‘Enhachyde with perle’: Pearl Imagery in Tudor Culture and Poetry

In Skelton’s *The Garland of Laurel,* the dream-pavilion that houses the court of Fame is described as being ‘enhachyde with perle[1]’. Likewise is Tudor culture and wider Tudor literature engraved with pearls. From the decadent wardrobes of Henry VIII’s wives to pearl-encrusted tapestries hung in the church at the christening of Princess Mary, these gems evidently hold a special place in Tudor cultural thought. They invoke ideas not only of beauty and preciosity but also of intimacy and piety. Such implications of pearls make their way into the realm of Tudor poetics, with court poet Skelton among others making use of the symbol of the pearl to introduce such themes into their work as beauty, intimacy, the celestial, piety, and preciosity. In the hands of Tudor poets, pearls are transformed from materials for making jewellery and kirtles to symbolism-loaded objects that have numerous implications when ‘sewn in’ to a text.

Opulent beauty is one invocation of the presence of pearls in Tudor culture and literature. As today, pearls in Tudor England were considered the epitome of beauty, indicated by their large presence in the regalia and the wardrobes of the succession of queens particularly in the court of Henry VIII. We get the sense from contemporary wardrobe records that Jane Seymour’s kettles were particularly opulently beautiful, featuring huge quantities of pearls. It is recorded that the King’s embroidered William Ibgrave ‘received a large quantity of pearls “for the hinder part of the queen’s kirtle”: 140 pearls of the bigger sort, 400 pearls of the second sort and 1552 of the smaller sort.[2]’. Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn are similarly depicted as laden with pearls in their portraits, their gowns and headdresses trimmed with pearls. The most overt contemporary artistic link between pearls and beauty is in Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, which depicts the goddess of beauty emerging like a pearl from an oyster. Tudor poets seemingly agree with the assertion that pearls are the very epitome of beauty; in Tudor poetry things of beauty are consistently either likened to pearls, contain, or are pearls. For instance the beautiful and ‘richely wrought’ garland in *The Garland of Laurel* has pearls sewn into it by the courtly ladies. These pearls become the object of praise by the dream-figures of Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate, who regard the laurel as the ‘goodlyest’ they have ever seen. Though ‘the sylke, the golde, the flowres fresh to sight’ (l.1111) are all celebrated as contributing to the garland’s overall beauty, it is the pearl alone which receives individual reverence. It is not only objects of beauty that are described in the language of pearls; beautiful women too are occasionally likened to pearls. In the Skelton-speakers loving poetic address to Mistress Margaret Tynley, he regards her a ‘perle orient’. It would be compliment enough to liken Mistress Tylney to a pearl, but the attachment of the epithet ‘orient’ elevates this compliment to the highest degree. An *orient pearl* is a pearl found in the seas around India as opposed to those around Europe, and generally considered to be of greater beauty (Oxford English Dictionary). To compare the courtly lady to an orient pearl is to compare her to a pearl so beautiful that it necessitates being distinguished from pearls of other varieties. To compare aristocratic women to pearls is a repeated trope in Tudor poetry. For instance the complexion of

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[1] All quotations for Skelton’s *The Garland of Laurel* have been taken from the EN4346 Course Reader.
[2] Maira Hayward, *Dress at the Court of Henry VIII* (London: Routledge, 2007), 165.

the poetic casting of real-world aristocratic girl Jane Scrope is likened to 'the orient pearle so cleare[3]' (l.1033) in *Phyllp Sparrowe*. Consistently we witness how objects of beauty in Tudor poetry become *impearled* - they either *are* pearls or are compared to pearls.

The presence of pearls in Tudor court poetry alludes to the presence of a concealed intimate space. In both Tudor literature and wider culture, pearls serve as ornaments that conceal a private or intimate space. One cultural example of this is the Elizabethan miniature, often encased in elaborately adorned lockets that frequently feature pearls. An example of such a miniature is the Gresley Jewel 'thought to be a gift from Elizabeth on the marriage of Catherine Walsingham to Sir Thomas Gresley[4]' whose casing is adorned with five pearls. Despite its elaborate exterior, what lies within the locket is personal and intimate. Upon opening, one is presented with miniatures of Walsingham and Gresley who stare out piercingly at the observer. When the locket is closed, though, the lovers' faces are pressed together and their gaze turns to one another. The adorning pearls stand guard on the exterior of the locket, restricting access to an intimate moment not intended for public viewing. To gain access to this intimate space one must 'penetrate the equivalent of an outer, higher social "room" - the ornamental picture-case richly decorated for all to see.[5]' Fumerton here alludes to an architectural reading of the pearl-clad Elizabethan miniature, wherein the limning itself is a private and highly intimate space, almost like a bed-chamber, which can only be reached by first advancing through the outer, more public rooms such as state rooms and galleries - in this analogy, the impearled locket. To access the private and intimate, then, one must make their way through a series of antechambers of which the decorated locket is the final. The object of the pearl and the idea of concealment of an intimate space are in this way linked. This cultural notion becomes infused in the literary, and in Tudor poetics the pearl becomes associated with private and intimate spaces. In the opening lines of Skelton's *The Garland of Laurel* the speaker encounters '...a pauylion wondersly disguised / … / Enhachyde with perle …preciously' (ll.38-40). The fact that it is 'disguised' implies that the pavilion is a place of privacy, secrecy, or intimacy. As the speaker advances, we as readers are allowed to bear witness to what lies behind the façade. The interior of the pavilion feels intimate on two counts: firstly, who is in there and secondly, the event that is unfolding in there. We are introduced through Petrarchan blazonic description to Dame Pallas, termed 'a goddesse immortal' (l.47) by the speaker, whose high praise of the Dame gives us the sense that we are in the presence of someone so beautiful and divine that it is an intimate privilege to be allowed to look upon her. In addition, the conversation being had within the pearl-clad pavilion is intimate, between two people only. In a voyeuristic way we encroach on something intimate that is not intended for our viewing. We know that it is not intended for us because Skelton prefaces this section with 'The Queen of Fame to Dame Pallas[6]'. Neither Skelton nor the speaker are invoked in this textual locator, and thus the fact that both are permitted into this intimate space signifies how the pearl serves as a precursor to intimacy and intimate spaces.

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[3] All quotations for Skelton's *Phyllp Sparrowe* have been taken from the EN4346 Course Reader.
[4] Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 74.
[5] Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics*, 72.
[6] Between l.49 and l.50

Aesthetically, the pearl invokes ideas of the celestial and particularly of the moon. Numerous aesthetic similarities may be drawn between the two objects: paleness, roundness, and the appearance of suspension. Just as pearls hang suspended from the casing of miniatures such as the Gresley Jewel and from jewellery such as Anne Boleyn's 'B' pendant, the moon appears to hang suspended in the sky. Beyond their aesthetic relationship, history has bore witness to various cultural associations between the pearl and the moon, such as the Vedic belief that the pearl is born of Soma, the Hindu God of the moon[7]. Though the Christian population of England would of course be unfamiliar with this piece of scripture, some Tudor poetry illustrates a similar belief in a close relationship between pearls and the moon. The 'pearl orient' to which Mistress Margaret Tylney is likened in *The Garland of Laurel* and the 'orient pearl' to which Jane is likened in *Phyllp Sparrowe* evidence this belief, though the term 'orient' is interpreted differently in this reading. Rather than being used to signify a pearl of the most beautiful and distinguished quality, 'orient' here is taken in the sense that is chiefly poetic - that which denotes 'that part of the heavens in which the sun and other celestial objects rise' (Oxford English Dictionary). We may, then, read Skelton's lines as referring to a pearl *in the orient* - in other words, as a metaphor for the pale, round moon suspended in the night sky. *Phyllp Sparrowe* in particular elicits the image of the "celestial pearl". In Jane's description she is both an 'orient pearl' (l.1033) and 'Diane…/…this maistres hight / The lode star of delight' (ll.1224-6). By likening pearl-Jane to the moon-goddess of ancient Italian divinity, Skelton once again links together the pearl and the moon. Through this poetic relationship, the presence of pearls implicates the presence of the moon and drags the skies, similarly to the heavens, down into Tudor poetry.

An implication of the pearl which is closely related to that of the earlier intimate spaces is that of sacred spaces and objects. Pearls have long held associations of holiness, proven by 'pearl passages' in biblical scripture. The most familiar is the description of the pearl gates of new Jerusalem which descends 'down from God out of Heaven' (Revelation 21:2 KJV). This passage tells us that '...the twelve gates *were* twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl' (Revelation 21:21 KJV), elevating the pearl to a heavenly status, given that it is described as a substance gifted from Heaven by the hand of God. Skelton adopts the image of the pearly gates in *The Garland of Laurel* with the pearl-adorned pavilion. Passing the impearled exterior of the pavilion and advancing into the divine interior can be read as passing through the pearly gates of new Jerusalem. Tudor royalty evidently subscribed to this biblical notion of pearl as a heaven-given object, and one piece of evidence for this is this adornment of the church at the christening of Princess Mary. 'As was traditional,' writes Hayward 'the church "was hung with cloth of needlework garnished with precious stones and pearls'[8]". Pearls are at the forefront of this sacred space, illuminating their place among the divine. Pearls as sacred is an idea that makes its way into Tudor poetics, such as *Time Trieth Truth*. In this unattributed poem, the 'perle' is identified as something which 'seldon ner decaies' (l.6). Like God, angels, and other divine figures the pearl resists the transience of earthly things, insusceptible to the eventual passing away of mortal things. Skelton's celestial pearls in *The Garland of Laurel* and *Phyllp Sparrowe*, his *pearl of the orient*, further pulls the heavens down into the realm of Tudor poetry. The incomparable and almost incomprehensible beauty and splendour of the heavenly sphere is, by the pearl, made accessible to man.

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[7] Dharmic Scriptures Team, 2002. *The Vedas: An English-only, indexed version of the 4 Veda Samhitas in one document*. Unknown: Unknown. https://zelalemkibret.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/the-4-vedas.pdf, 978.
[8] Hayward, *Dress at the Court of Henry VIII*, 58.

Pearls in Tudor culture and poetry invoke associations of preciousness. The idea of pearls as objects of preciosity has early roots in biblical scripture, continuing into Middle English literature and eventually into Tudor literature, where things that are considered so precious that it would be a devastation to lose them are often likened to pearls. The numerous biblical passages containing precious pearls may provide some inspiration for Tudor poets seeking to write on objects of preciosity to use the pearl metaphor - the precious impearled laureate garment of *The Garland of Laurel* and the beautiful pearl-like Jane in *Phyllp Sparrowe*, for instance. Two particular verses come to mind when considering the biblical association of pearls with preciousness: Matthew 13:45 and Matthew 7:6. The so-called 'parable of the pearl' in Matthew 13:45 illustrates the preciosity of the Kingdom of Heaven - Heaven itself is, according to this piece of scripture, a pearl: '...the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls' (Matthew 13:45 KJV). Pearls and Heaven are similarly precious in that both are hidden behind façades: pearls behind the outer shell of the oyster, and Heaven behind the impearled gates. To have gained access to the plains of Heaven according to Matthew 13:45 is to have gained access to the most precious place conceivable to man. Matthew 7:6 heightens the preciosity of the pearl even further, casting it not only as precious but *sacred*. It advises 'give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet…' (Matthew 7:6 KJV). Pearls in this passage are chosen as demonstrative of 'that which is holy', elevating their preciosity to the highest possible degree - *sacred*, that is, in close proximity to God. Pearls are similarly consistently worshipped as sacredly precious in Tudor poetry. Turning again to the garland of laurel constructed by the 'gentilwomen' (l.773) of the court in *The Garland of Laurel*, the pearls sewn into this garment are portrayed as extremely precious - not only because they have touched the fair 'handes as white as mylk' (l.797) of the courtly ladies but also because they are not handed out to just anybody. These pearls are not a widely-available commodity: by being sewn into (and therefore becoming a part of) the prized poetic laurel, permission to view and touch the pearls is reserved only for the worthiest of poets. This increases their value - their preciousness - significantly. Furthermore in the short unattributed *Time Trieth Truth* the pearl is designated as something which 'seldom ner decaies' (l.6), which alone increases its preciosity, as it is incredibly difficult to find something on earth that does not decay and eventually cease to exist. Everything, organic such as Jane's beloved sparrow in *Phyllp Sparrowe* and inorganic such as the pleasure of the court - the 'blodye Dayse' (l.11) of *Who lyst his welth and eas Retayne* - are doomed to pass away. The pearl, however, is described by the *Time*-poet as being one of the few things that resists such transience, and is therefore highly precious.

Pearls in Tudor culture are held in the highest of reverence, praised as objects of beauty and elegance. Though there are some cultural hints that pearls hold more than an aesthetic significance in Tudor society, for instance the hanging of the pearl-laden fabric in the church of Princess Mary's christening, it is the Tudor poets that truly imbue the symbol of the pearl with deeper significance. Through them, the pearl becomes emblematic of a great deal more than an object of aesthetic pleasure, introducing implications that perhaps exceed one's expectations.

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