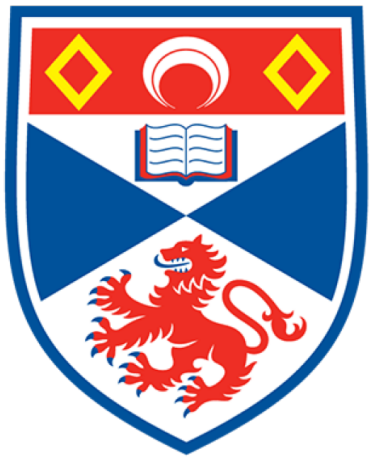
Voices, Visions and Parallel Worlds: Examining Anthropomorphism in Old and Middle English Dream Poetry.



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Introduction

The Old and Middle English poets of the Middle Ages were just as much dreamers as they were the scribes of a vibrant, turbulent world. Much of the remaining literature in these earlier dialects of Modern English narrates visions of nonhuman entities through the perspectives of human dreamers documenting such occurrences. Through utilizing a secondary body from the natural world to describe the voice of something from the unnatural one, the poet effectively bridges the divide between such worlds. They give perspective and perception to inanimate objects, animals, and gods through anthropomorphism, or applying human qualities to nonhuman beings. Such beings then become understandable to the human audiences of the medieval world, reciting tales ranging from Christ to chivalry through the "prophets" receiving their voices through dreams. However, Old and Middle English are complex dialects understood by few scholars. While Middle English is somewhat readable by the Modern English eye, Old English contains Icelandic and Runic characters along with an inconsistent grammar system. Therefore, further physical discrepancy arises between these two dialects, making it especially difficult to put the literature of such dialects in dialogue with one another.

This research focuses on bridging the gaps between Old and Middle English literature through analyzing the consistent genre of anthropomorphic voices in dream poetry throughout the Middle Ages. I will first examine the speaking Cross from the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* (author unknown) (c. 8th-10th century), who has bestowed a divine vision upon a human speaker for them to communicate to a human audience. This work, evident in its popularity due to its partial inscription upon the 8th century Ruthwell Cross, conveys the ingenuity of Old English poets in expressing seemingly unreachable emotions of divine entities in a dialogue and scenario that humans can understand and believe. I will then turn to the Middle

English works *Pearl* (c. late 1300s) by the Gawain poet and *The Parliament of Foules* (c. 1380s) by William Chaucer to show how nonhuman voices in dream poetry have persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Such voices were consistently used to place overwhelming feelings related to divine interactions into the human world through a human dreamer, so that they may be authentically communicated to a human audience. Finally, I will conclude by briefly comparing the evolved uses of medieval dream poetry from Old to Middle English based on my analyses of the listed texts, with the goal of lessening the divide between these two dialects and outlining the importance of dreams in understanding medieval poets.

Brief Summary of the Evolution from Old to Middle English

The shift from Old to Middle English revolves around the complex political, social and economic relationships between the British Isles and the surrounding foreign kingships. Most prominently noticed after the Norman Conquest of 1066 when much of Old English used in politics was replaced with French-influenced Anglo-Norman to signify new rule, linguistic changes included significance of word order, simplified phonology and new vocabulary. Janne Skaraffi notes the drastic decline in Old English usage in her Early Middle English studies, stating that "the role of vernacular English writing– so remarkable in the preceding Anglo-Saxon era– weakened in the two centuries after the Conquest."[1] She continues by noting the scarcity of texts written during the transitional period of Old to Middle English. This is a significant component of my research and why I focused on putting Old and Middle English literature in dialogue with one another instead of investigating the evolution between the two languages altogether. Firstly, this would be a massive feat spanning many years of research. One would need to track not only the grammatical, structural and vocabulary changes of Old English

[1] Skaffari, Janne. "Studies in Early Middle English Loanwords: Norse and French Influences." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 111, no. 2 (2010): 250.

through over 500 years of medieval Britain, but also investigate the plethora of foreign kingships from different regions with languages that influenced Old English and morphed it into Middle English. The lack of source material from Early Middle English would also overshadow this puzzle. While I intend to pursue similar research at a later date, I decided to examine a specific literary technique in a small but significant genre of medieval literature. This helped me narrow my focuses and remain thoroughly insightful in my analyses of the following texts. I hope to shed further light on the uses of anthropomorphism by medieval poets in dream vision poetry so that this specialized research might inspire further examination of creative literary techniques throughout Old and Middle English.

The Speaking Cross of *The Dream of the Rood* (c. 8th-10th century)

One of the only known surviving Old English dream poems, *The Dream of the Rood* follows a sorrowful human dreamer's journey to salvation through his encounter with the divine. Rather than envisioning Christ himself, the dreamer is visited by the Cross on which Christ was crucified. The Cross, characterized as a vessel receiving Christ's message through his blood and flesh merging with wood as one, recalls its own transition from Christ's unwilling killer to his most loyal follower. It establishes itself as less of a 'thing' and more of a dynamic entity through anthropomorphism with the ability to be battered and broken, rebuilt and revitalized through its transition from being "sorgum gedrefed"[2] ("sorrowfully afflicted") over Christ's death to "þrymfæst nu hlifige under heofenum" ("ris[ing] up under the heavens"). The Cross, steadfast even as it is "Bedealf … on deopan seaþe" ("buried [with Christ] in a deep pit"), is rewarded for

[2] All citations of *The Dream of the Rood* taken from Swanton, Michael, ed., *The Dream of the Rood.* University of Exeter Press (1996): 93-101. All sections were translated by me with the glossary of Kerry, R.C., Key, J.S. and Rauer, C. *Old English: An Introduction*. University of St Andrews School of English (2014).

its devotion through being “gyredon” (“adorned”) with gold and silver and worshiped as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice.

Through granting a voice to the Cross, a universal devotional being in Christianity, the poet effectively unites humanity with the divine. If Christ himself was speaking to the dreamer, there would remain a clear divide between the worlds of God and man. However, the human characteristics the Cross embodies through its vivid, personal retelling of Christ’s violent death establish its intimacy and familiarity with both humans and divine entities. In analyzing Anglo-Saxon devotional poems, Derek Pearsall describes the dreamer’s vision as the “enigma of divine strength which openly embraces suffering and humiliation []. The key to the poem’s success is the way the Cross is made to bridge the gulf between Christ incarnate and fallen sinful man, and by doing so to act as agent of the dreamer’s understanding.”[3] Thus, the anthropomorphism of the Cross, along with the “humiliation” of Christ as a wounded, dying body, allows for the human dreamer to relate to the nonhuman Cross. The Cross, granted agency through voice, explains how it found salvation as a sinner through the sacrifice of Christ. The dreamer, afflicted with similar sorrows, therefore listens to the journey the Cross made and regains hope through its story. In the same way the Cross has become the willing vessel of Christ’s message, the dreamer is the willing receiver of such a message. In outlining how humans are affected by divine interactions in dreams, James Paz describes the dreamer as “afflicted and altered by the things he sees, hears and speaks… [he is] spiritually and verbally active but physically passive and dependent.”[4] The anthropomorphism of the cross therefore works both ways; the humanization

[3] Pearsall, Derek. *Old English and Middle English Poetry.* Routledge & Kagan Paul Ltd (1977): 47.
[4] Paz, James. *Nonhuman voices in Anglo-saxon literature and material culture*. Manchester University Press (2017): 176.

of the Cross causes the somewhat objectification of the dreamer. They find common dialogue through adopting characteristics of one another.

The ultimate purpose of this mutual understanding is for the dreamer to become another "willing vessel" of Christ's message. In becoming "physically passive" yet "spiritually active", they are welcoming the salvation Christianity offers and willingly communicating it to the audience, as was the goal of the majority of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The transition of the Cross is just as much reflected in the dreamer as they grow to understand their own suffering and find strength through Christ. Thus, when they awaken, the dreamer is inspired and revitalized, touched by the divine paradox of the humanized Cross.

A Grieving Dreamer's "Perle" in *Pearl* (c. late 1300s)

The anthropomorphism of a sorrowful speaker's lost "perle" (pearl) in the Middle English poem *Pearl* is used to project the overwhelming grief they feel for their lost daughter onto an inanimate object that soon comes to life as the speaker becomes a dreamer. Like the poet of *The Dream of the Rood,* this poet engages with the "thingness" of such objects. By turning the death of a child into the misplacement of a pearl, the dreamer's coping mechanism offers hope instead of solace. Unlike humans, objects signify permanence in the world as they are not born and do not die; they are created and destroyed. Therefore, his daughter, now a lost pearl, becomes something to be searched for, not a child to be mourned.

The dreamer, speaking of past events, falls asleep after lamenting over his lost pearl and awakens in his dream to a heavenly garden and a beautiful maiden adorned in pearls. This "pearl maiden", now a Queen of Heaven and bride of Christ, proceeds to console the human dreamer on his strife and lecture him through Christian allegory on his fruitless attempts to obtain her, as he envisions the maiden as the personified being of his pearl. While *The Dream* seeks to place

humanity and the divine in dialogue with one another, the *Pearl* poet instead uses this anthropomorphized vision of the pearl and her surroundings to not only communicate the displaced grief of the dreamer but make the divide between the human and divine worlds clear. In describing the heavenly garden, he states that "For urthely hert myght not suffyse / To the tenthe dole of tho gladnes glade"[5] ("For an earthly heart could not describe a tenth of these glad joys"). This "earthly heart" then plays a crucial role in this divide throughout the rest of the poem as the dreamer and the pearl maiden debate a series of biblical stories, from the Parable of the Vineyard to John the Apostle's Apocalypse. As Sandra Pierson Prior describes in *The Pearl Poet Revisited,* the dreamer keeps "confusing the earthly with the divine; because he judges divine justice by human values."[6] He tries repeatedly to transpose human morals onto biblical allegories, which the pearl maiden rebukes as she assumes the role of an "authority figure" with him as her "wrong-thinking and often irrational pupil."

This power dynamic, along with divergent human and divine views on Christianity, signifies the divide between such worlds. While *The Dream of the Rood* conveys parallels of the human dreamer and the divine cross so that the former can understand the latter, the dreamer and the pearl maiden of *Pearl* are further separated by the dreamer's inability to understand the process of the pearl maiden's teachings. Preoccupied with his grief and repeated attempts to enter her world, she chides him by saying "Maysterful mod and high pryde, / I hete thee, are heterly hated here; / My Lord ne loves not for to chyde, / For meke are all that wones Him nere; /

[5] All citations of *Pearl* taken from Putter, Ad, and Myra Stokes ed. *The Works of the Gawain Poet: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Penguin Books (2014): 21-80. All sections were translated by me with the help of *The Works* glossary.
[6] Prior, Sandra Pierson. *The Pearl Poet Revisited.* Macmillan Publishing Company (1994): 27.

And when in His place thou schal apere, / Be depe devout in hole mekenisse".[7] She disapproves of his "mad purpose" and human irrationality in looking for something that already "flowered and fayled as kynde hit gef" ("lived and died as nature intended"). At the conclusion of the poem, the dreamer tries to cross a stream to get to the pearl maiden and suddenly wakes, feeling "overcome with anguish and remorse at his rashness."[8] The pearl maiden's consolation and lecturing has little impact on lessening his sadness, as he feels more divided from his pearl than ever. However, the poem offers some resolution in the last stanza as he, in the present, has since committed his grief to Christ: "For I have founde Him, both day and naght, / … For pyty of my perle enclyin, / And syn to God I hit bytaght…"[9]The dreamer seems to have accepted his fate as a human Christian unable to reach the divine in his grief while finding God in letting such "human" irrationalities go.

Animals and Allegory in William Chaucer's *The Parliament of Foules* (c. 1380s)

From the various "moralitas" communicated through animal dialogue in *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1380s) to animal agency in *The Book of the Duchess* (c. late 1360s), William Chaucer's plethora of beastily characters contain no shortage of purpose in anthropomorphism. *The Parliament of Foules,* a narrator's dream vision of a council of birds from various social classes choosing their mates with one of the earliest references to Valentine's Day, is no different. The dreamer, evidently conflicted through the famous opening line "The lyf so short, the craft so long

[7] Translation: "Arrogant temper and high pride / Are bitterly hated here / My Lord does not like complaining / For all who are near him are meek / And when you shall be in his presence / Be deeply committed to your meekness".
[8] Prior, Sandra Pierson. *The Pearl Poet Revisited.* Macmillan Publishing Company (1994): 28.
[9] Translation: "For I have found him, / Lost in my sorrows for my pearl, / which I have since given to God…"

to lerne"[10], seeks to learn a "certeyn thing." They briefly dream of heavenly lands followed by Venus's temple of disheveled and unsatisfied lovers before entering the Parliament of Foules hosted by Nature, a satirical arrangement of scenery as the fate of love seems to be already decided by the preceding ominous scene.

Unlike the roles of the *The Dream* and *Pearl* dreamers of passive receiver and active participant, this dreamer acts as simply an omniscient observer of the chaotic (multiple) lovers' quarrel before them. Larry M. Sklute describes their as "if Chaucer were using the narrator, especially in the dream section, as a living camera through whose lens we are allowed to see what he sees, but who rarely manipulates our responses by his own interjections."[11] The dreamer makes almost no indication of his development; on the contrary, the nonhuman voices of the poem are highly animated in dialogue. Nature, an anthropomorphic entity as the voice of reason, communicates the importance of free will; this itself is a paradoxical relationship between nonhuman body and voice as Nature is convening the birds because it is their destiny, or "nature", to choose a mate. This satirical atmosphere is further made clear by the chaotic birds desperately arguing their cases for one female mate. They emulate humans attempting to pridefully supersede one another's worthiness, arguing over who is "the worthieste / Of knyghthod, and lengest had used it, / Most of estat, of blod the gentilleste."[12] This debate leads nowhere, as Nature ironically permits the female courtee to choose not to choose; this stalemate reflects the dreamer feeling unsatisfied by their vision. Sklute encapsulates the poem in one

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[10] All citations from *The Parliament of Foules* taken from Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Larry Dean Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, Oxford University Press (2008): 385-394. All sections were translated by me with the help of the *Riverside Chaucer* glossary.

[11] Sklute, Larry M. "The Inconclusive Form of the 'Parliament of Fowls.'" *The Chaucer Review* 16, no. 2 (1981): 120.

[12] Translation: "the worthiest / in knighthood and served the longest, / Highest in rank, who has the most noble blood".

word: inconclusive. He details that the "inconclusiveness of the *Parliament of Fowls* rests upon both the coexistence of paradoxical and contradictory elements in its form and upon the irresolution of its argument."[13] Such satirical paradoxes are driven by the anthropomorphic entities claiming high moral standards yet falling short of this in their prideful boasts. Nonhuman voices are therefore used here to show the illogical cracks in the dream world through animals emulating exaggerated human behaviors.

Summarizing Centuries of Dream Visions

While the dream visions analyzed above span almost 500 years of medieval literature, conclusions can be drawn to show how nonhuman voices have persisted in the literary techniques of Old and Middle English poets. Firstly, the consistent use of anthropomorphism in dream visions signifies the possibilities of storytelling beyond the human world, as well as connecting it to that of the divine. *The Dream of the Rood* shows how a human dreamer and divine object, in an otherwise paradoxical interaction, find relation to one another through their shared sorrows and newfound hope in Christianity. This piece, while not unique in its Christian praise, revolutionized characterization of divine objects by introducing the Cross as an "enigmatic, shifting, developing symbol."[14] Additionally, *Pearl* conveys how a dreamer places his overwhelming anguish onto an anthropomorphized object in the dream world so that he does not have to face the inevitable grief he feels in the human one. Such poems show how seemingly indescribable emotions, from that of the conflicted Cross to that of a grieving father, are effectively characterized through nonhuman voices as to not lessen their weight through human vessels. Adjacently, *The Parliament of Foules* turns the human dreamer into an objective, omniscient observer, assuming the role of a God-like figure while anthropomorphized birds

[13] Sklute, Larry M. "The Inconclusive Form of the 'Parliament of Fowls.'" 119.
[14] Pearsall, Derek. *Old English and Middle English Poetry.* Routledge & Kagan Paul Ltd (1977): 47.

satirically debate their courtships. The animals' voices contrarily show dubious morality in divine beings, inviting the audience to use human judgment on previously unheard beastily values.

Furthermore, anthropomorphism has been consistently used to guide the dreaming narrator towards new morality not revealed by the human world. *The Dream of the Rood* conveys an epiphanous transition in the dreamer, as they "Ġebæd iċ mē þā tō þan bēame" ("I prayed to the cross") and "feala ealra ġebād" ("My spirit was lifted"). While the dreamer of *Pearl* is lectured on adopting heavenly values over human anguish by the pearl maiden, he awakens in anguish at his foolish "human" reactions to her moral advice. This human voice is contrasted with the pearl maiden's nonhuman one to convey the maiden's high moral status, also reflected in her role as Queen of Heaven. More lighthearted in nature, *The Parliament of Foules* preaches free will while contradicting it with satire and paradox, assuming a moral compass without actually giving guidance. It serves to humor the human audience through anthropomorphic, prideful, greedy birds as sensible morality loses logic through a nonsensical council of fowls.

Conclusion

This research has sought to put Old and Middle English dream visions in dialogue with one another through their consistent use of anthropomorphism in dream poetry. This literary technique reveals the ingenuity of medieval poets in making the dream world accessible and understandable to the human audience through animated objects, animals and divine entities. They give agency and voice to such characters to bridge the divide between humanity and the divine, so that narrators and listeners alike may find solace and closeness with their beliefs. While Old and Middle English are archaic dialects of Modern English that are no longer spoken, their significance in understanding the complex evolution of Modern English cannot be

understated. By studying Old and Middle English literature, we uncover the roots of modern literary techniques, uncover the ingenious creativity of medieval poets, and open our minds to the vibrant, turbulent world of the Middle Ages.

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