



PROJECT MUSE®

---

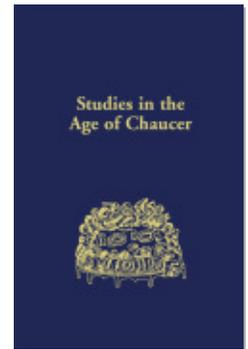
*The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* by Sandra Pierson Prior  
(review)

Zacharias P. Thundy

*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 20, 1998, pp. 311-314 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1998.0031>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/660874/summary>

and about the social contexts in which the play might have been performed. Avril Henry, finally, calls attention to the dramatist's use of unusual rhymes at important moments in *The Castle of Perseverance*, and concludes that it "is not certain whether rhyme-variation in the play reflects extreme sensitivity or ear in the medieval audience, or a craftsman's private delight, or devotional decoration for the glory of God, or simply flamboyant contemporary taste."

All in all, this is a very appealing collection of essays, partly because it is so refreshingly old-fashioned, but even more so because it calls to our attention a wonderful array of lesser-known works that are very deserving of attention. A pair of the essays have as their principal concern two such works—*The Simonie* and "Ne mai no lewed lued"—and in most of the other discussions our attention is drawn to many intriguing but relatively obscure poems, such as "The Festivals of the Church" (*Index* 3415), which contains among other things a stanza on Christ's circumcision; or the lyric poem that warns worldly girls of their mortality, found in MS Harley 116 (*Index* 2136); or Lydgate's *Testament* (*Index* 2464), a poem written late in his life in which he laments his mis-spent youth. What this group of essays does, finally, is to remind us of the many notable Middle English poems that we rarely have a chance to consider and that we even more rarely have a chance to incorporate into our teaching.

JOHN W. CONLEE  
College of William and Mary

SANDRA PIERSON PRIOR. *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet*. Medieval Texts and Studies, vol. 18. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996. Pp. xiv, 222. \$37.95.

This is a fine book of formalist New Criticism of the four well-known Middle English poems—*Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—assigned to the anonymous *Pearl*-poet of the fourteenth century. The major strength of the book is not only in what it says about these poems especially in the context of ecclesiastical iconography, illustrating the adage *ut pictura poesis*, but also in what it does by

pointing the way for future scholars to pursue. The book provides insights into the formal structures or “fair forms,” both visual and verbal, of these poems. Most importantly, the book dwells on the apocalyptic content of the poems, which is its significant contribution to scholarship. Prior sees the apocalyptic ideas of doom, death, punishment, and reward in various forms and shapes repeated and cleverly manipulated by the poet in these four works.

Prior shows that there is a providential plan in the process of sacred history in the Bible. The increasing intensity of sin invites God’s intervention, which is characteristically a call to conversion. Punishment brings sinners to their senses and helps them reform their lives. Once sinners are converted, the historical process leading to damnation is reversed and postponed. On the other hand, good deeds and a virtuous life on earth are rewarded not only with the eternal enjoyment of the beatific vision of God but also with the anticipation of glory on earth in the grace of the sacraments, like the Eucharist. Existentially speaking, grace is the beginning and foreshadowing of heavenly joy and glory on earth. Thus, Prior correctly points out two important facets of Biblical and English apocalyptic thought. First, the process of history is reversible in the sense that human history is not naively linear, with an absolute beginning and inevitable end in entropic fashion. Salvation history is, rather, circular in movement, with creation, destruction, and reconstruction or with creation, sin, punishment, and conversion; punishment is constantly thwarted by conversion. Second and consequently, the fact of conversion can and does almost interminably postpone the inevitable doom.

Prior demonstrates how the poet develops this providential pattern of salvation history in an orderly fashion from the first poem to the last. *Pearl* is characterized by the apocalyptic vision of the end borrowed almost verbatim from John’s Apocalypse. *Cleanness* is a return to the beginning of sacred history with the early stories of Adam, Noah, and Abraham followed by the later story of Daniel. *Patience* retells the story of Jonah with very obvious apocalyptic overtones. Finally, *Gawain* is a fictional account of a modern Christian and his society. *Gawain* also represents a return to the world and time and literary context of *Pearl*, stressing the pattern of circularity. However, this sweep of history leaves a lacuna—of the period between the time of Daniel and Gawain. Why not incorporate *St. Erkenwald* into this tectonic structure as the fourth

book, with *Patience* as the central work, giving us the following chiasmic pattern: *Pearl* (A), *Cleanness* (B), *Patience* (C), *St. Erkenwald* (B'), *Gawain* (A')?

Prior's basic premise, that apocalypticism plays a major role in the works of the *Pearl*-poet, is to be taken seriously. It is worth pointing out that *Pearl* is more apocalyptic than made out in the present book, provided we view it against the literary genre of the apocalypse, which often involves an otherworldly journey and the encounter of the visionary with his alter ego—as in the book's Asian analogues. In Zoroastrian tradition, at death the departing soul meets its *daena*, or the allegory of good deeds, in the person of a beautiful young maiden (compare the *Pearl* maiden) who leads the deceased's soul across a river. It seems that the English poet adroitly exploits apocalyptic motifs such as death, judgment, and reward in *Pearl*, albeit ambiguously. Future *Pearl* students could test and see whether the chiasmic pattern used by the Book of Apocalypse is also employed by the Middle English poet in versification.

Prior is at her best in exploiting the apocalyptic ideas and motifs, especially doom and conversion, found in *Cleanness* and *Patience*. She develops thoroughly the providential pattern of salvation history with special reference to the sacramental typologies of baptism and the Eucharist in these poems.

*Gawain* seems to pose problems for Prior in the discussion of apocalyptic ideas and motifs. It is the fair form of chivalric romance that seems to disguise the apocalyptic aspect of the poem. Beneath the veneer of romance apparently based on Celtic and Arthurian sources, there lie classical and Islamic subtexts in the poem. A careful comparison of the figure of the Green Knight with Virgil's Charon, his classical antecedent, shows that the Knight is green, old, and netherworldly, as the ferryman Charon is. This perspective would place *Gawain* squarely within the literary genre of the apocalypse with an otherworldly messenger and a vision of hell—the green chapel surrounded by a moat / river over which Bertilak leaps by using his ax handle as Charon could do from hell across the river Styx. Also, there is in the English poem the association of the Green Knight with the Islamic otherworldly green Khadir, who spares the life of a merchant on New Year's Day in the *Arabian Nights*, which also provides the motif of the severed speaking head.

This discussion leaves *St. Erkenwald* in limbo. Arguably, Prior discounts this work as a work of the *Pearl*-poet on the grounds that it is

not in the same manuscript (Cotton Nero A. 10) and that it is not in the same dialect, in spite of the many similarities found between it and *Gawain*. Though there does not exist a scholarly consensus on the unity of authorship of these five poems, a case can be made for their common authorship on the same grounds used for the four poems discussed above—their apocalypticism.

In traditional Catholic teaching, the four eschata or “last things” are Death, Final Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Church teaching also has emphasized particular judgments (the Augustinian “little judgments” referred to by Prior) which each soul must be subject to immediately after death—with a possible dispatch to Limbo, as in the case of the souls of unbaptized infants, to Heaven, to Hell, or to temporary Purgatory, as in the case of those dying with unforgiven and unexpiated venial sins but with forgiven and not fully expiated mortal sins. The good pagan of *St. Erkenwald* seems to have been lodged in Purgatory, like Dante’s Virgil, since the poem refers to fire and suffering, which are inconceivable in Limbo; further, the place is temporary, as Purgatory is, for the noble pagan is released from suffering after he receives baptism from St. Erkenwald. Therefore, Prior’s treatise on apocalyptic motifs in the works of the *Pearl*-poet raises the possibility of arguing for the common authorship of these five poems.

Though one may cavil at Prior’s limiting of the meaning of *forma* and at the exclusion of Aristotelian-Platonic-Scholastic treatises on *forma substantialis*, her rhetorical application of “fair forms” illuminates the formal structuring of the four poems. I encountered only one typo in the book with regard to English words; however, I cannot say the same with regard to Latin. We may dismiss this shortcoming by saying that our computers do not come equipped with Latin spell-checkers! It is regrettable, however, that the bibliography, published in 1996, does not include many works published in the nineties, suggesting that Prior did not consult much recent scholarship.

Sandra Pierson Prior’s book is a significant contribution to scholarship on the apocalyptic dimensions of the medieval works it covers, opening the door to opportunities for future scholars.

ZACHARIAS P. THUNDY  
Northern Michigan University