

Pearl and the Pearl Poet

Overview

The Manuscript¹

British Library MS. Cotton Nero A.x. (late fourteenth century). Cotton Nero A.x. contains four works which are usually assumed to be written by an anonymous author referred to as the *Pearl*-poet or the *Gawain* poet. The poems, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Cleanness*, were written sometime between 1350 and 1400 (probably the last third of the century). All four were copied by the same scribe.

Dialect

Fourteenth Century southeast Cheshire. The dialect of the scribe was either the same or similar.

Controversies Surrounding the Pearl Poet

Scholars have argued about whether all four were written by the same author or by several authors in the same school.

Pro Single Author

- Stylistic similarities
 - Use of Alliteration
 - *Sir Gawain*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness* are in the strong-stress meter of alliterative long lines
 - *Pearl* (iambic tetrameter) uses alliteration in most lines as ornament.
 - All share the amount of vocalic alliteration
- Diction
 - Several rare words appear in two or more of these poems that surface in few or, in some cases, no other Middle English writings
- Content
 - Serious Christian orthodoxy

Pro Single Author Scholars

- Henry L. Savage, *The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Background and His Personality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956).
- Charles Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet* (New York: Twayne, 1968).
- Some scholars have gone so far as to try to find a name to go with the legend. They claim that the name Massey is encoded in the texts. Some therefore argued that the poet is John Massey, who lived at the right time and place. However, the name is common and the “encoded” information is controversial.

Pro

- Erik Kooper, "The Case of the Encoded Author," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 83 (1982): 158-168.
- William Vantuono, "John de Mascy of Sale and the *Pearl*-Poems," *Manuscripta*, 25 (July 1981): 77-88.
- Barbara Nolan and David Farley-Hills, "The Authorship of *Pearl*: Two Notes," *Review of English Studies*, new series 22 (August 1971): 295-302.

Against

- Thorlac Turville-Petre and Edward Wilson, "Hoccleve, 'Maistir Massy' and the *Pearl* Poet: Two Notes," *Review of English Studies*, new series 26 (May 1975): 129-143.
- Clifford J. Peterson, "The *Pearl*-Poet and John Massey of Cotton, Cheshire," *Review of English Studies*, new series 25 (August 1974): 257-266.

Against a Single Author

Some of the basis for assuming a single author is tenuous, however. Most of the above can be explained by thinking of several authors writing from within the same school. Even the diction can be explained by the dialect, which often uses archaic words.

Pearl

Versification

- 101 twelve line stanzas in iambic tetrameter
- Rhyme scheme *abababbcbc*
- Uses alliteration 3/4 of the lines as ornament
- Sections of 5 stanzas (except section 15 which has 6)
- Each stanza in a group is linked to the next
 - Repetition of a key word in the last line of one stanza to first line in next

Use of Symbolism

Jewels

Pearl – soul, daughter (or sister)

- *Twelve precious stones in the foundation of the New Jerusalem*: jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and amethyst
- *Foundations of Christianity*: faith, hope, repentance, atonement, regeneration, good works, and the teachings, sacrifice, and rebirth of Christ

Numbers

12 appears in several instances

- New Jerusalem is twelve furlongs per side (biblical text has twelve thousand)
- twelve lines per stanza
- total number of lines (1,212)
- square root of the first three digits of 144,000--the number of virgins in the apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem

They may represent

- Number of apostles
- Number of days from the birth of Jesus to his epiphany
- Product of the mystical numbers three (the holy or heavenly Trinity) and four (the elements presumed in the Middle Ages to be the physical matter of which earthly things, including mankind, are comprised)

ⁱ All information taken from “The Gawain-Poet,” Dictionary of Literary Biography, 1994