

# Voices, Visions and Parallel Worlds: Examining Anthropomorphism in Old and Middle English Dream Poetry

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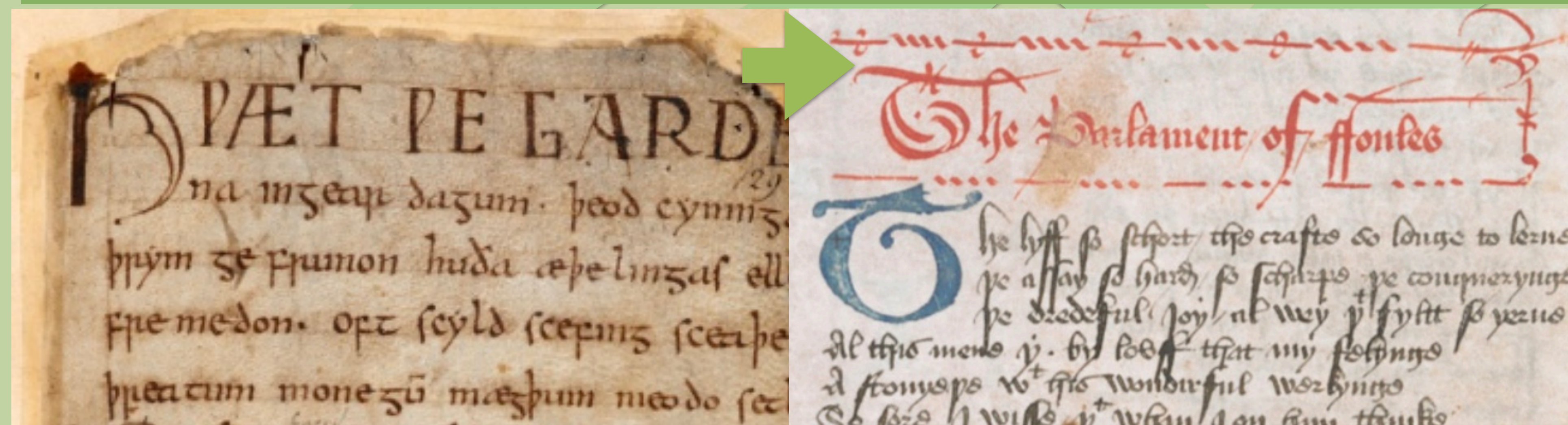
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## Research Summary

The utilization of anthropomorphic voices is a crucial motif in Old and Middle English dream poetry. Medieval poets used the perspectives of human dreamers to describe the voices of entities such as inanimate objects and animals. Therefore, they place such voices in a realm of human understanding while maintaining the authenticity of their nonhuman qualities and (commonly) divine power. However, Old and Middle English remain indiscernible to the Modern English audience, making the parallels between literature in both languages, along with the connections to dream worlds that their poets document, hard to decipher.

My research focuses on bridging this language barrier through placing Old and Middle English anthropomorphic voices in dialogue with one another for the Modern English speaker to understand. This not only outlines the complex differences between Old and Middle English language, but also the significance of nonhuman voices in dream poetry in conveying emotions and experiences that are otherwise unreachable by the human voice.

## Old to Middle English



The transition from Old to Middle English revolves around the complex political and economical history of the British Isles

- After Norman Conquest: most Old English replaced with French-influenced Anglo-Norman
- Grammatical shift from a Germanic language to a Romance dialect was substantial
- New phonology and vocabulary

- Thus, this drastic verbal and literary shift divided Old and Middle English in terms of word order, spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary. Yet, common creative motifs can still be found between them, as evidenced by the continuous employment of anthropomorphism throughout medieval English literature.

## Middle English: *Pearl* & *The Parliament of Foules*

In *Pearl*, a grieving dreamer looking for his lost “perle” argues Christian allegory with a heavenly maiden, who is the personified version of his “perle” and ultimately his lost child, on which the pearl metaphor has been placed. A more humorous piece, *The Parliament of Foules* details a conflicted dreamer’s vision of a council of birds satirically debating courtships.

### Anthropomorphism in *Pearl*:

- Shows divide between human and heavenly morals
- Conveys dreamer’s coping with overwhelming grief through personified dream of lost pearl

### Anthropomorphism in *Parliament*:

- Shows dubious morality of beast characters
- Bring satire to the divine dream world through exaggerated characteristics influenced by humans

## Methodology



I began by examining anthropomorphism in *The Dream of the Rood*. As this poem is one of the only known surviving Old English dream poems, it was my primary example for how nonhuman voices are used in OE dream poetry. Its partial inscription upon the Ruthwell Cross conveys its significance in early medieval society.

I then analyzed the Middle English texts *Pearl* and *The Parliament of Foules*, two popular visions tied to spiritual transition through anthropomorphic dream visions. Rather than specifically investigate evolution from Old to Middle English literature, I sought to simply place these texts from earlier dialects of English in dialogue with one another. This allowed for more insightful and objective analyses of each poem, which helped me find similarities and differences without forcing those connections.

## Old English: *Dream of the Rood*

In *The Dream of the Rood*, a sorrowful speaker is struck with a wondrous dream vision of the Cross that Christ was crucified on. The Cross recalls Christ’s bloodied death and subsequent resurrection through graphic imagery tied to pensive emotion.

### Uses of Anthropomorphism:

- To connect humans with divine entities through voice
- Give agency to inanimate objects for a new approach to Christian calling
- Unite human and dream worlds

## Acknowledgements and Resources

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### References

*Pearl* image: ‘Pearl’ (London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A X).  
*Dream of the Rood* manuscript: ‘Dream of the Rood’ (London, British Library, MS CXVII).  
*The Parliament of Foules* manuscript: ‘The Parliament of Foules’ (London, British Library, Harley MS 7333).