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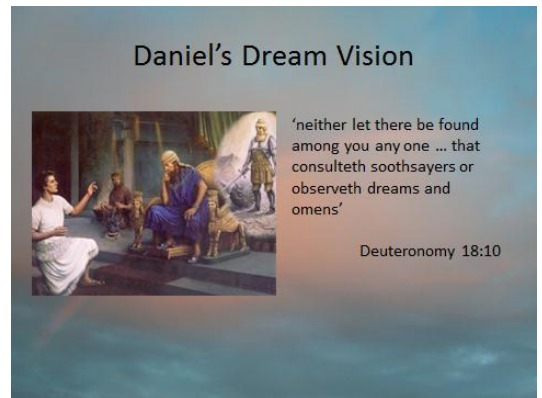
PEARL AND THE MEDIEVAL DREAM VISION

JON MACKLEY

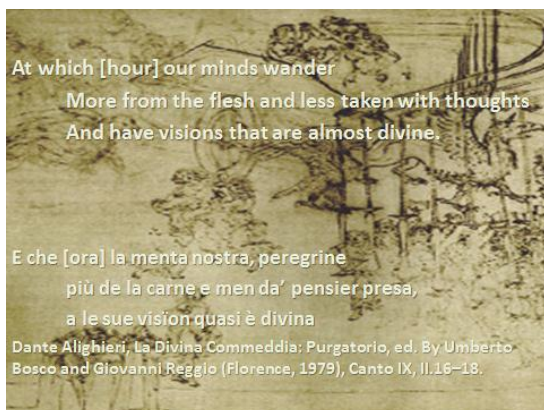


[PPT#1]What I want to do this morning is to look at how Classical and Biblical traditions provided the foundation for the medieval understanding of dream visions, and how this was employed by various authors of the Middle Ages, post particularly the fourteenth century elegiac poem, *Pearl*.

The dream vision is the most accessible of poetic forms. Anyone, whether king or pauper, can dream, and there is no limit to what one could do in the dream state. However, in the Middle Ages, dreams were approached with mixed feelings. There was precedent that dreams could be divinely inspired. Saints' lives often contained revelatory dreams, which had authority from the Bible: **[PPT#2]**Joseph and Daniel were able to interpret dreams. Yet, the Bible cautioned against dreams. The Book of Deuteronomy warns 'neither let there be found among you any one ... that consulteth soothsayers or observeth dreams and omens'.



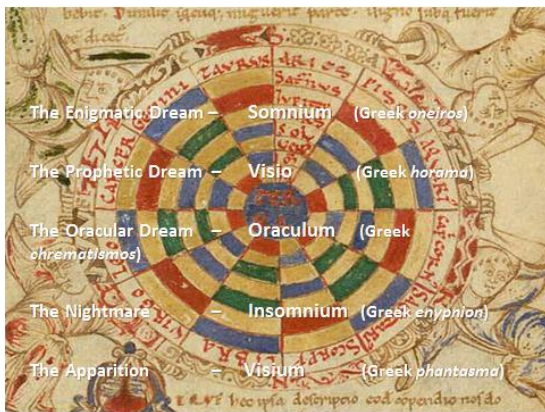
There was a belief that the immortal soul separated from the body whilst dreaming, and this potentially laid the soul open to problems: the devil could fill the minds of dreamers with evil thoughts, carried by goblins, or *mære* – hence “nightmare”. Conversely, no longer shackled by the physical restrictions of the human body, the soul can pass closer to God to receive inspiration.



[PPT#3]In the *Purgatorio*, Dante describes the prophetic dream: “At which [hour] our minds wander/ More from the flesh and less taken with thoughts/ And have visions that are almost divine”. This

description of the disembodiment of the soul is drawn from Homer and Vergil: classical writers believed that the dreamer and the ghost were both disembodied souls.

So, based on the authority of classical writers, including Homer and Plato, it was suggested prophetic dreams passed through the Gate of Horns, while deceptive dreams passed through the Gates of Ivory. This is also discussed in Macrobius's commentary on the *Dream of Scipio* by Cicero. Writing at the beginning of the fifth century, Macrobius copied verbatim the dream of Scipio Africanus, then added his analysis of this, identifying five types of dreams.




[PPT#4] The first three dreams: *oraculum*, *visio* and *somnium*, pass through the Gate of *Keras*, of Horns. Of the prophetic dreams, the *visio* presents images of future events, while an authority figure reveals the future in the *oraculum* and the ambiguous *somnium* bridges the divide between truth and deception. Of the last two, those which pass through the gate of *elephas*, of ivory, flee when the dreamer

awakes and Macrobius pays them little attention. **[PPT#5]** These dreams, he suggests, derives from a psychological disturbance or from over-eating. For example, in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Chanticleer the cockerel dreams of his approaching doom. His vision is a vivid description of Reynard the fox – "wheer as I saugh a beest Was lyk an hound ... His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed, And tipped was his tayl and bothe hise eeris; with glowynge eyen tweye." (I saw there a strange beast [which] was like a dog... His colour yellow was and somewhat red; And tipped his tail was, as were both his ears, and gleaming was each eye.") However, Chanticleer cannot comprehend what he sees, and therefore he assumes that it is an allegory, while his wife tells him that he simply has indigestion.

Geoffrey Chaucer also used the device of the dream poem as a literary construction: as well as taking his narrator (generally a wide-eyed innocent called 'Geffrey') to marvellous places, he could can be carried by a giant eagle (who complains that Geffrey is too fat and heavy to carry!); or using the device of a guide who has served his purpose can simply turn a corner and vanish, or the dreamer can awake to avoid making a startling revelation to an audience.

Chaunticleer's Dream



"Now God," quod he, "my swevene recche a right,
And kepe my body out of foul prisoun.
Me mette how that I romed up and down
Withinne our yeerd, wheer as I saugh a beest
Was lyk an hound, and wolde han maad areest
Upon my body, and han had me deed.
His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,
And tipped was his tayl and bothe hise eeris;
With blak, unlyk the remenant of hise heeris;
His snowte smal, with glowynge eyen tweye.
Yet of his look, for feere almost I deye!
This caused me my gromyng, doutelees"

Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll.2896-2907

Using the dream as a literary topos either places the audience in a position where they must interpret what has been presented to them, or it absolves the dreamer from responsibility for the events he describes: *The Vision of Piers Plowman* presents a parliament of rats and mice who discuss how they can 'ensure their common safety by preventing the cruelties inflicted upon them by a cat. This could be seen as an allegorical denunciation of the parliamentary system (the author, William Langland, might reply "well, you may see it that way. I just wrote a charming fable about rats and mice"). The allegorical parliament ends with a clever mouse observing it is better to have an unpopular ruler (Richard II) than having nothing to maintain law and slip into mouse anarchy! In addition, the dream of Piers Plowman was one of the few means that Langland could discuss Biblical matters in the vernacular rather than Latin, without the Church accusing him of heresy.



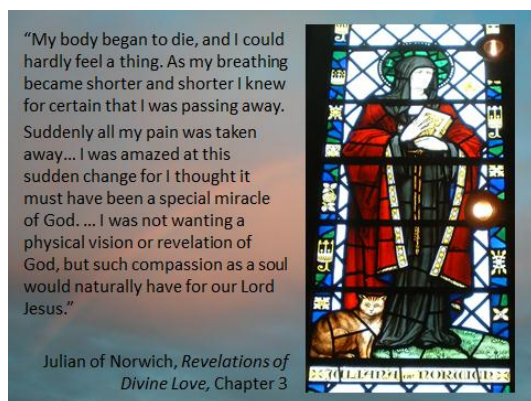
[PPT#6] During this time the medieval dream book – the *oneirocriticon* – developed. The general medieval view was that the interpretation of each dream must vary according to the social status of the person who experienced the dream. Neither the psychoanalytical view of the dream as wish fulfilment, nor that the dream personifies a fear that the mind cannot rationalise, were relevant to them. Instead the dream was a means

of prediction, an escape from physical or temporal constraints and a potential access to the divine realm. The dream state is a meeting place between Heaven and Earth, it is a place where man might receive a glimpse of the universe through God's eyes, and where one might see eternity laid out before him. However, the medieval dream commentators struggled with the problem of the balance between free-will and predetermination. In *The Dream of Scipio*, Scipio's grandfather (acting as *oraculum*, the prophetic authority figure) tells him that his life wavers between two destinies, suggesting that, even within a dream, nothing is pre-ordained.

Understandably, the medieval church denounced *all* dream books and the general interpretation of dreams because it was easier to discredit them outright rather than to enter a long theological argument about what was and what was not acceptable. The *somniatorum conjectores* – the dream interpreter – was accused of perpetrating the most pernicious of evils and there are examples of manuscripts where the dream texts have been crossed out. In short, medieval dream books were viewed with distrust as such books

made the dream experience something that one could interpret, rather than being a mystical and divine experience.

There was also the issue that the dream vision was a literary construction. This could partially be used to the writer's advantage, after all, if he has no control over what he dreams, then he has no choice to describe events that may be pleasing to one audience and abhorrent to others. Arguably, there can never be a 'true depiction' of a dream, as there is always a slippage from the dream to the written word (although in her Prophetic dreams,

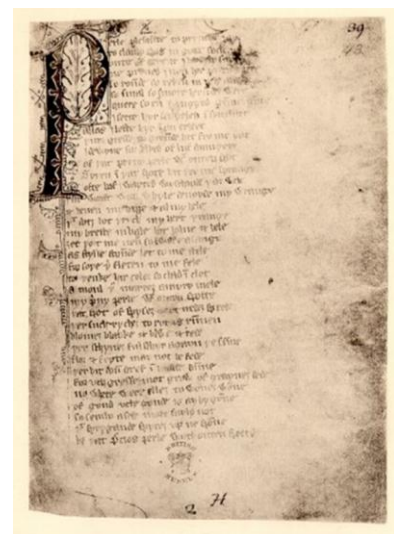


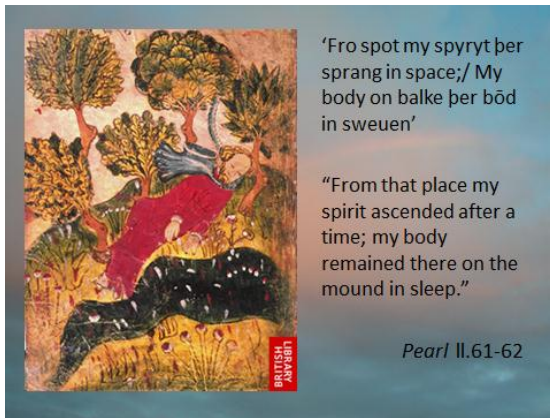
[ppt#7]the anchorite Julian of Norwich was so ill that she was read the last rites shortly before she received her visions, but she accepted them as direct knowledge of God's truth). There are a number of occasions when slippage might occur: the 'finite' mind or vocabulary is incapable of describing the 'infinite' that he sees in his dream (as discussed earlier, in the case of Chanticleer the cockerel

dreaming of Reynard the fox). Similarly, there is slippage from the dream with the necessity of changing the descriptions of events in order to create a dramatic effect, or to conform to the rhyme or metre of the poem, thus the form prescribes the content. Finally, a dream dissipates upon waking and a minute detail or an iconographic representation of vital significance for the dream may be overlooked.

Against such hostility from the Church, it is surprising that one of the most beautiful poems in Middle English which discusses important theological issues, is presented as a secular elegy in the form of a dream vision.

[ppt#8]*Pearl* is a poem written in a Cheshire dialect towards the end of the fourteenth century containing 1212 lines. It is a first person account of a man's grief at his loss of a 'precious pearl'. It begins, apparently, by describing a jeweller who has lost his pearl in a garden, although as the Latin for Pearl is Marguerite – Margery – it is also seen as a father lamenting the death of his daughter who died before she was two years old – *þou lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede* (You lived not two years in our land) and her father's inability to come to terms with his grief.

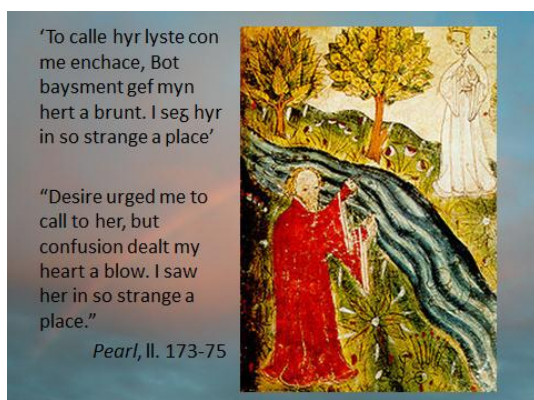




[ppt#9] The dreamer describes how, falling asleep in the garden, his spirit ascends, as has already been seen in relation to Dante: 'Fro spot my spyryt þer sprang in space;/ My body on balke þer bōd in sweuen' – 'sweuen' here means both 'to sleep' and 'to dream'.

In this dream he is transported to an otherworldly garden, the terrestrial paradise (so, from a structuralist point of view the terrestrial is set in opposition to the divine). In this place he encounters a beautiful stream that he cannot cross and he becomes convinced that paradise is on the other shore (another common motif in medieval literature, which derives from Celtic sources: the traveller is separated from paradise by a water barrier).

[ppt#10] The terrestrial paradise is described in vivid colours and precious gems, with birds singing sweetly, the trees in full fruit and the rich scent of spice plants. These features echo the description of the otherworldly Land Beyond the Waves in the *Voyage of Brendan* which was hugely popular in the Middle Ages. Although Brendan's voyage is a physical (and spiritual) pilgrimage to the otherworld, both Brendan and the dreamer in *Pearl* reach a water barrier in the otherworld which they cannot cross – in *Pearl* it is a stream shining with emeralds and sapphires. Everything beyond the barrier lies beyond the mortal's ability to process.



[ppt#11] As he looks for a crossing, he sees a maiden whom he identifies as his 'pearl' and she welcomes him. The Pearl-maiden is described as 'a child, a courteous maiden, most gracious in a mantel of shining white'. Paradoxically, she is older than when she died– but she has wisdom far beyond her years. And yet, there is a tantalising touch when the dreamer first sees her that he reveals something of

the nature of the dreamstate: 'Desire urged me to call to her, but confusion dealt my heart a blow. I saw her in so strange a place'. Thus, as with many dreams, the dreamer cannot correlate two images: a person in a location where she would not normally be found and it jolts the audience for a second about how this could happen. Of course, the maiden is

exactly where she is meant to be: it is the dreamer who is out of place: 'Þurȝ drwry deth boz vch man dreue,/ Er ouer þis dam hym Dryȝten deme' – (Every man must pass through cruel death before God allows him over this water').

As they converse, the dreamer raises his misconceptions about Christian doctrine, while the maiden is given the opportunity to rebut his views, offering a parable of the vineyard and summarising the Christian doctrine of grace (at this point the maiden becomes the *oraculum*, the authority figure who guides the dreamer's learning). In psychoanalytical terms, the pearl maiden effectively becomes the antithesis of the super ego, which is considered to be the authoritative voice of the father internalised by the child. Here, in the dream-state the authoritative voice of the child has been internalised by the father. Thus Pearl continues the tradition of the debate poems – outside of the descriptions of the otherworld, the majority of the poem is comprised of the jeweller asking questions and offering his flawed understanding of the nature of salvation, with the maiden offering her response. Although there are descriptions of the otherworld, there is little *dramatic* marvellous imagery, which can be seen in other poems, for example in the assault on the Barn of Truth by Antichrist and the seven deadly sins towards the end of *Piers Plowman*, or



'Þe oȝte better þyseluen blesse,/ And loue ay God, in wele and wo,/ For anger gaynez þe not a cresse'.

"You ought rather to cross yourself, and always praise God, in prosperity and suffering, for anger does not profit you"

Pearl, ll. 341-42

Geoffrey Chaucer being swept away by an eagle in *The House of Fame*. **[ppt#12]** The Pearl-maiden belittles the dreamer for his selfishness for wishing her away from Heaven: ('Þe oȝte better þyseluen blesse,/ And loue ay God, in wele and wo, For anger gaynez þe not a cresse'. (You ought rather to cross yourself, and always praise God, in prosperity and suffering, for anger does not profit you). The

cajoling is seen in other dream debate poetry as the mortal mind is incapable of absorbing exact knowledge about such cosmic matters.

It can be argued that *Pearl* is a response to the highly popular dream vision, *The Romance of the Rose*. Originally written in French around 1230 where the 'enclosed garden' (*locus amoenus*) is often associated with the Garden of Eden but also a representation of female sexuality. Conversely, the garden in which the *Pearl*-maiden is found has no walls and is a symbol of her incorruptible purity.

The final scene of the poem has the dreamer requesting to go to the New Jerusalem which lies beyond the stream; the pearl-maiden refuses, but explains that she has attained permission for him to view it from the exterior. He is led to view a city on the hill, which is

described in terms of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, where the gates are made of pearl. Likewise, the number of lines of the poem: 1212. 12x12 corresponds with the number of the saved in the New Jerusalem: 144,000.

One of the principal points concerning *Pearl* is that, like in a dream, the symbolism of what *the* pearl represents is constantly changing. At the beginning of the poem it is a precious gem: 'perle, pleasaunte to princes paye' (l. 1), but at the same time it is a lost daughter who develops into the handmaiden of Christ in Heaven, while at the same time representing the celestial procession of those who will be saved on the Day of Judgement, and thus the pearl 'withouten spot' is a symbol of purity; Jesus gives the parable which cautions about casting 'pearls before swine' – the valuable doctrine to those who are unable to appreciate it; conversely, Matthew describes how the 'Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking goodly pearls' (Matt. 13:45). As with a 'real' dream, each image can be a variety of signifiers, each representing a different interpretation of the sign. So, as Priscilla Martin argues 'The Pearl-maiden does not have to be represented *either* the soul of the dead child or immortality or the kingdom of heaven. All these meanings are simultaneously present in the figure of the immortal soul of an innocent child in heaven' (323).

The dream ends with the dreamer becoming overwhelmed by his desire to see inside the New Jerusalem, but jumping into the stream acts as the shock – what viewers of *Inception* would refer to as a 'kick' – to shock him from the dream and back into reality.

Conclusion

Many of us, as children, might have ended our stories where we had cornered ourselves into an impossible plot with 'And I woke up and it was all a dream. Phew!' However, when the dreamer in *Pearl* awakes, he is *still* grieving for the loss of his daughter, but he is wiser for his experience. Although this is just one reading of the poem, it is clear that the Pearl-poet has used the elegiac nature of the dream vision as a means of conveying a message of comfort and salvation, as the dreamer receives instruction in Christian doctrine. Once the Christian doctrine of redemption has been explained to him, he 'still asks questions but expresses no further objections'. However, as with *Piers Plowman*, the significance is that the dream debate occurs at a time when doing so in the vernacular would have been tantamount of heresy, but as everybody dreams, and no one can truly control their dream, the *Pearl*-poet is exonerated from any responsibility.