

**The Pearl, a Crayon, and a Lego****Daniel T. Kline**

Walking down Bardstown Road in Louisville, Kentucky, and considering whether to take an academic position in Alaska, my wife and I happened into a small curio shop. Among the baubles and figures, we found a small image of San Antonio, patron saint of children. Carved and painted in Guatemala in the 1920's or 1930's, he carried a tiny baby; no bigger than a thimble, the child was tied to the saint by a small string. "Oh!" I remember my wife saying, "It's perfect!" We bought it and put it on the mantle.

My academic work has always been a place I work out, at some level, my own preoccupations; and if I were to generalize, I would say that perhaps we chose to read the literature we do and work on the issues we do because it lets us talk about what's important to us. In my case, I began Ph.D. work at Indiana University when my first son, Sam, was five months old. He was a colicky kid, crying regularly and inconsolably from 8:00 to 11:00 three or four nights a week. That first term of Ph.D. work, commuting to Bloomington, Indiana, from the Louisville, Kentucky, area where we lived, I carried Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* under one arm and *The Riverside Chaucer* under the other. In a sense I was doing much the same thing listening to my son cry and reading Chaucer. I was learning to interpret a new language; looking for subtle clues of intonation and rhythm, of pitch and tone; hoping for understanding, seeking a sign.

With parenting constantly on my sleep-deprived mind, and the little guy giddily climbing all over me for the next few years, I began to notice that when children are featured in Middle English literature, they're invariably mistreated in some way: regularly threatened, abused, killed, or already dead, as in the case of the *Pearl*-child. And the representation of children in Middle English literature became the focus of my course work and dissertation. Three years ago I presented what later became the introductory chapter of my dissertation on children, violence, and subjectivity in Middle English literature.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the project, I considered the physical violence of a father against a daughter in

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the *Physician's Tale*; I worked through the cultural violence of anti-Semitism and the ideological appropriation of the murdered boy in the *Prioress's Tale*; I untangled Lydgate's debt to his poetic father Chaucer in the *Siege of Thebes*. I began to consider verbal or textualized violence, in which forms of representation themselves might be considered a form of violation. Following Derrida's elucidation of the "violence of reflection" in *Of Grammatology*,<sup>2</sup> I outlined a "violence of theory" that described the process whereby individuals are abstracted from the lived conditions of their experience and rendered into theoretical objects to be mobilized for different ideological agendas. In other words, I found that it is impossible not to be implicated in the very structures of violence that I attempted to elucidate, and such awareness was the price of resistant reading.

Coming to know my children in the way that I had, I couldn't quite figure out why the Dreamer in that marvelous poem *Pearl*, "slode vpon a slepyng-slau<sub>3</sub>t,"<sup>3</sup> did not recognize the young child who "watz me nerre ben aunte or nece" (line 233). Wouldn't a father or even an uncle, I reasoned, naturally recognize his own kid or kin? This is a personal poem of loss and reconciliation—an elegy—of harsh realities and difficult truths facing all parents, especially those in the medieval period with its high rate of infant mortality. I didn't like purely symbolic readings of *Pearl*; in my view, by universalizing the *Pearl*-child, they robbed her of her individual life. The poem, I believed, attempted to restore her particularity.

The answer, I thought, must be more complex than the Dreamer's simply not recognizing her. Dutifully using Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," I concluded that the Dreamer was trapped in a grief so excessive that it had become pathological. The poem itself progresses through a series of substitutionary tropes that Peter Sacks has identified with

the elegy 4—figures like the pearl, a rose, a penny, the eucharist, and even the poem itself. In compensation for his loss, the Dreamer fixes his desire inappropriately, even incestuously at times, so it seems upon the *Pearl*-maiden. In a fetishistic turn, the Dreamer's material preoccupation with the *Pearl*-child as an object of wealth, status, and overarching desire occludes his ability to see her as a subject in her own right. He sees her, rather, as a romance heroine and theological construct. It is only through the *Pearl*-child's patient teaching and her insistence upon her own status as a child in the heavenly kingdom that the Dreamer is brought to an awareness of their previous relationship. Finally, he recognizes the *Pearl*-child as "my lyttel quene / þat I wende had standen by me in sclade" (lines 1147-48).

I had the rough contours of this reading worked out when our second son, Jacob, arrived on the scene less than a week after I took my Ph.D. comps in the spring of 1994. My wife and I joked about whose delivery was more difficult. I contended that at least she got an epidural.

After completing the dissertation three years later, I accepted that position at the University of Alaska Anchorage, and that same fall of 1997 we found out that we were expecting another child, our third son, who in his desire to be born had circumvented all our best efforts to deter his conception. Unexpected, yes; poorly timed, probably; and way too expensive, especially in Alaska; nonetheless, we

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honored his wish to join the family and embraced his engendering like a couple of experienced old hands. My brother joked that with this third boy—Joseph Franklyn, we'd call him, after two of his granddads—we would be able to field our own basketball team; an Anglo-Saxonist friend of mine thought we were giving rise to our own warrior clan.

My wife and I are a bit longer in the tooth than when we had our first son, and so we passed carefully through a series of regular checkups and sonograms, and eventually a successful amniocentesis. As we slogged through our first long Alaskan winter, I had the opportunity to teach *Pearl* in an upper-level Medieval Survey for the first time. I put *Pearl* on the syllabus right after *The Inferno*—a good pairing, I thought, with plenty of room for comparison, contrast, and exploration. So I talked to my first medieval literature class about the structure and setting of *Pearl*, its framing devices and poetic virtuosity, its cultural and theological background, and a few of the standard readings from the critical literature. My students liked the poem very much, but they too wondered about the *Pearl*-child: how did she get so smart, and why was she so snippy to her dad sometimes? Why was she figured as a gem, a pearl, and not something else? Wasn't that an odd choice? I thought those were good questions and we enjoyed hashing them out. That was two weeks prior to delivering this paper at the 1998 Illinois Medieval Association annual conference.

The day after I taught *Pearl*, when my wife went for her regular OB-GYN check up and ultrasound, the LPN couldn't find a heartbeat. The sonogram confirmed that our boy had, in their terms, "lost integrity" at six months, at the edge of viability.

We had to wait until the next day before a bed came open at the hospital and, after a long night, we got a room in the maternity ward. The nursing staff had taped a small postcard to the door of our labor and delivery suite. It pictured a newly fallen oak leaf resting on a swath of billowing purple silk and bedewed with a single drop of water. It notified those pacing in the hall outside or sleeping fitfully in the lobby that what was happening silently in this room was not the same as what was going on in the other rooms on the ward. And as my wife labored to deliver the small body, perfectly formed but hopelessly entangled in the umbilical cord, I understood that the only thing we would be able to do for him as parents was to deliver him intact and see him safely buried. With dull fingers I dialed the phone number of a mortuary; the numbers of all the funeral homes in town had been conveniently put on a business card for just such an occasion.

We had no hillock nor enclosed arbor to give form to our grief, only a rectangular hole piercing the permafrost and a small white casket on a green bier. At the graveside, my wife said that this child was her third son and his name was Joseph. She said that she had been thinking about how she would teach him to tie his shoes and to read, to use his words when he got angry, and to pet the kitty gently, but that he would now become her teacher—he would teach us about facing what we had feared the most, the death of one of our children. Three-year-old Jake leaned over the gravesite and looked in. He wondered whether

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Joseph was sitting down in the casket or standing up. Sam, the seven-year-old, did not say much, but he somberly laid a red tulip on the casket like the rest of us.

When it was my turn, I told the boys the story of Jesus and the children: when the children were playing and climbing all over Jesus, Jesus' friends, the disciples, wanted them to go away and leave him alone, but Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Jacob looked up quizzically and I told him it meant, "Let them come and play." Jacob said, "Oh!" In the *Pearl*-poet's words, Jesus says: "Do way, let chylder to my ty3t" (line 718). When we were done, the attendants lowered the tiny box into the grave. I found a lego and crayon in my coat pocket. I dropped them into the grave as we turned and left.

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Notes

1. Daniel T. Kline, "Textuality, Subjectivity, and Violence: Theorizing the Figure of the Child in Middle English Literature," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 12 (1995), 23-38. Available online at [EMS 12](#)
2. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 112.
3. *Pearl*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley, 1978), line 59. All citations to the poem are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
4. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, 1987).