

THE PEARL

c. 1370

A great deal of investigation has entered into the attempts to identify the gifted writer who composed a group of poems some time about 1370. One manuscript contains four poems: "The Pearl", "Sir Gawayn and the Grene Knyght", "Patience", "Purity, or Cleannes". Like many other poems written in the north of England during the 14th century the group is in alliterative verse imitative of the old Anglo-Saxon poetic form. The style, the idiom, the dialect, and even the vocabulary of these four poems have such striking resemblances one to another that the assigning of them to one author is rather easy.

The difficulty lies in naming the writer. Ingenious research has linked the poems with half a dozen men in the 14th century, but the final convincing proof has yet to be advanced. It is reasonable to believe however that the Pearl Poet, as the author is called, had connections with the court of king Edward III (1327-1377), that he may have been a cleric, or perhaps a lay member of the clergy but that he was hardly an argumentative theologian. Whatever his occupation, or his character, his ability as a poet was unusual.

Sources: the Note from the Literature of England, Woods, Watt, Anderson, New York 1936 p. 100; translation of the text from "Twelve Centuries of English Poetry and Prose," Newcomer-Andrews, New York 1910, pp. 37-38.

For a comparative study on the origin of "The Pearl", its source in Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-1375) eclogue "Olimpia" (1361), compare Juliusz Krzyżanowski's paper in the Proceedings of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Kraków 1949, vol. L. No. 7, p. 389-392.

FROM THE PEARL (c. 1370)

1

O pearl¹, for princes' pleasure wrought,
In lucent gold deftly to set,
Never from orient realms was brought
Its peer in price, I dare say, yet.
So beautiful, so fresh, so round,
So smooth its sides, so slender showit;

Whatever gems to judge be found
I needs must set it apart, alone.
But it is lost! I let it stray
Down thro' the grass in an arbor-plot².
With love's pain now I pine away,
Lorn of my pearl without a spot.

2

Since in that spot it slipt from my hand,
Oft have I lingered there and yearned
For joy that once my sorrows banned
And all my woes to rapture turned.
Truly my heart with grief is wrung.
And in my breast there dwelleth dole³;
Yet never song, methought, was sung
So sweet as through that stillness stole.
O tide of fancies I could not stem!
O fair hue fouled with stain and blot!
O mould⁴, thou marrest a lovely gem,
Mine own, own pearl without a spot ...

4

Once to that spot I took my way
And passed within the arbor green.
It was mid-August's festal day,
When the corn is cut with sickles keen.
The mound that did my pearl embower
With fair bright herbage was o'erhung,
Ginger and gromwell and gilly flower⁵,
And peonies sprinkled all among.
Yet if that sight was good to see,
Goodlier the fragrance there begot
Where dwells that one so dear to me,
My precious pearl without a spot.

5

Then on that spot my hands I wrung,
For I felt the touch of a deadly chill,
And riotous grief in my bosom sprung,
Tho' reason would have curbed my will.
I wailed for my pearl there hid away,
While fiercely warred my doubts withal,
But tho' Christ showed where comfort lay,
My will was still my sorrow's thrall.

I flung me down on that flowery mound,
When so on my brain the fragrance wrought
I sank into a sleep profound,
Above that pearl without a spot.

6

Then from that spot my spirit soared.
My senses locked in slumber's spell,
My soul, by grace of God outpoured,
Went questing where his marvels dwell.
I know not where that place may be,
I know 'twas by high cliffs immured⁶.
And that a forest fronted me
Whose radiant slopes my steps allured.
Such splendor scarce might one believe-
The goodly glory wherewith they shone;
No web that mortal hands may weave
Has e'er such wondrous beauty known.

9

Yes, beautiful beyond compare,
The vision of that forest-range
Wherein my fortune bade me fare-
No tongue could say how fair, how strange.
I wandered on as one entranced,
No bank so steep as to make me cower⁷;
And the farther I went the brighter danced
The light on grass and tree and flower.
Hedge rows there were, and paths, and streams
Whose banks were as fine threads of gold,
And I stood on the strand and watched the gleams
Of one that downward in beauty rolled.

10

Dear Lord, the beauty of that fair burn!⁸
Its beryllitic⁹ banks were bright as day,
And singing sweetly at every turn
The murmuring waters took their way.
On the bottom were stones a-shimmer with light
As gleams through glass that waver and leap,
Or as twinkling stars on a winter night
That watch in heaven while tired men sleep.
For every pebble there that laved
Seemed like a rare and radiant gem;

Each pool was as with sapphires paved,
So lustrous shone the beauty of them.

13

Then longing seized me to explore
The farther margin of that stream,
For fair as was the hither shore
Far fairer did the other seem.
About me earnestly I sought
To find some way to win across,
But all my seeking availed me nought:
There was no ford; I stood at loss.
Methought I must not daunted dwell
In sight of such a blissful goal,
When lo, a strange thing there befell
That still more deeply stirred my soul.

14

More wonder still my soul to daze
I saw beyond that lowly stream
A crystal cliff refulgent raise
Its regal height, and, dazzling, gleam.
And at its foot there sat a child,
A gracious maid, and debonair¹⁰,
All in a white robe undefiled —
Well had I known her elsewhere.
As glistening gold men use to spin,
So shone that glory the cliff before.
Long did I drink her beauty in,
And longed to call to her ever more . . .

16

But more than my longing was now my fright:
I stood quite still; I durst not call;
With eyes wide open and lips shut tight,
I stood as quiet as hawk in hall.
I weened¹¹ it was some spectral shape,
I dreaded to think what should ensue
If I should call her and she escape
And leave me only my plight to rue².
When lo, that gracious, spotless may¹²,
So delicate, so soft, so slight,
Uprose in all her queenly array,
A priceless thing in pearls bedight¹⁴.

17

Pearl-dight in royal wise, perdie¹⁵,
One might by grace have seen her there,
When all as fresh as a fleur-de-lys
Adown the margent¹⁶ stepped that fair.
Her robe was white as gleaming snow,
Unclasp'd at the sides and closely set
With the loveliest margarites¹⁷, I trow,
That ever my eyes looked on yet.
Her sleeves were broad and full, I ween,
With double braid¹⁸ of pearls made bright.
Her kirtle shone with as goodly sheen,
With precious pearls no less bedight . . .

20

Pearl-dight, that nature's masterpiece
Came down the margent, stepping slow:
No gladder man from hero to Greece
When by the stream she stood, I trow.
More near of kin than aunt or niece,
She made my gladness overflow;
She proffered me speech — Oh heart's release! —
In womanly fashion bending low:
Caught off her crown of queenly show
And welcomed me as a maiden might.
Ah well that I was born to know
And greet that sweet one pearl-bedight!

21

"O pearl!" quoth I, "all pearl-bedight,
Art thou my Pearl, the pearl I mourn
And long for through the lonely night?
In weariness my days have worn
Since thou in the grass didst slip from sight.
Pensive am I, heart-sick, forlorn, —
While thou hast won to pure delight
In Paradise, of sorrow shorn.
What fate has hither my jewel borne
And left me beggared to moan and cry?
For since we twain asunder were torn,
A joyless jeweler am I!"

22

That jewel then, with gems o'erspread,
Upturned her face and her eyes gray,

Replaced the crown upon her head,
 And thus my longing did allay:
 "Oh, sir, thou hast thy tale misread
 To say thy pearl is stolen away,
 That is so safely casketed¹⁹
 Here in this garden bright and gay,
 Herein forever to dwell and play
 Where comes not sin nor sorrow's blight.
 Such treasury would thou choose, parfay²⁰,
 Didst thou thy jewel love aright²¹!"

¹ O pearl: this anonymous poem is allegorical: possibly the Pearl (Margarita) is the poet's daughter. The whole is a very interesting piece of construction combining the Romance elements of metre and rhyme, as employed by Chaucer, with the old Saxon alliteration which the West Midland poets like Langland, affected. - ² arbor-plot: place grown with trees, a herb garden. - ³ dole: grief, suffering. - ⁴ mould: earth, soil; here: grave. - ⁵ ginger and gromwell and gilly flower: ginger - aromatic tropical plant (imbr); gromwell: a low growing plant with blue flower and hard stony seeds whence its botanical name Lithospermium; gilly flower-name applied to the clove pink, the wallflower (goździk). - ⁶ immured: surrounded. - ⁷ cower: sit huddled up, shrink tremblingly. - ⁸ burn-stream. - ⁹ berylline: coloured as the sea-green stone of beryl (emerald). - ¹⁰ debonair: cheerful; pleasant and courteous. - ¹¹ I weened: I thought. - ¹² to rue - to grieve, to be sorry, to regret. - ¹³ may: maid. - ¹⁴ bedight: dressed. - ¹⁵ perdie: from French par Dieu, in God's name. - ¹⁶ margent: margin, border, edge. - ¹⁷ margarites: pearls. - ¹⁸ braid: narrow band of woven material, silk ribbon, thread. - ¹⁹ casketed: put in safety, in a casket. - ²⁰ par fay: truly, indeed. - ²¹ a long religious dissertation follows and the dreamer awakens consoled.