

INTERPRETATION IN POETRY AND HOMILY:
TWO MIDDLE ENGLISH VERSIONS OF
THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD

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The Pearl passage which retells the gospel parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard runs over one hundred lines. Discussing this key passage of the poem, critics have mainly emphasized its doctrinal content. Brown, for example, believes that the Pearl poet recounted the Parable of the Vineyard to defend his unorthodox position in the contemporary doctrinal controversy over the nature of the rewards in heaven (137). In response, Robertson cites passages from St. Augustine and from a twelfth-century patristic commentary by Bruno Astensis to show that the Pearl poet's "interpretation and use of the Parable of the Vineyard are consistent with medieval exegetical tradition" (155). Gordon states that the Pearl version of the parable "accords well with the teachings of the Church" and "does not contradict the traditional version in any essential" (xxiii, xxvi). And Spearing finds that the poet gives "his own individual interpretation" of the parable, "a full and explicit exegesis" (102-03).¹

This emphasis on the doctrinal content of the Parable of the Vineyard, however, overlooks the function of the telling of the parable in the poem itself. For Pearl handles the gospel story differently than the exegetical works described by the critics cited above. To demonstrate this, one might compare the poem with a thirteenth-century Kentish homily on the Parable of the Vineyard preserved in MS. Bodley Laud Misc. 471. Rooted in patristic tradition,

this Kentish homily shifts its audience's attention from the parable itself to typological and tropological interpretation. To smoothe over some of the difficulties raised by this interpretation, the homilist must invoke another gospel passage. Nevertheless, he assumes the validity of his reading--at one point ascribing it to Christ himself. The homily thus purports to provide a definitive interpretation of the parable. It clears up the story's complexities for the audience so that, fully understanding what the parable means, they can go do what it says.

Pearl's retelling does nearly the opposite. Instead of trying to avoid the problems raised by the gospel story, the Pearl poet highlights them with concrete details. Furthermore, his use of the parable in the poem's dramatic situation invites the audience to experience the difficulties of interpretation. Hence, instead of resolving the problematic elements of the parable with a "definitive" reading, Pearl challenges even its own reading of the parable with its characterization, context, and language play.²

As narrated in the gospel (Matthew 20:1-16), the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is by no means simple. It describes a landowner who hires workers for his vineyard at different times of the day: early morning, 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and 5 p.m. When the day is finished, however, he insists on paying all the workers the same wage, though some have worked all day and some only an hour or so. The story is framed by two statements that appear to be guides for its interpretation, but they are not very explicit. Christ introduces this parable, like many others, with the phrase "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." (Matthew 20:1); he closes with: "So shall the last be first, and

the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (Matthew 20:16).³ The first who will be last seem to be the men in the story who were hired first, since they are paid last and subsequently complain that the landowner shows favoritism to the latecomers. For this grumbling the landowner rebukes them, insisting that he does no wrong because he pays them the wage they agreed upon (Matthew 20:13-14). But Christ's "many are called, but few chosen" may imply that these grumblers have reasonable grounds. The landowner in the story pays the latecomers an equal wage and pays the first men last--not because the men merit such treatment but only because he chooses to do so. Christ's original listeners might well have found this seemingly arbitrary justice in the vineyard disconcerting and unsatisfactory, especially as a model for the kingdom of heaven. Thus as it appears in the gospel, the parable seems designed to challenge its audience.

Problems of this sort do not seem to trouble the thirteenth-century Kentish homilist who prepared the sermon on this parable in MS. Bodley Laud Misc. 471. In fact, from its very first sentence, this Kentish homily implies that the meaning of the parable is clear:

Hure lord godalmichti to us spekep
 ineþo holi godespelle of te day. and us
 seaweth one forbisne. þet yef we
 uilleth don his seruise. þet we sollen
 habbe þo mede wel griat in heuene.
 (33)⁴

[Our Lord God almighty speaks to us in the holy gospel of today, and shows us by means of an example that if we wish to do his service, we shall have then very great rewards in heaven.]

This opening sentence suggests that Christ himself intended the parable chiefly as a description of "the great rewards" God grants for serving him. Such a reading of the parable downplays the problem that in the story, these rewards are not distributed in proportion to the amount of service the workers do. With the words "us" and "we," the homilist assumes that the audience will share his insight into the message of the gospel once he explains it; he urges them to act upon their understanding of the parable by turning to the Lord's "seruise."

After presenting a paraphrase of the gospel story in Kentish, the homilist follows a pattern established in early biblical exegesis of the parable by Augustine and Jerome and continued into the later Middle Ages by, for instance, the Old English homilist Ælfric.⁵ The Kentish homily first explores the message of the parable at the typological level:

Nu i-herēþ þe signefiance. þes godeman
 be-tockneþ god almichti ure lord. Se
 winyard be-tockneþ. þe seruise of ure
 lorde. þe werkmen. be-tockneþ alle þo
 þet doþ cristes seruise. þo tides of þe
 daie; be-tockneþ þe time of þis world.
 Bei þe Morghen i-herde ure lord werkmen
 in-to his winyarde. þo ha sente þe
 patriarches. ate begininge of þis
 world[e]. ine is seruise. þet þurch
 gode beleauée him seruede. and seden
 his techi[n]ge to alle þo þet hi hedden
 hit to siggen. (34)

[Now hear the meaning. This
 property-owner signifies God Almighty
 our Lord. The vineyard signifies the
 service of our Lord. The workmen
 signify all those who do Christ's

service. The hours of the day signify the times of this world. In the morning the Lord hired workmen for his vineyard when he sent the patriarchs at the beginning of the world in his service, who served him through good faith, and said his teaching to all those whom they had to say it to.]

The homilist continues in this fashion for several more paragraphs, equating the midmorning and noon workers with Moses and the Prophets, the 3 p.m. workers with the apostles, and the last group of workers with the Church, including himself and the audience. Throughout he uses diction that implies that his reading is definitive. For instance, the homilist announces to the audience "Nu i-hereþ þe signefiance"--which one might paraphrase "Now hear what this parable means." In the same way, each time he connects an element of the story with some historical group or concept, his repetition of the word "be-tockneþ" [signifies] gives the impression that he is disclosing the true meaning of the original. The homilist next invites his audience to consider the tropological, or moral, level of interpretation, making the hours of the day represent the various periods during each man's life when he might choose to enter God's service. The homilist notes, for example, that "At Middai wanne þo dai is al þer hotestd be-tokned þo men of xxx^{ti}. wyntre. oþer of furti. for þe nat(u)re of Man is of greater stre[n]gþe and of greater hete in þo age" (35) [At Midday when the sun is the hottest of all represents those men of thirty or forty winters, for the temperament of men is of greater strength and of greater heat at that age]. Such a shift from one level of meaning to another is, of course, a standard

feature of medieval biblical exegesis. But it also shows how the verbal cues of the parable can be used to generate several different readings.

The homilist invokes the parable to urge the audience to reform their lives now and take up God's service. At one point in the tropological interpretation, however, this requires him to confront a complexity that he cannot quite smoothe over. According to his reading, the latecomers into the vineyard are those men who turn to God "in here elde" (35) [in their old age]. Nevertheless, just as the latecomers into the vineyard receive the same wage as those who worked all day, those who came late into God's service "solle hi habbe þo blisce of heuene; as þo þet ferst come[n]" (35) [shall they have the bliss of heaven just as those who first arrived]. Those who wait until old age to serve God win the same reward as those who serve him dutifully for years; then why should one be in any hurry to enter God's service? The sermon anticipates and addresses this question, but only by referring its audience to another gospel passage:

. . . ne solde no-man targi for to wende to godalmichti ne him to serui. for al so seid þet holi writ þet no[n] ne wot þane dai of his diaþe. for Man mai longe liues wene and ofte him legheþ se wre[n]ch. (36)

[. . . nor ought anyone delay in turning to God Almighty nor in serving him, for the Holy Scriptures also say that no man knows the day of his death; for he may expect a long life, but often a trick lies in wait for him.]

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Perhaps the homilist alludes to the parable in Luke 12:12-16 of the rich man who plans to build new barns to store his goods but then dies suddenly in the night. By employing here this notion of how death comes unexpected, the homilist reveals his assumption--a fairly ordinary one--that the gospel parables can be read together as a single text. His allusion to some part of Scripture attempts to reassure the audience that his tropological interpretation is viable. But the very need for such an allusion testifies to the difficulty of the parable. The homilist can control its implication only by using another text to supplement his interpretation.

An exhortation asserting what the audience should do now that they understand the parable ends the homily:

Nu gode men ye habbeþ i-herd þet
godspel and þe forbisne. Nu lokeþ yef
ye bieþ with-inne þo winyarde. þet is
þet yef ye bieþ ine godes seruise yef
ye bieþ with ute diadliche senne . . .
and doþ þet he hot. and bute ye do; ye
bieþ hut of his winyarde. (36)

[Now good men, you have heard the
gospel and the example. Now check if
you are within the vineyard, that is,
if you are in God's service, if you are
without deadly sin . . . and do what he
commands, and unless you do, you are
out of his vineyard.]

Audience members should be ready to examine their own lives and to commit themselves to God's service. In some ways, this homily helps bring the original gospel story closer to its contemporary audience: it offers an

interpretation that could help them see the significance of the story for their own lives both as members of the church and as members of a particular age group. From another perspective, however, the sermon also distances the audience from the gospel narrative. Between his audience and the original parable the homilist inserts a multi-layered interpretation that explains away some of the complexity of the story. The homily offers itself to the audience as a kind of mediator--or even substitute--for the original; it purports to have closed any questions raised by the original parable, to have explained its true meaning.

Pearl handles the Parable of the Vineyard in quite a different way. For one thing, the proportion between narrative and commentary differs in the two accounts. The sermon uses a single paragraph to present a paraphrase of the story, then develops exegesis that runs four times longer. In Pearl the paraphrase of the story runs seventy lines (ll. 501-72) and commentary only forty (ll. 573-612). Moreover, instead of emphasizing typological or tropological connections suggested by the parable, Pearl invites its audience to explore the literal level of the story by developing it with concrete detail. The poet expands much of the dialogue of the original parable, highlighting, for example, the frustration of the men as they stand idle before the landowner hires them and the landowner's surprise that they have no work (ll. 515-20). Sometimes the poet's detail encourages the audience to confront the complexity of the parable in ways that the Kentish homily never does. In the gospel, after the owner of the vineyard meets and hires the first group of men in the market, the workers withdraw, vanishing from sight: "having agreed with the laborers for a penny a

day, he sent them into his vineyard" (Matthew 20:2). The version of the story in Pearl, however, allows the audience to follow these men a bit further (ll. 511-12), describing as they "[w]rypen and worchen and don gret pyne, / Keruen and caggen and man hit close" [twisted and toiled and put in a great effort, / pruned and tied up and made it secure].⁶ By detailing the hard work of these men, the poem humanizes them more fully than the original parable, eliciting sympathy for them from the audience. Yet it is these same men who complain against the landowner later in the story. Hence the poet's detail may work to bring the audience closer to the experience and motivation of the grumblers, perhaps even hinting that their claim to deserve greater compensation than the others for their full day's work is a reasonable one.⁷ Furthermore, the poem revises the landowner's call to the men hired late in the day. In the gospel the landowner says only: "Go you also into my vineyard" (Matthew 20:7). In Pearl (ll. 535-36), he seems aware that it is too late in the day for these men to do much work: "Gotȝ to my vyne, ȝemen ȝonge / And wyrkeȝ and dotȝ þat at ȝe moun" [Go to my vineyard, young men, / and work and accomplish whatever you are able]. This statement in the poem raises an interesting problem. Since the landowner knows that there is not enough time for these men to do much work, why does he consider them worthy of the same wage as those who have worked hard all day? By retelling the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard with concrete detail, then, the Pearl poet reveals more fully the attitudes of the characters and brings the audience closer to the conflict between the landowner and the unhappy workers than the Kentish homily does. It explores creatively the possibilities--and

challenges--of the human situations in the parable in a way that the homily does not.

As Pearl turns from this paraphrase to a discussion of the story's meaning, certain elements in the poem allow the audience to question the interpretation offered. For one thing, in Pearl, the parable and its interpretation are offered to the audience as part of a dramatic situation--the debate between the Pearl Maiden and the Dreamer/narrator. The Maiden recounts the parable to answer the Dreamer's charge that she did not live long enough on earth to merit the rank of queen in heaven. As she interprets the parable, the Maiden identifies herself as one of the workers who go to the vineyard at the last hour and get paid first: "In euentyde into þe vyne I come-- / Fyrst of my hyre my Lorde con mynne: / I watȝ payd anon of al and sum" [I came into the vineyard in the evening-- / the first thing, my Lord took care of my wages: / I was paid right away all of it] (ll. 582-84). This interpretation of the parable--as a statement on a child's reward in heaven--is usually considered as the poet's own. But because the Pearl Maiden herself makes this interpretation it is as if the author wants his audience to see it as hers and not necessarily his. And, unlike the Kentish homilist, the Maiden acknowledges that her reading does not explain all of the parable's implications. She notes, for instance, that according to the parable, God's justice seems very confusing:

ȝet oþer þer werne þat toke mor tom,
 þat swange and swat for long ȝore,
 þat ȝet of hyre nobynk þay nom,
 Paraunter noȝt schal to-ȝere more.
 (ll. 585-88)

{Yet there were others who took more
time, / who toiled and sweated for a
long time, / who still have taken
nothing of their wages, / perhaps
(they) shall not for many a year yet.}

It would seem that the long hours worked by these men would have earned them their reward, but, the Maiden suggests, God's system of justice does not work that way. Thus, like the Kentish homilist, the Maiden in Pearl offers an interpretation of the parable; but while the homilist uses interpretation to explain and simplify the gospel story for his audience, the Maiden presents and interprets the parable to demonstrate God's complexity.

Pearl also invites the audience to experience the difficulties of interpreting this parable as it portrays the Dreamer's objections to the Maiden's reading. Generally, the Dreamer's response here to the Maiden has not earned much sympathy from the critics.⁸ But Bogdanos has suggested that instead of faulting the Dreamer for his objections, the poem asks its audience to sympathize with him; "We cannot stay for long the ironic spectators of an obtuse, spiritually insensitive human exception, because we are made to identify with his . . . confusion" (94). The Dreamer's arguments pose a reasonable challenge to the Maiden's application of the parable to God's system of justice; he appeals to common sense and to the Scriptures:

Me þynk þy tale vnresounable. . . .
In Sauter is sayd a verce ouerte
þat spekeþ a poynt determynable:
"þou quyteþ vchon as hys desserte,
þou hyþe kyng ay pertermynable."⁹
Now he þat stod þe long day stable,
And þou to payment com hym byfore,

þenne þe lasse in werke to take more
able,
And euer þe lenger þe lasse, þe more.
(ll. 590, 593-600)

[Your tale seems to me unreasonable. .
. . . In Psalms is said a clear verse /
that speaks a decisive point: / "You
reward each man according to his
merits, / You high king ever supreme in
judgment." / Now he who stood steady
the long day, / if you came to payment
before him, / then the less work done,
the more one is able to earn, / and
ever the longer (worked) the less
(reward), (and the less worked) the
more (reward).]

While the Kentish homilist assumes the passages of Scripture to represent a single text--and so can use one passage to supplement another--Pearl here shows the audience two passages of Scripture in apparent conflict. The Dreamer admits his inability to assemble the pieces of this interpretive puzzle. To him, the story seems to contradict what he finds written elsewhere in the Bible concerning God's justice; heavenly rewards in the parable appear to be distributed in inverse proportions to one's merits. The Maiden responds (ll. 601, 603-04) to this objection to the story by reminding the Dreamer of a paradoxical Christian teaching: "in Godeʒ ryche . . . is vch mon payed inlyche, / Wheþer lyttel oþer much be hys rewarde" [in God's kingdom . . . is each man paid alike / whether little or much according to his deserts].¹⁰ Such an answer does not reduce the Dreamer's confusion, however; as Bogdanos notes, the Maiden "does not explain divine mystery; she only restates it" (94). The Dreamer's questions

remain a vital part of the poet's retelling of the parable. Merely by raising them, the poem has helped the audience to appreciate the difficulties of the parable in a way that the Kentish homily does not.

Finally, even the elaborate language play in Pearl heightens for the audience some of the challenges in interpreting the Parable of the Vineyard. Pearl employs a highly ornate verse pattern featuring twelve-line stanzas that are arranged in twenty groups of five (the fifteenth group has one extra). Within each group, the same key word appears in the first and last line of each stanza. The linking words of the stanzas that present the Parable of the Vineyard and the debate over it may function in some interesting ways. During the narration of the parable itself, the repeating word is date--which can mean not only "day" or "time" but also "limit," "boundary." The stanzas containing the Dreamer's response feature more as the linking word--perhaps suggesting his longing for more understanding. Because the Maiden replaces the link word more with the word innogh [enough], Mann argues that according to the Maiden, everyone in God's kingdom is satisfied with "enough": "the idea of 'more' then becomes an absurdity; once one is satisfied, then there is no need for 'more'" (25). The narrator tries to transcend his own limits in understanding the story, yet he cannot and can never achieve "more," only "enough." The repeating link words thus highlight the difficulty of interpreting the gospel narrative.

In this way, unlike the Kentish homily in the exegetical tradition, Pearl does not claim to offer a definitive interpretation of the Parable of the Vineyard. Rather, Pearl is, in one sense, about interpretation. Mann refers

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briefly to the role of the parable in the poem's overall account of the Dreamer's education:

The maiden does not attempt to solve the dreamer's difficulties directly; instead, she relates the biblical parable of the workers in the vineyard--which may seem to be no answer at all, since the parable has produced in its readers the same kind of baffled protest that prompts the dreamer's questions. (23)

One could reasonably maintain that producing such bafflement is in fact the poet's purpose. His use of concrete detail heightens the contrast between the labor of the first group and the seemingly arbitrary decisions of the landowner. His account of the Maiden's interpretation and the Dreamer's questions may encourage the audience to perceive (along with the Dreamer) that the parable presents God's justice as confusing. In a larger sense, the audience shares the mysterious vision that constitutes the bulk of the poem through the Dreamer's point of view; along with him, then, they also are denied direct experience of the New Jerusalem when his attempt to cross the stream into heaven abruptly ends the vision. And after this glimpse of heaven from afar, the audience must return with the Dreamer to the world of this life, the work of the vineyard. The closing lines of the poem (ll. 1211-12) recall the Parable of the Vineyard as they link the Dreamer and the audience: "He gef vus to be his homly hyne / Ande precious perlez vnto his pay"¹¹ [May he allow us to be his household laborers / and pearls precious for his pleasure]. With the use of the present subjunctive gef, the poem leaves the

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Dreamer--and the audience--asking for, still awaiting, their reward from God. They are like those workers in the parable who, unlike the Maiden, have not yet received their pay and "paraunter noȝt schall to-ȝere more" [perhaps (they) shall not for many a year yet]. The poem thus invites members of the audience to recognize, with the Dreamer, their inability to understand God's justice: for He takes some swiftly to their reward while others must endure a long life of service. The Kentish homily explains what the parable means in order that the audience may be able to act upon its message; but in Pearl, the Maiden, the Dreamer, and the audience learn about Christian truth through the parable precisely because they cannot bring the narrative to any interpretive closure. Pearl, then, offers its audience an experience of Christ's parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard quite distinct from that which the exegetical tradition is able to offer.

NOTES

[From 1986 until his untimely death from cancer in 1988, Peter Braeger was an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Fine Arts at Loyola College in Baltimore. In 1985, he gave a version of the article above at the First Annual Conference of the Medieval Association of the Midwest held at Iowa State University. This presentation had its genesis in a paper written for a graduate course in Philosophy and Literature at Purdue University in 1984. In addition to the graduate paper and a shorter reading text for the conference, there exists a third version of this work somewhat hastily revised. In preparing the present text I have kept as closely as practical to this

version, because it seems clear to me that Peter wanted to complete a revised text of his paper for publication, even if he were not able to be as meticulous as was his custom. I have rechecked all quotations and reworked the footnotes and bibliography. I trust I have nowhere misrepresented Peter's argument and intent, and suspect that any errors and infelicities that remain in the text are more likely to the consequences of my tinkering than his misjudgment.--Shaun F. D. Hughes, Department of English, Purdue University.]

1. For more recent examples of the tendency to regard Pearl's use of the Parable of the Vineyard as a doctrinal statement, see Andrew and Waldron (81) and Fowler (215). Davenport's comment that the poet's treatment of the parable produces "blocks of solid dialecticism" and a "particularly irritating narrative" (19) is surprising, for typically his response to the poet's use of the Bible--as in his chapter on Purity--is far more sensitive. An exception to this type of reading is Bogdanos's insightful discussion of the role of the parable (91-96). In the portion of this essay that deals with Pearl, a different kind of evidence is presented that in some ways confirms and extends Bogdanos's conclusions.
2. For these reasons most modern readers will find Pearl's use of the parable more interesting than the homily's. This does not mean, however, that Pearl's version of the parable is for this reason better than the homily's--only that it is different.

3. Citations to the Bible are to the Douai-Rheims translation of the Vulgate.
4. Citations to this Kentish homily are to the text edited by Morris; also, see Dickens and Wilson, who supply some background (99). They note that this homily--along with four others using the same structure--was an early thirteenth-century translation of a French version.
5. Augustine's Sermo 87 (PL 38, cols. 530-39) is cited by Robertson (152); for other examples of what was no doubt a highly traditional way of reading the parable one might compare Jerome's Commentariorum in Matheum (174-75) and Ælfric's homily on the Parable of the Vineyard (41-51).
6. Citations to the text of Pearl are to the edition by Gordon, with the occasional reading noted from Andrew and Waldron.
7. The audience's sympathy for the grumblers may also be furthered by the poet's version of their complaint (ll. 553-54) in Matthew 20:12: "'More haf we serued, vus þynk so, / þat suffred han þe daye; hete'" [More have we served, it so seems to us, / who have suffered the heat of the day']. Spearing notes the colloquial element in the grumblers speech (102-03).
8. For example, Johnson writes that the Dreamer "misses the point; for he asks for justice, or wages based on merit . . . He focuses on the literal aspects of the parable, ignoring its spiritual implications" (186).

9. Gordon's emendation to pertermynable is unnecessary (Andrew and Waldron 81).
10. On the paradoxical teaching about the nature of heavenly rewards that these lines invoke, see Andrew and Waldron (82), Gordon (xxiv, 67-68), and Fowler (215): "Heaven is attained not by earning it, but by the gift of God." Horgan elaborates by noting that the version of justice in the parable is linked to the Hebrew concept sedeq. This notion of God's generous faithfulness to an undeserving mankind applies well here, even though Horgan finds the Maiden's description of this principle "is clearly intended to cinch the argument on behalf of the Pearl-Maiden, and hence the author" (177).
11. Ackermann finds that in these lines the suggestion of the Parable of the Vineyard reinforces a connection between the penny of the parable and the Eucharist (622). On gef as the present subjunctive, see Gordon (133); Andrew and Waldron (110) comment that gef may also be a past tense form. The resulting translation of the closing lines might then be "He allowed us to be his household laborers / and precious pearls for his pleasure," the past tense suggesting here God's invitation to do his service, the call to work in the vineyard. In any case, the lines imply that the Dreamer and the audience still have work to do before they receive their reward.

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