⁵⁸ Barrett, 2009, p. 183.

⁵⁹ Hill, 2009, p. 168.

⁶⁰ Kowalik, 2010, pp. 177-178.

⁶¹ Patterson, 2010, p. 282.

⁶² Turville-Petre, 2010.

⁶³ Brown, 2013, pp. 36, 39.



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Maiden died in 1390, when an epidemic killed many children and young people⁶⁴. If the poet knew about disease, he also knew about luxury, again making it impossible to accept that he was 'a cleric who could not progress beyond minor orders'⁶⁵. Still less credible is the notion that he was from Ripon, Yorkshire⁶⁶. Unhelpful again is a Marxist critique of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with its hero's protective girdle related to trade, commodities, and 'the profits of the chivalric economy'⁶⁷. More realistic here (in a tribute to a Warsaw professor) is an exploration of fairy-tale aspects of *Pearl*⁶⁸.

A final contrast. A study of poetic artifice and the Blessed Virgin has mention of how in supreme beauty she prevails for ever in Heaven, a place 'al of brende [refined] golde bryght' (line 989)⁶⁹. Elsewhere are remarks on *Pearl* as 'a meditation on the personal, soteriological, and even eschatological shocks' of plague in fourteenth-century England; plus, further ones on 'courtly patronage' and the Maiden as 'daughter' not of the poet, but his patron⁷⁰. Both approaches to *Pearl* can (despite appearances) be harmonized, as we now suggest.

Our survey from 1916 to 2019 reveals some progress. Hypotheses on *Pearl* as symbolic have faded. Since the 1960s, informed opinion has been that the poem really is about the loss of a child. There has been advance too on the poet's links with the court of Richard II and with Cheshire, which had special connections with the Crown. But there has also been relapse, above all on the author and his mentality. Laura Loomis in 1959 thought that he might be a 'wealthy magnate'; John Fisher in 1961 commented on his 'reactionary' politics, indicated by representation of Heaven as a universal aristocracy; Gervase Mathews in 1968 was the first to relate the poet to Sir John Stanley. Since then, the way has (on the whole) been lost. Few of those writing on the poem and its associates now refer them to the attitudes (even the ideology), of a powerful and well-connected grandee. This includes a profound reverence for the Blessed Virgin, who is very much the Queen of Heaven.

The poet's devotion to the Virgin Mary, as in all else that can be gathered from the four related poems, is consistent with authorship by Sir John Stanley. Accept the hypothesis, and all difficulties relating to the texts are removed. Ignore it, and those difficulties remain; for the poems are surely by a man who was

⁶⁴ Breeze, 2014, pp. 337-341.

⁶⁵ *The Works of the Gawain Poet*, p. xv.

⁶⁶ Gillespie, 2017.

⁶⁷ Wadiak, 2017, p. 90.

⁶⁸ Spyra, 2017, pp. 93-108.

⁶⁹ D'Arcy, 2018.

⁷⁰ Coley, 2019, pp. 89, 172.

at once a soldier, magistrate, and politician; a traveller abroad; a reader who was at home in four languages; a husband and father; and a royalist whose unflinching social conservatism was not possessed by contemporaries like Langland or Chaucer or Gower. If, then, scholars now focus attention on Sir John Stanley as author of *Pearl* and its three fellows, our understanding of English literature will be considerably deepened.

POSTSCRIPT: Since this paper was submitted for publication, a complete study of the case for Stanley as poet has appeared. It is A. Breeze, *The Historical Arthur and the 'Gawain' Poet* (Lanham, 2023). It includes these points, following arguments of the US scholar Ann W. Astell in her *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, 1999). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written probably in late 1387, and in any case between 13 October 1386, when Robert de Vere (1362-92) was created Duke of Ireland, and 20 December 1387, when (on defeat in battle near Oxford) he fled into exile, his political career ruined. Stanley was de Vere's host at Chester Castle in the summer of 1387, where his guest lived in lavish style. Hence sardonic allusions to de Vere in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as identified by Ann Astell (whose book should, of course, be consulted). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of 1387, will thus predate *Pearl*, of 1390. That is why, amongst other things, *Pearl* shows the influence of Dante and Boccaccio, as *Sir Gawain* does not: the explanation being that Stanley in 1387 had as his personal doctor an Italian graduate, Antonio de Romanis, who probably informed him on Italian poets previously unknown to him, but remembered when he came to write *Pearl*.

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