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Discuss the importance of 'Buildings' in the dream-visions you have read on this module.

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In this essay I am going to explore the importance of buildings in three dream-vision poems: Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, Chaucer's *The House of Fame* and the anonymous *Pearl*. Buildings are a crucial part of all three of these poems and are utilised and presented in differing ways. In *Pearl* and *The House of Fame*, the materiality of buildings is shown to be essential in the portrayal of what the buildings represent, exploring opposing uses of decorative architecture. In all three poems, the positions and views of the narrator/speaker regarding the purpose of buildings is also of significance. In a more detailed exploration of *Piers Plowman*, I explore Langland's use of Piers' barn as a defensive structure of the Church.

This significance of the material is perhaps most apparent in *Pearl*. The description of the New Jerusalem in the latter half of the poem is one where the poet uses an extremely rich and luxurious register. The proliferation of precious stones — 'Saffer' (1002), 'calsydoyne' (1003), 'emerade' (1005), 'rybé' (1007), 'crysolyt' (1009) — which are part of the twelve layers that form the city walls, serve to create a tone of extravagance.[1] This is coupled with frequent references to light and reflection: 'glemande glas' (990), 'glas that glysnande schon' (1018), 'glent' (1026). Here the poet creates an opulent description of the city walls, using alliteration as tool of embellishment with the New Jerusalem being described in such a manner that makes it a fantastical building, not of the real world. The description of these layers in *Pearl* is from the ground up, with the poet taking on a role similar to that of a builder — when each layer is described, the poet then builds on the next layer. This is perhaps best shown in the poem's form:

> Yet joined John the crysolyt,
> The seventhe gemme in fundament;
> The aghtthe the beryl cler and quyt;
> The topasye twynne-hew the nente endent;
> The crysopase the tenthe is tight,
> The jacynght the enleventhe gent;
> The twelfth, the gentyleste in uche a plyt,
> The amatyst purpre wyth ynde blente.
>
> (1009-1016)

As seen above, the visual presentation of the poem itself takes on properties similar to what is being described. The repetition of 'The' at the beginning of each line and the subsequent listing of precious stones are examples of what Meyer calls 'the poet's ambitions

[1] Sarah Stanbury, ed., *Pearl* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

as a master-builder'.[2] The lines of text form layers on top of one another, giving the poet the ability to build the wall in textual form. In this way the poet utilises the poem's structure as an architectural device, intertwining the construction of the poem with the construction of the New Jerusalem, taking an active role in the portrayal of the story and as part of the New Jerusalem. The *Pearl* poet reflects the same detail of description in the poem's form, with Meyer asserting, 'This unusually deliberate and minutely controlled craftsmanship is the frame within which the poet describes his eschatological landscapes with stunning, luminous detail'.[3] This opulence is matched in Chaucer's *The House of Fame*, where the temple of glass is described in a similarly lavish manner: 'ymages of gold' (122), 'ryche tabernacles' (123), 'perre moo pynacles' (124), 'queynte maner of figures Of olde werk, then I saugh ever' (126-27).[4]

However, I feel the inclusion of the rich imagery of description in these texts has very different purposes and effects. The abundance of precious stones in *Pearl* that are described by the Pearl maiden is a direct reference to the bible, and more acutely Chapter 21 of Revelation. In this passage of the bible, John describes the holy city of Jerusalem: 'And her light was like unto a stone most precious… And the foundations of the wall of the city were organised with all manner of precious stones'.[5] He then goes on to list, just like the Pearl maiden, the twelve layers of the foundations. The almost identical description of the New Jerusalem by the Pearl maiden brings to the forefront the symbolic nature of the New Jerusalem 'understood in medieval theology and allegory to represent the soul, heaven, and both ideal city and ideal church'.[6] The focus on materiality is thus a celebration of this New Jerusalem and the qualities that it symbolises. The precious stones serve to enhance the brilliance of the New Jerusalem, and thus God.

The materiality of *The House of Fame*, in contrast, has a very different purpose. While the proliferation of precious stones in *Pearl* serve to highlight religious qualities, in the *House of Fame* they serve to emphasise the exaggerated, reflective and deceptive nature of fame. At the beginning of Book III, Chaucer uses language such as 'Babewynnes and pynacles, / Ymageries and tabernacles / I say; and ful eke of wyndowes / As flakes falle in grete snowes' (1189-91) in order to describe the Palace of Fame. Descriptions of a similar kind are found in other works of Chaucer, such as in *The Book of the Duchess*, where the speaker finds himself inside 'a chamber whose windows were 'yglased' with the story of Troy'.[7] However, in *The House of Fame* these elaborate decorations appear to act as a farce, covering the Palace of Fame, suggesting the false nature of fame. This notion of falsity can be seen more explicitly when the speaker sees 'the half ygrave With famous folks names fele' (1136). While at first he notes that these famous names 'had iben in mochel wele, And her fames wide yblowe' (1138-39), he then soon realises that in fact their fame was temporary — 'That of the lettres oon or two Was molte away of every name, So unfamous was woxe hir fame' (1144-46). In this instant Chaucer rather explicitly portrays the transient nature of fame, and the luxurious exterior of the House of Fame is shown to work as a façade to its feigned interior. This idea is again enhanced with the presence, amongst all the famous people, of 'jugelours, Magiciens, and tregetours, And Phitonesses, charmeresses, Olde wicches, sorceresses' (1260-63). In the House of Fame, people whose profession is to deceive and trick others mix side by side with people of great fame. Furthermore, it is important to note the very material of what the Fame's Palace is made from. The fact that it largely

[2] Ann Raftery Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 167.
[3] Meyer, p. 167.
[4] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, in *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 348-73.
[5] http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+21&version=KJ21 [Accessed 13 May 2014]
[6] Sarah Stanbury, ed., Introduction to *Pearl* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), p. 15.
[7] Piero Boitani, 'Old books brought to life in dreams', in *Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, eds. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

consists of beryl (1184) is interesting, as noted by Bennett, because it is a stone 'with the quality of magnifying…especially appropriate to Fame'.[8] The very structure of the Palace of Fame is one that magnifies its interior. Chaucer suggests that what is seen is not actually what is real, heightening the sense of falsity that permeates every part of the Palace of Fame. Chaucer uses materiality in order to enhance the theme of illusion and deception, for the precious stones and opulent materials that make up the House of Fame are a façade.

While the materiality of the buildings sheds differing light on what they represent, the position of the speaker/narrator in relation to the buildings is also of significance. In *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, buildings (with idealistic symbolism) are often viewed from a distance by the narrator/dreamer. This notion is fundamental in *Piers Plowman* and is apparent in the opening lines of Passus I when Lady Holy Church, 'A lovely ladi of lere, in lynnen y-clothed', appears to Will.[9] She tells Will, '"The toure up the toft," quod she, "Treuthe is thereinne, And wolde that ye wrought as his worde techeth"' (I.12-13). In this instance the tower, which notably holds Truth within, is seen from a distance, and at that point in time an unreachable distance. Lady Holy Church soon after tells Will of the 'castel of Care… / Therinne wonieth a wighte that Wronge is y-hote, / Fader of flashed, founded it hymselve' (I.61-64).[10] Will and Lady Holy Church view both the 'castel of Care' and the 'toure up the toft' from afar, and the reader is placed in their position, surveying the land in front of them. Both these buildings are shown to harbour opposing figures and ideals, Truth and Wrong. Yet these buildings are far away, and although in sight, cannot be reached. In this way Langland begins the poem with an immediate importance placed on buildings, and the inability to access them. This theme is again apparent in Passus V when Piers offers directions to the pilgrims seeking Truth. He tells them that they will eventually 'shaltow come to a courte as clere as the sonne' (V.585). However, as before, this building is shown *to be hard to access*. Surrounding the castle is 'The mote of mercy, the manere aboute' (V.586) and that 'alle the wallis ben of witte to holden wille oute' (V.587). Donaldson asserts that 'It is characteristic of the poem that while Truth's abode is visible from the field at the very beginning, the search for Truth is a constantly recurring theme throughout, as if what seems present and immediate is actually remote and elusive'.[11]

Similarly, in *Pearl* the New Jerusalem, the focal point in terms of buildings for the poem, is addressed from a distance. The narrator is explicitly told 'Utwyth to se that clene cloystor Thou may, bot inwyth not a fote' (969-79). While there are other reasons for this restriction, it is in a basic sense a refusal of admittance to the buildings. The narrator is placed firmly outside the building, holding similarities to Will being unable to locate the tower of Truth in *Piers Plowman*. The similarities between the two texts extends in this instance, with the speaker in *Pearl* describing his experience, 'Bot lurked by launces so lufly leved, / Tyl on a hyl that I asspyed / And blusched on the burghe, as I forth dreved, / Byyonde the brok fro me warde keved' (978-81). Will and the narrator of *Pearl* share a very similar experience in their environmental setting looking towards buildings. In both instances the onlooker is in a state of wonder, with the building appearing as something of an enigma, a set of ideals to be reached. Buildings, in their physical solidity, represent ideological solidity at the same time. Langland and the *Pearl* poet use buildings to emphasise a lacking in the speaker where both the speakers are in search of something, and it appears that these buildings hold some form of answer. In this way Langland and the *Pearl* poet keep the buildings at a physical and ideological distance from the speaker. The buildings are used as a destination; or rather they hold what the speaker desires and thus the traveller must go through nature in order to arrive

[8] J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 115.
[9] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* B-Text, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1991).
[10] Langland, p. 16, ll. 63-64.
[11] E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Summary of the Poem', in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), pp. 331-3.(p. 331).

at the buildings. Sarah Stanbury notes that what these poems 'share…is a place of possibility, where the narrative begins with a sense of being stuck or even trapped and then moves into a place of freedom or expansiveness'.[12] I would argue therefore that the poets use buildings as this 'place of possibility' and that they are a destination to be reached, not only in a physical sense, but also metaphorically.

However, while the dreamer in *The House of Fame* has a similar experience of viewing a building from the outside, the experience is of a more suspicious nature. While the Palace of Fame itself is described with a similar awe and beauty of the New Jerusalem in *Pearl*, the dreamer's perceptions of the building change as he gets closer. He starts, like *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, viewing the building from a distance, 'I gan beholde upon this place' (1111) … 'That stood upon so high a roche, / Hier stant ther non in Spayne' (1116-7). Yet unlike *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, the dreamer describes his approach to the building and it is in his approach that the nature of the building is revealed: 'But of what congealed matere / Hyt was, I nyster redely. / But at the laste aspied I, / And found that hit was every del, / A roche of yse, and not of stel' (1126-30). Immediately the very foundations of the building are shown to have deceptive qualities. The fact that the rock is made of ice suggests the temporary element of the 'fame' that it supports. So rather than offering a place of possibility for the narrator as with *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, the approach to the Palace of Fame is of an opposite nature, highlighting the unappealing qualities that the building ahead represents.

Having explored the narrator's position in relation to buildings, and the material substance of buildings, I am going to explore an episode in *The Vision of Piers Plowman* in detail where a building is of paramount importance to the poem. This particular episode is in Passus 19 of *Piers Plowman* in the building of Piers' barn. In this episode Piers is asked to build a barn by Grace, which is to house the crops that have grown from Piers having 'sown the seed of cardinal virtues':[13] '"Ayeines thi greyness," quod Grace, "bigynneth for to ripe, / Ordeigne the an house, Piers, to herberwe in this cornes"' (317-18). For the construction of the barn 'Grace gave hym the Crosse, with the garland of thornes' (321) and 'of his baptesme and blode that he bledde on Rode / He made a maner morter, and / Mercy it highte' (323-24). As highlighted by Steiner, as a result of this 'Pier's barn has become a sanctuary built of holy relics and sacred text'.[14] The barn here therefore represents the very substance of the 'Holi Cherche on Englisshe' (328) and is named 'Unité' (328). The barn is then given further weight when Pride prepares to attack the barn, which represents 'Conscience and al Crystene and cardinale vertues' (337). Pride asserts that 'Pieres berne worth broke; and thei that ben in Unité Shulle come out' (344-45). Here it is the barn that becomes the object of importance, for in the metaphor of storing Pier's crops, it is a building that can store these crops, and provide a roof for all Christians.

The barn, however, later takes on the qualities of a defensive structure, similar to that of a castle: 'Conscience comaunded tho al Crystene to delve / And make a much mote that myghte ben a strengthe / To helpe Holy Cherche and hem that it kepeth' (364-66). In its medieval context the castle was ultimately a defensive building, and Piers' barn is given architectural features such as a moat in order to make it more akin a castle and thus more defensive. What is at first a simple barn to hold crops, the building's characteristics and purpose change, transforming it into a building 'That Holy Cherche stode in holynesse as it a pyle were' (363). Abigail Wheatley notes that 'Castles were…an essential part of the Church's administration in Britain, built alongside churches by and for the same patrons'.[15] In this way Langland channels the contemporary use of castles as religious buildings and

[12] Sarah Stanbury, Introduction to *Pearl*, p. 2.
[13] Emily Steiner, *Reading Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 225.
[14] Steiner, *Reading Piers Plowman*, p. 225.
[15] Abigail Wheatley, *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England* (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), p. 16.

presents Piers' barn as a building worthy of defending the 'Holy Cherche'. The barn therefore becomes a form of defence for an institution, the Church, which is represented at this point in the poem as a 'single, ideal entity' having been thoroughly criticised throughout the poem in different ways.[16]

In all three poems, buildings are shown to be of extreme importance. The material substance of the Temple of Glass and the Palace of Fame show Chaucer's manipulation of the supposed positive connotations of precious stones, and uses the buildings as part of his critique of fame. In opposition the New Jerusalem of *Pearl* uses materiality as a celebration of its religious qualities. And in the placing of the narrator/speaker outside, looking towards buildings, *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl* argue for the ideological solidity of buildings and their status as a destination to be reached, whereas in *The House of Fame* Chaucer reiterates the impermanent nature of fame, showing through a building that appearances can be deceptive. Through Piers' barn, Langland ultimately argues for the paramount importance of buildings, and that through their construction and defence, great institutions like the Church can be protected and ultimately revived to its previous glory.

[16] James Simpson, 'Religious forms and institutions in *Piers Plowman*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman*, eds. Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 97-114.

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