

In Defence of "Pearl"

Author(s): G. G. Coulton

Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Oct., 1906), pp. 39-43

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3713504>

Accessed: 25/06/2014 00:50

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Humanities Research Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Modern Language Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

IN DEFENCE OF 'PEARL.'

IN the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. XIX (1904), Professor Schofield subjects the poem of *Pearl* to certain observations which he himself commends to the public as 'heterodox,' but which seem to me to lack the solid foundation which alone can give any value to heterodoxy. His main thesis is, in his own words, 'that *The Pearl* is not in the least elegiac or autobiographical, as hitherto regularly regarded by scholars and critics.' It would be impossible here to deal fully with his sixty pages of arguments and quotations, and to show in detail how little each bears upon the real point; but I must, in defence of this beautiful poem, draw attention to the inconclusiveness of Professor Schofield's main arguments, even where they do not positively tell against his own thesis.

Starting from the premiss that 'Dr Brown has given good reasons for the belief that the author of *The Pearl* was an ecclesiastic,' Professor Schofield draws the extraordinary deduction that 'an English ecclesiastic in the fourteenth century could not possibly have had any but an illegitimate child.' The premiss is indeed extremely probable: though even here it is necessary to face the fact that Dr Brown's arguments would also prove—if we had not happened to know the contrary—that Sir Thomas More was an ecclesiastic. Still the ecclesiastic status of the author of *Pearl* is perhaps the point which stands out with the nearest approach to certainty among all our uncertainties about him; and Professor Schofield is therefore justified in building upon so likely a hypothesis. But his own superstructure has two fatal flaws at its very base. Firstly, the author—like Pope Clement IV before him—might well have had wife and children as a layman, and taken orders only after his spouse's death. Secondly, although Professor Schofield is right in surmising that some orders were a bar to matrimony, yet he ought to have known that there was a vast host of ecclesiastics in lower orders, who not only might,

but commonly did marry. Bishops might, indeed, prefer to have only celibate clergy in their service, and require—as we find in their registers—a certificate to that effect before engaging a clerk; but the very existence of such certificates is a plain proof of the prevalence of marriage among the lower clergy. It is strange that a student of *Piers Plowman*, as Professor Schofield evidently is, should have failed to realise a state of things which there stares us in the face, whether we accept or reject the autobiographical character of that poem.

Nor are his purely literary arguments more conclusive. There is, he contends, no hint of relationship between Pearl and the author, 'except one bewildering remark ... "Ho wacz me nerre then aunte or nece."' Yet it is sufficiently evident that the author here describes the girl as 'nearer to me than aunt or niece,' for the same reason which makes him assure us two lines higher up that 'there was no gladder man between here and Greece'—it suited his rhyme. 'The Poet,' pursues Professor Schofield, 'tells us nothing whatever of the living child'; he ought at least to 'have indicated some feature of her personal appearance.' This is not correct; he tells us the colour of her hair, which, I believe, is a more definite feature of personal portraiture than any which Dante gives of Beatrice in his far more lengthy *Commedia*. This, however, is quite lost on our critic, who has already concluded that 'The Pearl is, in truth, merely an allegorical figure, a being simply and purely of the poet's imagination.' It only remains for him, therefore, to ask 'what does she symbolize?' Here he turns abruptly from paradox to platitude, explaining at some length that 'medieval poets regularly utilized gems to betoken abstract qualities and conditions': 'the lapidaries emphasized the fact that the pearl was found alone and was singularly white and clean': therefore our Pearl here is an abstraction of 'pure maidenhood.' Yet even on this plainer ground he is often singularly inconclusive. Quoting the pearls of *Paradiso*, xxii, 23 ff., he is obliged to admit that 'they have no special character,' i.e., that they do not specially denote virgins—still less, virginity—but contemplative souls. Benvenuto da Imola, though he comments on Dante's use of the word 'pearls' in this context, has nothing to say about any symbolism of chastity; and in Dante's Heaven of the Moon, which was one transcendent pearl, the poet places precisely those spirits who had, however unwillingly, lost their maidenhood. Professor Schofield then gives us seven more pages of quotations, which show, indeed, that maidens were often compared,

naturally enough, with pearls, but which all refer to actual maidens who had (or were believed to have) lived in flesh and blood. From this he infers a totally different thing, for which he has advanced no direct proof, viz., that 'the poet...intended the Pearl to signify...a symbol of clean *maidenhood*.' And for the incredulous, who may desire further proof of a point which as yet has not been proved at all, he clinches the matter by a quotation from Thomas Usk: 'Margarite, a woman [i.e. a woman's name] betokening grace, learning or wisdom of God, or also Holy Church.' In this he finds 'still other, though closely allied, allegorical teaching' in support of his theory that in our present poem Margarite is *not* a woman's name, and betokens, *not* 'grace' or 'wisdom' or 'Holy Church,' but 'clean maidenhood'! After which come twenty-eight pages of no less inconclusive quotations from medieval allegorical poets, by which it would be equally possible to prove that neither Chaucer's *Death of Blanche the Duchess*, nor Dante's *Inferno*, deal with actual people who once wore mortal flesh.

But I have omitted, in my attempt to show the ineffectual character of this mass of quotations, one real tangible point—as tangible as that denial of ecclesiastical marriage from which Professor Schofield's argument sets out. 'The first thing that strikes us forcibly is that she [the Pearl] does not demean herself as a babe of two years¹.' This may very readily be granted: indeed, it would be difficult to name any book, medieval or modern, that fulfils his requirements in this particular. Pearl's behaviour in heaven can scarcely be more inconsistent with her earthly life than Beatrice's is; but the objection throws a flood of light on Professor Schofield's mental attitude, and explains much that would otherwise seem inexplicably perverse in his learned article. For, indeed, it is difficult to realize how anyone who has read *Pearl* with the care which he has evidently bestowed upon it, could persuade himself that the subject is merely an abstract virtue which never existed in the flesh.

The author repeatedly speaks of his Pearl not merely as lost to him—which would, of course, be conceivable enough of maidenhood—but as lost through her own death and decay. He cannot bear to think of 'her colour [i.e. beauty] clad in clay' (l. 22)²; he grieves

¹ Professor Schofield here makes a slip: l. 483 tells us that she was *not yet* two years old.

² I quote the lines from the E. E. T. S. Edition (*Early English Alliterative Poems*).

that 'mould' should 'mar' her (23) after she had slipped from him 'through the grass into the ground' (9). Sweet flowers, he says, naturally grew from a spot 'where such riches to rot is runnen' (25). Later on, Pearl distinctly names herself among those who are now blest in Heaven 'although our corsen in clottes clynge' (857), and although 'our flesh be laid to rot' (958). If the author gave us no more evidence than this, we should still feel that 'the common assumption that the poem was an elegiac one' deserved something more than the patronizing compassion with which Professor Schofield speaks of it. But there is plenty more—evidence overwhelming in its variety. If Pearl were simply 'maidenhood,' how could the author's lost maidenhood now be safe in heaven (257 ff.)? Why should he be rebuked for his selfishness in mourning her loss (264 ff.)? How could his maidenhood have been doomed, by the laws of nature, to flower and fade like a rose (269)? Stanzas 38 and 39, again (373 ff.), can only apply to a beatified soul; spoken of an abstract virtue, they make sheer nonsense. So also l. 485, describing how Pearl died 'before she knew her Pater or Creed'; 483, telling us that she died before she was two years old; 493 ff., describing her as receiving her full reward in heaven though she wrought but one short hour in the earthly vineyard; 641 ff., where she reckons herself among those who were damned through Eve's sin, were it not for Christ, whose blood and baptism had redeemed them from hell and 'Death the second' (cf. 807 ff.). Finally, how could it assuage the author's grief for lost maidenhood to learn that it was 'decked in garlands gay' in heaven? When we feel doubt of the evidence of our senses, we pinch ourselves to make sure that we are awake; so, when 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, we may look back to Professor Schofield's complaint that Pearl is too intelligent for a child of two, and to his fixed conviction that no honest medieval ecclesiastic could have written a poem about his own child. Without these two reminders, even the most passionate craving for 'heterodoxy' would be insufficient to explain his attitude.

But his Appendix shows still more clearly how completely he has been hypnotized by these initial misconceptions. It is beside the point that he seems to exaggerate beyond all reason the author's debt to Boccaccio; though the more carefully we compare the two, the more possible it seems that the similarities may be mere coincidences.

The point is that the similarity of the two poems, such as it is, tells not *for*, but definitely *against* his 'symbol' theory. Boccaccio's elegy, as even our critic is constrained to admit, does, in fact, deal with his actual dead daughter Violante, and with no mere symbol of a virtue. Again, Boccaccio definitely describes the unexpected maturity of those spirits, whose bodies had died so immature. Thirdly, just as Pearl (to Professor Schofield's bewilderment) lectures her father on theology; just as Beatrice (as he might well have remembered) lectures the learned Dante; just so does Violante lecture her scarcely less learned father. If Professor Schofield hopes to convert the majority to his theory of Pearl's unreality, he must begin by proving the unreality of this Violante, who is perverse enough to do precisely those things which, for the sake of his argument, no spirit that ever wore earthly flesh had a right to do.

In short, I cannot help thinking that the demonstrably false conception of medieval life from which Professor Schofield starts supplies the key to his heterodoxy, and that our rude forefathers who took *Pearl* for an elegy have not erred after all. Given the central false idea, nothing is easier than to mass vague quotations in its support. In one-tenth of the same space, and with corresponding conservation of energy in the matter of quotations, the purely symbolic character of Milton's 'late espoused saint' might have been proved. Does not Milton himself hint plainly that this vision was pure of the taint which we know that his earthly wife had in fact contracted? With what obvious intention, too, he avoids calling her anywhere his wife, in plain English, or making her behave like a wife! For the vague word 'espoused' can convey no valid proof to a really critical mind. After all, as many of us know by experience, it is far easier to 'espouse' a cause, a theory, or a paradox, than a real live wife.

G. G. COULTON.