

THE "ELEMENTAL" APPEAL OF THE PEARL: A CRITICAL VIEW
OF THE BACKGROUND AND TEXT

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By
MARY JANE RANDLE

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Approved for the Major Department

Charles S. Walton

Approved for the Graduate Council

Jurme C. Boylan

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PREFACE

I became interested in The Pearl while I was enrolled in a course in Middle English several years ago. At that time we studied Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in some detail and read parts of The Pearl. I was immediately struck by an underlying element of humanity and simplicity in both works, surprising, perhaps, in works noted for their extremely ornate passages and complexity of style. Further study of The Pearl revealed that I was not alone in recognizing the unique appeal of the poem, for as the survey of critical scholarship in Chapter I shows, the poem has been the source of much scholarly interest since it was made available to modern readers more than one hundred years ago. Basically, the present study attempts to identify the source of the poem's appeal.

Two other factors influenced my approach to The Pearl. The first is my long-standing interest in mysticism in literature, and the second, a frank impatience with tedious studies of arbitrary symbology as an approach to literary works of merit. Certainly, The Pearl offered a rich and challenging source of study for one interested in these areas.

Study of the poem led to a considerable amount of research on fourteenth-century background, and much of what I have found to be true of The Pearl may be logically applied to other literature of the period. I hope, therefore, that the

following study may prove helpful not only to those interested in The Pearl, but also to those interested in other medieval literature as well.

I want to express my appreciation for the wonderful service rendered by the Inter-Library Loan system. Through this system I was able to secure at the Kansas State Teachers College Library books and periodicals from many colleges and universities. The cooperation I received never ceased to delight and amaze me.

I want also to thank Dr. June J. Morgan, Professor of English, for the time she devoted to reading my manuscript.

In addition, I owe much to Dr. Charles E. Walton, Head of the Department of English, for the very patient help he has given me and especially for his contagious enthusiasm for Middle English literature, which prompted this study of The Pearl.

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M. J. R.

Emporia, Kansas

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CHAPTER I

BACK TO THE ELEGY

While Chaucer was still learning among princes and courtiers to fashion dainty measures on themes of love and Jolité . . ., Modern English Poetry had already stirred into life, presaging with no uncertain tokens its glorious future. Its cradle song was a "Lament"; its Vita Nuova, an "In Memoriam."¹

The "cradle song" of modern English poetry was the deceptively simple fourteenth-century elegy, The Pearl. As such, it holds a unique place in the development of English poetry, representing as it does, a compromise between the "forward-looking" poetry of the time that formed the foundation of modern literature, and the "backward-looking" form that hearkened to the patterns of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse.² Its meter, on the one hand, marks a revival of the Old English alliterative tradition evolving from Beowulf and Cynwulf, but it also shows the influences of the new literary forms and the ferment that were making themselves felt at this time and which were so notably evident in Chaucer's works.³ The Pearl was perhaps incomparable in reconciling the seemingly

¹Israel Collancz, Pearl: An English Poem of the Fourteenth Century, p. xix.

²Ibid., pp. xix-xx.

³Albert C. Baugh (ed.), A Literary History of England, p. 239.

"irreconcilable elements" of old and new.⁴

Baldwin has called it "our first elegy," noting that it contains not only the beautiful dignity of verse that moves the great elegies of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, but also much of the same attitude of mind toward the mystery of bereavement: "There is no jar in passing from the reading of Pearl to the reading of 'In Memoriam.'"⁵ Indeed, its merits as a literary work, in addition to its unique place on the "threshold of modern verse," have been widely recognized and its place in literature considered high, whether judged by "considerations of time, artistic form, or tone."⁶ In its best parts, it is considered to be unsurpassed by any other Middle English poetry,⁷ its author deserving a place beside Chaucer in English literature.⁸

As a matter of fact, from the time of its first introduction to modern readers, litterateurs have been impressed not only by its "intrinsic beauty" and its matchless "delicacy

⁴Gollancz, op. cit., pp. xix-xx.

⁵C. S. Baldwin, An Introduction to English Medieval Literature, p. 177.

⁶Gollancz, op. cit., pp. xix-xx. See also William Henry Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of The Pearl," PMLA, XIX (1904), 201.

⁷Baugh, op. cit., p. 235.

⁸Baldwin, op. cit., p. 155; and J. J. Jusserand, A Literary History of the English People: From the Origins to the Renaissance, p. 351.

and tenderness,"⁹ but by what Gollancz has characterized as its ". . . simple and direct appeal to what is eternal and elemental in human nature."¹⁰ Indeed, the fact that The Pearl was ever preserved, in the first place, for modern readers is in itself remarkable.¹¹ It is the first of four alliterative poems contained in a small quarto preserved in the Cotton Collection in the British Museum,¹² in which no author or titles are indicated, but the four poems, all written in the same small hand, have been named by modern editors, in the order of appearance in the manuscript, as follows: Pearl, Purity, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.¹³ Scholars are fairly generally agreed that these four poems are the work of the same author,¹⁴ whom they have designated

⁹J. C. Grierson, A Critical History of English Poetry, p. 17.

¹⁰Gollancz, op. cit., p. xix.

¹¹Ibid., pp. xx-xxi.

¹²E. V. Gordon, Pearl, p. ix.

¹³Baugh, op. cit., p. 233.

¹⁴J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (eds.), Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. xviii. Baugh, op. cit., p. 236, concurs although he notes that were it not for the fact that it is contained in the same manuscript, he might have some hesitancy in attributing Sir Gawain to the same author, so different is it in type. Gollancz, CHEL, I, 330-331, attributes the four poems to the same author. Baldwin, op. cit., p. 154, accepts Sir Gawain and Pearl as products of the same author, but feels that Patience and Purity are not treated by the same "delicate hand."

simply as the Gawain, or Pearl, poet.¹⁵

The question of authorship has intrigued readers since Morris's first edition appeared in 1864 and has been responsible for a great amount of speculation about the identity of the author.¹⁶ Like Morris, other nineteenth-century critics seldom questioned that the poem was an elegy. For example, Jusserand, who calls it a "song of mourning," felt it had been written sometime after the death of the poet's child, because some of the "bitterness of sorrow" had softened.¹⁷ Gollancz goes beyond random speculation and constructed a detailed "hypothetical biography" of the poet, in which he conjectures that the author was born about 1330 somewhere in or near Lancashire to a family of high rank. He notes the poet's intensely religious outlook and wide knowledge of the Scriptures and speculates that he may well have served as a "clerk" in a monastic school.¹⁸

This biographical view was not seriously challenged until 1904, when Schofield denied the elegiac sense of the poem and advanced his own allegorical interpretation: "One

¹⁵David M. Zesmer, Guide to English Literature: From Beowulf through Chaucer and Medieval Drama, p. 154.

¹⁶Jessie L. Weston, Romance, Vision, & Satire: English Alliterative Poems of the Fourteenth Century, p. 235.

¹⁷Jusserand, op. cit., p. 351.

¹⁸Gollancz, CHEL, pp. 323; 331.

cannot even affirm that it is an imaginary vision of a 'father' without going beyond the information of the text."¹⁹ Furthermore, in contrast to many scholars both of his own time and of the present day, Schofield found the elegiac view of the poem "ineffective."²⁰ He declared that the ". . . child so-called never had any physical shape on earth," and dismisses any references to the personal relationship between the narrator and the "pearl of paradise" as purely conventional literary devices.²¹ The pearl, as he conceived it, was a "purely allegorical figure" symbolizing "pure maidenhood," i.e., the virtue of purity.²² Others since Schofield, notably Sister Mary Hillman and Sister Madeleva, have devoted themselves to making various allegorical interpretations, but on certain crucial points their readings have proved less than satisfactory.²³

Sister Hillman's interpretation and editing of The Pearl is, nevertheless, one of the most painstaking of recent

¹⁹Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of The Pearl," p. 160.

²⁰Ibid., p. 201. Cf. Gollancz, CHRE, p. 323; Gordon, op. cit., p. xii; and G. G. Coulton, "In Defence of 'Pearl,'" MLR, II (October, 1906), 39-43.

²¹Schofield, op. cit., pp. 159-162.

²²Ibid., pp. 169-175.

²³Hillman, op. cit.; Sister M. Madeleva, Pearl: A Study in Spiritual Dryness. Cf. Gordon, op. cit., pp. xii-xvi. For an up-to-date summary of scholarship on the subject, see Zesnar, op. cit., pp. 345-346.

attempts to establish the work as a total allegory. This scholar, who describes her study as "one more attempt to prove that The Pearl is not an elegy," views the pearl as the poet's soul.²⁴ According to her interpretation, there is no daughter; rather, the pearl is literally a rare gem lost in a garden and symbolizes ". . . earthly treasure, which causes man to forget his high destiny."²⁵ She blames Collanz for popularizing the concept of the poem as a lament. She feels that scholars relied too heavily on what she terms his "free and misleading" translations and "fantastic emendations" even after Schofield had opened the way for allegorical interpretations.²⁶ For readers who do not readily abandon the elegiac sense of the poem, Sister Hillman's views are not always satisfactory. A case in point is the passage in which the narrator stands before "that spot" where his pearl was lost:

A denely dele in me deyned,
 Da3 rescoun sette my seluon la3t.
 I playned my perle bat ber wat3 spenned
 Wyth fyrte skylle3 bat faste fa3t,
 Da3 kynd of kryst me comfort kenned,
 My wreched wylle in wo ay wra3te.²⁷
 (51-56)

²⁴Hillman, op. cit., pp. vii-xii.

²⁵Ibid., p. xiii.

²⁶Ibid., pp. viii; xi.

²⁷Early English Alliterative Poems in the West Midland Dialect of the Fourteenth Century. This and all subsequent quotations from The Pearl are taken from this source.

Here is portrayed a man suffering from a devastating grief, and his reaction would seem entirely plausible to the average reader, but Sister Hillman takes exception to the concept that it is the sorrow of bereavement; such grief at bereavement, she declares, is ". . . contrary . . . to Christian teaching," and she cannot conceive of such a response from a Christian father. Rather, she would have one believe that this wild grief ("inordinate" is her term) results when the jeweler loses the real pearl that he is examining.²⁸ Obviously, she is confusing the ideal Christian response to bereavement with the actual tortured sorrow experienced even by those who know well the Christian teachings about death and eternal life. However, the poet does not fall into similar error. The whole point of the early passages concerns the conflict within the speaker. He realizes only too well that such grief does not become a true Christian; he acknowledges even that comfort could be found in Christ, but he finds that his will cannot submit--indeed, that the "wretched wille" is the source of his woe. These lines emphasize the conflict between Christian teaching and human capacity of acceptance that constitutes the central theme of the poem--its raison d'être, as it were--and it is this frailty of the human spirit and the suffering occasioned by such weakness that imparts to these sections and

²⁸Hillman, op. cit., pp. xi-xii.

the ensuing doctrinal exposition the moving sense of urgency and depth of feeling. Certainly, it is difficult to see how scholars can overlook or deny this mainspring of power and emotion.²⁹ A recent critic has stated unequivocally, in fact, that

. . . without the elegiac basis and the sense of great personal loss which pervades it, Pearl would indeed be the mere theological treatise on a special point, which some critics have called it.³⁰

This "sense of personal loss," of course, rather than the autobiographical "truth" of the poem, is the fundamental concern of modern critics. The question of autobiographical truth is not of great import to the twentieth-century reader, accustomed as he is to separating the poet and the narrator of a given poem. If evidence were found, for example, to show that the poet never had a child, the elegiac sense of the work would not necessarily be destroyed. Only a personal reference, some "driving force" of emotion, is necessary for acceptance of the poem on this basis.³¹ This point of view has been explained as follows:

²⁹ Ibid., pp. viii-xii; Madeleva, op. cit., p. 267; Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of The Pearl," p. 201. Schofield finds no evidence of "parental emotion" or "personal love" in the poem. His opinions are astutely challenged by Coulton, op. cit., pp. 40-41.

³⁰ Gordon, op. cit., p. xviii.

³¹ Zesmer, op. cit., p. 160.

Various symbolic readings . . . need not exclude the possibility that Pearl (like Deor and Milton's Lycidas) may have a core of human emotion to provide its driving force; that this emotion may or may not be involved with the death of a real or imagined child; that the poem nonetheless can be made the vehicle for earnest reflection about the state of man.³²

The question arises, however, as to whether or not a fourteenth-century poet would assume the purely fictitious "I" as many modern poets habitually do. Opinion differs on this point. Gordon, for example, after a careful study of this question, concludes that a ". . . first person feigned as a narrator who had no existence outside the imagination of the real author" had probably not yet appeared in literature of this kind in the fourteenth century. While he acknowledges the common use of the fictitious narrator in the travel literature of the time, he finds no evidence to indicate that the "I" of a dream was other than the dreamer himself. He, then, cites works of this type by Chaucer and Dante, among others, to support his contention that the poet and the dreamer were one and that The Pearl was ". . . founded on a real sorrow, and drew its sweetness from a real bitterness."³³

Hamilton, on the other hand, presents a strong case against the assumption that the author and the dreamer are one

³²Loc. cit.

³³Gordon, op. cit., pp. xiv-xvi.

and the same. She points out, for example, the "convenient" theological ignorance of the narrator of The Pearl as contrasted with the obvious familiarity of the author with points of doctrine.³⁴ This fact would not, of course, deny the elegiac sense of the poem, nor even the element of autobiographical truth, although there is, obviously, as she observes, a vast difference between the understanding of the dreamer (at least, in the beginning) and the poet who expounds the lengthy doctrine on salvation. This contrast may only mean that, sometime after the loss of the pearl, the poet learned a submissiveness to the will of God and gained a serenity about salvation which in retrospect he tells one about in his poem. Hamilton, as a matter of fact, carefully avoids denying any sense of "immediate personal tragedy" within the poem, although she is more concerned with the allegorical level in which the loss of the priceless pearl represents (to her) the "universal historical bereavement" resulting from Man's fall in the Garden of Eden that brought death to the world.³⁵

Whether or not the poem is autobiographical, however, is not of primary importance, because, as one scholar has pointed out, ". . . a feigned elegy remains an elegy: and

³⁴Marie P. Hamilton, "The Meaning of the Middle English Pearl," PMLA, LXX (September, 1955), 810-811.

³⁵Ibid., p. 811.

feigned or unfeigned, it must stand or fall by its own art."³⁶ Whether the pearl symbolized the jeweler's daughter as Gollancz and Morris and Gordon have asserted, whether it was literally a precious gem, a worldly treasure, as Sister Hillman has taken it to be, or whether it symbolizes spiritual sweetness, as Sister Madeleva insists--few would deny the devastating sense of loss and desolation that the man feels when he returns to the spot in which his pearl was lost. This sense of loss, however, is about the only point in the opening sections of the poem on which there is any general agreement. The exact nature of the spot, for instance, has been the source of widespread speculation. The scene to which the narrator returns was unquestionably a grave in an arbor or garden to Gollancz and to those who share his traditional view of the poem.³⁷ To Sister Madeleva, who connects the loss of the pearl with the loss of spiritual sweetness by a religious, the spot is unmistakably a monastic garden.³⁸ Sister Hillman insists that it is not a grave at all, but merely a grassy spot whereon the jeweler dropped the gem which he had carried outside to examine in the sunlight.³⁹

³⁶Gordon, op. cit., p. xvi.

³⁷Gollancz, CHERL, p. 320; Morris, op. cit., p. 2; Jusserand, op. cit., p. 351; Baldwin, op. cit., p. 177.

³⁸Madeleva, op. cit., p. 208.

³⁹Hillman, op. cit., p. 77.

Perhaps, the most detailed study of the "erberere" in which the pearl was lost has been made by Hamilton, who cites descriptive details of the scene to support her contention that the setting represents the "Garden of Eden" wherein the "maiden soul of man was lost."⁴⁰ In effect, the "erberere" represents as well, in this view, the "restored Eden of the Church."⁴¹

The next lines, however, would seem to strengthen the concept of the spot as a grave:

Dat spot of spyse3 my3t nede3 sprede,
 Der such ryche3 to rot is runnen;
 Blome3 blayke & biwe & rede,
 Der schyne3 ful schyr agayn þe sunne . . .
 Of goud vche goude is ay bygonne.
 So semly a sede mo3t fayly not . . .
 (25-34)

The poet's words, "such ryche3 to rot is runnen," are harsh words, but by their very harshness, they convey the nature of the man's condition and are but another example of the author's inimitable economy in his choice of words when he wishes to be simple and direct, as he so often does at climactic moments. Nevertheless, some have objected that a bereaved father would not use such words.⁴² Such an observation,

⁴⁰Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 814-817.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 815.

⁴²Hillman, op. cit., p. 79.

however, fails to recognize the profound nature of the man's grief. Indeed, these lines not only depict with exquisite sensitivity the agonizing, masculine sorrow, but also the mourner's touching self-tormenting attempt to face the reality of his loss. Furthermore, in the passage there is also an interesting contrast between earth and Heaven, which foreshadows the central theme of the poem: the contrast between mortal man's flawed and incomplete understanding and Supernal Intelligence--between the transient quality of earthly existence and Eternal Salvation.⁴³ This theme is further emphasized later, in fact, when Pearl distinctly identifies herself as one of those blessed in Heaven, "al-pa3 oure courses in clotte3 clyngge" (856) and "our flesch be layd to rote" (957).⁴⁴ These lines, moreover, are not an unnatural response to bereavement, if one judges by the sentiments of other poets. Gollancz, who anticipated a vast number of controversial points, notes this fact and illustrates his point in the following quotations from Hamlet and "In Memoriam," respectively:

And from her fair unpolluted flesh
 May violets spring.

And from his ashes may be made
 The violets of his native land.⁴⁵

⁴³Wendell Stacy Johnson, "The Imagery and Diction of The Pearl: Toward an Interpretation," ELH, XX (September, 1953), 131-180.

⁴⁴See Coulton, op. cit., p. 42.

⁴⁵Gollancz, Pearl, p. 109.

To those who view the pearl literally, on the first level, these lines must, of necessity, be interpreted somewhat differently. Hillman suggests that the poet sorrowfully contemplates the "decomposition" which the pearl will undergo in contact with the acid soul, and, thus, likens the pearl to a seed buried in the earth. She continues:

The pearl, too, will produce fruit--spiritual fruit for the jeweler's own welfare, namely, a willingness to renounce that special earthly treasure which hinders his soul's salvation.⁴⁶

This view, it would seem, is considerably less satisfying than the traditional one. It is true, as the poem progresses, that the dreamer ultimately transfers his concern for the pearl of mortal life to the pearl of Heaven. This change, however, is in accord with the elegiac view of the poem and does not seem to support Hillman's contention that the pearl on the first level could not represent a child, but only material wealth.⁴⁷ Baugh has observed that "there are too many features which are meaningless on any other assumption than that the poet mourns the loss of a real child."⁴⁸

Not only do "allegorical" interpretations which deny

⁴⁶Hillman, op. cit., p. 79.

⁴⁷Loc. cit.

⁴⁸Baugh, op. cit., p. 235.

the elegiac sense of the poem lack plausibility, but they also remove from the poem the sense of "urgency" that, as a lament, gives meaning to the work.⁴⁹ Admittedly, interpretations such as those of Madeleva or Hillman may possess the same urgency to readers who, like them, have concentrated their lives on religious experience, but the universality of appeal is lost when the sense of personal loss (a literal bereavement) is denied. For example, it is not inconceivable that the poet was mourning the death of a loved one at the same time that he was suffering grave doubts about the state of his own soul. The response would, of course, be especially understandable if the poet was, as has been suggested, both the father of the child and a "religious."⁵⁰ Such a case would not have been unusual in the Middle Ages, even if one were to assume that the child was not illegitimate, for the poet might have taken orders after his wife's death, or might even still have been married, since marriage at this time was still common among members of the lower clergy.⁵¹

Although there is no general agreement among scholars as to how the author gained his knowledge of religious doctrine, nor even as to the orthodoxy of his view, his wide experience

⁴⁹Gordon, op. cit., pp. xii; xviii-xix.

⁵⁰Coulton, op. cit., p. 40.

⁵¹Loc. cit.

in such matters is readily acknowledged.⁵² Religious thought of the period, one should remember, was complex, as was the symbolism employed in both the poetry and prose dealing with it, and religious themes--Christian themes, more specifically--permeate almost all of the enduring literature of the period.⁵³ Thus, it would appear natural for a poet of that time, whether an ecclesiastic or not, to turn to the Scriptures as a source for his work and to employ a measure of symbolism and allegory in his presentation.

The Scriptures were not the only source on which the poet drew, however, for a second source has been widely noted, and this source was the French allegory, Romance of the Rose, which popularized the dream-vision as a poetic device.⁵⁴

Romance of the Rose appeared in the thirteenth century and exerted a wide influence on fourteenth-century poets in England and throughout Europe as well.⁵⁵ For example, the

⁵²Carleton F. Brown, "The Author of The Pearl, Considered in the Light of his Theological Opinions," PMLA, XIX (1904), 115-153. Brown supports the theory that the poet was an ecclesiastic (p. 127); but finds his theological opinions highly unorthodox. Gollancz, Pearl, p. xlvii, was convinced that the author was not a priest. Madeleva, op. cit., p. 267, was just as firmly convinced that he was.

⁵³Zesmer, op. cit., pp. 88-90.

⁵⁴Charles G. Osgood (ed.), The Pearl, p. xiii-xvii. William Horrostein et al (eds.), The Reader's Companion to World Literature, pp. 388-389.

⁵⁵Osgood, op. cit., pp. xiii-xiv.

influence of the Wynanne on the Pearl poet is unmistakable in his depiction of the garden--bright, flowery, tranquil--and in his general conception of the heavenly region.⁵⁶ What one should remember, however, is that the dream-vision was more than a literary convention. Indeed, much of its popularity derived from the fact that the medieval mind still accepted the idea ". . . that blessed faces appeared and prophetic voices spoke" to a dreamer upon occasion, and the vision described represented, if not an actual dream, at least a crucial resolution of some important spiritual conflict.⁵⁷ This is the case with Dante, and it is similarly the case with The Pearl.⁵⁸

Modern critics in noting the fondness of the medieval mind for allegory and symbolism are perhaps overlooking this simple acceptance of the reality of a dream-vision and, in so doing, are likely to dismiss the personal relationship between the dreamer in the poem and the dream-maiden. Thus, they may be depriving themselves of the supreme sense of identification which the fourteenth-century reader of The Pearl (never doubting this relationship) felt with the distraught father who, after falling asleep in the flowery garden, finds himself

⁵⁶Gordon, op. cit., p. xxxii.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. xv.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.

viewing his lost pearl in Paradise. His astonishment (for she is now a full-grown maiden) and his joy lend intensity to the passage.⁵⁹ Indeed, he recognizes her almost at once, and with "gladande glory" he feels impelled to call out to her, but is restrained by the shock of seeing her "in so strange a place" (171 and 175). At least two critics have used these lines in an attempt to disprove the father-daughter relationship ostensibly present. Hillman, for example, states: "He could not reasonably, as a Christian, be surprised at seeing his little dead daughter there."⁶⁰ Madeleva expresses a similar opinion: "A man so thoroughly instructed in doctrine as the poet would never have betrayed such ignorance of dogma about the condition of children after death."⁶¹ She believes that his astonishment is due to the fact that it is his own soul which he sees before him: "The beauty of the human soul is so great as to almost overpower one who should behold it in this life."⁶² Again, these two scholars display a curious

⁵⁹Pearl's transfiguration had ample precedent in the literature, notably Boccaccio's Olympia, as Osgood, for one, has pointed out, op. cit., p. xiv. However, the fact that Pearl appears in the Vision as a young woman is used by Mother Angela Carson to support her thesis that The Pearl is a lament not for a dead child, but for an adult, probably a young woman with whom the poet had been in love: Mother Angela Carson, "Aspects of Elegy in the Middle English Pearl," SP, LXII (January, 1965), 17-27.

⁶⁰Hillman, op. cit., p. 83.

⁶¹Madleva, op. cit., p. 131.

⁶²Loc. cit.

obtuseness. They allow their own pre-conceptions of ideal Christian response to blind them to the touching reality of the poet's depiction of the very human reactions of one whose faith has been grievously tried. The dreamer may "know" Christian dogma, but his true conversion is yet to come.

Medieval history offers a further explanation of the narrator's bewilderment, for although the Church at this period held that baptized children who died in infancy were saved, some disagreement had existed in the early medieval church as to the salvation of these children and thus doubts may have persisted in England at this time.⁶³ It seems likely, as Gordon suggests, that the author's ". . . knowledge of these divergent views may well have affected the emphasis on this point in the poem."⁶⁴

Certainly, the dreamer's happiness knows no bounds when he sees his Pearl dwelling in the bliss of Paradise: there is ". . . no gladder game hepen in to grece" (231). He has already made it clear that he recognizes the maiden: "I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere" (164). Now, he is more explicit: "Ho wat3 me nerre þen aunte or nece (233). Conceivably, she could be a sister, but it has been observed that ". . . the

⁶³Gordon, op. cit., p. xviii.

⁶⁴Ibid. cit. Corroboration of the view may be found in Chapter II.

depth of sorrow portrayed for a child so young belongs rather to parenthood."⁶⁵ Even Schofield, who, one will recall, denied the elegiac sense of the poem, admitted that these lines are difficult as a part of interpretations which do not accept the poem as a lament, but he suggests that they have been used for the purpose of minimizing ". . . even such personal elements as the setting would have justified."⁶⁶ Others have suggested that the poet's choice of words, here, was determined by the necessities of the rhyme scheme.⁶⁷ More clearly, one thinks, these lines illustrate the poet's sure touch in handling emotion--his skillful restraint when restraint is in order.⁶⁸ Indeed, such reticence and economy of expression serve to enhance the effectiveness of the poem, so that it is difficult to understand Professor Schofield's failure to recognize the strong force of personal emotion in the poem.⁶⁹

⁶⁵Ibid., p. xiii. This line, of course, has suggested other possibilities as well. To Carson, she is the poet's "beloved," op. cit., p. 24; and to Cargill and Schlauch, she is most probably the granddaughter, Margaret, of Edward III. See O. Cargill and M. Schlauch, "'The Pearl' and Its Jeweler," EMLA, XLVIII (March, 1928), 108.

⁶⁶Schofield, op. cit., p. 160.

⁶⁷Coulton, op. cit., p. 41.

⁶⁸Osgood, op. cit., p. xxxiv. Osgood sees the reticence of these lines as the natural reticence of sorrow.

⁶⁹Coulton, impatient with Schofield's obtuseness, characterizes his attitude as "inexplicably perverse," and accused him of being "hypnotized" by his own "initial misconceptions," op. cit., pp. 41-42.

The importance of the identity of the Pearl maiden becomes clear in the doctrinal lesson that follows, for it is lent special significance when the celestial maiden is associated with the poet's lost child.⁷⁰ The child shall instruct the man, as it were, and show him the way to Christian salvation. In fact, many critics who deny the elegiac basis of the poem cling to the "child" theme which permeates and unifies the poem. To such critics, the pearl represents perfect innocence or purity "without a spot" that has been lost, though once possessed, either in the childhood of the narrator (representing, in one view, Everyman),⁷¹ or in the "childhood" of mankind in the Garden of Eden.⁷² Such views are in keeping with the instruction that follows, mainly concerned with the special position of innocents in heaven. The maiden begins her instruction by first pointing out the man's error in assuming that his pearl was utterly gone: "For þat þou lesteþ watþ bot a rose / Ðat flowred and fayled as kynd hit gef (269-270). The maiden is formal and cold at this point. Objections have been raised, as a matter of fact, to her use of "sir" as a form of address, if the man were her father, and also to

⁷⁰ See Gordon, pp. xii-xiii; xviii; xix.

⁷¹ Durant W. Robertson, Jr., "The 'Heresy' of The Pearl: The Pearl as a Symbol," MLN, LXXV (March, 1950), 156-157.

⁷² Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 812-815.

her hard-hearted attitude toward the man.⁷³ The use of "sir," however, was a customary form of address used by medieval children in speaking to their fathers and, therefore, would be a natural form for her to use.⁷⁴ Still her hardness is puzzling, and, thus, her attitude has been used as evidence against the validity of the elegiac reading of the poem.⁷⁵

The lessons of Christianity, however, are hard lessons, and it is Pearl's concern to impart these truths to the jeweler, whose limited, earthly point of view repeatedly blinds him to the significance of what is revealed to him.⁷⁶ In a sense, the dreamer's doubts and bewilderment indicate a lack of faith in God's promise of Eternal Life.⁷⁷ She is, thus, righteously indignant with his seeing-is-believing attitude and lack of comprehension:

I halde þat Iueler lyttel to prayse
 Ðat loueþ wel þat he seþ wyth yþe,
 & much to blame & vncertoysse,
 Ðat loueþ oure lorde wolde make a lyþe,
 Ðat lilly hyþte your lur to rayse,
 Ðaþ fortune dyd your flesch to dyþe.
 (301-306)

⁷³Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of The Pearl," p. 201; and Hillman, op. cit., p. 87.

⁷⁴Gordon, op. cit., p. xviii.

⁷⁵Hillman, op. cit., p. 87.

⁷⁶Gordon, op. cit., p. xviii.

⁷⁷Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 808-810.

According to one view, the "fortune" that brought death was Adam's sin, and the figure is the "maiden soul of man."⁷⁸ This interpretation does not deny that the lost pearl and the second pearl are one and the same, and does not necessarily deny (as does Hillman's view) the initial identity of the pearl as a child.⁷⁹ Such a view, while somewhat overly ingenious, perhaps, accounts well for the maiden's severity without disturbing the elegiac sense of the work which gives it its basic appeal.

Pearl's harshness serves also to emphasize the minor importance of earthly woe in contrast to the eternal bliss of salvation. Her cold objectivity points up the vast difference--symbolized, no doubt, by the stream separating the dreamer and the Heavenly Vision--between Earth and Heaven. Her instruction makes clear that it is he who is in error and sin; there can be no softening on the part of God; it is man who must humble himself before God.⁸⁰ Actually, the Maiden's severity is motivated by her concern for the dreamer.⁸¹ Indeed, his words show that he understands the reasons for her harshness: "Ne worpe no wrathe þe vnto my lorde, / If rapely

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 805-807.

⁷⁹Loc. cit.

⁸⁰Gordon, op. cit., p. xviii.

⁸¹Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxx-xxxi; Gordon, loc. cit.

raue sporande in spelle" (352-363). With a new measure of understanding, he explains his earlier sorrow and the comfort he now finds in seeing her once more: "I wyste neuer quere my perle wat3 gon: / Now I hit se, no lepe3 my lope" (376-377). Perhaps not surprisingly, these lines have been held by some as a denial of the father-daughter relationship.⁸² How, indeed, it is asked, could a Christian father make such a statement?⁸³ There are two possible answers to this objection, both previously alluded to. First, his words are indicative of a very natural human skepticism and confusion;⁸⁴ and, secondly, he is demonstrating what has been termed a "conveniently naive" attitude necessary to the purposes of the poem.⁸⁵ Indeed, though his attitude is beginning to change here, his state of mind is still basically the same as it was when he expressed his surprise at seeing his pearl in Paradise, a response some have regarded as a denial of the paternal relationship at that point.⁸⁶ Thus, although he may have been well acquainted with Christian teachings, his anxiety over the fate of his lost pearl is unmistakable. Whatever the

⁸²Hillman, op. cit., p. 88; Madeleva, op. cit., p. 131.

⁸³Loc. cit.

⁸⁴Gordon, op. cit., p. xxii.

⁸⁵Hamilton, op. cit., p. 811.

⁸⁶Hillman, op. cit., p. 83; Madeleva, op. cit., p. 131.

reasons for this anxiety may have been, the purpose of the poem gradually becomes clearer as one of assurance about the salvation of innocents. The reassurance he will receive is such that the resolution of his conflict will be achieved, and he will be, in the end, able to resign himself to God's will with a new serenity. Of course, in the first moments of his vision, his comprehension is extremely limited, and his spirit is still rebellious. After he learns his lesson of meekness, however, his speech becomes dear to her, and she begins her explanation of the blissful state in which she now resides, referring, first, to her life on earth:

Dou wolde3 knaw ber-of the stage;
 Dou wost wel when by perle con schede,
 I wat3 ful 3ong & tender of age,
 Bot my lorde be lombe, pur3 hys godhede,
 He toke myself to hys maryage
 Corounde me quene in blysse to brede,
 In lenghe of daye3 pat euer schal wage.
 (410-416)

These lines, as even Madeleva acknowledges, would be "naturally" interpreted as supporting the elegiac view by the "secular mind"; however, she takes issue with this view, declaring that only a religious could anticipate such a reward.⁸⁷ This is an unusual view, even among Catholics; and one Catholic scholar takes specific issue with Madeleva's assertion that marriage with Christ is reserved for those in the orders: "It

⁸⁷ Madeleva, op. cit., pp. 152-154.

is the teaching of Catholic mysticism that Christ is the destined Bridegroom of all souls of good will."⁸⁸

The question of the position of Pearl in the Heavenly realm is of major importance to the poem and is brought up at the time of the father's first view of Heaven. He asks in amazement how one so young could be raised to such an exalted position. How could Pearl be crowned the same as one who had lived a long life of penance and toil?

Doa lyfed no two þer in cure þede,
 Doa cowþeþ neuer god nauþer þese ne pray,
 Ne neuer nauþer pater ne crede,
 & quen mad on þe fyrst day!
 (482-485)

His incredulity knows no bounds, although he struggles not to offend the maiden. He speaks more as a father now to a child. Perhaps a position of countess, he tells her, or a "ober elleþ a lady of lasse aray," he could understand. "Bot a quen!" (490-491). This "cortayse" is indeed incredibly generous. These lines, simple to understand, if one accepts them as the conversation with his dead child who is now installed in Heaven, are interpreted in a variety of ways by those who find a consistent allegory in the poem. For example, to Hamilton, they are indicative of man's doubts ". . . concerning the efficacy of his own christening in infancy." The

⁸⁸Hillman, op. cit., p. 89.

maiden represents the dreamer's "inspired soul" and assures him the possibility of grace. The maiden's short life referred to represents the brief span of time spent in the Garden of Eden before Man's transgression brought death to the world.⁸⁹ To Madeleva, the brief span represents the loss of spiritual sweetness by a novice in religious life, a condition (which she asserts) occurs frequently to religious individuals early in their careers in the Church. The maiden of the vision is, thus, ". . . the personification of his [the poet's] own soul in the state of . . . potential perfection."⁹⁰

Other scholars who approach their interpretation first on the literal level explain that the gem has been in the possession of the jeweler for only a brief time. On the second level, it may be considered as innocence early lost in childhood.⁹¹ However, the lines are more difficult to reconcile in Hillman's interpretation on the second level. She concludes that the jeweler is "confused," because of his "worldly concern for his material pearl." He has not yet become concerned about his own soul which the maiden symbolizes. Hillman would have one believe that the lines about the maiden's age and the prayer are references not to childhood but to "the simple

⁸⁹Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 811-821.

⁹⁰Madeleva, op. cit., p. 152.

⁹¹Robertson, op. cit., p. 158.

usual prayers recommended for early states of conversion." According to this view, the maiden symbolizes the promise held out to the jeweler if he renounces the worship of worldly goods.⁹²

The next lines mark the beginning of the drooner's instruction about Heavenly rewards, explained by the maiden in her paraphrase of the Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew XX:1-16) which relates how the Lord rewards the toilers in the vineyard equally, whether they have toiled the day through or but for an hour at eventide. The maiden compares herself to one who came at ". . . eventide into the vineyard" and declares her reward is, thus, equal to that given to those who toiled all day long. Although to the man at the outset such equal pay seems unreasonable, the maiden expounds at length on the salvation of the innocent who are saved "by ry3t" (719). Hence, one finds that sections IX-XIII are devoted almost exclusively to an exposition on salvation by grace. Indeed, there can be little question but that the theological matters treated here in such detail were of great importance to the poet. In a sense, these sections are the heart of the poem, lending convincing support to Greene's assertion ". . . that the poem as a whole was designed to illustrate . . . Divine

⁹²Hillman, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

Grace."⁹³ Certainly, the importance of the elegiac sense-- if not the reality--is clear, here, for the personal reference (the death of the child) gives these crucial passages a dramatic force, otherwise lacking.⁹⁴

After the maiden convinces the dreamer that she is indeed worthy of being among Christ's "elect," he again takes a suppliant attitude (is it possible that some doubt still linger in his mind?) and asks to see where she and the "hundred & forty thousand" dwell. Only those who are stainless, "with-outer mote," can enter, of course, but she is able to secure permission for him to glimpse the city wherein the pure dwell. He is granted "one short hour" to view the Heavenly City, and the description that follows is rich, "vividly adapted" from the Apocalypse.⁹⁵ The vision is dazzling. Indeed, these stanzas have been called ". . . one of the most magnificently sustained passages in our literature."⁹⁶ Certainly, these sections have been of great interest to scholars concerned with the poet's sources of imagery because they are extremely rich in color and brilliancy of

⁹³Walter Kirkland Greene, "The Pearl--A New Interpretation," ELM, XL (1925), 815.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 816. See also, Charles Moorman, "The Role of the Narrator in 'Pearl,'" MLR, LIII (November, 1955), 77.

⁹⁵Saugh, op. cit., p. 234.

⁹⁶Zesner, op. cit., p. 164.

description.⁹⁷ Such brilliancy is not only enhanced, but given rich emotional overtones by the fundamental concept of the "Pearl" as a flesh-and-blood child who has died and has reappeared as the Pearl of Paradise. Again, without this personal reference, not only much of the poignancy of the narrative, but also much of the symbolic contrast between earthly existence and the soul's Celestial Home is lost.⁹⁸

The magnificence of Pearl's dwelling place is still further emphasized. The dreamer is even allowed to see the throne of God and the procession led by the Lamb in all its dazzling splendor:

De lombē delyt non lystē to wene,
 Daȝ he were hurt & wounde made,
 In his sembelant watȝ never sene,
 So wern his glenteȝ gloryous glade . . .
 Denne saȝ I þer my lyttel quene.
 (1140-1146)

Even at such moments of lyric intensity, the reader is always conscious of the dreamer's personal involvement, and the thread of the narrative is never lost.⁹⁹ Not even the throne of God or the vision of the Lamb robs the dreamer of his concern with the maiden, there. In fact, such concern may be taken in several senses. Obviously, it may depict a touching

⁹⁷Collanze, Pearl, p. xxvi.

⁹⁸op. cit., p. 41.

⁹⁹Baldwin, op. cit., p. 170.

personal interest; and it may, on another level, indicate the dreamer's new concern for his soul.¹⁰⁰

The dreamer, of course, though viewing Heaven, is still a mortal. He has learned much, it is true, but his understanding is still imperfect, and he is yet subject to overpowering human emotion. Thus, he is seized with a mad resolve to cross the stream that separates him from Pearl and the heavenly sphere in which she dwells. He is restrained at the brink, however, and, wrenched from his dream, he awakes.

His determination to cross over and the subsequent restraint are generally taken to indicate the last step in his lesson of submission to God's will.¹⁰¹ As is the case throughout, the simplest lines, here again, carry the greatest weight of narrative and emotional import. Thus, when the jeweler says, "Out of þat caste I wat3 by-calt; / Hit wat3 not at my prynce3 paye" (1163-1164), suddenly the reader is given insight into the narrator's new state of mind--his ultimate submission to the will of God. He has thus gained ". . . at the triumphant close of the story . . . a state of grace and friendship with God."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰Gollancz, CHHL, p. 320. For allegorical interpretations of Hamilton, op. cit., p. 820 and Robertson, op. cit., p. 160.

¹⁰¹Zesner, op. cit., p. 165.

¹⁰²Hamilton, op. cit., p. 822.

The concluding lines lend themselves well to a variety of interpretations. According to the traditional view, the man has at last commended his "jewel" to God; he faces the reality of his mortal child's death, and with true Christian resignation, he now accepts the "Prince's will," secure in his new knowledge of his Pearl's place in God's realm.¹⁰³ In this view, which clearly recognized the allegorical significance of various passages, the pearl, doomed in the beginning by the laws of nature "to flower and fade like a rose," thereafter became a "pearl of price," a concept based on the Biblical passage about the man who ". . . sought precious margarites; and when he found one to his liking sold all his goods to buy that jewel."¹⁰⁴ The jewel on the Maiden's breast--the matchless pearl--is thereby construed as the emblem of Eternal Life that she now enjoys.¹⁰⁵

"Allegorical" readings generally accept this view of the Pearl of Price, but their interpretation of the symbolism is more complex and abstract. According to Hamilton's view, for example, the maiden herself represents the "maiden soul" of man, which "through baptismal regeneration" has become the "Pearl of Great Price," and the gem on her breast, the Pearl

¹⁰³Collancez, CHRE, pp. 320-321.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 323.

¹⁰⁵Gordon, op. cit., p. xxviii.

of eternal life, symbolizing the maiden's state of grace. "Both jewels," in this view, are presumed to have been lost in the "primal bereavement" described in the first stanza.¹⁰⁶ Robertson's reading of the poem as a total allegory has much in common with Hillman's. To Robertson, however, the loss represents the universal loss of innocence in childhood rather than the loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden. The Pearl-maiden, in his view, represents perfect innocence, and the pearl on her breast, the "symbol of eternal life." The jeweler, then, becomes the negotiator of the parable who sells all his jewels for the Pearl of great price. Thus, to Robertson, the poem is clearly an instruction on the necessity of renouncing worldly wealth in order to obtain the pearl of eternal bliss.¹⁰⁷ Actually, his view has much in common with Hillman's (as he acknowledges), and like hers, it could readily be used to enrich the meaning of the poem were it not for its narrow view of worldly treasure. Neither acknowledges that the child could be thus viewed.¹⁰⁸ Robertson claims that "the literal value" of the pearl on the first level "serves as a

¹⁰⁶ Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 805-807.

¹⁰⁷ Robertson, op. cit., pp. 158-160.

¹⁰⁸ See John Conley, "Pearl and a Lost Tradition," JERP, XIV (July, 1955), 343-345. Conley agrees with Sister Hillman that in one sense the pearl does represent worldly treasure, but takes this treasure to be the child who had died.

unifying focal point."¹⁰⁹ His claim may be sound, but his disregard of the personal, elegiac sense robs the work of an even more important unity, while also depriving it of its compelling basis of appeal.

The most disruptive views, however, insofar as unity is concerned, are those which deny that the lost pearl and the Pearl of the vision are one and the same. A distinction between these two pearls is an important feature of Hillman's and Madeleva's interpretations, and is more or less implicit in Robertson's reading.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Hamilton specifically refutes such a distinction:

The identity of the two jewels, notwithstanding the fact that it has been denied by more than one interpreter [Hillman and Madeleva, according to her notes] is everywhere implicit in the poem and is twice affirmed.¹¹¹

this is an important point, for if the identity of the two pearls is denied, not only is the elegiac sense denied, but also the important concealment of the concluding lines.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹Robertson, op. cit., p. 160.

¹¹⁰Hillman, op. cit., pp. viii-xiii; and Madeleva, op. cit., pp. 192-193; Robertson, loc. cit.

¹¹¹Hamilton, op. cit., p. 605.

¹¹²Conley, op. cit., p. 343: "As the educated person of the Middle Ages would surely have been expected to perceive, Pearl is, in brief, a Christian concealment." See also, J. R. Heiserman, "The Plot of 'Pearl,'" PMLA, LXXX (June, 1965), 168.

Indeed, the last lines give dramatic coherence and power to the theological discussions to which the entire middle section of the poem is devoted, as revealed in the lines that describe the dreamer after he awakens. He can now accept his present state in the "deceit down-goun." He is, it is true, still an outcast from Heaven, but he is consoled by the fact that his Pearl, i.e., his lost daughter, is pleasing the Prince. In any view, he is an enlightened man, serene in his new Christian insight. Now, indeed, he finds it easy to be a good Christian, and he can commend his Pearl to God's keeping.

Certainly, minor differences in interpretation need not obscure the fundamental import of the poem.¹¹³ Rather, they serve to emphasize the central theme which is the contrast that exists between the vanity and cupidity of this world and the "transcendent beauty of the next."¹¹⁴

Only when readings deny the sense of personal loss within the poem which lends it its unique freshness do they defeat their purpose. Those whose interpretations deny this personal frame of reference should be reminded, perhaps, of what Gordon pointed out when he wrote that an "allegorical description of an event does not make that event itself allegorical." One thinks it fair to conclude, as has Gordon,

¹¹³Hamilton, op. cit., p. 823.

¹¹⁴Zesmer, op. cit., p. 165.

that the initial use of the pearl as a symbol and its subsequent use and applications are "intelligible [only] if the reference of the poem is personal."¹¹⁵

The poem as a supreme narrative of a man's grief, conflict of conscience, and ultimate submission to the will of God has an almost matchless universality and appeal. It is, perhaps, a credit to the work that it has tempted so many critics beyond their depths. However, they have strayed so far into fanciful speculation that one is forced to agree with Coulton, who observed many years ago that ". . . our imagination staggers at the gulf which seems here to yawn between what the author actually wrote and what his critic imagines him to have written."¹¹⁶ Certainly, it would seem fair to conclude that it is time for scholars to return to the elegiac sense of the poem if they wish to preserve it as a moving piece of literature. Fortunately, the trend of criticism in recent years seems to be returning to this more traditional view. Perhaps, then, with renewed conviction, one can declare with Coulton that our "rude forefathers" did not err after all when they took The Pearl for an elegy.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵Gordon, op. cit., p. xii.

¹¹⁶Coulton, op. cit., p. 42.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 43.

CHAPTER II

THE ANGUISHED SPIRIT: A STUDY OF THE THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PEARL

The elegiac view of The Pearl does not deny the importance of the theological discussion which occurs in the poem. Since the debate with the attendant instruction by the Pearl-maiden is the means of consoling the narrator, the doctrinal aspects of the poem are of fundamental importance. Therefore, it is necessary for one to have some understanding of the theological temper of the times to comprehend fully the poem itself. One must remember that the work was written in a period of "theological ferment" when the question of the relative efficacy of grace and merit as a means of salvation was a source of considerable controversy.¹¹⁸ Undoubtedly, the fate of the soul of a baptized child was a matter for real concern in the fourteenth century, even as it had been a matter of some divergency of opinion throughout the Middle Ages.¹¹⁹

Although the exact theologians which the poet had read have not been identified, most of the arguments expounding the

¹¹⁸Brown, op. cit., p. 144. See also, Osgood, op. cit., p. xxxix.

¹¹⁹René Wellek, "The Pearl: an Interpretation of the Middle English Poem," Studies in English, IV (1933, 22.

doctrine of grace within the work were common to medieval theology, as is witnessed by the writings of Augustine refuting the Pelagian doctrine of salvation by merit only.¹²⁰ However, while the doctrine of grace was well established, scholars are not agreed on the orthodoxy of the poet's view which stresses grace to the extent of providing equal rewards for grace and merit. Brown, for example, finds the poet's views distinctly unorthodox, pointing out that the concept of a heavenly hierarchy had been established as early as the fifth century, having been repeatedly affirmed by both Gregory and Augustine and referred to in vernacular writings as well. Brown asserts that he had "been unable to find a single orthodox theologian or poet, from the time of Jerome until the appearance of Pearl who asserts the equality of Heavenly rewards."¹²¹ Indeed, still other indications of the poet's unorthodoxy may be observed in his direct appeal to the Scriptures.¹²² The poet, it has been noted, cites no "patristic authority," and while showing great loyalty to the cardinal doctrines of Christianity and the Church, he is, nonetheless, in accord with much of Langland and Wyclif.¹²³ Thus, the poet

¹²⁰Gordon, op. cit., p. xxx.

¹²¹Brown, op. cit., pp. 136-137.

¹²²Ibid., p. 140.

¹²³Ibid., pp. 140-141.

probably represented a trend of his century against scholasticism--a trend toward an "emancipation of the religious spirit," and, additionally, "a most interesting and remarkable anticipation of Sixteenth Century Protestantism."¹²⁴

Osgood, who found the poet not only generally orthodox, but "enthusiastically so," agrees with Brown that the poet's emphasis on the equality of rewards for all the redeemed is, indeed, "heretical."¹²⁵ He explains:

The poet's nature as revealed in his works shows not only no readiness for theological or ecclesiastical controversy, but something approaching abhorrence of it. Now an isolated bit of heresy, at variance with the tendency of his convictions . . . seems naturally not to have been achieved by reason, but is the reflex of violent emotional experience And the opinion is exactly that to be expected of one afflicted as was the poet. For, as he implies, reason and the condition of humanity at large convince anybody that the rewards in heaven must be unequal; but let a man suffer the loss of the one least dispensable to him--can he then bear to think that the fullest rewards of heaven are not in store for that one . . . ? Under stress of emotion he is forced into the other view, and our poet, conscious of his slight decline from orthodoxy, seems to be trying to justify himself in it by connecting it closely with the orthodox teaching concerning grace.¹²⁶

Not all scholars accept these views. While acknowledging the unorthodoxy of the doctrine of equal rewards, several critics

¹²⁴Ibid., pp. 141; 145.

¹²⁵Osgood, op. cit., p. xxxix.

¹²⁶Ibid., pp. xl-xli.

point out that the poem itself is somewhat ambiguous and contradictory on this point, and they, therefore, find nothing particularly heretical about the views of the poet, even in his use of the Parable of the Vineyard.¹²⁷ Robertson takes especially sharp exception to Brown as follows:

A re-examination of the evidence has shown that the interpretation and use of the Parable of the Vineyard in The Pearl are consistent with medieval exegetical tradition.¹²⁸

It is clear that McAndrew finds nothing in the poem that anticipates Protestantism, for in his view, the poem presents "an expression of intense spiritual life It is the product of the Catholic life and thought of its century."¹²⁹

Actually, the question of the poet's orthodoxy is not likely to be settled since the disagreement hinges not upon historical facts regarding the position of the Church in the fourteenth century (which are more or less ascertainable), but rather upon varying interpretations of the poem, which of necessity, reflect a measure of subjectivity. The question of orthodoxy is not, however, a crucial one to an understanding

¹²⁷Gordon, op. cit., p. xxiii; Wellek, op. cit., pp. 20-22; Jefferson B. Fletcher, "The Allegory of the Pearl," JEGP, XX (1921), 17.

¹²⁸Robertson, op. cit., p. 155.

¹²⁹Bruno McAndrew, "The Pearl, a Catholic Paradise Lost," ABR, VII (1957), 246.

"Ultimate and revealed truth of theology was one thing and the human condition of the seeker another."¹³² Rand's statements are clearly relevant to the narrator's attitudes in The Pearl, revealing that the narrator's uncertainties and conflicts were not an uncharacteristic response, as some have claimed.¹³³

A study of the contemporary literature shows, furthermore, that the poet's grim emphasis on the physical ruin of the Pearl while in the earth was not an uncommon attitude. The medieval mind was pre-occupied with death; and while it is true that death was viewed in many lights and that the more hopeful attitudes toward death became increasingly common as the age drew to a close, an emphasis upon the horrible--even macabre--aspects of death was commonplace throughout the period. Certainly, a pre-occupation with death is understandable when one considers the conditions of the time--the plague, the famines, the high infant and childhood mortality, and all manner of sudden and violent deaths.¹³⁴ Understandable,

¹³²E. K. Rand, "Mediaeval Gloom and Mediaeval Uniformity," Speculum, I (July, 1926), 267.

¹³³See Sister Mary Vincent Hillman, op. cit., p. 83, and Sister M. Madeleva, op. cit., p. 131. Both contend that the narrator's responses are uncharacteristic of a bereaved Christian father, a point which leads them to abandon the elegiac interpretation.

¹³⁴Mary Christopher Pecheux, Aspects of the Treatment of Death in Middle English Poetry, p. 131.

too, is the emphasis placed upon the grim and horrible aspects of death if one recognizes it as the means of accepting the reality of death and of facing consciously the conflicts and fears it engenders.¹³⁵ Thus, while some scholars have held that the narrator's early confusion and doubt and his grim emphasis on physical decay are uncharacteristic of a bereaved Christian father,¹³⁶ the narrator's attitude is, on the contrary, clearly sound from both an historical and a psychological point of view. It is evident that divergency of opinion did exist at this time (even among theologians) as to the fate of a baptized child. Obviously, doubts thus raised could create serious uncertainties in the bereaved. The poet's theological orthodoxy must remain a moot point. One concludes, however, that it is the emphasis on the narrator's state of mind, as many scholars point out, rather than the unconventional or unorthodox aspect of his outlook, that distinguishes this poem from the bulk of Middle English literature and places it in the tradition of the great English elegies that followed.¹³⁷ Thus, while scholars clearly disagree on specific points relating to the poet's theological inclinations, in

¹³⁵Karl Menninger, Love Against Hate, p. 181.

¹³⁶Hillman, op. cit., pp. 79; 83; Madeleva, op. cit., p. 131.

¹³⁷Moorman, op. cit., p. 81; Everett, op. cit., p. 96; Gollancz, Pearl, pp. xix-xx.

general they tend to indicate that in theological matters he displayed a "comfortable" orthodoxy supplemented by an equally strong independence of mind. Certainly, there is in his portrayal of the anguished spirit an appeal that transcends time and theological differences.

CHAPTER III

MEDIEVAL SYMBOLISM AND THE PEARL

Perhaps no aspect of the poet's tradition was more important to the poem than the love of symbolism displayed by the age. Indeed, one finds the poet approaching symbolism as he did theological matters. His use of symbolism in The Pearl, for example, reveals a ready reliance on tradition supported by the same qualities of individuality and independence displayed in regard to theological questions. The Pearl contains an abundance of traditional or conventional symbolism.¹³⁸ One has no doubt concerning the appeal of pearls to a fourteenth-century audience.¹³⁹ Indeed, the poet could hardly have chosen an object of greater symbolic potential and preciousness to the medieval mind. Actually, the history of pearl symbolism antedates the Middle Ages. Perhaps no gem known to man has been valued so highly over such a long period of history.¹⁴⁰ In part, the age-old regard for pearls may be explained by the fact that skilled cutting, or faceting, of

¹³⁸Gordon, op. cit., p. xxviii.

¹³⁹A. C. Spearing, "Symbolic and Dramatic Development in Pearl," MP, LX (August, 1962), 2; W. H. Schofield, "Symbolism, Allegory, and Autobiography in 'The Pearl,'" PMLA, XXIV (December, 1909), 639.

¹⁴⁰George Frederick Kunz and Charles H. Stevenson, The Book of the Pearl, p. 3.

crystal gems was not achieved until the middle of the fifteenth century.¹⁴¹ Until this time, the pearl among gems probably had no rival in beauty. Thus, it is not surprising that a unique value was placed on this gem.

Pearls were not only highly valued by ancient cultures, but also, early in the history of civilization, were associated with magical powers and invested with a religious significance, especially in the Orient.¹⁴² Biblical allusions to pearls, especially the parable of the Pearl of Great Price, undoubtedly strengthened the association of the pearl with preciousness and purity, a common signification in medieval times.¹⁴³ The parable of the Pearl of Price remained the source of much interest among churchmen throughout the centuries and was variously interpreted, especially popular being the association of the Pearl of Price with eternal life.¹⁴⁴

In the fourteenth century in England, pearl symbolism

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 303.

¹⁴³Gordon, op. cit., pp. xxii; xxvii. See also, "Pearl," Encyclopaedia Britannica, XVII, 421. The association of pearls with perfection and preciousness was obviously never lost. Even the fact that they could be worn only by those in high position in ancient Rome makes an interesting parallel to the use of the pearl on the Maiden's breast, signifying, as it were, her high position in Heaven.

¹⁴⁴Hamilton, op. cit., p. 808. For a summary of historical symbology of the pearl among churchmen, see Osgood, op. cit., p. 82, and Kunz and Stevenson, op. cit., p. 304.

reached new heights of popularity.¹⁴⁵ Evidence exists to show that the pearl was still being used at this time to signify the "undefiled human soul" or "the soul redeemed in baptism."¹⁴⁶ In addition, the association of the Pearl of Price with grace and knowledge of God continued to be traditional.¹⁴⁷ The identification of jewels or pearls with virtues, moreover, received new emphasis through the cult of Margaret, which flourished in fourteenth-century England.¹⁴⁸ St. Margaret had been a favorite saint of the English throughout the later Middle Ages, and evidence of her association with various Christian virtues is to be found in the Legenda Aurea, which lists a number of virtues specifically in reference to her.¹⁴⁹ Of these virtues, purity was commonly stressed, and the pearl as a symbol of purity had a special appeal in the Middle Ages, especially in the fourteenth century.¹⁵⁰

The symbolic consciousness of the age was such that the Pearl poet hardly could have been unaware of the popular

¹⁴⁵See Gordon, op. cit., pp. xii; xxvii-xxviii.

¹⁴⁶Hamilton, op. cit., p. 808.

¹⁴⁷Wellek, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

¹⁴⁸Gordon, op. cit., pp. xxvii-xxviii.

¹⁴⁹Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxi-xxxii.

¹⁵⁰Gordon, op. cit., p. xii.

symbolic associations of the pearl. His use of these, however, is a matter of considerable divergency of opinion. A number of scholars, apparently, base their readings of The Pearl on traditional associations of the kind just described.¹⁵¹

Others, however, while acknowledging the prevalence of these associations in theological works, find little evidence to suggest that these associations were used in medieval literary works of merit.¹⁵²

For example, Spearing stresses that, while certain lesser works of the period may indeed have been "parasitic upon the symbolic consciousness of their age," great poems like The Pearl ". . . reconstruct current symbols within themselves, and in doing so give them a permanent and unique validity."¹⁵³

Actually, far less consistency in symbolic significations existed than is commonly assumed, for ". . . there was no science of symbolism."¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the poet was ". . . forced . . . to select from among the varying ideas" available to him.¹⁵⁵ Not only was he compelled to make

¹⁵¹Schofield, "The Nature and Fabric of The Pearl," pp. 162-169; Hamilton, op. cit., p. 808; Fletcher, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

¹⁵²Spearing, op. cit., pp. 2-3; Gollancz, Pearl, pp. xxii-xxiii; Morton W. Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," MP, LVI (November, 1958), 74-75; Heiserman, op. cit., p. 164.

¹⁵³Spearing, op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁵⁴Bloomfield, op. cit., pp. 76-77. See also, Heiserman, op. cit., p. 164.

¹⁵⁵Heiserman, op. cit., p. 164.

a choice, but his audience was accustomed to looking for new meanings and significance in familiar ideas.¹⁵⁶ The poet was, therefore, free to develop and enrich the symbols of his tradition as he chose.¹⁵⁷ This process of selection from and enrichment of the elements of tradition, moreover, was characteristic of the Pearl poet.¹⁵⁸ Thus, from what is known of the poet's methods and of the attitudes of his age toward symbolism, one discovers that a study of the arbitrary (i.e., conventional) symbolism of the time is not likely to provide an adequate guide to the poem. Certainly, the premise that the key to medieval works of any literary merit lies in a detailed study of the symbolism of the time is, as can be seen, a faulty one.¹⁵⁹ The key to the poet's use of the symbols of his tradition lies, rather, in the text.¹⁶⁰ In other words, one must rely on the poet's own "artistic sense" for an

¹⁵⁶Gordon, op. cit., p. xxvi.

¹⁵⁷Heiserman, op. cit., p. 164.

¹⁵⁸Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxviii-xli; liv-lv.

¹⁵⁹Heiserman, op. cit., p. 164. Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 81. Bloomfield's views concerning the interpretation of medieval literature in general seems especially relevant to The Pearl: "With sixteen meanings for peacock, who is to decide between them?" In thus stressing the futility of certain symbolic approaches, he emphasizes that only the text itself can serve as a reasonable "court of appeal."

¹⁶⁰Heiserman, op. cit., p. 164.

understanding of the poem.¹⁶¹

Objections to the so-called symbolic approach to interpretation should not be construed as a denial of the presence of symbolism within the poem, however. This concept must be kept in mind particularly in the consideration of a second kind of symbols which may have relevance to The Pearl. These symbols, which Dunbar has designated as "insight symbols," are essentially of an interpretative nature:

. . . [They express a] meaningful experience which has basis in an association neither extrinsic arbitrary, nor intrinsic remaining in the realm of sense comparison, but intrinsic as expressing and reaching out toward the supersensible.¹⁶²

Such symbols, in contrast to conventional ones, are a means of apprehending great "meanings and relationships" that otherwise

¹⁶¹ Everett, op. cit., p. 93. The fact that the text, not an historical resurrection of medieval symbolism, was the clue to understanding the poem was recognized by such early scholars of The Pearl as Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxi-xxxiv, and Coulton, op. cit., p. 42; and after the flurry of symbolic study initiated by Schofield had died down, this fact has once more been recognized by a large number of authorities. In addition to Everett's 1955 essay and Heiserman's 1965 article, studies which indicate that an emphasis on historical study is misleading and that the text must remain the ultimate guide are those by Wellek, op. cit., p. 28 (1933); Gordon, op. cit., p. xii (1952); Moorman, op. cit., pp. 73-74 (1955); and Spearing, op. cit., p. 2 (1962). See also, Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 81 (1958), treating medieval literature in general.

¹⁶² H. Flanders Dunbar, Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in the Divine Comedy, p. 11.

could not be understood.¹⁶³ In this context, they function as religious symbols, as Tillich explains:

This is how we understand a religious symbol. It is material taken out of the world of finite things to point beyond itself to the ground of being and meaning, to being itself and meaning itself. A symbol participates in the power of the ultimate toward which it points. Religious symbols open up the mystery of the holy and they open up the mind for the mystery of the holy to which it can respond.¹⁶⁴

Essentially, such symbols are mystical in nature,¹⁶⁵ and, as one would expect, scholars who view the reality of mystic experience with reservations, are likely to doubt the effectiveness, if not the existence, of these symbols.¹⁶⁶ Others, like Bloomfield, do not deny the existence of this level of symbolism in literature, but rather question the validity of symbolic interpretations which do nothing to enhance an understanding of the work. He states:

Unless the system implied by them [the symbolists] really gives meaning to the world and man, the general, the

¹⁶³Cyril C. Richardson, "The Foundations of Christian Symbolism," Religious Symbolism, p. 3; Daniel J. Sullivan, "Symbolism in Catholic Worship," Religious Symbolism, p. 46; Paul Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," Religious Symbolism, p. 109.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 110-111.

¹⁶⁵Caroline Spurgeon, Mysticism in English Literature, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶⁶Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Symbolism and Jewish Faith," Religious Symbolism, pp. 77-78.

cyclic, and the mythical are no more meaningful than the particular, the unique, and the fact. This axiom is not always kept in mind by the "symbolists."¹⁶⁷

Bloomfield's objection is not, in fact, to meaningful symbolic interpretations based upon the text, but rather to those symbolic readings which neglect the concrete on the assumption that the "concrete exists only for the universal." This assumption, he emphasizes, was never considered valid in the Middle Ages, even in regard to the Bible.¹⁶⁸

Actually, scholars with varying views generally insist upon the importance of the literal level of a work as a guide to whatever symbolic meaning may be developed therein.¹⁶⁹ For example, Dunbar, while taking a manifestly more enthusiastic approach to symbolic reading of medieval literature than Bloomfield, nevertheless stresses the importance of the first, or literal, level of meaning and concentrates only on that symbolism which, in her view at least, makes a literature more meaningful.¹⁷⁰

Dunbar, however, proceeds even further in insisting that this type of symbolism played a predominant role in

¹⁶⁷Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 73.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 75-76.

¹⁶⁹Heschel, op. cit., p. 67; Cf. Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 76; Dunbar, op. cit., pp. 21; 24.

¹⁷⁰Dunbar, op. cit., pp. xi-xiii; Bloomfield, op. cit., pp. 75-76.

medieval tradition. She makes clear, however, that "insight symbolism" was in no way restricted to the Middle Ages, noting that it has been recognized not only by such modern psychologists as Jung and Woodworth, but also by men of literature, including Dante. Indeed, she credits Carlyle with bringing this concept (e.g., in his words, "celestial essence . . . rendered visible") to the attention of the many.¹⁷¹ Certainly, Dunbar is not alone in her emphasis upon this kind of universal symbolism. A number of authorities, as a matter of fact, attach similar importance to it,¹⁷² although no one, perhaps, has explained its nature more clearly than Underhill in her study of mysticism, who observes that the appeal of ". . . good symbolism [will not be] to the clever brain, but to the desirous heart, the intuitive sense of man."¹⁷³

In the approach to an interpretation of The Pearl, too much emphasis has been placed upon arbitrary systems of medieval symbology that appeal only to "the clever brain." The futility of this approach has been demonstrated. On the other

¹⁷¹Dunbar, op. cit., pp. 6-9: This classification became known to the world, though in different terminology "as a result of the learning of Teufelsdröckh."

¹⁷²Sullivan, op. cit., p. 46. Sullivan cites contributions to the understanding of these symbols. Tillich, op. cit., p. 109; Richardson, op. cit., p. 3; Erich Fromm, The Forgotten Language, pp. 15-16.

¹⁷³Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness, p. 151.

hand, a number of scholars have suggested that the important symbolism in The Pearl is of a mystical nature, more universal in its appeal. This possibility will be examined in some detail in a later section on mysticism and in the chapter dealing with an explication of the poem.

CHAPTER IV

MEDIEVAL ALLEGORY: FACTS AND FANTASY

Had studies of medieval symbolism gone no further than indicated in the last chapter, many valid, though divergent, readings of The Pearl could be made without forcing the poem into any pre-conceived superstructure of medieval "system." Studies of The Pearl's symbolism, such as Spearing's, for example, have been made without relying upon arbitrary symbolism or "external" sources.¹⁷⁴ The existence of a medieval method of Biblical exegesis, however, has led a number of scholars to attempt the application of this fourfold method to literary interpretation.¹⁷⁵ These attempts have, in the opinion of some scholars, been extremely unfortunate.¹⁷⁶

Not only has the consideration of "allegory" been a matter of controversy, but it has also led to a confusion of terms. Dunbar makes distinctions which one must consider in relation to The Pearl:

There are . . . [those] who in reading of symbolism in

¹⁷⁴Spearing, op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁷⁵Harry Caplan, "The Four Senses of Scripture," Speculum, IV (July, 1929), 283; Dunbar, op. cit., pp. 241-330; D. W. Robertson, "The Pearl as a Symbol," MLN, LXV (March, 1950), 155-161.

¹⁷⁶Bloomfield, op. cit., pp. 74-75. See also, Spearing, op. cit., p. 1.

medieval thought expect to read allegory . . . yet allegory as generally understood today has its basis in symbolism of the arbitrary-association type and hence has no kinship with the allegory based on insight symbolism which dominated the learned tradition of the Middle Ages.¹⁷⁷

Courthope made a similar distinction between kinds of allegory, although his terminology is different. He notes that three aspects of allegory existed in medieval literature:

(1) as a method of interpretation of natural phenomenon as in the Divine Comedy; (2) as the embodiment of the abstract by personification, such as Lady Mede, Conscience, the Seven Deadly Sins, etc.; and (3) as a "specific form," growing out of allegorical interpretation and the use of personification, as illustrated by the Romance of the Rose.¹⁷⁸ Personification, as has been noted, involves making the abstract concrete; "it cannot normally have more meaning than what it says."¹⁷⁹ Obviously, then, allegories based on personification would come under the classification of arbitrary-association or descriptive allegory.¹⁸⁰ The interpretative allegory listed by Courthope, however, extends meanings toward the abstract and

¹⁷⁷Dunbar, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁷⁸W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, I, 341-342.

¹⁷⁹Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁸⁰See Dunbar, op. cit., pp. 278-279.

encompasses the multi-level allegory--or "allegorical method," to use Dunbar's term--purportedly based on interpretative symbolism.¹⁸¹

This interpretative allegorical method was a common form of Scriptural exegesis in the Middle Ages, although its use has been traced to times antedating the Christian era. The earliest of Christian scholars to use it was Origen, who devised a systematic multi-leveled interpretation based upon an earlier system which proceeded on three levels: the literal, the moral, and the mystical. The latter level consisted of two aspects, thus forming the basis of the fourfold interpretations that eventually developed.¹⁸² The four senses thus developed are listed by Caplan as (1) the literal level, (2) the tropological sense which contains instruction or correction of morals, (3) the allegorical or figurative level, and (4) the anagogical or mystical sense, which involves the contemplation of Heavenly things.¹⁸³ This method was used extensively by Pope Gregory, whose works were standard in medieval education,¹⁸⁴ and was developed by Augustine as a method of

¹⁸¹Loc. cit.

¹⁸²Ibid., p. 263.

¹⁸³Caplan, op. cit., p. 283.

¹⁸⁴Courthope, op. cit., p. 345.

attaining knowledge through the "mystic quest."¹⁸⁵

While symbolic or mystical thought was not unique to the Middle Ages,¹⁸⁶ it was uniquely suited to the needs of medieval thinkers. Rand has called it a means of connecting "private theory with established truth," which provided a measure of "freedom of thought" otherwise inaccessible at the time.¹⁸⁷ The extent to which the allegorical method was used in Scriptural exegesis itself is, however, open to question. Bloomfield, for example, points out that Augustine, who has been credited with establishing the fourfold method, made no "consistent and continuous multi-leveled interpretation of the Scripture," but rather used the "level" of interpretation demanded by the "nature of the particular text." Even Gregory, who, as Bloomfield acknowledges, placed more emphasis than most upon the "figurative" meanings of the Bible, did not apply the system consistently throughout his interpretations.¹⁸⁸ Bloomfield's main argument, however, is not concerned with the extent to which this method was used in theological writings but with its application to literary works.¹⁸⁹ Actually, there

¹⁸⁵Dunbar, op. cit., p. 269.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 18; 24.

¹⁸⁷Rand, op. cit., p. 267.

¹⁸⁸Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., p. 75.

seems to be little doubt that the method was (as Courthope has maintained) "available" for "poetic purposes" from the eleventh century on.¹⁹⁰ Its serious use in works of literature, however, is quite another matter.¹⁹¹

Interest in the application of the exegetical method of Scriptural interpretation to literary works, nevertheless, has persisted since the publication of Dunbar's Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in the Divine Comedy in 1929. In this work, she brought Dante's assertion of the polysemous nature of the Divine Comedy to the attention of literary critics.¹⁹² Dante's unequivocal claim to the use of multiple senses in the Divine Comedy is recorded in a letter to Can Grande, which Dunbar uses as a starting point for an elaborate four-level interpretation of the work and also as a basis for her thesis that this kind of polysemy was a common feature of other medieval writing as well.¹⁹³ One must remember, though, that not all Dante scholars agree that systematic levels of meaning can be found within the work.¹⁹⁴ Even if Dunbar's interpretation of the Commedia as a four-level allegory

¹⁹⁰Courthope, op. cit., p. 349.

¹⁹¹Bloomfield, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

¹⁹²Ibid., p. 74. See Dunbar, op. cit., pp. ix-xiii.

¹⁹³Loc. cit.

¹⁹⁴See Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 79.

is accepted as valid, her second conclusion regarding the polysemous nature of other medieval works is highly questionable. It is important to note here that, as far as is known, Dante was the only poet who ever claimed to use the fourfold allegorical method of the medieval theologians.¹⁹⁵ Dante, moreover, considered himself primarily a prophet, and in making this claim, he was, as it were, placing his work outside the traditional category of poetry as it was known to his contemporaries.¹⁹⁶ Therefore, one may construe Dante's statements on this aspect of the Commedia as his recognition of the exceptional nature of such an approach to literature. Thus, his claim weakens rather than supports the contention that the allegorical method was commonly used by other medieval writers.¹⁹⁷ One sees, therefore, that the validity of interpreting medieval literature according to this method must be questioned on two counts: first, one must establish that Dante actually used the method; and, secondly, even if one accepts Dante's use of the method as fact, one must yet establish the general use of the method in other medieval works. Clearly, the case for the polysemous view of medieval literature

¹⁹⁵Erich Auerbach, "Figurative Texts Illustrating Certain Passages of Dante's Commedia," Speculum, XXI (October, 1946), 475.

¹⁹⁶Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 79. See also, Friederich Heer, The Medieval World, p. 365.

¹⁹⁷Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 79.

rests on the assumption that Dante used it,¹⁹⁸ and Dante's employment of the polyseme is definitely not a matter upon which scholars agree.¹⁹⁹

Much evidence is available, in fact, which weakens the case for applying the fourfold method of Scriptural exegesis to literary works. For example, there was a decrease in the emphasis placed upon symbolic interpretation of the Bible itself with the rise of vernacular literature in the later Middle Ages.²⁰⁰ The allegorical method permitted a measure of freedom in Scriptural exegesis.²⁰¹ In a sense, it represented an early, almost unnoticed, trend away from the rigid authoritarianism of the Church that culminated in even greater resistance represented by the growth of the vernacular languages and literatures.²⁰² Thus, while both trends were a part of the same general movement,²⁰³ it is not surprising that the allegorical method of Biblical exegesis was gradually

¹⁹⁸Dunbar, op. cit., pp. xii-xiii. Dunbar insists that the case for Dante's use of the polyseme can be made conclusively from the study of his works, and does not depend on the statement in his letter to Can Grande, the authenticity of which has been questioned.

¹⁹⁹Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 79; cf., Dunbar, op. cit., pp. ix-xiii.

²⁰⁰Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 76.

²⁰¹Rand, op. cit., p. 267.

²⁰²Heer, op. cit., pp. 24; 361-368; Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 76.

²⁰³Loc. cit.

abandoned by many medieval thinkers for the greater freedom afforded by vernacular literature.

The Church, of course, did not look with favor on vernacular literature, displaying much the same attitude toward it that had been shown toward the classics in an earlier period.²⁰⁴ Certainly, ". . . literary composition as pure art was not encouraged."²⁰⁵ Throughout the Middle Ages, therefore, authors of secular literature were on the defensive, and the allegorical claims they made for their works are now considered in some quarters to have been little more than conciliatory gestures toward the Church.²⁰⁶ As a case in point, Bloomfield cites Boccaccio's custom of defending his poetry by suggesting that it contained a "sentence."²⁰⁷ Even Dante, it has been proposed, resorted to intricate and puzzling symbolism, not through choice, but as a means of avoiding the censure or persecution by the Church that frankness most surely would have brought.²⁰⁸ The case of the Pearl poet is obviously different. While it is true that the narrator voices his

²⁰⁴Kenneth Sisam (ed), Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose, p. xxxi.

²⁰⁵Loc. cit.

²⁰⁶Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 78.

²⁰⁷Loc. cit.

²⁰⁸Heer, op. cit., pp. 366-367.

doubts and anxieties about theological matters, the resolution of the poem (i.e., the narrator's final consolation as a result of his new knowledge of God's grace) could hardly have been objectionable to the Church. Therefore, the poet would have had no reason to resort to the claims of mystical significance or veiled expressions of symbolism that some medieval poets found necessary.

Actually, allegorical claims for medieval poetry in general were not taken seriously by the "real thinkers" of the time, but just as the symbolic interpretations of classic poetry had, at an earlier date, been a means of placating the Church by "christianizing" pagan writers, so had the method come to be used once more to gain acceptance of vernacular literature.²⁰⁹ This view is not meant to deny the Christian purpose of much medieval literature or the presence therein of individual symbols with multiple meanings, but rather to emphasize the fallacy of applying cumbrous and mechanical systems of Biblical exegesis to literary interpretation.²¹⁰ Medieval works, unlike works of theology, were notable for their clarity. This fact has been stressed by Osgood, who observes that it was a "rule of medieval allegory" for the poet of an allegorical piece to make its nature clear to the reader.²¹¹ And

²⁰⁹Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 78.

²¹⁰Ibid., pp. 78; 80.

²¹¹Osgood, op. cit., p. xxxiv.

Bloomfield, in much the same vein, points out that the meaning of medieval literature, including the Divine Comedy, is made explicit in the work itself: the reader is ". . . expressly told by the authors what the poems mean in Christian, moral, dogmatic and mystical terms."²¹²

Of course, it is true that the medieval mind was accustomed to the system of allegory that stressed the truth of many meanings at once.²¹³ It is true, also, that matters of religious significance were of vital concern to the medieval mind.²¹⁴ Unquestionable, it was an age that was clearly pre-occupied with symbolism of all kinds.²¹⁵ These facts, however, do not warrant the assumption that allegorical methods of Biblical exegesis were used by the poet in writing The Pearl. On the contrary, the evidence clearly indicates that the possibility of multiple simultaneous levels of meaning within The Pearl are extremely remote. The question can be settled conclusively, however, only through careful attention

²¹²Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 80.

²¹³F. R. Webber, Church Symbolism, p. 17; Dunbar, op. cit., p. xiii.

²¹⁴Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 75.

²¹⁵Webber, op. cit., p. 17; Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

to the literal level of the work itself.²¹⁶ This was the course expected of the medieval audience; for despite the luxuriance of symbolism in this period, the "importance of literal reality" was never denied.²¹⁷ Difficulties with the poem arise chiefly when this fundamental attitude of the medieval mind and the importance of the "literal reality" is overlooked.²¹⁸

²¹⁶Wellek, op. cit., p. 28; Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 80; Spearing, op. cit., p. 2; Osgood, op. cit., p. xxxiv; Dunbar, op. cit., pp. 21; 490; Heschel, op. cit., p. 67.

²¹⁷Cargill and Schlauch, op. cit., p. 105.

²¹⁸See Wellek, op. cit., p. 28; Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 80, suggests that the three- and four-level method of allegorical interpretation is less a product of the medieval mind than it is the ". . . creation of modern systematizing scholars." He believes that its application to medieval literature shows a lack of understanding of the functions and the limits of the method as it was employed in the Middle Ages.

CHAPTER V

THE PEARL AS A PRODUCT OF THE "CENTURY OF MYSTICISM"

While mechanical systems of interpretation and arbitrary-association symbols appear to have little relevancy to comprehensive understanding of The Pearl, the relevancy of the more universal--or mystic--symbolism is quite another matter. Although the presence of such symbolism reveals itself through the work as it emerges, an understanding of mysticism and the mystic consciousness that flourished during the time of the Pearl poet increases one's awareness of these elements in the poem.²¹⁹

Symbolism has been called the "language" of mysticism,²²⁰ but in this context it is far removed from the arbitrary associations preserved in medieval dictionaries.²²¹ The symbolism of the mystic has a timeless and universal quality which is the antithesis of arbitrary symbolism, because mystic symbols derive not from learned associations, but from age-old mystical cravings of man "to know God."²²² Hence, they may be termed

²¹⁹ See Underhill, op. cit., p. 541; and Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 23. Both emphasize the prevalence of mystic consciousness in the fourteenth century.

²²⁰ Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 9.

²²¹ Dunbar, op. cit., p. 20.

²²² Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 40: ". . . the fundamental position of the mystic [is] that the object of life is to know God"; op. cit., p. 14: "Mystic truths can neither age nor die."

true symbols, even in a theological sense, which point beyond themselves to what Tillich has called "the unconditional, unlimited, and infinite."²²³ Such symbols possess a universality inextricably bound up with mysticism and the mystic experience.²²⁴ Maeterlinck observes, "The truths of mysticism have a strange privilege over ordinary truths: they can neither grow old nor die A work grows old in exact proportion to its anti-mysticism."²²⁵ Studies of The Pearl reveal the striking universality and timelessness of the poem. Perhaps, at least a part of its appeal is due to its mystic qualities.

In the poet's time, the wave of mystic consciousness that swept Europe and England had become so widespread that he could hardly have escaped its influence. Indeed, the fourteenth century has been called the "Century of Mysticism," and, although the history of mysticism as an element of Christian thought is ancient, dating back to the writings of the pseudo-Dionysius in the fifth century, mysticism assumed unparalleled proportions and directions in the fourteenth century.²²⁶ In England, in the Pearl poet's own time, or

²²³Tillich, op. cit., p. 110.

²²⁴Dunbar, op. cit., p. 22.

²²⁵Maurice Maeterlinck, Ruysbroeck and the Mystics, with Selections from Ruysbroeck, pp. 23-24.

²²⁶Underhill, op. cit., p. 545.

shortly before, Richard Rolle recorded his mystical experiences, and in the same century such mystical works appeared as Dame Julian's Revelations of Divine Love and the anonymous "Cloud of the Unknowing."²²⁷ Thus, the time was ripe for a reaction against the "political and ecclesiastical miseries" that had beset England in the thirteenth century. Mysticism provided a system whereby "inner kingdoms of the mind and soul" could be established, safe from the turmoil and inequities of the outer world; and, as such, it expressed the "doubts and despair which troubled the age."²²⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that England shared fully in the tide of mysticism that was invading Europe.²²⁹ The English, as well, were reacting against the "formalism and worldliness of the church."²³⁰ It must be emphasized, however, that the mystic of this period in no way protested against Church doctrine in the manner of

²²⁷Zesmer, op. cit., pp. 120-129. See Richard Rolle, "Love Is Life," Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose, pp. 36-40: A comparison of Rolle's "Love Is Life" with The Pearl shows striking similarities of outlook. See also, The Cloud of the Unknowing, and Other Treatises, pp. 6; 10-11; 38-56. The elements of mysticism in The Cloud of the Unknowing reveal interesting parallels to The Pearl.

²²⁸Heer, op. cit., p. 26; see also, Underhill, op. cit., p. 541.

²²⁹Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 23.

²³⁰Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison and Evelyn Underhill, "Mysticism," Encyclopaedia Britannica, XVI, 52-53. See also, Heer, op. cit., p. 375.

Reformation leaders, although mystic thought of the period actually advanced a spiritual freedom that surpassed that of the Reformers. Mysticism, though, was not rebellion, per se, but in its own way, it did very effectively prepare the way for the break with tradition that was later to come.²³¹

One notes, then, that, while medieval thinkers were not ready to break with Church doctrine, they were increasingly in need of some free or plastic interpretations of it. One notes, too, that the ends of both mysticism and the elaborate system of Biblical exegesis that still persisted at the time were both means toward more "freedom" in dealing with the "established truth" of the Church.²³² Mysticism, while it shared the same ends as allegorical "systems," was, nevertheless, of a totally different nature. It seems obvious that the elaborate systems of Scriptural exegesis were a hold-over from the scholastic approach; whereas, mysticism was a "theology of the heart," and, as such, it instinctively recoiled from "formulas that have become stereotyped and mechanical."²³³ Essentially, the fourteenth century represented a period of transition in which thoughtful people displayed an unquestioning

²³¹Pringle-Pattison and Underhill, op. cit., p. 53.

²³²Rand, op. cit., p. 267; see also, Heer, op. cit., p. 375.

²³³Pringle-Pattison and Underhill, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

adherence to the dogma of the Church, demonstrating at the same time an increasing freedom from rigidity and uniformity of thought.²³⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that scholars fail to agree on the orthodoxy of the poet's religious views.²³⁵ In his own way in The Pearl, the poet reflects the essential ambivalence of his century in this respect, for the tide of mysticism that developed in his time represented both reaction and renewal--reaction against the hard chrysalis of tradition, and, at the same time, a renewal in the earnest search for Knowledge of God.

Actually, this search for enlightenment--for Illumination--is the essence of the mystic way.²³⁶ Such a quest often begins in a state of bewilderment and confusion,²³⁷ and the narrator's state of mind in The Pearl clearly reflects such a condition.²³⁸ This initial state of anxious perplexity arises essentially, it has been suggested, from the painful recognition of the disparities between man and God--between Earth and Heaven. The true mystic, however, is convinced that

²³⁴Ibid., p. 53; Rand, op. cit., p. 267.

²³⁵Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxviii-xxxix; Brown, op. cit., pp. 140-141. Cf., Robertson, op. cit., p. 152; McAndrew, op. cit., p. 250.

²³⁶Spurgeon, op. cit., pp. 23; 117; Underhill, op. cit., p. 157.

²³⁷Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 125.

²³⁸All of the early stanzas show the narrator's bewilderment. Lines 175 and 55-56 are but two examples.

behind this divergency is unity. This belief in the unity of all things is, thus, both the "starting point" and the "goal" of the mystic quest: it is the fundamental element of mysticism.²³⁹ Such a belief in unity, one can see, made the obvious disparities between the hard existence on Earth and the medieval concept of Heaven particularly bewildering to the people of the time and made the quest for Divine Knowledge, through which these dualities of existence could be reconciled, a particularly urgent one.

The mystic belief in unity was inextricably bound up with the medieval concept of the symbolic nature of the world.²⁴⁰ For example, that which could be apprehended by the senses and comprehended by the intellect were, to the mystic, but traces of a greater reality beyond the usual limits of human understanding.²⁴¹ This latter "reality" was the one sought by the mystic. And, since all things were considered manifestations of the Divine Essence, it followed that man, too, shared the divine nature of God. In the mystic's view, therefore, it was possible for man to know God through the "godlike part of his nature," i.e., his soul or spirit.²⁴²

²³⁹Spurgeon, op. cit., pp. 3; 11.

²⁴⁰Sullivan, op. cit., p. 43.

²⁴¹Etienne Gilson, Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, p. 100.

²⁴²Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 3.

The way of knowing God was by becoming more godlike and, in so doing, ever to expand this receptivity for such knowledge of God. Life for the mystic was, thus, a "continual advance" and a "ceaseless aspiration" toward a union with God based on the ". . . passionate belief in the continuity of essence through ever changing form."²⁴³ Such a belief was not only the "mark" of the mystic, but of the Middle Ages, as well.²⁴⁴

Indeed, when one examines The Pearl, he can hardly overlook the "mark" of mysticism upon it. The classic stages of the mystic journey as outlined by Underhill are helpful in considering the poem. For example, the first step in the Mystic Way was the purgative stage which consisted of stripping away all temporal concerns: the pilgrim was to become "poor, bare, and desolate." This stage was followed by the "onset of illumination." The pilgrim, thence, enters the "Valley of Knowledge," or the stage of "Enlightenment," and from there may progress through the "Valley of Detachment" a stage "of utter absorption" in Divine Love, and, thereafter, on to the "Valley of Unity," the stage of the Beatific Vision. After this stage, comes the "Valley of Amazement," in which the Vision so transcends the pilgrim's receptive powers that he

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁴⁴ Dunbar, op. cit., p. 23.

again suffers the distress of bewilderment--a stage termed by mystics as the "Divine Dark" or the "Dark Night of the Soul." This point in the journey has been described as the "truest and closest of all apprehensions of the Godhead" and is considered the culmination of the Illuminative way. Thus, it completes the "journey to God." From this point, a few mystics claim further progress to a "second mystic life," which is the ultimate journey of the soul "in God," i.e., the "Unitive Way." This is the last stage of the mystic journey, the point known as the "Valley of Annihilation of Self," wherein the self is entirely "merged in the ocean of Divine Love."²⁴⁵

The narrator's progress in The Pearl (as will be traced later in more detail) closely follows each stage of Underhill's pattern, with the exception of the final one. In the poem, only the last consummation, the ascension into Oneness with God, is denied the jeweler. He has progressed beyond the initial limits of his understanding to a new apprehension of the Truths of existence. In so doing, he has realized one of the primary goals of the mystic,²⁴⁶ and he is better and stronger for his experience.²⁴⁷ The bewildering disparities

²⁴⁵Underhill, op. cit., pp. 156-158.

²⁴⁶Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 1. Spurgeon uses the definition of a mystic as "one who believes in spiritual apprehending of truths beyond understanding."

²⁴⁷Underhill, op. cit., p. 323. In this regard, Underhill's comments on true mystic experiences as contrasted

that he recognizes--the Pearl rotting in the ground and the Pearl established in grandeur in Heaven--are at last reconciled. The bridge over the great chasm between Earth and Heaven--the continuity so earnestly sought by the mystic--is now revealed to him.²⁴⁸

This concept of continuity from one plan to another is expressed by the mystic symbol. It is a means, as Dunbar has shown, of welding the puzzling dualities of nature²⁴⁹ and of expressing "ideas . . . not yet mastered."²⁵⁰ Thus, while the medieval mind displayed great fondness for symbols of all kinds, including the most arbitrary and artificial, the symbolism of the medieval mystic has significance for all ages, arising, as it does, from the deep, unconscious drives universally present within man.²⁵¹ In other words, the symbols of mysticism appeal to a profound human yearning for a pilgrimage toward a better place, an ultimate home.²⁵²

(continued) to pathological states have an interesting relevance. Healthy mysticism, in her view, tends to ". . . infuse something new in the way of strength, knowledge, direction": it tends to leave the individual better off "physically, mentally, or spiritually." Such experiences, unlike pathological states, have a "life-enhancing quality."

²⁴⁸See Spearing, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

²⁴⁹Dunbar, op. cit., pp. 15-17.

²⁵⁰Ibid., p. 13.

²⁵¹Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 43-46. Sullivan notes that this view is essentially the Jungian view of symbolism.

²⁵²Underhill, op. cit., p. 151.

The goal of the mystic, therefore--though not his experience--is common to men of all times and all cultures, and his use of symbols is but a means of expressing and clarifying the mystical progression to greater understanding of the universe. Thus, the symbols themselves, unlike arbitrary symbols or "systems," are not mysteries or puzzles, but tools by which the paradoxes of life may be fathomed. The skillful use of these symbols becomes especially effective in literary works, notably in poetry, the latter being particularly suited to the expression of mystic insights, because it deals with the finding of similarities and universalities in the elements which it treats, and, also, because it appeals to the heart--to the "transcendental feeling" in man--more strongly than any moral treatise can.²⁵³ Tillich, in fact, emphasizes the unique position of art as a means of communicating mystic concepts, believing that the symbolism of art can reveal higher realities otherwise not apprehended. Thus, not only does the artist make the audience aware of mystic truths, but makes it a part of these higher realities.²⁵⁴ The symbol, then, in the hands of an artist, is not only a means of enlightenment, but also one involving the audience, and it functions in the latter manner, perhaps, only because it touches some common strain

²⁵³Spurgeon, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

²⁵⁴Tillich, op. cit., p. 109.

of experience or mystic longing within the audience.

The appeal of The Pearl through the touching humanity it portrays has, of course, been widely recognized.²⁵⁵ A second source of its appeal may well be its subtle element of mysticism. Actually, these two qualities are in themselves related, for the mystic yearning for something beyond self-- for some "intelligible unity"²⁵⁶--is a part of man's make-up; it is just as human as his temporal concerns, his sorrows, and his sometimes rebellious responses to life's vicissitudes. Spurgeon has explained:

The mystics would never hold the audience they do hold, were it not that the vast majority of people have in themselves what William James has called a "mystical germ" which makes response to their message.²⁵⁷

Whether the answers offered by the mystic are but a rationale-- a pathetic delusion--or whether they are conceived through Divine Knowledge, the mystic's convictions of the heart and that "mystical germ" within men everywhere both stem from the same yearning for meaning and bind them together.

Thus, one can see that the universality of the mystic appeal of The Pearl lies actually in the universality of the

²⁵⁵Gordon, op. cit., p. xviii; Everett, op. cit., p. 4; Heiserman, op. cit., p. 171.

²⁵⁶See Richardson, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁵⁷Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 6.

jeweler's yearning for answers and the more or less common attitude of mind that assumes the existence of such answers. The reader, for example, need not accept the possibility of the mystic experience described; the experience for the poet may indeed have been entirely fictional. Perhaps, he did not seriously believe that such experiences were possible. However, he could scarcely have been unaware of the claims of the many mystics among his contemporaries. He may have been only toying personally with the concept of such a mystic experience. If he had, in reality, suffered the loss attributed to the jeweler, it is entirely possible that the poem was his expression of a kind of wish fulfillment. Of course, it is true (as several critics have pointed out) that the Maiden, not the bewildered jeweler, expresses the real convictions of the poem.²⁵⁸ This observation does not imply, however, that the poem necessarily expresses the true sentiments of the poet. It is possible that the poet, unlike the narrator, did not ultimately find the answers which he advances to be satisfactory. This latter point must be stressed, not because it is considered probable, but because it must be recognized as a possibility. Certain elements of mysticism may be found which

²⁵⁸ Everett, *op. cit.*, p. 95; Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 819. Both note that the Maiden reveals the "real sentiments" of the poet. This view is valid if the poem expresses the real opinion of the poet, a circumstance which is probable but not necessarily certain as is indicated above.

obviously have much in common with simple wish fulfillments, and it should be clear that the author of the present study neither accepts nor denies the possibilities of the mystic experience outlined. Furthermore, one does not wish to imply that he supports the thesis, so popular among modern psychologists and theologians which states that really universal symbols (i.e., symbols completely independent of the age or culture in which they appear) do actually exist. Two conclusions, however, do seem valid. The first of these is that the mystic yearning for harmony and unity--for making sense out of the puzzling dualities of existence is a universal one that transcends time and culture. The second is that in The Pearl the mystic quest is made extremely credible.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹See Fletcher, op. cit., p. 5; Spearing, op. cit., pp. 11-12; Greene, op. cit., p. 823; Stanton de Voren Hoffman, "The Pearl: Notes for an Interpretation," MP, LVIII (November, 1960), 80. More detailed support of this conclusion will be found in a later section of the present study devoted to an explication of the poem.

CHAPTER VI

AN APPROACH TO AN ELEGIAC INTERPRETATION OF THE PEARL

Clearly, an understanding of the poetic tradition can serve only as a starting point in making a reasonable interpretation of this poem. While such an understanding can define areas of possibility for interpretations, it is obviously the text alone which validates an interpretation. The following study, therefore, is a suggested approach to a reading of the poem based upon the possibilities suggested by the poet's tradition along with a careful textual consideration.

The significance of the pearl symbol is unmistakable throughout. As a matter of fact, in the first line the poet describes the gem most precious in the eyes of a medieval audience, and, as has been pointed out, the one richest in symbolic significations for this audience.²⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the poet carefully delineates the suggestion of preciousness. The reader is told that the pearl is the delight of princes to set in "gold so clere" (2). Thus, by showing the gem to be worthy of royal possession or royal setting, the poet at once establishes the very special nature of this precious gem, at the same time initiating a sentiment to be repeated

²⁶⁰Kunz and Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 21; 303.

at the close of the poem in another connotation. The lines immediately following not only further emphasize the unique worth of this pearl, e.g., "oute of oryent" (3),²⁶¹ but also depict the pearl traditionally in terms of medieval descriptions of fair ladies.²⁶² Here, again, the author hints about the true nature of this pearl, later to be made clear in the poem. Having thus established the peerless quality of the precious pearl, the poet next informs the reader of the loss of this matchless gem: "Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere, / Dur3 gresse to grounde hit fro me yot (9-10).²⁶³ Immediately, then, he describes the jeweler's grief: "I dewyne for-dolked of luf daungere / Of pat pryuy perle with-uten spot (11-12). Although the reader must still consider the pearl strictly in a lapidary's sense, he sees that even in the first stanza other implications are (at least in retrospect) clearly present in the poet's references to the pearl.

In the second stanza, as the narrator continues his lament, curious overtones of sin emerge from the narrative,

²⁶¹Hillman, op. cit., p. 76.

²⁶²Gordon, op. cit., pp. 45-46.

²⁶³Morris, op. cit., p. 1. suggests, with a question mark, the word got for yot in this line. Gordon, op. cit., p. 46, suggests yot is an "unusual form" of yode meaning went. There is the suggestion, here, that the pearl is taken from the jeweler without his really knowing how it happened. This suggestion, which accords well with what is to come in the poem, is especially clear in reading the word as got.

noted in detail in Hillman's study, which could naturally be construed at this point in the poem as indication of the jeweler's excessive attachment to worldly goods.²⁶⁴ Such suggestions of covetness are, however, somewhat puzzling--though intriguing--in their obvious reference to grief for a lost child.²⁶⁵ One must remember, however, that the pearl, here, is still represented chiefly as an actual gem; hence, the elegiac theme is thus far only hinted at.²⁶⁶ Here, perhaps, is the key to the whole poem: it is the jeweler's sin--or error, at least--that he has placed such a lasting value on his ephemeral treasure.²⁶⁷ His concern at the moment is the fate of the Pearl's physical state. He can think of his loss only in terms of her earthly existence, revealing the very limited scope of his comprehension of the nature of things. Obviously, this pre-occupation has a very human

²⁶⁴Hillman, op. cit., pp. 78-79.

²⁶⁵Ibid., p. xi. Hillman sees it as a "culpable grief" arising from covetness. She never recognizes the pearl as the representation of a child that once lived. Cf. Conley, op. cit., pp. 334-335. Conley agrees with much of Hillman's interpretation because it accounts for the "reprehensible" nature of the jeweler's grief, but Conley objects of Hillman's "fundamentalism" in taking the lost pearl literally throughout.

²⁶⁶Most scholars agree that the pearl represents a child. Morris, op. cit., p. ix; Gollancz, CHEL, p. 320; Gordon, op. cit., p. xvi; Osgood, op. cit., p. xxviii. For a summary of critical opinion on this point, consult Chapter I.

²⁶⁷Conley, op. cit., pp. 334-336.

appeal, but, at the same time, it also emphasizes the disparity of the two worlds--the physical and the spiritual--the resolution of which is the raison d'être of the poem, if one accepts the interpretations advanced in a number of recent studies.²⁶⁸

Every stanza--every line--in the early parts of the poem is full of implications and studied ambiguities which are subsequently developed. For instance, the jeweler in Section I notes the luxuriant growth over "pat spot" where ". . . such ryche3 to rot is runnen" (25-26). He observes, as well, the continuing cyclical order of Nature: "Flor & fryte may not be fede, / Der hit doun drof in molde3 dunne (29-30). In the next line, he emphasizes implications of the Resurrection: "For vch gresse mot grow of grayne3 dede" (31). This observation is voiced almost absently by the jeweler. In the early stanzas he is so pre-occupied with the rot and ruin of his pearl "so clad in clot" (22) that he is, as it were, unaware of these implications on another level. His words, of course, foreshadow the events to come and prepare the reader for the direction in which the poem moves.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸Moorman, op. cit., p. 75; Heiserman, op. cit., pp. 170-171; Spearing, op. cit., p. 8; Johnson, op. cit., pp. 161-180.

²⁶⁹A number of studies illustrate the poet's use of the resurrection motif. Hoffman, op. cit., p. 79; Moorman, op. cit., p. 75; Johnson, ibid., p. 167.

The narrator's pre-occupation with his loss denies him the solace of his religion. On the fateful day of his vision, still deep in sorrow, he returns to that spot--the "huyle"--in which he believes his precious pearl dwells. His heart is heavy with "denely dele,"²⁷⁰ and, although one part of his mind recognizes the comfort offered by Christ's teachings, his "wreched wylle" keeps him in woe (52-56). Even within the character of his narrator, the poet, here, develops the dichotomy of worldly and spiritual values, and while this description of the jeweler's obtuseness and suffering contributes much in the way of emotional appeal to the poem, the jeweler's limited, worldly point of view, here, is but another instance of the poet's emphasis upon the dualities of existence.

In this sorrowful state, the jeweler falls into a deep sleep or swoon, and the time, the place, and the state of mind of the narrator at this point have been the source of scholarly speculation. For example, the time is undoubtedly effective in its suggestion of a kind of serenity or world-weariness on the part of the narrator.²⁷¹ The setting in late summer is also suggestive of the Festival of the Assumption, which

²⁷⁰Hillman's version of the text reads "deuely," op. cit., pp. 4; 80. The wickedness of the jeweler's grief becomes clear in later sections when the Maiden reprimands him. Therefore, while "deuely" is obviously in accord with Hillman's view, it is not crucial to the point which she is making.

²⁷¹Spearing, op. cit., p. 4.

Hamilton finds particularly significant because it is this festival which commemorates the ". . . restoration through Mary of what Mankind forfeited through Eve."²⁷² Still another reason for the poet's choice of the month of August may stem from the tradition of medieval dreamlore which suggests that puzzling dreams and visions were more likely to occur during this period of the year.²⁷³ Now, it should be clear that each of these significations could be validly incorporated into an acceptable reading of the poem. However, the merit of the poem may lie in the fact that all of these suggestions regarding the time and setting may have significance, as only one of the many isolated examples of the richness of connotation to be found in the work. Repeatedly, one will note what Johnson has called the "conscious ambiguity" which enriches and dramatizes this poem.²⁷⁴ Certainly, this section deserves close attention, because it is in this section that the "basic imagery" of two worlds is introduced, providing the keynote of the whole poem.²⁷⁵ Up to the onset of the dream, however, the jeweler's point of view is so earth-bound that he displays

²⁷²Hamilton, op. cit., p. 813.

²⁷³Heiserman, op. cit., p. 166.

²⁷⁴Johnson, op. cit., p. 166.

²⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 166-167.

little awareness of the existence of another realm. The dream, nevertheless, brings to the poem a dramatic awareness of the Heavenly region, and with it begins the jeweler's long, arduous struggle toward understanding and consolation.

Section II describes the onset of the dream, when the grieving man's spirit springs to the region of crystal cliffs and glistening splendors that dazzle, bewilder, and for the moment, cause him to forget his sorrow and torment. In his description of this realm, the poet makes it impossible for the reader to overlook the fact that the splendors of this region clearly eclipse even the beauty of the lovely "erbere" in which the pearl was lost. In these passages, furthermore, the two categories of imagery which Johnson notes become manifestly clear. The real contrast between earth and this realm--only hinted at in Section I--becomes apparent through the use of the elaborate imagery, especially that of dazzling light which transforms the whole region through its "reflected brilliance."²⁷⁶

The wonders described in Section II, however, are but a prelude to the wonders which the dream is yet to behold, for beyond the stream are still more marvelous splendors. In

²⁷⁶Johnson, op. cit., pp. 168-169. Johnson notes that the region in which the dreamer finds himself ". . . bears a considerable resemblance to the Earthly Paradise of the medieval accounts."

mystical terms, the dreamer has reached what would seem clearly to be the "onset of illumination."²⁷⁷ The emphasis upon light imagery would, thus, appear a purposeful one. In other words, the narrator has reached in his mystic journey ". . . a position midway between earth, with its unsolvable riddles of life and death, and heaven where all contradictories are united."²⁷⁸ His vision and understanding are still very limited, as is clear in subsequent stanzas, but he is possessed, at this stage, with a great desire to see beyond the stream (146). The stream, however, proves to be a formidable barrier, and his attempt to ford it is arrested at this point when he catches sight of the Maiden beyond the stream, because he knows her. With utter simplicity he remarks: "I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere" (164). This commentary is but the first of the narrator's many understated, almost reticent, references to the identity of the Maiden. It has been noted that this reference, as well as similar ones which follow, is placed in sharp contrast to the veritable crescendoes of elaboration used in the descriptive passages.²⁷⁹ It is difficult to believe

²⁷⁷Underhill, op. cit., p. 156. (The stages of the mystic way are outlined in Chapter V of the present study.)

²⁷⁸Moorman, op. cit., p. 76. See also Johnson, op. cit., p. 168.

²⁷⁹Gordon, op. cit., p. xxxviii. Gordon attributes the ease with which the poet switches from rich elaboration to simple expressions to the freedom allowed by the alliterative tradition.

that such stylistic contrasts are mere accident. The effect is one of bringing the reader back sharply to the reality of the narrator's human condition to emphasize again the contrast between his world and the world beyond in which the Maiden dwells. Furthermore, the statements referring to the dreamer's prior relationship with the Maiden are not nearly so ambiguous as they are reticent, and such reticence, it has been observed, is entirely fitting as a natural response to profound grief.²⁸⁰ The measure of mystery thus produced serves additionally to arouse the reader's interest, for, as Heiserman explains, the poem consistently presents the reader with a ". . . scheme of character and action which evokes a series of discoveries," which, in turn, leads to the resolution of the conflicts occasioned by the narrator's loss of the pearl.²⁸¹ The dreamer's resolution of these conflicts, however, does not come easily. In fact, his initial bewilderment is only compounded at the beginning of the dream, especially at the sight of the Pearl-maiden. Indeed, he expresses his surprise at finding her "in so strange a place" (175). Objections to this response as uncharacteristic of a Christian father²⁸² seem groundless when one considers the careful description of

²⁸⁰Osgood, op. cit., p. xxxiv.

²⁸¹Heiserman, op. cit., p. 166.

²⁸²Hillman, op. cit., p. 83; Madeleva, op. cit., p. 131.

the jeweler's state of distraction from the very beginning of the poem and when one recalls, also, that the place of the deceased infant in the Heavenly hierarchy was still a matter of concern in the poet's time.²⁸³ Certainly, the jeweler's obtuseness at this point is a poetic necessity, since the poem is explicitly concerned with the problem of explaining the presence of Pearl in Heaven. There is little doubt that the poet's real sentiments are revealed through the Maiden's instruction,²⁸⁴ but the reality with which the poet depicts the uncertainty and ignorance of the narrator is responsible for much of the poem's appeal, clearly attesting to the poet's power and effectiveness.²⁸⁵

Clearly, one sees the poet's careful delineation of character in the narrator's emotional responses to his first glimpse of the Maiden. He is at once overjoyed, anxious, and awed. The longer he looks at her, the greater his sense of "gladande glory" (171). But what he sees seems to be too good to be true. Very naturally, having once lost her, he is

²⁸³Wellek, op. cit., pp. 20-22. See, also, Chapter II of the present study dealing with theology.

²⁸⁴Ibid., p. 19. It should be noted again that if the message of the Pearl-maiden is not representative of the poet's actual sentiments, it is at least likely that her words reflect what he would like to believe. It is possible that the poem represents the poet's earnest effort to rationalize his religious teachings which he has come to question.

²⁸⁵Everett, op. cit., p. 95.

afraid he will again lose her. In addition, the elegance of her array increases his sense of awe. Much of Section IV, in fact, is devoted to a rapturous account of the Maiden's magnificence and to her rich raiment when she ". . . ryse3 vp in hir arraye ryalle" (191), literally bedecked with pearls and wearing on her breast the most magnificent pearl of all.

Despite his awe, the dreamer summons courage to address the Maiden, and his words reflect his sense of humility and wonder and repeat once more his sorrow felt when he thought his Pearl was lost. However, the Maiden is hard with him, reprimanding him for his obtuseness and reminding him that his pearl was never really lost: "'Syr 3e haf your tale myse-tente, / To say your perle is al awaye'" (257-258). To many readers, she may seem incredibly harsh--even arrogant. One must remember, however, that Christianity is not without its harsh elements and arrogant assumptions.²⁸⁶ The important consideration here, though, is that in the Christian view the narrator has sinned, not only by putting an inordinate value upon a possession of a transient nature,²⁸⁷ but also

²⁸⁶The Biblical version of original sin and the sacrificial nature of Christ's death on the cross, if taken literally, reveals a harsh, cold Deity. Certainly, the insistence of Christians that salvation depends upon accepting their faith and their Saviour reflects a certain arrogance, not unlike the arrogance of the Church displayed in its reaction to the theories of Copernicus.

²⁸⁷Conley, op. cit., pp. 334-335.

for failing to realize that Pearl had eternal life. In this context, correction of such misconceptions are imperative for the man's own salvation. Furthermore, the contrast between the Maiden's assurance and the dreamer's uncertainty emphasizes the diversity of their two levels of understanding. Gordon explains: "In the manner of the maiden is portrayed the effect upon a clear intelligence of the persistent earthliness of the father's mind" ²⁸⁸ This contrast, of course, is but one of many in the poem that stress the differences between the two worlds of the dreamer and the Maiden. Actually, the theme of the differences in the earthly and Heavenly realms and their transcendent relationship was common in medieval literature, especially in the literature of the mystics. ²⁸⁹ The Pearl differs from these works, however, in the degree of its interest and emotional appeal, and these qualities depend specifically on what Gordon terms the "persistent earthliness" of the narrator, or what Spearing describes as the dreamer's ". . . inability . . . to realize the disparity between the two [worlds]." ²⁹⁰

Thus, the Maiden's curtness when she makes clear that what was lost "wat3 bot a rose, / Dat flowred and fayled as

²⁸⁸Gordon, op. cit., p. xviii.

²⁸⁹Spearing, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

²⁹⁰Ibid., p. 8.

kynde hit gef" (270) is intended to free the dreamer from his earthly view. For the moment, she appears to have succeeded, for he asks forgiveness for his erroneous assumptions. Next, he speaks of his joy upon learning that his Pearl is not lost, expressing his desire to join her: "'Now were I at yow by-
 3onde þise wawe3, / I were a Ioyful Iueler'" (287-288). The Maiden, again, rebukes him (289-300). He is still in error, she tells him, and, in Section VI, she explains the nature of his misconceptions in more detail, reprimanding him (1) for believing only what his eyes can see, (2) for thinking that he can dwell with her, and (3) for presuming that he can, at present, cross the stream that separates them. His distress at the thought of another parting is great, but she responds coldly, chiding him for his grief over "lure3 lesse" (339). She informs him that anger will avail him nothing; rather, he must learn to abide by the Lord's desires (345-348).

In Section VII, more chastened than before, the dreamer again apologizes for his rash words. His grief is somewhat assuaged at seeing her new estate, and he begs her, with the simplicity characteristic of all his expressions, not to be angry: "'God forbede we be now wroþe, / We meten so selden by
 stok oper ston'" (379-380). One should note, however, that, while the dreamer protests that Christ's mercy is now the grounds of all his bliss (383), in his response he is still

very human, his chief concern being to remain with the Pearl and keep in her good graces. At this point, his words appease the Maiden, and she promises to tell him of her life with the Lord the Lamb. It is significant that, even though she now speaks more kindly, her position remains one of undeviating assurance and authority. Clearly, she represents ultimate, immutable intelligence. There can be no bending of her point of view. It is the narrator's spiritual growth, his expanding awareness, that is crucial to the resolution of the poem. Thus, his words become pleasing to her (400) only after he is properly meek--purged, in a mystic sense, of the "maysterful mod & hy3e pryde," which "arn heterly hated" in the realm in which Pearl now dwells (401-402).

Section VIII may represent in mystical terms the "Valley of Knowledge."²⁹¹ At this point, the pilgrim (the narrator) is enabled by the complete humbling of his spirit to receive more enlightenment. He still has questions, of course, and although sorely afraid of Pearl's wrath, he ventures to ask her how she can have attained to such a high place. He wants to know how she, who "wat3 so 3onge" could achieve a place equal to that gained by those "pat hade endured in worlde stronge / & lyued in penance hys lyu3 longe, / With bodyly bale hym blysse to bye" (475-477).

²⁹¹See Underhill, op. cit., p. 157.

In Section IX, the dreamer continues to express his amazement when he considers the brevity of her life on earth:

Dou lyfed not two 3er in oure pede,
 Dou cowpe3 neuer god nauþer plese ne pray,
 Ne neuer nauþer pater ne crede,
 & quen mad on þe fyrst day!
 (482-485)

In answer to these objections, Pearl explains her position in Heaven, using the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew XX: 1-16). Clearly, the inequity of equal rewards for good works and for innocents who lived but a short time runs counter to the dreamer's reason, although there can be no doubt that he is immeasurably comforted by the fact that Pearl has received such a reward. In a sense, the debate that follows is the heart of the poem: all else hinges on the strength of the Maiden's argument, for consolation of the grieving father depends on his assurance regarding the whereabouts of his lost pearl--an assurance that must persist after he awakens. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that the poet devotes four entire sections of the poem (IX-XII) to an explanation of the doctrine of salvation by grace. The paradox of equal rewards is carefully explained and possible objections meticulously countered.

The Maiden first explains that late-comers to the Vineyard--those who toiled but for a short time--were paid the same as those who had suffered the heat of the whole

day (496-635). The reasons for the equality of rewards is next explained: those who toil long (i.e., live longer and gain salvation by good works) are inevitably much tainted by sin and, therefore, are actually also saved by the "mercy & grace of god" (616-623). But the innocents who are brought into the Vineyard just after baptism, although their time of toil is short, are free of this taint of sin. Thus, the Maiden asks: "'Why schulde he not her labour alow, / 3yrd & pay hym at þe fyrst fyne: / For þe grace of God is gret innoghe'" (633-636). In the ensuing stanzas she proceeds to answer her own question. Salvation may be won, she acknowledges, "if þou be wy3te," but she makes clear that the situation of the innocent is unique: "'Bot hardly with-oute peryle, / Ðe innosent is ay saue by ry3te (693-695). She concludes with the words of Jesus: "'Do way, let chylder vnto me tyet, / To suche is heuen-ryche arayed'" (717-718).

The reward--the "penny" paid at the end of the furrow--most critics agree, is the reward of Eternal Life.²⁹² Whether or not the poet implies, here, equality of reward for all the saved has been a source of considerable controversy.²⁹³ In

²⁹²Gordon, op. cit., pp. xxi-xxii; Wellek, op. cit., p. 23; Fletcher, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁹³Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxviii-xl; Brown, op. cit., p. 137; cf. Gordon, op. cit., pp. xxiv-xxv; Wellek, op. cit., pp. 22-23; Fletcher, op. cit., p. 19.

fact, much of the divergency of scholarly opinion on the so-called orthodoxy of the poet stems from this question.²⁹⁴

However, this point is not crucial in the poem. The urgent issue, the one of emotional import to the narrator, was the child's salvation, and this issue is clearly resolved.²⁹⁵ It is the father's assurance of Pearl's high estate, not of her precise rank, that is the source of his final consolation and reconciliation to God's will.

The Maiden's long discourse, then, on the relative merits of good works and grace in God's plan of salvation is an integral part of the "purpose and movement of the poem," a means whereby the narrator is led to recognize the real nature of Pearl's new state and the vast difference between her world and his own.²⁹⁶ Only after the narrator is able to comprehend the difference between earthly and Heavenly values--the difference between the Pearl lost in the "erbere" and the Heavenly Pearl before him--is he prepared to understand the

²⁹⁴Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxviii-xl; Brown, op. cit., p. 137; cf. Gordon, op. cit., pp. xxiv-xxv; Wellek, op. cit., pp. 22-23; and Fletcher, op. cit., pp. 17-19. Fletcher acknowledges the contradictions within the poem on this point, but he does not question the poet's essential orthodoxy.

²⁹⁵Fletcher, op. cit., p. 19; Gordon, op. cit., pp. xxiv-xxv.

²⁹⁶Moorman, op. cit., p. 80.

unity, or the "continuity," of these diverse worlds.²⁹⁷

It is important to note that in these sections devoted essentially to emphasizing the difference in the two realms, the word pearl is not once used. Its reintroduction in Section XIII, after its notable absence, can hardly be without significance. Spearing observes that the pearl symbolism is picked up again exactly at the point in which it was dropped in Section V.²⁹⁸ Certainly, there can be little doubt that the Maiden's first reference to the pearl in Section XIII (731) echoes the "perle of prys" in line 272.²⁹⁹ In Section XIII, however, the reference is explicitly developed. The "perle of prys" now clearly becomes the pearl for which the merchant in Matthew XII: 45-46 sold all of his goods.³⁰⁰ Now that the dreamer is better able to comprehend the significance of this pearl of price, the girl explains that the pearl is like the kingdom of Heaven and that the pearl on her breast is the token of eternal life (732-742). She, then, advises the dreamer to renounce the "worlde wode" and purchase such a pearl

²⁹⁷Spearing, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁹⁸Ibid., pp. 8-10.

²⁹⁹Ibid., p. 9.

³⁰⁰Loc. cit.; Hillman, op. cit., p. 99; Gordon, op. cit., p. xxviii; Osgood, op. cit., p. 99.

for himself (743-744).³⁰¹ Section XIII marks a new stage in the spiritual instruction of the narrator. It marks, as well, a new development--or clarification--of the pearl symbolism with various associations previously suggested in the poem now tied together at this point.³⁰² Clearly, the symbolism has been developed step by step rather than presented from the beginning in "total allegorical simultaneity."³⁰³ This method of development is particularly significant, in keeping with what has been identified as the "dialectical structure"³⁰⁴ and the "essential mysticism" of the poem.³⁰⁵ Whereas the poet in the early sections of the poem has played with the many associations of the pearl symbol, investing it purposefully with ambiguity,³⁰⁶ in Section XIII, he begins to use the pearl symbol as a means of clarifying and unifying the elements within his poem.³⁰⁷ It is the pearl symbol, for example, that

³⁰¹Hoffman, op. cit., p. 80. These lines make clear, it would seem, that the Pearl figure is, as Hoffman puts it, "separate from the narrator," and not, as some critics claim, representative of the man's soul. The latter view is advanced by Hamilton, op. cit., p. 834; and McAndrew, op. cit., p. 249.

³⁰²Spearing, op. cit., p. 10.

³⁰³Loc. cit.

³⁰⁴Heiserman, op. cit., p. 93.

³⁰⁵Johnson, op. cit., p. 166.

³⁰⁶Everett, op. cit., p. 93; Johnson, op. cit., p. 166.

³⁰⁷Spearing, op. cit., pp. 3; 9-10.

identifies the two pearl figures with one another,³⁰⁸ thereby establishing a unity underlying the contrasting nature of the two figures--the one rotting in the earth; the other, having been established in the dazzling splendor of Paradise. In this function, the pearl becomes a symbol in the truest sense of the word.³⁰⁹ Other associations, such as the crown and the pearl on the Maiden's breast are probably emblematic.³¹⁰ This remarkable fusion of the many associations may be illustrated in the passage in which the dreamer addressed the Maiden:³¹¹ "'O maskele3 perle in perle3 pure, / Dat bere3,' quoth I, 'the perle of prys'" (744-745). After these lines, which reveal the recognition of Pearl's real worth, the Maiden emphasizes the "spotlessness" of her innocence, and in the sections immediately following, she extols the vicarious nature of Christ's death on the Cross. In l. 817, for example, she speaks of Christ's own sinlessness and describes his crucifixion: "For vus he swalt in Iherusalem" (815). Later, she associates the spotlessness of the Lamb with the innocents:

Thys Ihersulem lombe hade neuer pechche,

³⁰⁸Greene, op. cit., p. 822.

³⁰⁹See definition of symbol; Richardson, op. cit., pp. 3-5; Spurgeon, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

³¹⁰Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxv-xxxvi.

³¹¹Everett, op. cit., p. 93.

Of ober huee bot quyt Iolyf
 Dat mot ne masklle mo3t on streche
 For wolle quyte so ronk & ryf,
 For-by vche saule pat hade neuer teche,
 Is to pat lombe a worpyly wyf
 (840-845)

The dreamer's words, now, reveal a more genuine understanding of the differences between his estate and hers:

I am bot mokke & mul among,
 & pou so ryche a reken rose,
 & byde3 here by pys blysfyl bonc
 Der lyue3 lyste may neuer lose
 (904-907)

But even though he has come to accept the girl's account, he still sees things from an earthly point of view. It has been noted, for instance, that the Old Jerusalem wherein Christ was slain is much more comprehensible to him than the New Jerusalem which the girl describes to him.³¹² However, he is now eager to know more about the great new city in which Pearl dwells, and, although he has been told much about the place, he yearns still to enter her dwelling place and see her "blysfyl bor" (963). While he is not allowed to set foot within the Heavenly City, he is granted, through Pearl's intercession, special permission to view it. The vision of New Jerusalem that follows in the next three sections is described

³¹²Moorman, op. cit., p. 80.

in the poet's "grandest terms."³¹³ The poet's vision of Heaven--more splendid even than his previous descriptive passages--is based upon the Apocalypse, although he selects and orders the details for his own purposes.³¹⁴ He lists in considerable detail the precious gems contained in the Scriptural account, but he apparently intends them to have no special symbolic significance.³¹⁵ Obviously, these gems may have had for the medieval mind a special significance now lost for a modern reader, but if the poet intended special significance without explicitly indicating his purpose, he was clearly departing from the method of utmost clarity which he had used consistently throughout the poem.³¹⁶ It seems more likely that the function of the list of stones is chiefly an ornamental one, the poet's means of emphasizing the supreme magnificence of the city.³¹⁷ The most significant feature of the vision is not these stones, however, but the tremendous light or brightness of the celestial realm. Perhaps, one of the most interesting descriptive passages in the entire poem is that in which he describes the light of the Heavenly City,

³¹³Johnson, op. cit., p. 169.

³¹⁴Osgood, op. cit., p. xviii.

³¹⁵Loc. cit.; Spearing, op. cit., p. 11.

³¹⁶Osgood, op. cit., pp. xxxiv-xxxv; xxxviii.

³¹⁷Spearing, op. cit., p. 11.

comparing it with the sun and the moon. In fact, he devotes at least as much space (all of Section XIX) to the description of the light of the realm as he does to his cataloging of the stones. In his description of the brightness of the Heavenly City, moreover, he amplifies more upon the Biblical account than he does in his description of the stones. It seems reasonable to suppose that these extended references to light are used to emphasize the mystical nature of the dreamer's progress toward supernal knowledge. At this point, he is reaching the culmination, in the terms of mysticism, of the "Illuminative Way."³¹⁸ In other words, in attaining to the stage of the Beatific Vision, the dreamer is viewing what Johnson considers as "the supreme source of light,"³¹⁹ who explains further the significance of the imagery contained in these passages as follows:

. . . the city, with its jewels, its perfect hardness and constancy, its brilliance and purity--the very opposite of dust--all associated with royalty and with light, symbolizes the heavenly.³²⁰

The vision is one of matchless splendor. Indeed, there seems to be almost no end to the wonders which the dreamer beholds at this point. First, he is awed by the sight of the procession

³¹⁸Underhill, op. cit., pp. 156-158.

³¹⁹Johnson, op. cit., p. 176.

³²⁰Ibid., p. 178.

of the virgins, arrayed in white and bedecked with pearls (1098-1104). Then, he adds still another dimension to his ecstatic joy when he sees the Lamb passing before him toward the throne of God. Not only is he filled with inexpressible delight at the sight of the Lamb, but he is also led to his most profound realization of the significance of Christ's sacrificial death. The grievous wound in his Saviour's side leads him to contemplate the great wrong which provoked it, and despite all of his instruction and the enlightenment of the vision, he remarks with characteristic obtuseness, "Alas! tho3t I, who did þat spyt? / Ani breste for bale a3t haf forbrent, / Er he þer-to hade had delyt" (1137-1139). In a sense, these lines foreshadow the "doel doun-goun" (1187) which the man must yet endure before he can know the real delight of dwelling with his Saviour. The limitations of his comprehension are clearly shown herein, and the very personal basis of the poem is illustrated in the lines which follow describing the climax of the vision as he sees with his own eyes his "lyttel quene" among Christ's bright retinue (1144-1147). This is the dreamer's supreme moment of ecstasy, eclipsing even his delight upon beholding the Saviour. This fact is important, because it indicates the personal, elegiac approach of the poem. To the narrator, the greatest significance of Christ's grace is clearly in regard to the fate of his Pearl. While it is true that he is wiser about God's ways than

formerly he was, his understanding is still most limited, as the next lines indicate. At the sight of the vision Maiden, his heart is filled with "luf longyng" (1151), a significant echo of the word "luf daungere" in l. 11.³²¹ The poet's choice of "luf longyng" seems to support the contention that the dreamer is overwhelmed by the desire to be with the "lyttel quene,"³²² rather than by the more mystical desire for a union with God.³²³ Certainly, "luf longyng" suggests an emotion quite different from the very holy delight he expresses at the sight of the Lamb. Heiserman explains this change in the narrator's emotions as follows:

Delight becomes the tonic for this procession led by the Lamb. As this delight grows in the dreamer, and if the poet is successful, in us, we reach the resolution to which the poem has been leading us. At this farthest swing of the pendulum this "delight" becomes the "love-longing" that began the poem. The dialectic comes round on itself. In ecstatic delight the earthly dreamer is "maddened" by his desire to leap³²⁴

It is at this point in which the dreamer commits the folly of trying to cross the stream to join the Maiden (1157-1159).

³²¹Heiserman, op. cit., p. 170.

³²²Hillman, op. cit., p. 106. Although Hillman does not view the poem as an elegy, she notes that it is the "beauty" of the maiden, and not God's realm in which she dwells, that arouses the dreamer's desire to cross the stream.

³²³Madeleva, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

³²⁴Heiserman, op. cit., p. 170.

He has still another lesson to learn: it is not God's will that he should enter the Heavenly realm at this time. Thus, he is hurled back from "kythe3 pat laste3 aye" (1197).

Although the dreamer has obviously failed to comprehend the full significance of what has been revealed to him, elements of the mystic quest are clear, nevertheless. Parallels between the dreamer's moment of high ecstasy and the mystic stage known as the "Valley of Amazement" are striking. This is the stage, as explained by Underhill, of supreme illumination in the mystic quest wherein the pilgrim's receptive powers prove inadequate for greater light, and he is plunged into darkness. At this point, the vision often appears to be taken from the mystic, and he experiences what is known as the "Divine Dark" or the "Dark Night of the Soul" This marks the culmination of the "Illuminative Way," and, although some mystics progress beyond this stage to the second mystic life (the Unitive Way), their numbers are few.³²⁵ Most, like the dreamer in The Pearl, are restricted in their mystical experiences by their human limitations. Certainly, the dreamer's words indicate a recognition of the fact that he was denied further insight into God's mysteries through his own shortcomings:

To pat prynce3 paye hade I al bente

³²⁵Underhill, op. cit., pp. 156-157; 454.

& 3erned no more þen wat3 me geuen . . .
 As helde drawn to godde3 present
 To mo of his mysterys I hade þen dryuen.
 (1188-1193)

In trying to join Pearl, the dreamer demonstrates his lack of real understanding of the child's transfiguration: he still confuses the Maiden with the earthly child; and it is his love for the latter that drives him to this last willful act. In other words, he is still driven by "human love," which, as Conley explains, is the basis of his error or folly.³²⁶ While this concept may seem strange to modern readers, "the reprehension of natural love is profoundly Christian," as such passages as Luke IV: 26 clearly indicate:³²⁷

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

The folly of placing human love above love for God is a common theme in mystical writing.³²⁸ Perhaps, the words of St. Bernard

³²⁶Conley, op. cit., pp. 343-344.

³²⁷Ibid., p. 343. In further support of his argument, Conley cites St. Thomas: "Now every sin consists in the desire for some mutable good, for which man has an inordinate desire, and the possession of which gives him inordinate pleasure."

³²⁸Richard Rolle, "I Sleep and My Heart Wakes," Varieties of Mystic Experience, p. 133; "Theologia Germania," Varieties of Mystic Experience, p. 161; Meister Eckhart, "Expedit vobis," Varieties of Mystic Experience, pp. 127-128. Meister Eckhart writes: "So long as any thing is still object of our gaze we are not yet one with The One."

of Clairvaux express the common medieval attitude most clearly:

Love is a natural affection . . . but it is only right that what is natural should serve the maker of nature before all others. Hence, the first and greatest commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . ." ³²⁹

Unfamiliar as this concept of equating fine human love with folly or error may be to the modern reader, one sees that it was a familiar idea in the Middle Ages. One sees, too, how well this concept fits into the analogy of the rich merchant in Matthew, which the poet uses to illustrate the point. The narrator's sin is clearly that of "cupidity" or "avarice," but it is, also "spiritual" rather than "carnal."³³⁰ The unique delicacy and subtlety of the application of this idea to the love for a child is evident.

Thus, while the narrator is motivated by an intensely appealing emotion, the fact remains that he has not yet surrendered wholly to the will of God, as his last rash act of rebellion indicates. There can be no doubt, however, that his outlook has been profoundly altered by the dream. For example, almost his first thought when he awakes in the "erbere" (the original setting where he lost his Pearl) concerns the preciousness of what has been revealed to him in the Vision.

³²⁹St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "Man's Love of Himself for His Own Sake: Fleshly Love," Varieties of Mystic Experience, p. 101.

³³⁰Conley, op. cit., p. 344.

It is enough to bring him consolation even in his sorrow, as his words indicate: "'So wel is me in pis doel doun-goun / Dat pou art to pat Prynces paye'" (1186-1187). He is singularly impressed also with the power of God (1196-1199). In a very earthly context, he is forced to submit to the will of God, as are all men. He realizes, from a common-sense viewpoint, the futility of striving against God. With his customary simplicity, he observes: "Lorde! mad hit arn pat agayn þe stryuen" (1198).

God's power, however, is combined with the sweet assurance which the jeweler now has of his Pearl's eternal bliss. This twofold persuasion brings his ultimate, spiritual submission to God's will. Despite all of his earlier protestations of humility and submission, his complete, wholehearted submission is not revealed until the last stanza. The beginning lines tell of the change he has undergone:

To pay þe prince oþer sete saþte,
 Hit is ful eþe to þe god krystyin:
 For I have founden hym boþe day & naþte,
 A god, a lorde, a frend ful fyin.
 (1200-1203)

In a sense, he has been redeemed; he has become the good Christian.

Many scholars note this theme of redemption in the poem.³³¹

³³¹Moorman, op. cit., p. 81; Hoffman, op. cit., p. 80; Hamilton, op. cit., p. 822.

In fact, some note little else.³³² Clearly, the poem does, in one sense, trace a "spiritual adventure" of the soul³³³ through various stages of Redemption.³³⁴ Indeed, this present study reveals some of the mystical elements involved in this adventure of the soul. This theme, however, seems clearly subordinate to the more predominant elegiac theme or, more specifically, to what Heiserman calls the consolatio aspect of the elegy.³³⁵ The last stanza, moreover, indicates something of the relative importance of these themes. Had the redemption of the narrator's soul been the primary theme, the poet most surely would have concluded with l. 1203, adding nothing more except, perhaps, the concluding prayer. In the lines immediately following the last-named passage, however, the poet again reverts to a description of the event that occasioned this spiritual growth, once more dwelling upon the Jeweler's sorrow: "Ouer pis hyill I lote I la3te, / For pyty of my perl enclyin" (1204-1205). The next lines reveal the depths to which the narrator has been stirred and the true

³³²Hillman, op. cit., pp. xii-xiii; Madeleva, op. cit., pp. 192-193.

³³³Hoffman, op. cit., p. 80.

³³⁴Moorman, op. cit., p. 81.

³³⁵Heiserman, op. cit., p. 168; see also Conley, op. cit., pp. 345-347, who finds the poem essentially a "Christian consolatio."

nature of his submission to God's will: "& syþen to god I hit byta3te / In kryste3 dere blessyng & myn" (1206-1207). This step represents the man's ultimate submission, the only submission that brings him real consolation. The power of God to take the earthly Pearl from him (or, for that matter, to hurl him from the realm) forces a kind of submission. But the submission--the total reconciliation to God's will--revealed in ll. 1206-1207 indicates his real spiritual surrender. Emotionally, the jeweler could not relinquish his Pearl until he had received the assurance of Christ's Grace through the Vision. His earlier willfulness and doubts were sinful errors, of course, and the redemption of his own soul obviously depended upon their correction. It is important for one to remember, however, that the jeweler's concern throughout the poem and his consolation at the end are centered around the fate of the Pearl-child. This fact is significant, as a number of scholars have pointed out, because it lends humanity and emotional appeal to the poem, a means of reader identification not present to the same degree in the more abstract representation of the Pearl as the Man's soul.³³⁶ Indeed, the poet's intent in maintaining the reader's involvement with the narrator's emotional responses is indicated by

³³⁶Greene, op. cit., pp. 824-825; Gordon, op. cit., p. xvi; Heiserman, op. cit., p. 168; Coulton, op. cit., p. 43.

the fact that the narrator's final attitude toward the loss is not divulged until the end of the very last stanza. The poet, as has been observed, reveals his strong sense of "plot."³³⁷ With unerring dramatic sense, therefore, he reserves the last lines of the poem for the resolution of the major conflict within his story, i.e., the narrator's anxious sorrow over the loss of the Pearl. The jeweler's final words preceding the concluding prayer, in fact, allude to the initial loss of the Pearl and reveal, for the first time, his voluntary surrender of Pearl to Christ's care. The order of the lines of the last stanza, in addition to its content, should indicate clearly the primacy of the consolatio theme of the poem.

This view does not suggest, however, that the association of the last stanza and the Pearl of Price in Matthew XIII: 45-46 is not maintained throughout. The Pearl-child, as has been pointed out, was indeed a worldly treasure, as were the goods of the rich merchant. Such treasures, the poet shows, must not--and, indeed, cannot, for long--remain the grounds of all man's bliss. The jeweler's error is made plain within the poem, and there is the strong suggestion, as well, through the use of the story of the rich merchant, that, when the jeweler finally gives up the Pearl (1207), he purchases the Pearl of

³³⁷Heiserman, op. cit., p. 171.

Price, i.e., Eternal Life, for himself.³³⁸ A child, of course, is not "traded" in the same manner as are other worldly goods. But God took the Pearl from the jeweler, thereby unmistakably revealing His will. It was the jeweler's error that he could not at this point be reconciled to her loss--that he could not really give her up. In a sense, then, he was jeopardizing his own salvation with his "wreched wylle" by not yielding in spirit to the will of God. Even in this context, however, it would be incredible to propose that the father could, considering his initial uncertainty regarding the fate of his Pearl, resign himself to God's will, even to save his own soul. Certainly, such a "trade" would be too cold-blooded and inhuman to secure a reader's sympathy. To surrender the Pearl, as the father eventually does, because he sees the bliss that Christ's Grace has assured her, is quite another matter. Nowhere in the poem does the protagonist reveal any concern for his own salvation. All evidence of the poem, on the contrary, indicates that the jeweler's only concern centers around the fate of the lost Pearl. Hell could hardly have provided more desolation than that which he suffers in his uncertainty and anxiety at the beginning of the poem. Significantly, this conflict within the jeweler is extended throughout

³³⁸Hillman, op. cit., pp. viii-xiii. This is essentially Hillman's view with the one notable difference that Hillman does not consider the worldly treasure in any sense other than the most literal terms of material wealth.

the entire poem, its final resolution coming only in the last stanza wherein the jeweler relinquishes the Pearl to the sweet blessing of Christ. The last lines, still shaded with traces of suggestive ambiguity, make plain, nevertheless, the nature of God's gifts to man and man's role as His servant. The lines reveal completely the final resolution of the narrator's painful dilemma described in the initial stages of the poem, emphasizing the solace and strength that has come through understanding: "He gef vus to be his homly hyne / Ande precious perle3 vnto his pay. Amen. Amen." (1210-1211). God's gifts (the "precious pearls"), then, remain subject to His "paye" (His pleasure or will). In a sense, the poem tells the reader that these gifts are His to take back as redeemed souls. The Pearl-child was, therefore, but the earthly (mutable) manifestation of an immortal soul. But the term, "precious pearls," represents, at one and the same time, an earthly essence (such as the child) and souls potentially worthy of the Pearl of Eternal Life. The Maiden has, through Christ's Grace, secured this pearl. And although the emphasis of the theological arguments and the concern of the narrator are clearly centered around the Maiden and her reward, a subordinate theme suggests that this pearl of Eternal Life may one day be bestowed upon the jeweler as well, since he has at last bent his will to the will of God. It must be emphasized again, however, that this is a strictly incidental facet of

the poem, probably an inadvertent--though not unfortunate--result of the poet's use of the analogy of the rich merchant; but this story, it must be remembered, was used to illustrate the folly and error of the jeweler's inordinate regard for the mutable treasure, the earthly Pearl. Certainly, there is no indication within the poem that the poet had any intention of developing this peripheral theme of the man's redemption. Even at the end of the poem, the emphasis remains on the narrator's consolation when he learns of the true fate of Pearl. Clearly, it is the man's new-found certainty of his Pearl's salvation that gives him strength to endure life despite his sorrow.

The narrator's solace has come, thus, from his new-found understanding of God's ways, and the last line of the poem emphasizes again the truth which he has, at last, comprehended. By echoing the first line, this time in reference to the spiritual Pearl and the Heavenly prince, the phrase in the last line, "perle3 vnto his pay," enables the poet to play upon the contrast between the two worlds and their transcendent relationships that have been revealed within the poem.³³⁹ It has also provided a bridge of understanding between these two concepts, establishing a unity or continuity between these diverse

³³⁹Spearing, op. cit., p. 8.

states that is essentially the goal of the mystic.³⁴⁰ This fusion has been accomplished chiefly by means of the pearl symbol, which clearly functions as a true or mystic symbol.

The narrator's mystic experience, of course, falls far short of the ultimate heights of mystical experience.³⁴¹ However, this limitation is in itself fortunate from a literary point of view, since it was the result of a most appealing kind of human frailty--the love for the child. In the cold light of theology, this frailty represented folly; but no folly or sin, surely, could be less reprehensible to the reader than that displayed by the dreamer in his "maddened" desire to be with Pearl. The humanity of the protagonist and the subtle nature of his folly lend a universality and appeal to the poem, not generally present in mystical literature. The mystical element, however, is crucial, since it is only through recognition of the fundamental unity underlying the earthly and Heavenly worlds that submission to God's will and solace come at last to the jeweler. Through the Pearl, he has been led to new--though still limited--understanding of God, and

³⁴⁰Greene, op. cit., p. 823. Greene observes: "Literary art alone, without the emotion of the mystic, could never have produced the poem."

³⁴¹Heiserman, op. cit., p. 171. Heiserman suggests that the limited nature of the experience and the "residue of mystery" that remains is more satisfying than a poem developed according to a "formula of meaning."

through the pearl symbolism--true symbolism in the mystical sense--the reader has shared with him his new insights. For this reason, the final words of the poem, "Amen. Amen," can now be expressed with heartfelt sincerity and a new measure of serenity.

CHAPTER VII

THE TWOFOLD NATURE OF THE APPEAL OF THE PEARL

This poem has a timelessness and universality of appeal that make it, even today, a unique reading experience and a challenging subject for interpretative studies. There can be little doubt that much of its appeal depends upon the elegiac sense of the work. The study of the theological background relative to The Pearl further strengthens the case for viewing the poem as an elegy.

Certainly, the elegiac view does not deny the presence of symbolism within the poem. No science of symbolism existed, however, even in the fourteenth century when symbolism of all kinds was held in high esteem. Symbolic associations of the time were too rich and too contradictory to be used successfully by an author without careful development and clarification on his part. Obviously, the Pearl poet used a popular symbol of his time and with traditional associations, for the most part; but he used and developed this symbol according to his own artistic ends. His application of the symbol is made clear within the poem, and studies of arbitrary symbolism as an approach to the poem are of little value. The poem remains as its own best guide to the symbolism therein.

The case for an application to literature of the allegorical method of Biblical exegesis is extremely weak. Even

in its application to Dante's works, considerable divergency of scholarly opinion exists. Interpretations of The Pearl on four simultaneous levels appear to be fanciful and over-ingenious applications of medieval Biblical exegesis. Such interpretations are not warranted, either by literary history or by the text of the poem.

The mystical significance of The Pearl is another matter. It is likely that the poet was influenced--perhaps unconsciously--by the wave of mystic consciousness that swept over Europe and England in the fourteenth century. Certainly, the pearl symbol clearly functions as a mystical symbol, revealing an underlying unity or "continuity" between the dualities of existence, more specifically between the seemingly diverse realms of earth and Heaven. The poem, also, represents a mystical experience, incomplete though it is. This theme of spiritual adventure, however, remains clearly a peripheral one, perhaps not having been consciously intended by the poet, but an enhancing feature nonetheless.

The poem is notable for the appealing human qualities of its narrator. It reveals also a careful scheme of ambiguity and disclosure which lends a unique dramatic interest to its form. In the end, a residue of mystery or ambiguity remains, clearly in keeping with the incomplete nature of the narrator's mystical experience. Certainly, the breaking off of the spiritual adventure at the point wherein the narrator has gained

consolation, though only limited understanding, is dramatically satisfying. It seems clear, too, that the poet, by ending on this point, indicates the essential consolatio aspect of the poem. Thus, he accomplishes what he set out to do--to reconcile the jeweler to God's will by demonstrating His Grace in regard to Pearl. The jeweler, in the end, has new grounds for bliss in his assurance of Pearl's place in Heaven. For the poet to have continued beyond this point would have been anti-climactic.

In conclusion, one finds two fundamental aspects of The Pearl which account for its appeal. First, there is the elegiac sense of the poem with its strong emotional and very human appeal. This aspect has long been recognized by many scholars and was undoubtedly a major source of the immediate appeal of this work to a medieval audience. The second major element of its appeal lies in the vigorous strain of mysticism to be found within the work. This element probably accounts for the poem's depth of meaning and for the "symbolists'" great interest in the work. Certainly, this mystical characteristic has led to a great variety of scholarly interpretations and insights. Both aspects, however, appeal to man's basic emotions and yearnings. Indeed, its appeal is to two of the most elemental sides of human nature--earthly love, limitation, and sorrow, on the one hand; and spiritual yearning for Heavenly light and love, on the other. In The Pearl, these two

themes are bound together in a remarkable fashion, mystically and artistically. It is not surprising, then, that The Pearl has been the source of so much interest and study. It is likely to remain so in the future, for the basis of its appeal is timeless and universal.

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Est-ce au peuple, madame, à choisir un maître?
 Sitôt qu'il hait un roi, doit-on cesser de l'être?
 Sa haine ou son amour, sont-ce les premiers droits
 Qui font monter au trône ou descendre les rois?
 Que le peuple à son gré nous craigne ou nous chérisse,
 Le sang nous met au trône, et non pas son caprice;
 Ce que le sang lui donne, il le doit accepter;
 Et s'il n'aime son prince, il le doit respecter
 (La Thébaine, act II, scene iii, p. 21).

Polynice believes that Etéocle is bound as a slave to his subjects.

While Jocaste and Antigone are trying to obtain some reconciliation between the two brothers, their armies are camped close together. Créon manages to cause strife between the armies, and war is imminent. When Jocaste receives word of the situation, she tells Antigone to persuade Hémon to separate the brothers, saying she herself has not the strength:

Tout ce que je puis faire, hélas! c'est de mourir
 (La Thébaine, act II, scene iv, p. 24).

At this extreme point, Jocaste claims only the freedom to die. Alone, she questions if divine vengeance will continue and complains of the utter unfairness of it:

O ciel, que tes rigueurs seraient peu redoutables,
 Si la foudre d'abord accablait les coupables!
 Et que tes châtements paraissent infinis,
 Quand tu laisses la vie à ceux que tu punis!
 Tu ne l'ignore pas, depuis le jour infâme
 Où de mon propre fils je me trouvais la femme,
 La moindre des tourments que mon cœur a soufferts
 Egale tous les maux que l'on souffre aux enfers.
 Et toutefois, ô dieux, un crime involontaire
 Devait-il attirer toute votre colère?
 (La Thébaine, act III, scene ii, p. 25)

Hope returns, however, with Antigone. She brings word that Ménécée, son of Créon, has managed to halt the battle and may indeed have halted the enmity between Etéocle and Polynice. She quotes him:

"Apprenez, a-t-il dit, l'arrêt des destinées,
 Par qui vos allez voir vos misères bornées.
 Je suis le dernier sang de vos rois descendu
 Qui par l'ordre des dieux doit être répandu.
 Recevez donc ce sang que ma main va répandre;
 Et recevez la paix où vous n'osiez prétendre
 (La Thébaine, act III, scene iii, p. 26).

Ménécée, motivated by love, tries to change fate by offering himself as a sacrifice and fulfilling the prophecy. He then commits suicide. However, Étéocle is unmoved. If it was Ménécée's fate to die for Thèbes, it is his to rule Thèbes. Créon, public actions to the contrary, is ready to continue with his ambitions. If he has lost a son, he still has another. But he wants revenge for Ménécée also. Since Créon's plans for war between the two brothers' armies were foiled by his son, he decides to change tactics. He knows that the closer the two brothers come together, the more their hate will increase. He therefore urges a meeting between them. Jocaste and Antigone are in accord, hoping to effect a reconciliation between them. A meeting is arranged.

Just prior to the meeting, Créon discusses the chances of reconciliation with Étéocle. Étéocle says:

Nous étions ennemis dès la plus tendre enfance;
 Que dis-je? nous l'étions avant notre naissance.
 Triste et fatal effet d'un sang incestueux!
 (La Thébaine, act IV, scene i, p. 36)

The brothers meet. Each pours out hate like venom upon the other. Jocaste reminds them of the common bonds of brotherhood and a shared home. Everything she says only deepens their hatred. She recognizes the hopelessness of her cause:

Ils ne connaissent plus la voix de la nature!
 (La Thébaine, act IV, scene iii, p. 38)

She accuses Polynice, in whom she had the most hope, of being tyrannized by his desire to be king. Polynice recognizes his lack of choice:

Ah! si je suis cruel, on me force de l'être;
Et de mes actions je ne suis pas le maître
(La Thébaine, act IV, scene iii, p. 39).

Jocaste gives up. The two brothers depart to select a site to fight. Antigone enters and finds that Jocaste has committed suicide. She sends Hémon after the brothers to separate them. Antigone is ready to commit suicide also, but her love for Hémon holds her. Créon returns and says the fight is over. Hémon was unable to stop it and Polynice has killed Étéocle. Antigone receives this information. However, Créon continues. Hémon was killed in striving to separate the rivals. He quotes Hémon's last words:

"Je meurs, dit-il tout bas,
Trop heureux d'expirer pour ma belle princesse.
En vain à mon secours votre amitié s'empresse;
C'est à ces furieux que vous devez courir:
Séparez-les, mon père, et me laissez mourir"
(La Thébaine, act V, scene iii, p. 49).

Hémon did not envision himself dying because of the curse of the gods, but for Antigone. Créon goes on to say that Étéocle had managed to kill Polynice before he himself died. Créon then becomes king.

All of Créon's ambitions have been fulfilled but one. He wants Antigone as a lover. Since Hémon is also dead, there is nothing to stand in his way but Antigone herself. Antigone commits suicide. Créon, alone with all his guilt, realizes that he too must die:

Je suis le dernier sang du malheureux Laïus;
Perdez-moi, dieux cruels, ou vous serez déçus
(La Thébaine, act V, scene vi, p. 54).

Of the tragic characters in the play, two, Étéocle and Polynice, recognized they had no freedom of choice. Étéocle admitted to being a slave to Thèbes, and Polynice, to the gods. The past had condemned them to their courses of action, and they knew it. Jocaste and Antigone attempted to change destiny throughout the play with no success. Jocaste, for all her efforts to the contrary, was an agent in fulfilling destiny. Ménécée attempted to change fate and failed. Créon, the most realistic and perhaps the strongest, realized his failure at last. Perhaps the most successful person, in terms of freedom, was Hémon, who refused to recognize the gods as agents of his destruction. Though he died honorably in his own eyes for Antigone, he nevertheless fulfilled the destiny spoken by the oracles. All of the tragic characters were guilty in the eyes of the gods, but of an involuntary crime.

Alexandre. Racine dedicated Alexandre to Louis XIV, pointing up a supposed resemblance between Alexandre and Louis. This was merely an attempt to win favor with the King. The play takes its matter from the historians Quinte-Curce and Justin.⁵⁷ The handling of the theme bears a strong resemblance to that of Pierre Corneille.

The setting for the play is India at the time of Alexandre's invasion. The scene is the camp of Taxile, an Indian king. Taxile has a sister, Cléofile, who is loved by Alexandre. Cléofile tries to persuade her brother that it is hopeless to resist Alexandre, and that the sanest thing to do is to obtain a treaty of peace. Taxile knows that such peace as could be made with Alexandre would be to Alexandre's credit and

⁵⁷Racine, Théâtre complet, op. cit., pp. 59-61.

dishonorable to Taxile. Also, Taxile is in love with Axiane, an Indian queen who is for resisting Alexandre to the last. Porus, another Indian king, is also in love with Axiane. He too is for war with Alexandre. Taxile then is caught between two courses of action. If he resists Alexandre, he believes he will certainly lose. If he does not, he will lose the respect of Porus and Axiane.

Porus comes to urge Taxile to join him in war against Alexandre immediately, saying that Alexandre does not believe his forces strong enough for battle yet, or he would have already attacked. Taxile says he wants to talk to Alexandre of peace. Porus points out that a peace treaty is easily broken, and besides, he believes you can only be a slave or an enemy to Alexandre. Continuing, he says that it will be an honor to pit himself against so formidable an enemy. Their kingdoms, he says, would be bought too dearly if they cost cowardice.

When Porus tells Axiane of Taxile's desire for peace, she is surprised. She knew Taxile to be weak, but she believed his love for her would cause him to join them in battle. When Taxile does make peace with Alexandre, Axiane goes to see him. She upbraids him. He replies:

Porus fait son devoir, et je ferai le mien
(Alexandre, act II, scene iv, p. 81).

Taxile retains Axiane at his camp while the battle rages between Porus and Alexandre. News of Porus' defeat causes Axiane to tell Taxile that she loves Porus for his bravery and hates him for his cowardice. Alexandre gives Taxile the conquered kingdoms for staying out of the battle. With this booty, Taxile tries to win Axiane back, but she

loathes him for it. He asks what he must do to gain her respect, and she tells him to take over where Porus failed and fight against Alexandre. Taxile resolves to do so. Cléofile tries to talk him out of such a hopeless action. She tells him to forget Axiane, who will destroy him. He answers:

Je l'aime; et quand les vœux que je pousse pour elle
N'en obtiendraient jamais qu'une haine immortelle,
Malgré tous ses mépris, malgré tous vos discours,
Malgré moi-même, il faut que je l'aime toujours
(Alexandre, Act IV, scene iii, p. 99).

It is at this point that Cléofile tells him that Porus, who was believed dead, is yet alive, and is coming to claim Axiane. Taxile, alone, says:

Quoi! la fortune, obstinée à me nuire,
Ressuscite un rival armé pour me détruire!
(Alexandre, act IV, scene v, p. 100)

Meanwhile, Alexandre is paying court to Cléofile. The problem he faces in winning her love is that she believes he would soon discard her, since his ambitions lead him always to new conquests. She points out that his armies undergo depletion and suffering. She asks why he must continue his conquests. His reply is that he has only to appear and his armies will follow him. As they talk, Porus appears. He has evidently just killed Taxile, who had come to the battle area to destroy Porus. Porus also tells Alexandre that, though his armies have been conquered, he is still a formidable enemy. Alexandre therefore rewards Porus for his valor by returning to him his kingdom and giving him the hand of Axiane. To console Cléofile, he promises a grand tomb for her brother Taxile. Cléofile wishes to be alone in her grief. Thus Alexandre leaves her.

The only personages in this play whose ends were in any way tragic were Taxile and Cléofile. Taxile lacked tragic stature, and Cléofile's

misfortunes were the losing of a brother and a lover. Porus and Axiane, who possessed qualities of tragic stature, lost neither honor nor possessions in the play. And of course Alexandre was grandly triumphant, losing only the person of Cléofile and not her love. He was not expected by any of the protagonists to lose. On this point Hubert says:⁵⁸

L'invincibilité d'Alexandre apparaît comme si évidente et son avance à travers le monde connu semble si inexorable qu'il cesse à vrai dire d'être un personnage humain pour revêtir certains des attributs de la fatalité.

The tragic personages, such as they are, possessed the freedom of choice, though the choice was limited, in determining their own ends. The choice was between life, with loss of honor, and probable death. One might say that Porus and Axiane, being by nature honorable, had no choice. But Taxile is a different matter. He loved Axiane more than honor. What he had to learn was that without honor himself, he could not gain Axiane's love. His first choice taught him this, and his second choice got him killed, still without gaining or regaining honor. His choices shaped his own destiny, it is true, but not as he desired them.

In comparison with la Thébaine, we find more freedom in Alexandre. The tragic characters are not condemned by the past. There is no hint that the gods have any control over their actions. Finally, there is nothing of the inexorable in the play's movement toward the resolution.

⁵⁸J. D. Hubert, Essai d'Exégèse racinienne, (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1956), p. 54.

CHAPTER IV

FULL DEVELOPMENT

It is with Andromaque that Racine really emerges as a dramatist, for with it, the heavy clouds of Corneille's influence dissipate and the tragedy of amour-passion begins.⁵⁹ Racine followed it with les Plaideurs, a comedy. As such, it will not be a part of our inquiry. Then came two plays with a Roman background, Britannicus and Bérénice. The tragedy Bajazet followed, a play with a Turkish background. We may in Bajazet see Racine at his purest, for the subject matter itself is neither classical nor Christian.

Andromaque. In his prefaces to the play, Racine cites as background influences Euripides' Andromaque, la Troade of Seneca, Rotrou's Hercule mourant, and especially some eighteen lines of Virgil's Aeneid which he quotes. Clark also notes some influence from Quinault in Racine's use of the language of gallantry.⁶⁰

The scene is laid in Epire, at the palace of King Pyrrhus, son of Achille. At the palace is Andromaque, the widow of Hector, a Trojan captive allotted to Pyrrhus, and with whom he is in love. With her is her son Astyanax, whom she treasures not only as a mother, but as a reminder of the dead Hector whose memory she cherishes and honors. Also at the court is Hermione, daughter of Héléne and Ménélaus. Family

⁵⁹Clark, op. cit., p. 119.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 120.

arrangements have been made for her to marry Pyrrhus, with whom she is in love.

When the Greeks find that Hector's son Astyanax is alive and at Pyrrhus' court, they become alarmed, for he might grow up to become their enemy. They would like to assure themselves of his death. Too, there is the problem of honor raised by Pyrrhus' slowness in wedding Hermione. They decide to send an ambassador to Epire to straighten out these matters. Oreste arranges to become that ambassador. He, luckless son of Agamemnon and slayer of his own mother, is in love with Hermione, who has already rejected his love. He has been wandering about waiting for his own end when he hears of the situation at Epire. He sees in the situation the possibility of yet winning Hermione.

Upon his arrival as ambassador at Epire, Oreste encounters Pylade, an old and dear friend who is acquainted with Oreste's situation. When he inquires of Oreste his business at Epire, Oreste tells him:

Hélas! qui peut savoir le destin qui m'amène?
L'amour me fait ici chercher une inhumaine;
Mais qui sait ce qu'il doit ordonner de mon sort,
Et si je viens chercher ou la vie ou la mort?
(Andromaque, act I, scene i, p. 119)

Oreste's denial of responsibility for his own actions excuses him from what otherwise would be treason, for he certainly cannot hope to fulfill his ambassadorial duties and win Hermione too.

Pylade chides Oreste for thinking to win Hermione now where he has failed before, but decides to help him draw up a plan of action. The plan is to get Pyrrhus to reject the Greek demands and to continue his wooing of Andromaque. If Pyrrhus were to marry Andromaque,

Hermione might then, in despair, turn to Oreste. Oreste, an able politician and orator, succeeds in antagonizing Pyrrhus while pleading the Greek cause. Pyrrhus rejects the Greek demands. He then goes to see Andromaque and tells her that the Greeks want the life of her child. He uses this as a threat to get her to marry him. She, however, does not give in, and Pyrrhus leaves with the threat to her child still hanging over her.

Oreste, triumphant thus far in his plans, goes to see Hermione. She, proud and disdainful, knows that Oreste comes in the attitude of triumph over her and is outraged at the thought of it. They talk, however, and Oreste shows, during the conversation, perfect insight into his predicament and hers:

. . . et le destin d'Oreste
Est de venir sans cesse adorer vos attraits,
et de jurer toujours qu'il n'y viendra jamais
(Andromaque, act II, scene ii, p. 133).

A few lines later, he says:

Vous me voulez aimer, et je ne puis vous plaire;
Et, l'amour seul alors se faisant obéir,
Vous m'aimeriez, madame, en me voulant haïr
(Andromaque, act II, scene ii, p. 135).

Hermione recognizes the truth of this last statement by Oreste, and although it is plain that she is in love with Pyrrhus, she promises to go with Oreste back to Greece if he will ask Pyrrhus to decide between Andromaque and her. Oreste accepts the proposal happily, for he is sure that Pyrrhus will choose Andromaque.

Oreste's triumph is short-lived, for Pyrrhus has decided, with the help of his mentor, Phoenix, that he must triumph over his love for

Andromaque. He decides to do the bidding of the Greeks: give them Axyanax and marry Hermione. He is proud of his sensible resolve and says to Phoenix:

Eh bien! Phoenix, l'amour est-il le Maître?
(Andromaque, act II, scene v, p. 137)

However, his pride suffers when, a few moments later, upon telling Phoenix that he believes he will see Andromaque and tell her how much he hates her, Phoenix convinces him that his true purpose is only to see her once more.

Oreste greets the new change in circumstances with extreme disconsolateness. He says to Pylade:

Que sais-je? De moi-même étais-je alors le maître?
(Andromaque, act III, scene 1, p. 141)

He blames Pyrrhus for his misfortune at first, then turns to condemn some supernatural power:

Mon innocence enfin commence à me peser.
Je ne sais de tout temps quelle injuste puissance
Laisse le crime en paix, et poursuit l'innocence.
De quelque part sur moi que je tourne les yeux,
Je ne vois que malheurs qui condamnent les dieux
(Andromaque, act III, scene 1, pp. 142-43).

Oreste, feeling himself the victim, presents himself to Hermione, who this time sees herself triumphant. He tells her:

Chacun peut à son choix, disposer de son âme.
La vôtre é tait à vous. J'espérais; mais enfin
Vous l'avez pu donner sans me faire un larcin.
Je vous accuse aussi bien moins que la fortune
(Andromaque, act III, scene ii, p. 144).

Oreste in this speech makes a seeming contradiction, for though he credits Hermione with choice in love, he blames her less than fortune for not choosing him. The point is evidently that the misfortune is his; is personal, and deep in the meaning is the veiled recognition of a

weakness in himself, something perhaps unlovely, inherent and impossible to change. The speech surprises Hermione. She is usually quite sure of how he will react.

Andromaque, aware of her change of fortune, goes to see Hermione to plead for her intercession in behalf of Astyanax. Hermione refuses haughtily, for she has not succeeded in convincing herself that Pyrrhus now loves her and not Andromaque. She tells Andromaque to plead with Pyrrhus, since she seems to have had so much control over him.

Andromaque recognizes the wisdom behind this rash suggestion. She devises a plan. She will get Pyrrhus to promise to spare Astyanax if she will marry him. She plans to marry him and, immediately after the ceremony, she will commit suicide. Pyrrhus, an honorable man, will keep his word and spare Astyanax, and she herself will keep her own honor and be true to the dead Hector.

Oreste once more presents himself before Hermione in a victorious light. She is beside herself with rage. Her pride has undergone a terrible blow. She asks Oreste if he loves her and tells him to prove it by killing Pyrrhus immediately, before she changes her mind and before he has a chance to marry Andromaque. Oreste is appalled. He has qualms about committing regicide, though he has done so before in killing his mother. Also, however much he may hate Pyrrhus, he yet respects him as an honorable man. She heaps scorn upon him for being weak and a trifler. He leaves with the intention of carrying out her desires, for she has promised to accept him if he will.

Pyrrhus feels some guilt in his treatment of Hermione and comes to apologize. Her hate vanishes in a moment and she declares her love

for him. Unmoved, he leaves to carry out his wedding to Andromaque. Hermione is mad with anger and humiliation. She is afraid that Oreste will kill Pyrrhus, and then that he will not. Then it occurs to her that it would be valueless if Pyrrhus died, not knowing it was by her order. It is at this point that Oreste returns with the information that Pyrrhus has been killed. The pain of comprehension of what has happened begins. She had gloried in the thought of the killing itself; had even imagined herself doing it, but she had not thought ahead to the irrevocability of death. Her mind will not bear responsibility for it. She blames Oreste:

Pourquoi l'assassiner? Qu'a-t-il fait? À quel titre?
Qui te l'a dit? (Andromaque, act V, scene iii, p. 168)

The supreme injustice of the accusation surpasses a mortal blow for Oreste, and, a few moments later, when he finds that Hermione has committed suicide over the body of Pyrrhus, he says:

Grâce aux dieux! mon malheur passe mon espérance!
Qui, je te loue, ô ciel, de ta persévérance!
Appliqué sans relâche au soin de me punir,
Au comble des douleurs tu m'as fait parvenir; . . .
(Andromaque act V, scene v, p. 170).

Oreste goes mad. Pylade takes advantage of the confusion at court and of Oreste's helplessness to bear him away from Épire.

Of the four persons involved in the chain of love, only Andromaque escaped tragedy. Indeed, she, through her marriage to Pyrrhus, became Queen of Épire. However, it was not by choice that she was able to avoid a tragic end. Her control of the situation ended with her marriage to Pyrrhus. Still, had circumstances developed as she foresaw them, she would have accomplished her purpose despite a tragic end. She could

control her circumstances only insofar as she knew them, and at the cost of her own life.

Oreste was the most tragic of the characters. He was to some extent the victim of the past. The fact that he had killed his mother would no doubt have made him an unhappy individual, and might also have led him to deny responsibility for his actions, a habit which he carried into his madness. Also, he had met with defeat in his love for Hermione in the past. He heaped most of the blame for his situation on fortune, a supernatural power he equated with the gods. Yet behind his accusations lurks the perhaps partially understood knowledge that his own character was responsible for his situation and that he deserved his misfortune. It will be worth while to note certain traits of his character.

First, Oreste was weak. He was neither ambitious nor imposing. He was quick to accept a defeat and equally quick to absolve himself of blame for it. Also, he was fascinated by and drawn toward death. He had sought it before coming to Epire and expected it while there. Part of his tragedy seemed to be that he never found it. Finally, and coupled with his other weaknesses, was his tendency toward masochism. He seemed to enjoy his unhappiness and take pleasure in his misfortunes. It is as if his stature increased with the injustice of his situation, or that the injustice expiated him in some way for being what he was. In sum, whether the cause was some supernatural power or something in his own makeup, Oreste was not free to determine his own future.

Pyrrhus was a much stronger character than Oreste, and something of a sadist in his treatment of Hermione as well as of Andromaque. His

control over his own actions ended with his control over his love for Andromaque. He could but love her, and he partially recognized that truth. Also, he had no control over Hermione's love for him. He had not tried to win her love, and he could not discourage it. The consequence was his own death.

Hermione's weakness was that of Pyrrhus; she could not change her love. She had also another weakness, a fierce pride that would not admit defeat. If Pyrrhus would not accept her love, it was because he was ungrateful. She had the final freedom, however: the freedom unto death.

Britannicus. This is a Roman and a political tragedy. The subject matter is Corneilian but the treatment is Racinian. We gather from his first preface to the play that he wrote it to attack the defenders of Corneille.⁶¹ In the second preface⁶² written some years later he talks of the extra pains he has taken with the play, and acknowledges his debt to Tacitus, author of the Annals, and regarded as the political historian par excellence of the time.⁶³ Britannicus is the tragedy of the end of a regency and therefore probably calculated to win interest, as France had just witnessed such a period during the minority of Louis XIV.

Britannicus derives its action from the struggle for power between Néron and his mother Agrippine. The subject is the unfolding of Néron's character. As the play opens, we find Agrippine outside Néron's door at

⁶¹Racine, Théâtre complet, op. cit., pp. 233-36.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 236-38.

⁶³Lucien Dubech, Jean Racine Politique (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1926), p. 55.

the court, the setting for the play. It is early. She wants to see him alone. Her influence over him, and thus her power at court, has been dwindling. Also, Néron has just had Junie arrested. This is a direct affront to her, for she has promised Junie's hand in marriage to her step-son Britannicus, Néron's stepbrother. Agrippine believes that if she can see Néron alone, she can regain control over him.

Albine, Agrippine's confidante, appears, and Agrippine complains to her of Néron's neglect of her. Albine is surprised, believing Néron an attentive son and a virtuous ruler. Agrippine admits to the appearances but says:

Toujours la tyrannie a d'heureuses prémices: . . .
(Britannicus, act I, scene i, page 240).

Her formula for power over Néron is fear:

Je le craindrais bientôt, s'il ne me craignait plus
(Britannicus, act I, scene 1, p. 241).

Burrhus appears at the door and informs her that Néron is receiving people by another entrance. She believes Burrhus is responsible for barring her from his presence, and this angers her, for it is she who arranged for his position as tutor for Néron. She believes he has usurped her power over Néron. He tells her to cease holding power over Néron for:

Ce n'est plus votre fils, c'est la maître du monde
(Britannicus, act I, scene ii, p. 244).

He believes that Rome desires a real ruler, and a male ruler.

In the second act, we find that Néron is angered by Agrippine's actions and that he thinks she and a confidante of hers, Pallas, are plotting against him. We also find out in his meeting with Narcisse, governor to Britannicus and Néron's confidant, that he is in love with

Junie. He asks Narcisse if Britannicus really loves her. Narcisse believes so, saying:

Seigneur, l'amour toujours n'attend pas la raison
(Britannicus, act II, scene ii, p. 251).

Néron wants Junie, but he is married to Octavie, and though he has no qualms about divorcing her, he fears Argippine, who arranged their marriage. He has Junie brought before him and offers her marriage. She tells him she loves Britannicus, which angers him. In order to cause her suffering, he tells her that Britannicus will be brought before her while he himself hides nearby. She must discourage Britannicus' love for her, or he will have Britannicus killed. The spectacle is carried out to Néron's satisfaction.

Néron's next move is to have Pallas exiled. He does this not only to insure his safety from that quarter, but to test his mother. He is also still nursing plans for divorce and subsequent marriage to Junie. Burrhus tries to discourage him in his plans for Junie. Néron says:

Il faut que j'aime enfin
(Britannicus, act III, scene i, p. 262).

Burrhus tries to convince him otherwise:

On n'aime point, seigneur, si l'on ne veut aimer
(Britannicus, act III, scene i, p. 263).

Néron thinks Burrhus wrong and tells him so. His attitude here causes Burrhus the first real stirrings of disquiet concerning Néron's character. Burrhus, however, is not the only one disquieted, for when Albine chides her for trying to control Néron even in his love life, Agrippine answers:

Quoi! tu ne vois donc pas jusqu'où l'on me ravale,
Albine? C'est à moi qu'on donne un rivale
(Britannicus, act III, scene iv, p. 265).

Her statement here shows not only jealousy of her power over Néron, but a peculiarity resembling incestuousness in her mother-love.

Agrippine's next setback comes with Néron's arrest of Britannicus, for it is he who is her weapon in the struggle for power with Néron. The throne should have gone to Britannicus in the first place, since he was the son of the emperor Claudius. Agrippine may yet be able to sway the power to him if she wished.

The incidental situation which leads to Britannicus' arrest is a chance meeting between Junie and him. Junie convinces him that she yet loves him and tells of Néron's arrangement of their last meeting. He throws himself at her feet, begging forgiveness for having doubted her. Néron enters. In the argument which follows, Britannicus heaps scorn upon Néron, deeming it unbelievable such as he could be the master of the world. Néron replies:

Ainsi par le destin nos vœux sont traversés: . . .
(Britannicus, act III, scene viii, p. 271).

They continue to argue and Britannicus gets the better of his self-control. Néron orders his arrest, and follows it by ordering Burrhus to arrest Agrippine. Agrippine believes Burrhus mostly responsible for the arrest, and when she confronts Néron in the second scene of the fourth act, she says so. In the scene she completely dominates Néron, recounting the crimes and sacrifices she made to get the throne for him. She tells of her crimes, some of them ghastly, as if the mere fact that she committed them justifies them. Her story, however, does not fool Néron:

Vous n'aviéz, sous mon nom, travaillé que pour vous
(Britannicus, act IV, scene ii, p. 277).

He goes so far as to accuse her of using Britannicus as a tool against him, which is what she was doing. She denies the accusation, again causing him to recall what she has done for him:

Vous êtes un ingrat, vous le fûtes toujours
(Britannicus, Act IV, scene ii, p. 278).

Néron cannot stand up to her. He gives way, says he will do what she requests, and acts completely humbled. She leaves triumphantly. But she is no sooner gone than Néron tells Burrhus that he has had enough of her and means to do away with her weapon, Britannicus. Burrhus tries to persuade him to desist from a crime which can only lead to other crimes, destroying his freedom:

Mais, si de vos flatteurs vous suivez la maxime,
Il vous faudra, seigneur, courir de crime en crime
(Britannicus, act IV, scene iii, p. 280).

Burrhus knows Néron's nature; that he likes the least troublesome path to his goals, and that he likes his freedom. He succeeds in winning Néron over. Néron decides to give up Junie and make peace with Britannicus. His decision lasts about as long as it takes Burrhus to depart and Narcisse to enter.

Narcisse, shrewd, criminal and power-hungry, has much to gain by gaining influence over Néron. If he loses influence, Britannicus might have him put to death for his plotting with Néron. Narcisse argues that Agrippine has won power away from him and is publicly declaring so. The thought of it is unbearable to Néron. Narcisse continues, saying that Burrhus is self-serving, standing to gain by Néron's new outlook. He also points out that Néron has nothing to fear from Rome, for the mob needs nothing more than a master. In short, he says the world belongs

to Néron, and Néron does not take it. Néron is convinced of the truth of this.

While Agrippine exults in her newly regained power, Néron has Britannicus poisoned at a banquet in his honor. Agrippine is dismayed, but confronts him with the accusation of the murder. He denies it, but again cannot defy her in person. She realizes he will have her killed ultimately. Burrhus recognizes the same fate. Junie, to avoid Néron's wiles, rushes out of the palace and, falling at the foot of a religious statue, proclaims herself a vestal virgin. Narcisse attempts to stop her and is torn apart by the mob. Néron's first crime, fratricide, does not yield to him the object of his desires.

Néron, though he dominated the play, was not tragic, for he more than deserved what befell him. His freedom to follow his own inclinations was almost limitless, since, as emperor, he was the master of the world. However, a person who fears others is not completely free, and Néron feared. He feared the censure of Rome at first, but his greatest and lasting fear was of Agrippine. To be free, he had to overcome her power over him. To overcome her power, he had to resort to crime. The crime, as Burrhus pointed to him, would set the pattern for him for the rest of his life. It must be noted, too, that for Néron, a crime was merely an expediency and carried no guilt. Néron did not become corrupt in the play; he was, as Vera Orgel has pointed out, naturally corrupt. He loved pleasure and comfort and would brook no restraint, not even

self-restraint. The freedom he demanded led him through crime to insanity. He was, and wanted to be, the victim of his own desires.⁶⁴

Agrippine, a stronger character than Néron, has some tragic overtones. She is a victim of her desire for power. Control of her destiny ended with her control over Néron. Tremendously proud, she could not admit defeat, and that pride was part of the cause of her defeat.

Britannicus was not a strongly tragic figure. A pawn in the power game between Néron and Agrippine, his distinction lay in his love for Junie.

Junie was more tragic than Britannicus, because, having been at court and under Néron's power for a short time, she was aware of, though helpless before, the machinations that destroyed her future. She was, however, able to escape the clutches of Néron and an even worse fate.

Burrhus, though having a somewhat minor role in the play, was perhaps the most tragic figure. He had spent years trying to shape the character of Néron. Néron's first crime brought his efforts to nothing. As with Agrippine, control over his destiny ended with his control over Néron.

The evil Narcisse was, of course, not tragic. He miscalculated the character of the mob, and it cost him his life.

⁶⁴Orgel, op. cit., p. 57.

Bérénice. As a source of inspiration for Bérénice, Racine gives in his preface a quotation from Suetonius' Titus. Plot and action in the play are almost nonexistent. Racine has here reduced his formula for tragedy to its simplest parts. We find him confident and sure of his method in the preface, and fully aware of its value as a weapon in his feud with Corneille and his followers. To point up his victory over the influence of Corneille, he uses a theme Corneille is accustomed to treat. But the treatment opposes Corneille's.⁶⁵

Bérénice is a political tragedy. The conflict which produces it grows out of Titus' having to choose between his position as emperor of Rome and therefore master of the world, and his love for, and desire to possess Bérénice. Bérénice's need to justify and accept Titus' choice gives the play the only movement and character growth it possesses.

At the beginning we discover Antiochus, king of Comagène and friend and fellow warrior of Titus, urging his friend Arsace to arrange an audience for him with Bérénice. He has been secretly in love with Bérénice for five years. She, queen of Palestine, has been in residence in Rome during this time, for her country has fallen before Roman armies. Titus, her captor, has fallen in love with her, as she has with him. Antiochus, out of deference for their love, has kept his to himself. However, new circumstances have arisen. Titus' father Vespasien, emperor of Rome, has died eight days earlier, and so Titus has himself become emperor. Antiochus believes Titus will make Bérénice empress.

⁶⁵Racine, Théâtre complet, op. cit., p. 299.

Seeing his situation as completely hopeless, he has decided to tell Bérénice of his love and take his final leave of her. Antiochus' predicament is a sad one, for not only has he not wanted to appear as false to his friend Titus, but also he has, by his abilities in war, added to his friend's glory and helped him become emperor. It is of this rather strange state of affairs that his friend Arsace is thinking when he says to Antiochus:

Quel caprice vous rend ennemi de vous-même?
(Bérénice, act I, scene iii, p. 306)

Antiochus has his meeting with Bérénice, tells her he is leaving forever, and tells her of his love. Though she had before confided in him as her best friend, she finds his love repelling and is angered. Also, she believes him false to his friend Titus.

After Antiochus has gone, Phénice, Bérénice's confidante, tells her she should not have let Antiochus go, for Titus may not marry her after all. The reasons she gives for such a possibility are that the Romans accept only other Romans as marriage partners and that they detest royalty and Bérénice is a queen. Such considerations do not bother Bérénice, for she believes that since Titus is now master of the world, he can do what he wishes.

Phénice's doubts are realistic, for we find Titus with his friend and advisor Paulin mulling over this very problem. Titus asks Paulin to tell him truthfully how Rome would react to his marriage to Bérénice.

Paulin says:

Rome, par une loi que ne se peut changer,
N'admet avec son sang aucun sang étranger,
Et ne reconnaît point les fruits illégitimes

Qui naissent d'un hymen contraire à ses maximes.
(Bérénice, act II, scene ii, p. 315).

Titus is aware of the truth of the statement. He has been trying to come to terms with that truth since the death of his father, and has avoided seeing Bérénice. But, recognizing the situation, he seems to have no real choice. He decides to separate himself from her forever. He reflects upon the irony of his situation. He realizes the extent of his power:

Maître de mon destin, libre dans mes soupirs,
Je ne rendais qu'à moi compte de mes desirs.
Mais à peine le ciel eut rappelé mon père,
Dès que ma triste main eut fermé sa paupière,
De mon aimable erreur je fus desabusé:
Je sentis le fardeau qui m'était imposé;
Je connus que bientôt, loin d'être à ce que j'aime,
Il fallait, cher Paulin, renoncer à moi-même;
Et que le choix des dieux, contraire à mes amours,
Livrait à l'univers le reste de mes jours
(Bérénice, act II, scene ii, p. 317).

At this time, Bérénice appears, wishing to speak with him. She wants to know what is keeping him from her company for so long. Titus is unable to tell her of his decision to see her no more, and leaves. Bérénice believes she has offended him. She guesses at the truth but does not accept it, blames Antiochus, thinks Titus may be jealous, and attempts to find excuses for Titus' behavior.

Titus searches out his friend Antiochus. He wants him to tell Bérénice of his decision, and is surprised to find Antiochus making plans for departure. Antiochus is in turn shocked to learn of Titus' decision not to marry Bérénice. Arsace sees in Titus' decision a change of fortune for his friend Antiochus, and tells him several reasons for hope in the outcome of his love for Bérénice. Antiochus realizes, however,

that he is not likely to gain a more favorable place in her heart by being the messenger of Titus' tidings.

Antiochus was correct in judging Bérénice's view of his mission. And she doubts the sincerity of his news. He again regards his situation and finds it unbearable in its injustice:

Moi ! je demeurerai pour me voir dédaigner?
Des froideurs de Titus je serai responsable?
Je me verrai puni parce qu'il est coupable?
Avec quelle injustice et quelle indignité
Elle doute, à mes yeux, de ma sincérité:
Titus l'aime, dit-elle, et moi je l'ai trahie
(Bérénice, act III, scene iv, p. 332).

Bérénice, not believing the message Antiochus has brought, seeks audience with Titus to learn the truth. Titus grants the audience, wondering if he is yet ready to make his farewell to her. He reappraises the problem he has had to face. There is no real question about the rightness of his choice, however:

Ah ! lâche! fais l'amour, et renonce à l'empire:
Au bout de l'univers va, cours te confiner,
Et fais place à des cœurs plus dignes de régner
(Bérénice, act IV, scene iv, p. 335).

In the scene which follows, he makes his decision known to her, and also expresses the painful consequences of that decision:

Je sais tous les tourments où ce dessein me livre:
Je sens bien que sans vous je ne saurais plus vivre,
Que mon cœur de moi-même est prêt à s'éloigner;
Mais il ne s'agit plus de vivre, il faut régner
(Bérénice, act IV, scene v, p. 337).

Bérénice, however, only believes that his love for her is not strong. Her reaction upon leaving leads Titus to believe she might commit suicide. His resolve to see her no more breaks down. Paulin fears that he might change his decision and marry her. Torn by the imprecations of Antiochus

to go to her, his own conscience which says the same, and his duties as emperor, he however turns to his duties.

As time passes, Titus' resolve not to see Bérénice weakens. Also, he is bothered by the thought that Bérénice doubts his love. Antiochus, his hopes somewhat restored by Titus' break with Bérénice, is again plunged into despair when he learns of Titus' desire for Bérénice to remain at his court:

Qu'ai-je donc fait, grands dieux? Quel cours infortuné
A ma funeste vie aviez-vous destiné?
(Bérénice, act V, scene iv, p. 344)

Titus seeks audience with Bérénice. He explains to her his position and swears his love, having Antiochus brought to judge impartially of his love. Antiochus, in this cruel role, can take no more. He tells Titus he has been his rival for the love of Bérénice. Bérénice interrupts him to avoid a more extreme situation. She admits to Titus that she has been in error about his love and that she understands why they must not marry. She says good-bye to Titus, saying she is leaving Rome. She explains to Antiochus the hopelessness of his love, and tells him not to follow her. Antiochus meets her command with despair, and the play ends.

Titus was aware of the limits of his freedom as well as of the cost of maintaining it. As the emperor of Rome he was indeed the master of the world. At the same time, however, he was Rome's servant. He could not break Rome's laws and remain emperor. Marrying Bérénice would have broken one of those laws. He could not, then, have the position of emperor and possess Bérénice. He had to be emperor. Titus was no slave to his passions, and they did not cost him the empire.

The position of Bérénice was somewhat similar. She had not the power to control her love, but confronted with a situation she could not change, she rose above it by accepting it.

Antiochus' situation was the most frustrating, and perhaps the most tragic. Hopelessly in love with Bérénice, he attempted to show her his love and to win her love, and only made his position more hopeless. He blamed fortune for his predicament, and the gods, whom he seemed to equate with fortune. He, as did Titus and Bérénice, cried out at the injustice of his predicament.

CHAPTER V

THE CLIMAX

Bajazet. Like Bérénice, Bajazet is a political tragedy, but it is set in Constantinople in Racine's own century. The play grows out of an actual historical occurrence and attempts to follow the manners and customs of the Turkish people. The plot, in comparison with that of Bérénice, is highly complicated, though the theme is similar.

At the beginning of the play, the Sultan Amurat is absent from his court at Constantinople. We learn through a conversation between Acomat, the Grand Vizir, and his henchman and friend Osmin, that Amurat is, with his armies, beseiging Bagdad. Success of his mission will consolidate his power. Acomat, his enemy, does not want him to be successful, and contrives to take advantage of his absence from Constantinople and relieve him of his kingdom.

The Sultan Amurat has been fearful of losing his throne, and one of his worries has been his brother, Bajazet, a capable and ambitious leader. He therefore sends word to his favorite, the Sultanness Roxane, to have him put to death. A part of Acomat's plan to defeat Amurat is to promote a marriage between Roxane and Bajazet. His friend Bajazet would then have the throne. Acomat would assure him of religious support, and his power would be secure. Too, Acomat feels he has some influence over Bajazet, and thus he would gain in power also.

Acomat's plan proceeds very well. Roxane, charged with the task of having Bajazet killed, meets him and falls passionately in love with

him. However, there is a flaw in the plan: Bajazet is not in love with Roxane, but with Atalide, an Ottoman princess and the object of affection of the old Acomat. Atalide, to protect Bajazet's political chances and his life, has kept her love a secret and has acted as a go-between for Roxane and Bajazet. It is an advantageous ruse for her, for it gives her an opportunity to see her lover. The situation is confounded when Roxane decides upon a plan of action. She tells Atalide to inform Bajazet that she wants to see him so that she may judge for herself his love for her. She plans to offer him the throne if he will marry her. If he will not, she plans to have him put to death, as the Sultan Amurat has ordered. The difficulty of choice lies in the fact that it will be to Bajazet's dishonor to marry, since sultans are accustomed to forego the presumed indignity of such ties.

But Bajazet is not the only one to be faced with a decision. Atalide must decide whether she would rather have Bajazet dead or married to Roxane. The best choice is for her to encourage Bajazet to marry Roxane and become ruler, as Atalide knows:

Mon unique espérance est dans mon désespoir
(Bajazet, act I, scene iv, p. 366).

However, the thought of her rival and Bajazet together is intolerable, and as she reveals to her confidante, Zaïre, she is not too sure of her magnanimity:

Ah! Zaïre, l'amour a-t-il tant de prudence!
(Bajazet, act I, scene iv, p. 367)

She feels that she has lost control of the situation and says:

Le ciel s'est déclaré contre mon artifice.
(Bajazet, act I, scene iv, p. 367)

Roxane gives Bajazet his choice and he refuses her while trying to avoid displeasing her. His argument is that it would be dishonorable to marry her. Her reply is that love does not follow imaginary laws such as honor. Bajazet will not be victimized, and they part under strained emotions.

Later, Acomat, in audience with Bajazet, tries to persuade him he is acting against his best interests, and Bajazet replies:

J'aime mieux en sortir sanglant, couvert de coups,
Que chargé malgré moi du nom de son époux: . . .
(Bajazet, act II, scene iii, p. 375).

Though Acomat believes all is lost, he admires Bajazet for his honorable stand. Atalide, however, will not accept Bajazet's sacrifice for her, and urges him to accept Roxane's offer:

Vos bontés pour une infortunée
Ont assez disputé contre la destinée.
Il vous en coûte trop pour vouloir m'épargner:
Il faut vous rendre; il faut me quitter et régner
(Bajazet, act II, scene v, p. 377).

Bajazet will not hear of it, however, and it remains to Atalide to threaten to confess her relationship with him to Roxane and thus endanger her own life before he relents and tries to recapture the good graces of Roxane.

Bajazet is successful in winning back Roxane's favor. Upon hearing this, though Atalide becomes jealous, believing Bajazet may really have some love for Roxane. Her jealousy is communicated to Bajazet in their next meeting, and he is disturbed. Roxane appears as they are talking and, because of their actions, becomes suspicious. Bajazet's attitude toward Roxane at this meeting is very cool, defeating the amicable relationship he had so recently constructed. Bajazet immediately sends Atalide a letter protesting his love to her. She realizes that her jealousy has again placed Bajazet in a dangerous situation.

Somewhat later, Roxane surprises Atalide into giving away her love for Bajazet. Atalide, in her confusion, loses Bajazet's letter. It comes into the hands of Roxane. Apprised of the hoax perpetrated upon her, she gives orders for Bajazet's death. Meanwhile, Acomat tries to save Bajazet by organizing a revolt. The revolt meets with little resistance, but Acomat is unable to locate Bajazet. As he is questioning Atalide concerning his whereabouts, her servant Zaïre appears with the news that Roxane is dead. Her killer was a messenger sent by Amurat, who has evidently been informed of her betrayal. Atalide, believing that Bajazet yet lives, exclaims:

Juste ciel, l'innocence a trouvé ton appui!
 Bajazet vit encor: courez à lui
 (Bajazet, act V, scene x, p. 409).

Her hopes are short-lived, though, for Acomat's servant Osmin informs her that Roxane's orders have been carried out. At this point, Acomat flees. All is lost, he finds, for Amurat is successful at Bagdad and is returning to Constantinople. Alone, Atalide reflects and finds herself responsible for much of what has passed:

Enfin, c'en est donc fait; et, par mes artifices,
 Mes injustes soupçons, mes funestes caprices,
 Je suis donc arrivée au douloureux moment
 Ou` je vois par mon crime expirer mon amant!
 (Bajazet, act V, scene xii, pp. 411-12)

Her guilt is too much to bear. She takes her own life.

Atalide was the most tragic figure of the play. She tried to control her destiny and that of Bajazet by deception; and when that failed, by selflessness. That failed too, for her jealousy of Roxane was stronger than her resolve. Throughout the play she recognized her

weakness and that some other power, that of fate, was shaping events. Yet it was of her emotions that she was the greatest victim.

Bajazet's tragedy grew out of a situation similar to that of Titus in Bérénice. He had to choose between the throne and a woman--between ruling and loving. The circumstances were such that, in choosing Atalide, he chose death. The forces which caused him to make the choice were varied. Bajazet was a man of action. He wanted power, but he did not, as did Acomat, understand the machinations of power. He was willing to fight for something he believed in, but intrigue left him cold. His actions were ruled by what he conceived to be honorable. He made some half-hearted attempts to follow courses he believed dishonorable. He did not recognize, as even Atalide did, the sacrifice which power demands. Bajazet was a Turk, not a Roman.

Mithridate. For the subject of this tragedy, Racine goes back to Greek history. He attempts to follow events closely and to retain the known character traits of Mithridate. The scene is set at Nymphée, a seaport on the Bosphorus, in the first century B.C., during Mithridate's final conflicts with Rome.

At the play's outset, Xipharès, one of Mithridate's sons, is discovered discussing with Arbate, Mithridate's governor at Nymphée, the news of Mithridate's defeat and death at the hand of the Roman armies. We learn that Xipharès shares his father's hatred of Rome, and that his half-brother Pharnace is aligned with the Roman cause. Xipharès feels he has a greater claim to his father's throne than Pharnace, therefore, and Arbate agrees. He confesses to Arbate, though that he is in love,

as is his brother, with Monime, Mithridate's crowned favorite who was never married to him. He and his brother share this secret and this rivalry. However, since the reported death of their father, Pharnace has made his love known to Monime, desiring both her and the throne. Arbate declares himself aligned with Xipharès in his desire for the throne.

In a conversation later with Monime, Xipharès discovers that Monime feels herself a captive, first of Mithridate, whom she respected, and now possibly of his successor, Pharnace, whom she dislikes. His politics are also repugnant to her, since the Romans are responsible for her father's death. At this time Xipharès confesses to her his love, though protesting she is in no way obligated to him and is free to do what she may. Her reaction to this speech is not cold, but they are interrupted by Pharnace who has come to marry her and move to Rome where she would be more at ease. Monime lets him know her repugnance for his alliance with the Romans. The argument which ensues is interrupted by Phœdime, Monime's confidante, with the news that vessels are approaching bearing Mithridate, who is alive. The shocked brothers confer, with Pharnace urging Xipharès to join him in a quick revolt. Both feel guilty in their love for Monime, and are well aware that Mithridate's jealous nature would not hesitate at killing a son or a mistress. Xipharès will not be disloyal to his father, however, and after a vow of silence concerning the preceding events, they part.

Phœdime is surprised to find that Monime has not run to greet Mithridate on his arrival. Monime confesses that she does not love Mithridate, but Xipharès, and the fact that Mithridate is yet living dashes her hopes of happiness.

Mithridate, upon his arrival, confers with his governor, Arbate. We learn that Mithridate has suffered a crushing defeat by the Romans. To his misery is added the fact that he believes his sons have been disloyal to him in his absence. Arbate, to Mithridate's joy, defends Xipharès, his favorite son. Still, Mithridate knows of Pharnace's affiliation with the Romans and suspects him of making advances toward Monime. He is eager to see her.

Mithridate, anxious to establish matrimonial ties with Monime, informs her of such in their meeting shortly after his return. Her reply is that she is ready to obey. This is not what he wanted to hear. He accuses her of having one of his sons as a lover. She fears he has guessed her love for Xipharès, but learns he means Pharnace. He calls Xipharès to inform him of his suspicions of Pharnace. He charges Xipharès with the protection of Monime from Pharnace, and leaves. Xipharès questions her about Mithridate's accusation that she has a lover and learns to his joyous surprise that she is in love with him. But she sees their love as hopeless:

Ah! par quel soin cruel le ciel avait-il joint
Deux cœurs que l'un pour l'autre il ne destinait point!
(Mithridate, act II, scene vi, p. 440)

Xipharès also recognizes the dilemma:

Quelle marque, grands dieux! d'un amour déplorable!
Combien, en un moment, heureux et misérable!
(Mithridate, act II, scene vi, p. 440)

He will be loyal to his father.

Mithridate calls Xipharès and Pharnace together to reveal his plan of action against the Romans. It is to attack Rome itself. He

believes it the least protected part of the empire. Pharnace objects to the plan, urging peace with the Romans. Xipharès opposes him and in the argument which follows, Mithridate orders Pharnace's arrest. Pharnace, at this point, informs Mithridate of Xipharès' love for Monime.

Mithridate pretends not to believe it, but his jealous doubts leave him no peace. He resolves to test the truth of the charge with a ruse. He has Monime brought to him and offers her Xipharès as a husband. He learns from her reactions that she loves Xipharès. Monime then realizes that she may have doomed Xipharès. There is justification for her fears, for Mithridate, believing Xipharès a traitor, intends to have him killed.

Though Mithridate attempts to hide his knowledge from Xipharès, Xipharès nevertheless suspects he knows the truth. He wonders who has betrayed him and, questioning Monime, finds it is she. He realizes that her love for him is too great to hide. He blames neither her nor his father for his predicament for, as he has said earlier:

Je suis un malheureux que le destin poursuit;
C'est lui qui m'a ravi l'amitié de mon père,
Qui le fit mon rival, qui révolta ma mère,
Et vient de susciter, dans ce moment affreux,
Un secret ennemi pour nous trahir tous deux
(Mithridate, act IV, scene ii, p. 455).

Xipharès leaves, resigned to part with her forever. After his departure, Mithridate appears, demanding the completion of his marriage to Monime. She refuses him, and he threatens her. She defends Xipharès' loyalty and censures Mithridate's trickery, accusing him of being a barbarian. Mithridate cannot believe her audacity. Left alone, he is torn by desires for revenge, jealousy, and love. He knows that if he kills Xipharès, there will be little chance of revenge upon the Romans. He

has been counting heavily upon Xipharès' help. As he wrestles with his passions, Arbate enters to tell him that Pharnace has escaped and, helped by some Roman forces, has organized a revolt. It appears also that Pharnace has been joined by Xipharès. Leaving orders for the death of Monime, he rushes to battle.

As the battle rages, we find Monime in despair. Report has reached her that Xipharès is dead. Phœdime tells her to wait for a more reliable report, and she questions Mithridate's servant Arcas as he enters. He will answer nothing, but instead gives her poison that she must take. She accepts it with relief:

A la fin je respire; et le ciel me délivre
Des secours importuns qui me forçaient de vivre.
Maîtresse de moi-même, il veut bien qu'une fois
Je puisse de mon sort disposer à mon choix
(Mithridate, act V, scene ii, p. 464).

It is the first freedom she has enjoyed: the freedom to death. As she is about to take the poison, Arbate appears to stop her. He reports that Mithridate, believing the battle lost, has attempted suicide. As he is dying, he sees Xipharès appear with loyal forces and defeat those of his brother. It is at this point that Mithridate counteracts his orders for Monime's death. Monime's joy at learning that Xipharès still lives is increased when the dying Mithridate is brought in to give his consent to their marriage. Mithridate is content, having lived a full life and having seen the Romans again routed. He gives them his blessing and dies while Xipharès speaks of avenging him.

The tragedy in the play was Mithridate's. Heroic, passionate and shrewd, he dominated the action throughout. Aging and suspicious, he fell

victim to his jealousy. He did not restrain his passions, for he had the power to indulge them and the cunning to avoid enemies. But jealousy was an emotion with which he was not accustomed to deal. He was suspicious and learned acceptance too late to save his life, though not too late to save his greatness.

Xipharès, a tragic character, did not reach a tragic end in the play. His salvation was not really in his own hands, however. He saw himself as a victim of circumstances; of a design or destiny beyond man's control. He had the power to sacrifice his love for Monime, but only because his love for his father was stronger. Able to triumph over one love, he was the victim of the other. It is worth noting that, although Xipharès believed he was not in control of his end, he nevertheless felt criminal or guilty in his love for Monime.

Monime too had tragic stature but was not subjected to tragedy. She, like Xipharès, did not feel herself free to determine her future. She felt herself at first a slave to Mithridate but, when she lost her respect for him, she was able to disobey him. Still, she felt herself a victim of a higher power or order. Presented with poison, she believed that she had gained the freedom to death, only to have the poison snatched from her. Condemned by a situation beyond her control, she was saved by a situation beyond her control. Pharnace lacked tragic stature. He attempted to control his future and failed.

Iphigénie. Racine is dealing with Greek legend again in his Iphigénie, though with some remarkable variations. He cites in his

preface some authority for the variations.⁶⁶ The scene is set at Aulide at the time of the Greeks' preparations for departure for Troy.

Agamemnon, leader of the Greek forces, sets the scene for the action of the play in a dialogue with Arcas, his servant. The Trojan Paris has taken H el ene, sister to Clytemnestre, Agamemnon's wife, from her husband M en elas and borne her off to Troy. Largely through the urging of Achille, a mission of rescue and revenge has been organized which comprises the forces of twenty Greek Kingdoms. Ready to set sail, these forces are kept from doing so by a windless sea. The priest Calchas is consulted to learn why the gods are withholding the winds. The oracle he delivered states that a girl of H el ene's blood line, named Iphig enie, must be sacrificed before the winds will be restored. Though Iphig enie is his daughter, Agamemnon has nevertheless consented to the sacrifice. The main reason for the consent has been the urging of the Greeks who, Agamemnon believes, would have seized his power and condemned her anyway had he resisted.

Agememnon loves his daughter Iphig enie. He decides he cannot bear the sacrifice and that the gods are really trifling with him to demand such an unjust thing. He therefore sends Arcas with a message to turn back Iphig enie and his wife Clytemnestre, who are journeying to Aulide for the marriage ceremony which will unite Iphig enie with Achille. Agememnon does not believe he can protect her from the Greeks' demands if she arrives:

Va, dis-je, sauve-la de ma propre faiblesse
(Iphig enie, act I, scene 1, p. 482).

⁶⁶Racine, Th eatre complet, op. cit., pp. 475-78.

Meanwhile, Achille, who has been absent from Aulide and is therefore ignorant of what sacrifice the oracle has demanded, returns eager for the marriage to Iphigénie and war with Troy. Agamemnon and Ulysse try to persuade him to put off the marriage. Achille answers that he will marry and that they should make whatever sacrifices necessary to the gods and then leave for Troy. He tells Agamemnon:

Vous lisez de trop loin dans le secret des dieux
(Iphigénie, act I, scene ii, P. 486).

He adds:

L'honneur parle, il suffit: ce sont là nos oracles.
Les dieux sont de nos jours les maîtres souverains;
Mais, seigneur, notre gloire est dans nos propres mains
Pourquoi nous tourmenter de leurs ordres suprêmes?
(Iphigénie, act I, scene ii, p. 486).

Achille leaves, and Ulysse urges Agamemnon to comply with the demands of the oracle. Agamemnon replies that he has given his word and that, if his daughter arrives at Aulide, he will consent to her sacrifice:

Seigneur, des mes efforts, je connais l'impuissance:
Je cède et laisse aux dieux opprimer l'innocence
(Iphigénie, act I, scene vi, p. 490).

Agamemnon learns that his wife and daughter have arrived at Aulide. However, Arcas delivers his message. The message contains the hint that Achille no longer wishes to marry Iphigénie, for he is in love with Eriphile, a royal captive he won in battle at Lesbos. Honor calls for them to return home. Eriphile, who is in Clytemnestre's train and has accompanied them to consult the priest Calchas about her unknown parentage, decides to remain. As Clytemnestre and Iphigénie are leaving, they encounter Achille. His greeting and manner make it obvious that he is in love with and intends to marry Iphigénie. Eriphile overhears the

conversation and is jealous, for she is secretly in love with her captor. Clytemnestre and Achille grow suspicious of Agamemnon's motives. Besides, Achille has been warned by Calchas and some Greek leaders to forgo his marriage to Iphigénie.

Agamemnon is faced with the problem of how to sacrifice Iphigénie with Clytemnestre present. He conceives the plan of consenting to the marriage, thus allaying suspicion. When Iphigénie comes to the altar for the marriage ceremony, she can then be seized and sacrificed. To avoid conflict with Clytemnestre, he orders her to return home. Arcas, however, sent to bring Iphigénie to the altar, confesses Agamemnon's plan. Clytemnestre pleads with Achille to protect Iphigénie. Achille, outraged and feeling dishonored directs his wrath at Agamemnon, but Iphigénie defends him:

Pourquoi me perdrait-il s'il pouvait me sauver?
(Iphigénie, act III, scene vi, p. 510)

Even if the responsibility belongs to the gods, Achille is not to be dissuaded:

Croyez du moins, croyez que, tant que je respire,
Les dieux auront en vain ordonné son trépas:
Cet oracle est plus sûr que celui de Calchas
(Iphigénie, act III, scene vii, p. 512).

Agamemnon quickly learns from Clytemnestre and Iphigénie that Arcas has betrayed him. He tells Clytemnestre that the responsibility for the sacrifice rests with the gods. She sees it as his:

Cette soif de régner, que rien ne peut éteindre,
L'orgueil de voir vingt rois vous servir et vous craindre,
Tous les droits de l'empire en vos mains confiés,
Cruel! c'est a ses dieux que vous sacrifiez; . . .
(Iphigénie, act IV, scene iv, p. 518).

Achille is next to challenge Agamemnon, and he again denies responsibility. The guilt, he says, belongs Calchas, the Greek forces who religiously support him, Ulysse and Ménélas who have counselled him to obey Calchas' oracle, and primarily to Achille himself who wanted and considered only the Trojan venture. Achille recognizes no guilt and assures Agamemnon that he will oppose any attempt to sacrifice Iphigénie.

Alone, Agamemnon realizes that the sacrifice of Iphigénie would cost other lives and conflicts. He has Iphigénie flee. The jealous Eriphile warns the Greek forces, and she is captured. However, as she is about to be sacrificed, Achille attacks and fights his way to the sacrificial altar. As Achille, backed by friends, challenges the other Greeks, the desperate Calchas arises and proclaims that it is really the sacrifice of Eriphile, secretly the daughter of Héléne and Thésée, that the gods desire. Seeing that she is going to be sacrificed, Eriphile commits suicide on the altar. Thunder sounds, and the winds begin to blow.

Agamemnon was the most important character in the play, and in many ways the most tragic. He held the position of power over the Greek forces, but he was placed there by the help of Achille. His control over them was not so much as that possessed by Calchas, their religious leader. In consenting to the sacrifice of his daughter, he was victimized by the circumstances and people surrounding him. Still, Clytemnestre was right in putting the responsibility on his desire for power. That he did at last revoke his consent shows a victory over his desire, but he was by that time helpless in changing the course of events. He vacillated so much in his decision about the sacrifice that he appears weak as a

character. It is necessary to note that his decision either way showed little hope of saving his daughter from the outset. On the one hand there existed power, probable future glory, the will of the gods, the support of his friends and advisors and the will of the Greek forces. On the other was his love for his daughter. His love for his daughter won out belatedly and did not redound to his credit.

Iphigénie's control over her situation was negligent. She believed her father's demand on her was beyond his control. She felt she must obey him. The responsibility for her death, she felt, rested with the gods. That she was rescued from sacrifice was not owing to her own devices.

Achille was, next to Agamemnon, the most culpable figure in the play, though he did not recognize it. Had he not loved Iphigénie, he would no doubt willingly have let her be sacrificed. He was a man of action and saw things as they appeared. Personally involved in terms of love and honor, he was quite willing to challenge the gods in attempting to shape the course of events. Indirectly, not by insight into the situation, but by sheer strength, he was able to influence the outcome of the play. His behavior was dictated by love and honor.

Eriphile was the victim of her love for Achille and consequent jealousy of Iphigénie. Her betrayal of Iphigénie was an attempt to shape her own future. Her suicide showed her freedom to death, though it did not alter the course of events in any way. Whether she was a scapegoat for Calchas or a victim of the gods, her situation was at all times hopeless.

Clytemnestre believed in man's ability to control his future, though not particularly in her own freedom. She held Agamemnon responsible at all times for the fate of Iphigénie. She felt that Achille was entirely responsible for rescuing Iphigénie. The world she saw was not the complicated one that appeared to Agamemnon.

Phèdre. Racine returns to the Greeks for the final time in Phèdre. Politics is in the background here, as he simplifies his tragedy to a conflict of passion and will. The stage is set at Trézène, a city on the Peloponnesus.

As the curtain rises, Hippolyte, son of Thésée and Antiope, Queen of the Amazons, is talking to his tutor Théràmène about the long absence of Thésée. It is possible he has been killed, though Théràmène believes it likely he is being delayed by one of his many amorous adventures. Hippolyte is not only worried about his father, but he is also unhappy with domestic circumstances. His once care-free life has become complicated by the ill-will of his stepmother, Phèdre, the daughter of Minos and Pasiphée. Phèdre's attitude toward Hippolyte is in part explained by the fact that he represents a threat to her children's inheritance of the throne. Too, Hippolyte's contemptuous attitude toward women in general might be considered displeasing by her. Hippolyte decides to go in search of his father and, in so doing, avoid conflict with Phèdre. Another reason for departing is that he wishes to flee Aricie, an Athenian princess whose brothers have been killed by Thésée. Thésée has forbidden her marriage and would not approve of Hippolyte's love for her.

As Hippolyte makes preparations to leave, it is discovered that Phèdre is dangerously ill. Her nurse and confidante Oenone discovers that she suffers from feelings of guilt. Phèdre tells her:

Grâces au ciel, mes mains ne sont point criminelles.
Plût aux dieux que mon cœur fût innocent comme elles!
(Phèdre, act I, scene iii, p. 549).

As Oenone continues to question, she learns to her consternation that Hippolyte is the object of that love. Phèdre says she has been in love with him from the moment she first saw him, and that she has attempted to overcome her love. She has avoided his presence, only to see his image in his father. She has persecuted him, only to find that her love has increased with his dislike. She has also implored the goddess Venus, for it is she whom Phèdre really blames for her love:

Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veins cachée:
C'est Venus tout entière a sa proie attachée
(Phèdre, act I, scene iii, p. 552).

As her confession continues, Panope, one of her attendants, enters to inform her that news has reached Trézène of Thésée's death. Oenone views this as good news, since Phèdre's love may now appear as ordinary. Too, Oenone believes that Phèdre could gain by uniting with him against a common enemy, Aricie, who may now get the throne of Athens.

Meanwhile, Aricie, apprised of Thésée's death, reflects upon her future. Much, it seems, depends upon Hippolyte, now named King of Trézène, who may or may not continue his father's policy toward her. She tells her confidante, Ismène, that she secretly loves Hippolyte. Hippolyte presents himself at this point, and tells her he is abandoning his father's cruel policy toward her and that as his rival for the

Athenian throne, she is likely to receive it, as Greece reproaches him for having a mother of foreign birth. He then confesses his love for her.

Phèdre seeks out Hippolyte. They talk of Thésée and Phèdre, in reminiscing, confuses Thésée in her mind with Hippolyte to the point that her secret comes out. The shocked and disgusted Hippolyte hears her weakness and debasement:

Je m'abhorre encor plus que tu ne me détestes.
 Les dieux m'en sont témoins, ces dieux qui dans mon flanc
 Ont allumé le feu fatal à tout mon sang;
 Ces dieux qui se sont fait une gloire cruelle
 De séduire le cœur d'une faible mortelle
 (Phèdre, act II, scene iii, p. 564).

Knowing how odious she must seem to him, she asks him to kill her. His refusal to do so is her final degradation. OEnone seeks to cheer her by informing her she is to receive the throne of Athens. She replies:

Moi, régner! Moi, ranger un État sous ma loi,
 Quand ma faible raison ne règne plus sur moi!
 (Phèdre, act III, scene i, p. 566).

She blames OEnone for her self-betrayal and, as she dwells on her predicament, she consoles herself with the thought that Hippolyte scorns all women. She contemplates the possibility of winning him by offering him the throne. She is interrupted by the news that Thésée is alive and is returning. She is extremely disconsolate, for she believes Hippolyte will betray her to Thésée. OEnone tells her that to save herself, she should accuse Hippolyte of incestuous advances.

Upon Thésée's return, Phèdre does make the accusation, and the offended Thésée turns to Hippolyte. Hippolyte protests his innocence, calling his unblemished past to witness and reminding Thésée that

Phèdre's mother had given birth to the Minotaur. Hippolyte confesses his guilt in loving Aricie, but Thésée sees the confession as a ruse. Thésée exiles him and then calls upon Neptune to revenge him.

When Phèdre learns of the sentence which Hippolyte has received, she thinks of confessing, but, a moment later, when she learns that she has a rival in Aricie, her jealousy is boundless. Moments later, her reason begins to reassert itself:

Que fais-je? Où ma raison se va-t-elle égarer?
Moi jalouse!
(Phèdre, act IV, scene vi, p. 582).

Weighted unbearably with guilt, she searches for some path of escape from it, but can find none:

J'ai pour aïeul le père et le maître des dieux;
Le ciel, tout l'univers est plein de mes aïeux;
Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale.
Mais que dis-je? mon père y tient l'urne fatale;
Le sort, dit-on, l'a mise en ses sévères mains:
Minos juge aux enfers tous les pâles humains
(Phèdre, act IV, scene vi, p. 582).

OEnone tries to allay her feelings of guilt, but Phèdre turns against her, again accusing her of culpability in her predicament.

Hippolyte, as he leaves Trézène, sees Aricie and convinces her to follow him. Thésée appears after Hippolyte leaves and learns from Aricie of Hippolyte's love for her. He begins to realize his terrible error. Panope next appears to inform him that OEnone has committed suicide. Full realization of the situation comes to him when Theramène tells him that Hippolyte is dead. His horses have bolted from fright of a sea monster and have dragged him to death. As Thésée mourns, Phèdre appears and confesses. Having taken poison, she dies, and Thésée is left with his guilt and mourning.

Phèdre's tragic character overshadowed the other personages in the play. Weighted with guilt for an incestuous love she was powerless to control or avoid and having penetrating insight into her situation, Phèdre was as great as the injustice of her predicament. She believed that the responsibility for that predicament belonged to Venus, the goddess of love. Venus had condemned not only Phèdre, but also her family or blood line. Phèdre's will or reason was powerless over her passion. All efforts to extricate her from her plight only deepened her involvement. There was no place where she could escape censure, not even in death, for her father held sway in Hades.

Thésée was a victim of his own nature. A man of passion, he was quick to anger when his word or his honor was threatened. His revenge was disproportionate to the affront, too, as witness his treatment of Aricie. His tragic error was not clearly caused by a lack of knowledge of the situation, but by a reliance upon the appearance of things and a penchant for acting too quickly and too mercilessly.

Hyppolyte felt some guilt in his emotions toward Aricie, for they conflicted with Thésée's desires. His love did not overwhelm him, however, and there is no reason to believe he could not have continued to control it. Too, his refusal to accuse Phèdre in attempting to save himself from his father's revenge shows freedom of choice. If, indeed, Hyppolyte was a victim, it was of his own proud nature. He simply disdained the mode of conduct necessary to have saved himself. The situation was beyond his control once the sentence was pronounced. The god Neptune, or, if you will, chance or accident took his life.

OEnone was not of sufficient stature to be tragic. She loved her mistress and sacrificed her life for her. Her attempts to help Phèdre had the opposite results. Guilt-ridden and a failure, she availed herself of the freedom unto death.

CHAPTER VI

RESOLUTION

Esther. Esther is not, in truth, a tragedy. The subject matter of the drama comes from the Book of Esther in the Old Testament scripture. The play was written upon the request of Madame de Maintenon for the girls of Saint-Cyr for purposes of religious instruction. It contains three acts, and has choral scenes similar to those in Greek tragedy. The scene is set at Suse, at the palace of Assuérus, King of Persia.

The play opens with Esther, Queen of Persia, greeting her long-lost childhood friend Elise. A prophet has directed Elise to Esther, and Esther recounts the events that have made her queen. The former queen, Vasthi, had offended King Assuérus. He then rejected her and sought a new queen. Esther, Jewish and an orphan who had been living with her uncle, Mardochée, was chosen.

Esther, now in a position of power, remembers her ancestry and pities her people. She tries to help her people by having some of the young girls protected and secretly educated. Too, she secretly retains the counsel of her uncle Mardochée. Conflict arises for Esther when Mardochée presents himself with the news that Aman, the powerful favorite of Assuérus, has issued, under the king's signature, an order for the extermination of all Jews in Persia ten days hence. Mardochée wants her to try to influence Assuérus to recall these orders. Esther tells him she cannot go into the king's presence on pain of her life unless he shows favor by giving her the scepter. Mardochée censures her for

fear and discounts any choice she may think she has in the matter:

Quoi! lorsque vous voyez périr votre patrie,
 Pour quelque chose, Esther, vous comptez votre vie!
 Dieu parle, et d'un mortel vous craignez la courroux!
 Que dis-je! votre vie, Esther, est-elle à vous?
 N'est-elle pas au sang dont vous êtes issue?
 N'est-elle pas à Dieu, dont vous l'avez reçue?
 (Esther, act I, scene iii, p. 610)

Also, there is no reason to believe that she will not die anyway, for the fact that she is Jewish is certain to come to light. Esther accepts her task and prays to God for help.

In a choral scene following Esther's prayer, a very young Jewish girl asks why she is condemned to die. Another replies:

Des offenses d'autrui malheureuses victimes,
 Que nous servent, hélas! ces regrete superflus?
 Nos pères ont péché, nos pères ne sont plus,
 Et nous portons la peine de leurs crimes
 (Esther, act I, scene v, p. 614).

Meanwhile, the powerful Aman, in conversation with a court officer, Hydaspes, learns that the king has been lately disquieted. He has been reading court history and, sleepless at night, has spoken of enemies. His actions are unusual, for he is a powerful and secure king. Aman finds this unsettling as a possible curb to his own power. He has also been upset lately by the actions of Mardochée, who sits before the castle gate and refuses to bow to him. He knows Mardochée is to be killed soon since he is Jewish, but he cannot bear to wait for revenge. He plans a quicker death for Mardochée.

Much to Aman's chagrin, Assuérus has also been thinking of Mardochée. He remembers that Mardochée once gave him information that foiled a plot on his life by two servants. He had intended to reward

Mardochée, but forgot. Now, remembering, he calls upon Aman to dress Mardochée in royal robes and lead him mounted through the streets. He is to proclaim Mardochée's goodness and to have everyone encountered bow to him.

When Aman leaves, Esther appears before the king. She believes she is doomed, and faints. He, however, gives her the scepter and tells her he will grant her desires, even to half the kingdom. She asks the king to come with Aman to dine with her that day, and she would then make her request. Assuérus accepts the invitation. He also speaks to her of his fears of a possible mutual enemy. Elise later comments on the change in Assuérus. A member of the chorus replies:

Un moment a changé ce courage inflexible:
 Le lion régissant est un agneau paisible.
 Dieu, notre Dieu sans doute a versé dans son cœur
 Cet esprit de douceur
 (Esther, act II, scene ix, p. 627).

Before Aman goes in to dine with Esther and the king, he tells his wife Zarès of the humiliation he has borne because of the king's orders concerning Mardochée. He fears for his position because of Esther. Zarès too is fearful and counsels care and plans for escape.

At table later with Esther, the king asks what she seeks. She throws herself at his feet and, admitting she is Jewish, asks pardon for her people and herself. Assuérus is shocked to learn of her ancestry, but has her continue speaking. She accuses Aman of complete responsibility in his cruelty toward the Jews while using the king's own power for protection. Aman tries to defend himself, but only succeeds in arousing the king's anger. The king also is told that

Mardochée is Esther's uncle and is reminded that Mardochée has saved his life. The king decides that he must talk with Mardochée. He leaves and Aman throws himself on the mercy of Esther. She will not help him, and he asks if her God is implacable toward enemies. He clasps her feet, and the returning Assuérus is offended by the sight of his conduct. He pronounces Aman's condemnation as the guards seize him.

Assuérus decrees that Mardochée shall have the position of the deposed Aman, and later revokes the edict against the Jews. Word is received that Aman is dead. The action is complete. In a final chorus Esther is given credit for saving her people. One Israelite says:

De l'amour de son Dieu son cœur s'est embrasé;
 Au péril d'une mort funeste
 Son zèle ardent s'est exposé
 Elle a parlé; le ciel a fait le reste
 (Esther, act III, scene ix, p. 644).

Esther was the heroine of the drama. She at no time believed she had control over her future. It was not by her own devices that she became queen. When her people were condemned by Aman, she viewed them as possibly being abandoned by God. She considered her intercession for them a duty, and their salvation the will of God. She protested her people's innocence, but held it as an influence for, and not a right to, salvation.

Assuérus based his actions upon what he believed to be true and just. He was victimized by Aman at first, then fell under the influence of Esther. Her influence was not based on his love for her, but on his belief in her goodness. Choral comment in the play attributed Assuérus' submission to Esther's influence to the will and control of God.

Mardochée influenced his future to some degree by foiling a plot to kill the king. His concept of duty and the will of God, however, placed the responsibility for the outcome of events out of his control. Aman's control over his future ended with his control over Assuérus. His recognition of the Jewish God and subsequent pleas for mercy were of no consequence. Salvation was denied him.

Finally, it should be pointed out that while Esther protested the innocence of her people, choral comment recognized the responsibility of the people for the sins of the forefathers.⁶⁷ The past, present, and future condemned them. Only God's will, they believed, could save them.

Athalie. Athalie is not in any real sense a tragedy, for Racine does not seek to engage the reader's sympathy in the plight of Athalie, the only person of tragic consequence. Like Esther, the drama was written for production at Saint-Cyr and purposes a moral lesson. The scene is at a temple in Jerusalem, in the outer offices of the high priest.

The drama begins with a conversation between Joad, the high priest, and Abner, one of the high royal officers, on the day of Pentecost. Abner fears the destruction of the temple, the last stronghold of the Jewish religion, by Mathan and Athalie. Mathan, once a worshipper of the only God, has been won over by his wife, Queen Athalie, daughter of Jezabel, to the idolatrous worship of Baal. Joad praises Abner for clinging to his faith though serving Athalie and Mathan, and tries to urge him to

⁶⁷cf. p. 80.

action in the cause of his subjected people. Abner sees his people as helpless and apathetic and hints at their abandonment by God. Joad protests that the times are rich in miracles and that God is ever the same. Abner then wants to know what has become of the glorious reign of the son of David that God has promised them. He knows the impossibility of such a reign, for Athalie has put to death all the children of the royal line of David. Joad believes God will keep faith with the people, nevertheless, and tells Abner to continue in hope and to return to the temple later for proof of his word.

After Abner's departure, Joad speaks to his wife Josabet. We learn from their conversation that there is indeed a young living member of the family of David, that Josabet is responsible for having saved him from the hand of Athalie, and that he has been reared in the temple by Joad and his family. Joad believes it is time to show the people their king. Josabet, however, fears for his life, for Athalie will surely have the child killed when she learns of its existence. Joad tells her there are the priests of the temple and God himself for protectors.

Josabet's fears for the royal child are increased when, later, her son Zacharie brings her information that Athalie has audaciously entered and profaned the temple and, while there, has been shocked by the sight of the child. There is reason for her fear, because, in a conversation between Athalie and Mathan, we learn that Athalie has had a dream in which her dead mother Jezabel has warned her against the God of the Jews. Also, she has seen twice in dreams the image of a child which resembles the one she has just seen in the temple. She wishes to see

the child more closely. Mathan fears that Joad may be substituting a child for one of royal blood.

Athalie seeks and obtains an interview with the child in the temple. His appearance again fills her with fear. The child, called Eliacin, is really ignorant of his royal ancestry and thinks himself an orphan. His responses to her questions reflect the religious upbringing he has had, and allay her fears for the moment. She leaves with a softened attitude toward the child. Indeed, Mathan notices afterward more hesitancy and femininity in her character. He considers the possibility of divine intervention in her life. Mathan takes some time for self-appraisal at this time, reflecting how his desire for power has led him from innocence and his religion, through the corruption of court politics, to the idolatry of his wife's religion. He feels that God has given him no respite for deserting his faith, and he would like to assuage his remorse by destroying the temple, the last stronghold of the faith.

Mathan has a message for Joad and his wife. Athalie, it seems, upon reflection, wants the child Eliacin as a peace offering. If she does not get him, she may destroy the temple. She and Mathan suspect something of Joad's design and the lineage of the child. Joad attacks Mathan, ordering him as a base infidel out of the temple. Josabet fears for Eliacin's life, and suggests to Joad that he be taken to a neighboring king, Jéhu, for protection. Joad discounts the idea saying Jéhu is neither true nor innocent enough for such a trust, for he has allowed Athalie to rule in peace. His decision is to rely upon his small army

of priests and children, and God. At this moment, God speaks to Joad. Joad's faith restored, he begins the work of defense.

Joad arms his priests with the weapons of David stored in the temple. He then informs Eliacin that he is really Joas, of the line of David, and that he will be king. After counselling Joas in the use and abuse of power, and in the necessity of upholding the laws of God, Joad has him crowned. The joyful gathering is interrupted by the news that Abner, whom they had hoped would supply military support, is in chains, and that Athalie is probably assembling forces against them. Josabet believes all is lost:

Cher enfant, que le ciel en vain m'avait rendu,
Hélas! pour vous sauver j'ai fait ce que j'ai pu:
Dieu ne se souvient plus de David votre père!
(Athalie, act IV, scene v, p. 702)

Joad chides her for her lack of faith. Still, it appears that Athalie will break in and destroy the temple. Abner appears at this time. Athalie has released him to bring a message to Joad. Joad is to relinquish Eliacin and the treasure Athalie believes is contained in the temple. If this is not done, the temple will be destroyed. As yet ignorant of Eliacin's royal lineage, Abner pleads with Joad to sacrifice the child and the treasure to Athalie. Seeing that Joad will not forsake the child, Abner asks for a sword that he may die defending the temple. Joad has a plan of action, however, which will leave the choice in Abner's hands. Athalie, with some of her men, is to be brought to the temple where, in the presence of Eliacin, she will be told the circumstances of his birth. Abner will at that moment judge whether or not the child is to be delivered to Athalie. Abner agrees and Athalie is

summoned. The child Eliacin, now crowned as Joas, wears the bloody headband that he wore when Athalie had attacked him as a child. His nurse, who was present at the attack, enters. Both are concealed behind a curtain.

Athalie and her men enter the temple, and she is stunned by the revelation of the child. The armed priests take advantage of the moment to surround them. Athalie calls upon Abner to protect her but, convinced that Eliacin is really Joas, Abner will not act against him. Meantime, word has been spread among the populace concerning the crowning of Joas. Athalie's army dissolves, and Mathan is killed. Realizing that she is defeated, she believes her vanquisher to be the Jewish God. She is killed, and the reign of the house of David is secure.

Athalie was defeated by uncommon circumstances which she recognized as the work of God. Her inability to destroy Joas as an infant and then as a child was the basis for her defeat, for he served as a unifying force for the Jewish people. The shrewd Joad was an important factor in her defeat. Her emotional involvement with Joas, which delayed her plans of assassination, must be considered as well as her pride and disdain of the enemy. They caused her to ignore the power of her enemy. Whether these factors are regarded as weaknesses or errors on her part or as machinations of a supreme power, they robbed her of control over her future.

Mathan was a victim of the same circumstances which defeated Athalie, for her defeat was his. Primarily, however, he was victimized by his own desire for power, which caused him to reject his own people

and religion and ally himself with Athalie. The victorious Joad gave all credit for his success to God. Abner secured control over his own future by remaining true to his God.

In summary, only Athalie and Mathan regarded their actions as other than duties to their god. Of these, Athalie at last recognized the power of the Jewish God. That God had promised a reign by the son of David, and that this reign came about in spite of greatly adverse circumstances, evidenced fatality or the predestination of events.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing scrutiny of Racine's tragedies reveals that his tragic characters were not entirely in control of their destinies. Indeed, severe and often total limitations were placed on their freedom. Upon examination, these limitations tend to fall into two general groups. They are the character's own nature and superhuman forces. Let us examine these areas.

Freedom and Man's Nature. Freedom implies that man can choose from a plurality of possibilities those actions and modes of conduct that will lead him toward a desired end or goal. Anything that denies or limits man's choice, or causes him to choose against his own interests, victimizes him. That man can be victimized by his own nature, is a major theme in Racine. Before examining the ways in which Racine's characters are victimized by their own natures, however, let us note what these characters considered desirable ends.

There are, in Racine, two major goals toward which his tragic characters strive. They are power and a loved one. A given character may strive toward one or the other, or both. Power is of the will, while love is of the passions. Power as self-aggrandisement or as an enlargement of personal freedom is nowhere in Racine considered bad, though the means of attaining it or using it may be. Néron in Britannicus and Agamemnon in Iphigénie can be criticized in this respect. Love becomes undesirable as a goal if it is socially unacceptable or

unnatural, as in the case of incestuous love. Major conflict arises for the tragic character in Racine when, in his desire for power, he must face competitors. Such is the case with Polynice and Etéocle in la Thébaine. Another point of conflict can be a character's desire for both power and a loved one, and circumstances make them mutually exclusive goals. This is the problem with the emperor Titus in Bérénice. Another situation where conflict can arise when a loved one is the goal is created when the love is not reciprocated. Oreste faced this dilemma in Andromaque. Finally, incestuous love can lead to conflict, as in the case of Phèdre. It is in dealing with these conflicts that Racine's tragic characters reveal the limits of their freedom.

The mind is the arbiter in making an advantageous choice among a given set of circumstances. Insufficient or inaccurate information can cause a character to act against his best interests and thus victimize him. Mithridate, in the play by the same name, believing the battle lost, committed suicide. None of Racine's characters comes to misfortune because of a lack of mental ability. Mithridate was by nature quick to judge and to act. No doubt a strength in battle, this characteristic was here a weakness.

The tragic figure's own passions often victimize him in Racine. Let us look briefly again at Hermione's predicament in Andromaque. In love with Pyrrhus, she felt that her love was a gift to him. He did not return her love because he was ungrateful. Thus ran her logic in the grip of her passion. Jealous of his love for Andromaque, she ordered Oreste to kill him. She knew that his death would defeat her, but her

reason was powerless against her passion. Her proud and passionate nature robbed her, in the end, of all freedom but the freedom unto death.

Other character traits which defeat their possessors in Racine may be quickly catalogued. Avoidance of responsibility, guilt and a desire for punishment can be found in the nature of Oreste in Andromaque. Personal honor was at least partially responsible in defeating Bajazet in Bajazet and Hippolyte in Phèdre. Weak leadership ability contributed to Agamemnon's defeat in Iphigénie. In general, Racine's characters suffer from a profound insight into their dilemmas.

Freedom and Superhuman Forces. Many of Racine's characters were victims of forces outside themselves and others. The words fate, destiny and the heavens were used to describe inhuman force. They seemed to name a natural, irrational and contrary power in the universe against which it was hopeless to struggle. This power was sometimes equated with deity. The gods and God victimized or controlled the actions of some characters. The gods' or God's power was manifested in two ways: by direct control or influence over a character or characters, or events; and by pre-determining the future through prophecy or oracles. Phèdre in the play by the same name, saw herself hopelessly controlled by the goddess Venus. Action in la Thébaine is a fulfillment of prophecy. An oracle produced the tragic conflict in Iphigénie.

The past is another force beyond the control of the tragic personages. Past events predetermine or predestine present and future events. Polynice and Étéocle are victims of the incestuous relationship of

that Racine's tragedies represent an attempt on his part to come to terms with the problem. His answer seems to be that man is not only guilty if he has choice and chooses wrongly, but also if his ancestors had choice and chose wrongly. In terms of Christianity, the ancestral mistake is called Original Sin, or the fall of Adam. Being human condemns one and makes one guilty also. In Racine's pagan tragedies, incest represents ancestral guilt. The results are the same. Man must suffer for what he cannot help.

Assuming personal guilt for ancestral mistakes or sins gives rise to another problem: the problem of justice. Why do some individuals escape punishment for the same crime for which others are condemned? How do these individuals avoid punishment? Do they have some personal influence with the gods or God? There is some slight evidence for such a belief. Mardochée in Esther is saved from death at the hands of Aman for having done a good deed for the king. Esther's influence in behalf of her people may have depended in part on her goodness, and also possibly on the present innocence of her people. In Iphigénie, the sacrifice of Eriphile influenced the gods to change the course of events. If goodness or innocence, or even sacrifice may on occasion have influence on the course of events, there is no guarantee of its success. Racine poses another answer in his two Christian plays. Guilty and condemned by the past, man is not free to shape his future. He can only depend upon God's grace for his future well-being. If God abandons him, he is doomed, for he has not the ability to save himself without the grace of God. This is the classic view of man. We sometimes call it the human condition.

At its base is an acceptance of unjustness in the world. That Racine accepted this answer himself is witnessed by his return to Jansenism. It is the Jansenist answer.

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