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## Rhetorical Strategies in *Cleanness* and *Patience*

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Of the four poems in British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the two that stand out as most closely related are *Cleanness* and *Patience*. The most obvious similarity is that both are religious poems which combine discussion of a religious virtue with biblical storytelling: so *Cleanness* retells the stories of Noah, of Sodom and Gomorrah, and of Belshazzar's feast, which are prefaced and interspersed with discussion of cleanness (*clannes(se)* is the poet's word),<sup>1</sup> and the much shorter *Patience* retells the story of Jonah, which is prefaced with discussion of patience; both poems end by urging the desirability of their respective virtues. But these two virtues are, as the poet conceives them, very different, and it is my concern in this paper to investigate some of the ways in which the two poems construct very different, and in some respects sharply contrasting, rhetorical and linguistic worlds which convey and reflect the essence of the virtues. In this short study I focus my investigation mainly on the beginnings of the poems and I have more to say about *Cleanness* than *Patience*.

From the outset, the rhetoric of *Cleanness* is characterized by explicitness, emphasis, reiteration, and opposition. The first lines explicitly contrast the *fayre formes* which go with cleanness with the *kark and combraunce huge* ['great trouble and difficulty'] which go *in the contraré* (lines 3-4). God is said to be angry with filth (lines 5-6), and later in the passage this anger is explained in contrastive terms: God is himself so clean (line 17). Unclean priests are contrasted with the angels, steeped in *alle that is clene* (line 19), who serve God in his heavenly court. There is also a contrast between unclean priests and clean priests: the latter are said to win great reward (line 12), the former to drive God to anger (or perhaps the meaning of *hym to greme cachen*, line 16, is 'bring harm upon themselves'). The priests' uncleanness is referred to a strongly-expressed contrast between outward appearance and inner nature (*honest utwyth and inwith alle fylthes*, line 14), and the same inner-outer dichotomy is used to point up the contrast between the priests and the angels, who have inner and

outer nature in harmony, as they are clean *bothe withinne and withouten* (line 20). The poem goes on to quote in its own words the sixth beatitude from Matthew 5. 8: 'Blessed are the clean of heart; for they shall see God', only to recast it immediately in negative terms: *As so says, to that syght seche shal he never! That any unclannesse has on, awwhere aboute* (lines 29-30). The insistent rhetoric suggests an already-worked-out narratorial position and the strong contrasts suggest a polarized system of values. The vocabulary of the passage supports this, in the reiteration of words expressing the concept of cleanness and words which express its opposite: in the first 32 lines the words *clannesse* and *clene* each occur six times in all (*clannes(se)* three times and *clene* three times), and there are four occurrences of *unclannesse* and its synonym *fylthe* (*unclannesse* once and *fylthe* three times).

The leading idea which the contrasts express is that God loves and rewards cleanness and hates and punishes uncleanness, with the emphasis of the passage, as of the poem, falling on the negative element of the contrast. So God is *wonder wroth . . . wyth the freke* ['man'] *that in fylthe folwes him after* (lines 5-6), such as the unclean priests; on the other hand, clean priests *cleche* ['obtain'] *gret mede* (line 12). The man clean of heart is rewarded with the beatific vision (lines 27-28), but when a man tries to enter Heaven in unclean clothes, God *may not byde that burre* (line 32), that is, may not endure the shock of it. The leading idea of the passage is the leading idea of the poem. Not only is it worked out in the narratives, but it is repeated again and again throughout the poem in explicit, often flatly oppositional statements which reiterate the language and imagery of the opening passage, particularly that of the sixth beatitude. In the transitional passage between the wedding feast parable and the story of the fall of the angels, the narrator tells his reader that if he is clean, *Thenne may thou se thy Savior and his sete ryche* (line 176), whereas the sinner *may forfeite his blysse, / That he the Soverayn ne se* (lines 177-78), and again *in the Creatores cort com never more, / Ne never see hym with syght* (lines 191-92). At the end of the story of Noah's flood comes the statement that *On spec of a spote* [of sin] *may spede to mysse / Of the syghte of the Soverayn that sittes so hyghe* (lines 551-52), followed immediately by *For that schewe me schale in tho schyre howses* ['For he who will make an appearance in those bright houses', *sc.* in Heaven] *As the beryl bornyst byhovos be clene* (lines 553-54). A little later, in the preface to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the narrator refers to the *vycios fylthe* which so defiles a man's soul *That he his Saveour ne see with syght of his yyen* (line 576), and to the way in which God honours the honest man: *Sendes hym a sad syght, to se his auen face, / And harde honyses thise other and of his erde flemes* ['And harshly spurns the rest and drives them from his dwelling'] (lines 595-96). At the end of the story of

Sodom and Gomorrah the narrator states that the conclusion to be drawn from the fact that God took such drastic vengeance on the *fylthe* of the Sodomites is that he *the wlonk lovies* 'loves what is clean' (line 1052), and he urges the reader to be clean if he wishes *To se that semly in sete and his swete face* (line 1055). The poem concludes with further restatement of the basic proposition: *unclannes* makes God angry (lines 1806-08), while *clannes is his comfort . . . And those that seme* ['seemly'] *arn and swete schyn se his face* (lines 1809-10). There is a sense in which the poem never goes beyond its opening proposition. At the same time the proposition gathers force, from the narratives and the discussions, with each reiteration.

The poem moves from the opening discussion to its first narrative example, the parable of the wedding feast, by explicit logical steps. It gives not one version of the parable but two, so that the main point of the parable (as far as the poem is concerned) is made twice over: the guest who arrives at the feast in unclean clothes receives harsh treatment. This enables the poet to develop another contrast, between men's attitude to uncleanness and God's. The first and shorter 'earthly' version (lines 33-48), where the feast is in charge of an *urthly hathel* 'earthly lord' (line 35), is entirely concerned with the guest at the feast and the lord's response to him, giving graphic details of the guest's ragged clothes and of his punishment at the hands of the lord. It both prepares the reader for the main focus of the parable proper as it is retold in the poem, and allows the poet to remark again God's extreme hatred of uncleanness: the two lines which link the two versions of the parable state that if uncleanness is unwelcome on earth, it is still more unwelcome in Heaven (lines 49-50). The two parable narratives bear out this statement. In the earthly version the disgraced guest is thrown out from the feast, banned forever from returning to the lord's house, and threatened with imprisonment if he does return. In the parable proper the lord [i.e. God] goes further, ordering him to be imprisoned at once in a dungeon and tortured (lines 153-60).

In the retelling of the parable proper the emphasis on God's hatred of uncleanness which the poet contrives through the clothing metaphor is reinforced by narratorial statement. The version in Matthew 22. 1-14 is taken as the basis, as the poem indicates (line 51), but this version is altered, and material from the version in Luke 14. 16-24 is worked into it. Indeed, apart from the details of the lord's preparations for the feast in lines 55-60, which extend the details in Matthew 22. 4, the first part of the retelling largely follows Luke. There is one significant ~~added~~ detail, found in neither Matthew nor Luke: the poem reports Matthew as saying that the lord invited the guests to come *in comly quoyntis* 'in comely attire'. As in Luke, so in the poem the invited guests make their various excuses, the lord is displeased

with them, he sends his servants out into the streets of the city to bring in all the people they can find of whatever condition, and when they do this and he sees there is still room he sends them out once more, this time into the countryside beyond the city, to find yet more people, until his house is filled. In Matthew the episode of the prospective guests who refuse ends apocalyptically: the king's servants are reviled and killed and the king retaliates by sending his armies, who destroy the murderers and burn their city (Matthew 22. 6-7). In Matthew the servants go out only once more, not twice, and they bring back 'all that they found, both bad and good' (Matthew 22. 10). The poet takes his main episode of the guest without a wedding garment from Matthew 22. 11-13 (there is no equivalent in Luke), and he expands the phrase 'both bad and good' from Matthew 22. 10 into a number of references to the motley nature of the crowd at the wedding feast, some *worthy* and some *wers*, indicating that, although some wore finer clothes than others and were seated accordingly (lines 114-16), all were at least respectably dressed: *And ay a segge soberly semed by her wedes* (line 117). In this way the poet underlines the crucial point of difference between the guest who is singled out for blame and the other guests. The contrast of reward is made extreme: the difference between wearing clean and unclean clothes is the difference between being *served to the fulle* (line 120) and thrown into a dungeon. The poet leaves out the earlier Matthean detail of the killing of the servants and the king's anger (the Vulgate text of Matthew 22. 7 has 'iratus est') and revenge because he wants the greatest offence, the anger of the lord and his greatest punishment to be reserved for the unclean guest. When the lord hears of the refusals the poem does not mention anger as such but states that he *hade dedayn of that dede* and spoke *dryyly* (line 74; *MED* drili adv. 'strongly, earnestly, seriously') as he pronounces a judgement (lines 75-76, 84), which is, essentially, that those who refuse are much to blame and not worthy of him (lines 75-76, 84). His barring of them forever from his table (lines 105-08) recalls the ban placed on the guest in the preliminary 'earthly' version of the parable. These words and actions, though severe, are restrained by comparison with the treatment of the guest in unclean clothes, to whom the lord responds immediately and angrily, accusing him at length of insulting him (lines 140-48). The lord's anger is confirmed by the narrator both before this speech (*And gremed* ['was angry'] *therwith the grete lorde, and greve* ['injure, punish'] *hym he thoght*, line 138), and after it, when his words are described as *brothe* 'angry' (line 149). Lines 153-60, in which the lord orders the guest to be cast out, are based on Matthew 22. 13. As well as enlarging on the biblical punishments to which the guest is condemned, the poem supplies another narratorial indication of the lord's fury (*Then the lorde wonder loude laled* ['spoke'] *and cryed*, line 153), and a final addition in which the lord makes explicit the

purpose of the punishments: *to teche hym be quoynt* ['well-dressed'] (line 160). This last echoes the addition of the phrase *in comly quoyntis* at the beginning of the parable. In the poem's version, therefore, the parable begins and ends with emphasis on the need for those who sit at the Lord's table to be 'well-dressed'.

The passage of explication which follows, beginning with the statement that Christ himself compares the marriage feast to the kingdom of Heaven (cf. Matthew 22. 1-2), spells out the parable's meaning. All who are baptized, whether better or worse, are invited to Heaven. The reader is addressed directly, and urged to make certain that his clothes are clean for the occasion, which repeats the advice already given in the opening discussion (see lines 33-34). By means of a question put to the reader (*Wich arn thenne thy wedes . . .?*) which is immediately and directly answered (*Hit arn thy werkes . . .*), a didactic device which is found elsewhere in *Cleanness* (compare the questions put to the reader in lines 1110 and 1112, both answered in line 1115), his clothes are explained as the deeds which he has done (line 171). The poet then pulls out all the rhetorical stops in a lengthy statement beginning with a long list of sins of various kinds (lines 178-88), which is followed by a series of cumulative negative expressions (lines 197-201) to the effect that, while there are many sins which may lead the sinner to miss out on the bliss of Heaven, it is the sin of *fylthe of the flesch* which is the worst of all in that it actually moves God to anger. The statement links the retelling of the parable to the stories which follow in that the distinction it makes both looks back to that made between the guests who refuse and the guest in dirty clothes, and forwards to that made between God's 'moderate' treatment of Satan and Adam on the one hand and the violent destruction of Noah's world on the other. The distinction is made explicit in the stories by further narratorial comment. So the poem states that the fall of Satan and the angels was in accordance with the moderation of God's nature (*In the mesure of his mode*, line 215), and that though it was 'a fearful calamity and a mighty vengeance' (*a brem brest and a byge wrache*, line 229), yet God did not become angry (*And yet wrathed not the wyy*, line 230). Similarly, in the fall of man, God's vengeance showed moderation (*Al in mesure and methe was mad the vengiaunce*, line 247). In the Flood, by contrast (a contrastive *but* introduces the episode at line 249), God destroyed all living things, exhibiting 'merciless anger and great hostility' (*malys merciles and mawgré much*, line 250).

*Patience* too begins with a statement about the nature of its virtue, but, by comparison with *Cleanness*, one is struck by the unassertiveness of its opening, which consists largely of a series of aphorisms, beginning with the first line: *Paciencie is a poynt* ['virtue', or possibly the better reading is *apoynt* 'enjoined (by God)'], *thaghit displese ofte*. Though both poems emphasize the negative point of view, *Patience*

does not develop the strong contrasts that *Cleanness* does, either in commentary or narrative. Its argument proceeds more discursively and less explicitly. One indicator of this is the relative absence in the first part of *Patience* of clear-cut linguistic oppositions, of the *clannesse-unclannesse/fylthe* kind; the word *pacience* is used four times, but *impacience* or its equivalent is not found. The one contrastive statement made in the first lines of *Patience* is, like the very first line, aphoristic in style: *For quo-so suffer cowthe syt, sele wolde folwe, And quo for thro may noght thole, the thikker he sufferes* ['For the one who is able to put up with misfortune, prosperity follows, and the one who may not endure on account of obstinacy, the more he suffers'] (lines 5-6). The neatness with which the opposition is put, and especially the element of witty word-play (*suffer* means both 'put up with' and 'suffer pain')<sup>2</sup> keeps the tone light, and the use of the relative *thikker*, together with *better* in the next line, suggests relative rather than absolute values. Relative expressions are used again in lines 47-48, where the narrator concludes that it is better or easier (*lyghtloker*) for him to like poverty and patience than to resist and so have *the wers*. The same light narratorial tone is found at the end of the poem, when, in urging his reader to adopt the virtue of patience, the narrator resorts again to proverbial or aphoristic statement: *For he that is to rakel to renden his clothes/ Mot efte sitte with more unsounde to sewe hem togeder* ['For he who is too hasty to tear his clothes must afterwards put up with more annoyance to sew them together'] (lines 526-27).<sup>3</sup>

In *Patience* as in *Cleanness* the narrator appeals to the Beatitudes to support his opening discussion. The narrator of *Cleanness* goes straight to the sixth beatitude and leaves the reader in no doubt as to its subject: it *of clannesse uncloses a ful cler speche* (line 26). The narrator of *Patience* paraphrases all eight beatitudes. The virtues and their rewards straightforwardly follow the biblical text, without narratorial comment, until the last is reached. Here the poem departs considerably from Matthew 5. 10: 'Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' The poet leaves out altogether the biblical ideas of persecution and justice, and he chooses not to use the words 'patience' or 'patient', in his formulation, though it is soon clear that, following many commentators, he does indeed see patience as the virtue of the eighth beatitude. Instead he offers a thought-provoking phrase which opens up meaning and makes the beatitude more wide-ranging in its application: *Thay ar happen also that con her hert stere* ['They are blessed also who can steer their hearts']. Whereas in *Cleanness* the emphasis is on differentiating uncleanliness from other sins as particularly hateful to God, *Patience* draws attention to the way the virtue of patience links in with other virtues, taking the trouble to establish the whole Beatitude context and developing in particular a link between patience and poverty,

based on the identity of reward of the first and last beatitudes – a link which involves blurring the distinction between the spiritual poverty of the first beatitude and the physical poverty which the narrator says he has to endure.

The *Cleanness* narrator no sooner identifies and quotes the sixth beatitude than he recasts it as a fierce negative. In *Patience*, the virtues of all the beatitudes are turned immediately into ladies to be loved. In suggesting that it is appropriate to love the ladies of the Beatitudes by copying their virtues (*If we thyse ladyes wolde lof in lyknyng of thewes*, line 30), the poet of *Patience* draws on an idea found in *Le Roman de la Rose*, in which the Lover is advised to win the favour of his mistress by imitating her manners. The same idea is also used in *Cleanness*, where, in keeping with the more explicit method of that poem, *Clopygnel* and his *clene Rose* are mentioned by name (line 1057), the passage of advice to the lover to copy the ways of his mistress is formally quoted, in paraphrase (lines 1059-64), and then the advice is formally applied to the poem's purpose:

If thou wyl dele drwrye wyth Dryghtyn thenne ['have love-  
dealings with the Lord'],  
And lelly lovy thy Lorde and his leef worthe ['be his dear one'],  
Thenne confourme the to Kryst, and the clene make.  
(lines 1065-67)

*Cleanness* carefully maintains the distinction between secular idea and sacred application. In *Patience* the idea is only lightly touched upon, there is no explicit reference to or quotation of *Le Roman de la Rose*, and the line between sacred and secular is eliminated. The narrator refers to the virtues of poverty and patience as *playferes* 'playfellows' (line 45) and proposes to *play me with bothe* (line 36), and he plays also with ideas and words, moving in and out of personification and between the ideas of spiritual and physical poverty.

My final point is that the narrator of *Patience* is brought much more into the picture than is the narrator of *Cleanness*. In lines 7-8 he applies the opening aphorisms to himself, and in lines 35-48 he muses on his own situation of poverty. Both poems effect the transition from their beginnings to their biblical narratives by positing a hypothetical situation. In *Cleanness* that situation is the earthly version of the parable of the wedding feast. In *Patience* the narrator puts himself at the centre of his hypothetical situation when he imagines that he, like Jonah, is ordered to go to a distant city against his will (lines 49-56). In this way the narrator in the prologue personalizes his message and offers his thoughts, in a somewhat whimsical way, as



the fruit of his experience. In lines 29-30 he uses the pronouns 'us' and 'we' as he contemplates the reward for loving the ladies of the Beatitudes, thereby putting himself in the same frame as his audience. The *Cleanness* narrator keeps a greater distance, addressing the reader from a position of cut-and-dried authority. He maintains a didactic style and a clear boundary between teacher and listener, frequently using the imperative and the second-person pronoun (usually 'thou', occasionally 'ye'), as when he comes to sum up at the end of the poem: *Thus upon thrynne wyse I haf yow thro* ['clearly'] *schewed* (line 1805). At the end of *Patience* the narrator does not direct the lesson to the reader but takes it to himself, returning to his account of himself in the prologue: *Forthy when poverté me enpreces and paynes innoghe! Ful softly with suffraunce saghttel* ['settle'] *me bihoves* (lines 528-29). The aim in *Patience* is evidently not to frighten the reader into submission but rather to seek to persuade him to see the rightness of the narrator's point of view, and the rhetoric is reflective and ironic rather than explicit and didactic, inviting the reader to share the narrator's experience and to engage with him in considering the manifold and subtle ways in which the story of Jonah illuminates the nature of the virtue of patience and the need to practise it.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from *Cleanness* and *Patience* are from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, ed. by J. J. Anderson (London: Everyman, 1996). I quote the Bible in the Douay version.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of these meanings see Myra Stokes, 'Suffering in *Patience*', *Chaucer Review*, 18 (1984), 354-63.

<sup>3</sup> Some readers see these words as belonging to God, not the narrator; so e.g. Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the 'Gawain'-Poet* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), p. 95.