

[Essays in Medieval Studies 3](#)

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The Power of Words and the Power of Narratives: *Cleanness***Ruth E. Hamilton**

One theme that emerges from a careful reading of the fourteenth-century poem known as *Cleanness* is the power of words, both spoken and written. This should be no surprise to readers of two more famous poems generally considered to have been written by the same author, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*. Students of these works have noted the poet's careful choice of words, his artistry in linking them together, and their power of evocation. Ironically, however, it is in *Cleanness*, which has never enjoyed the critical acclaim of its companion pieces, that the poet celebrates his artistry. In *Cleanness*, the poet proclaims not only the power of words but also their capacity to serve as bearers of a divine message. The ability to use words makes a relationship with God possible for humans and distinguishes them from animals. It is in the acts of speaking and writing that humankind draws closer to God. Furthermore, in *Cleanness*, the poet demonstrates his awareness of the power of the narrative, the weaving of words into stories. And he claims kinship with the prophets of old because of his craft.

The poet demonstrates his knowledge of the power both of words and of narrative from the very beginning of the poem. The whole poem itself is, of course, an exercise in defining the word *cleanness*, a definition that mainly proceeds by demonstrations of both cleanness and uncleanness in narratives, stories drawn from, the Bible. The structure of the poem, the poet's choice of the methods by which to

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accomplish his definition, reveals both his awareness of the power of narrative and speech and his sophisticated use of them for rhetorical purposes.

The definition of cleanness is begun by a narrator speaking directly to an audience, a homilist who introduces the topic and calls attention to himself at line 25 with "Me mynez" [I am thinking] of a beatitude which refers to cleanness. The narrator continues his definition through the example of an earthly feast from which a guest is excluded because he is dressed in filthy rags. Then he tells of another feast, one in the gospel of Matthew, a heavenly feast at which a similar event occurs. During the recital of this narrative, an interesting shift occurs. The voice of the homilist disappears, replaced by the direct speech of the host of the feast, the reported dialogues between him and his servants and guests. For this important example, this warning of heavenly wrath the poet chooses that the audience experience his message directly, not filtered through the voice of the homilist nor reported in indirect or transposed speech. This example has immediacy; members of the poem's audience become wedding guests, personally witnessing the punishment of the unclean guest. Following the command of the lord that the offensive guest be tortured (the guest himself, significantly, remains silent), the voice of the homilist intrudes again, explaining the parable and directly warning the audience to be clean. In other words, the poet replaces the *mimesis* of the narrative, the *showing* or demonstration, with the didactic *telling* of the homily.

Following this explanation, the homilist begins another narrative, the fall of Lucifer. This narration contains only two lines of direct speech, but these two are significant. Lucifer

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proclaims: "I schal telde vp my trone in þe tramountayne, / And by lyke to þat Lorde þat þhe lyft made" (211-12). [I shall raise my royal throne in the region of the Pole-star / and be like the Lord who created the firmament]. But this improper use of speech, equating himself with God, is swiftly punished. "With þis worde þat he warp, þe wrake on him ly3t (213)." The words themselves cause vengeance to light upon him; they are the agent of his downfall. Once again, then, the poet of *Cleanness* uses direct speech not simply for dramatic effect but to demonstrate the power of words and to bring his audience right into a narrative that illustrates the eternal punishment for uncleanness.

The casting out of the evil angels is accomplished in silence; the poet notes that Lucifer will not pray to God for pity (232). The fall of the angels is followed in the poem by a quick recounting of the fall of Adam and Eve. Then the poet begins another narrative, that of the Flood, a major example in his definition of cleanness. During the story of the Flood, the voice of the homilist once again recedes, and the audience comes face-to-face with an angry God who declares "I greatly regret that I ever created man," and announces his intention of destroying everything on earth ["Me forþynkez ful much þat euer I mon made / Bot I schal delyuer and do away þat doten on þis molde"] (285-86).

But God favors one man with speech of a different sort, commands to build an ark and promises of salvation. And when God returns to see if all is in readiness, Noah, the clean man, replies directly to him: "3e, Lorde ... Al is wro3t at þi worde" ["Everything is done according to your word"] (347-48). However, those who are drowning, the unclean, do not speak with God; in fact, they do not use speech

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at all. They roar for fear, they cry out, and the resulting cacophony, according to the poet, only signifies their damnation (393-96).

Ande alle cryed for care to þe Kyng of heven,

Recoverer of þe Creator þay cryed vchone,

þat amounted þe mase His mercy watz passed,

And alle His pyté departed fro peple þat He hated.

God will not answer them. They have lost the human privilege of speaking to God and being addressed by him. They are like the raven that Noah sends out from the ark and that he curses when it disobediently does not return. The dove that Noah tries next, however, is obedient. It stands in the same relationship to Noah as Noah does to God, a fact highlighted by the only other use of direct speech within this narrative. Noah commands the

dove to do his bidding, a clear echoing of God's command to him. The direct speeches within the Flood narrative, then, reinforce the proper order of things. God commands man, who obeys; man commands animals, who obey. Those who disregard this order are destroyed.

In contrast to those who roar at God with no effect, Noah often names the name of the Lord on the ark (410), and is rewarded for his proper use of language and his obedience by (as the poet puts it) the "glad message" (499) that he and his family can come out. But there is even better news. In the last direct speech of the Flood narrative (513-27), God promises that he will never again destroy the earth. This speech clearly is to be contrasted with the first direct speech of this narrative. Where God had previously announced his plan to destroy the

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earth and had repented of his creation, here he promises never to destroy it again and in effect creates man and his world again. The world which God had created with words and then destroyed, he creates anew with the words of his promise.

A close analysis of the Flood narrative, then, reveals that the poet once again deliberately alters his method of exposition and sheds the voice of the homilist to allow the narrative itself to speak to the audience. Drawn closer to the action, the audience is put into the position of one of the damned or one of the saved. The dilemma, the situation, the choice is brought home to them. Furthermore, the force of the narrative is enhanced at key moments by the power of direct speech. As has been shown, the use of direct discourse by the poet is never casual. The moments of direct speech reinforce important teachings or reflect on each other. The Flood narrative also demonstrates that for the poet, speech is symbolic of the relationship between man and God.

After order is restored at the end of the Flood narrative, the voice of the homilist is heard. Once again, he reinforces the lesson of the narrative by *telling* the audience what they've already experienced through showing, through the power of narrative and the power of direct speech: God rewards those who are clean and punishes those who are unclean including members of the audience.

The homiletic intrusion is followed by a series of interrelated narratives concerning Abraham, Lot, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The file of these narratives proceeds mainly through dialogue, much of it between Abraham and God. Once again, as in the Flood narrative, man's ability to speak with God is a sign of his cleanness, a sign of his right

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Flood narrative; man's ability to speak with God is a sign of his cleanness, a sign of his right relationship with God. But Abraham far surpasses Noah in this respect. Where Noah only obeys God's commands and assures God that his orders have been carried out, Abraham bargains with God almost as an equal. The mark of a special relationship with God which is evident in their dialogue is also clear in a curious reversal of roles within the narrative. In contrast to the parable of the wedding feast recounted at the beginning of the poem, where God is the host of the heavenly banquet, in this narrative God comes to earth to dine with Abraham. Abraham is the host; God is the guest. Abraham's cleanness is demonstrated by his courtesy as host; Sarah's uncleanness is seen in her disbelief in their reward: the gift of a son.

God's relationship with Abraham is so special that when he decides to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he declares that he *must tell* Abraham about his plans (687). But on hearing the plan, Abraham begins to argue and bargain with God. And the results of his arguing are another instance of the power of words. God says that for fifty good men and Abraham's "fair speech" (729) he will forgive the wickedness of the cities. And for Abraham's "righteous words" (756) concerning thirty men, Sodom and Gomorrah will be spared. Not solely because of their own righteousness, their cleanness, would these people be saved, but because of their merit *and* the fact that Abraham has interceded for them. Through his bargaining, Abraham acts as a mediator between man and God. Like Christ, he is trying to save men from damnation. But in the end there is only one clean man who will be spared, Lot. He is saved both because his uncle Abraham pleads for him and because of his own

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to be his guests, a situation which echoes God's own visit to Abraham.

The narrative continues, with the poet using dialogue or direct discourse to highlight important moments: Lot's courtesy to his guests, his wife's contrasting unclean disobedience and irreverence, Lot's exchanges with those who want to molest his guests, and the commands of the angels to flee and never look back. The Sodomites speak also, but such unclean words accompanied by hideous noises that, the poet notes, a stench arose, one that still lingers in the world (845-47). The evil odor of hell is a medieval commonplace; compare, for example the smell of the whale's belly in *Patience*. The evil-doers are in hell already, condemned by their own words.

The series of related narratives demonstrates once again the poet's conscious artistry. As before, the narratives allow the audience to experience the blessings of life and cleanness and the agonies of death and uncleanness. The audience also sees vividly the power of words as the poet, following hints in his biblical source, uses speech to illustrate the relationship between man and God. And the moments of direct discourse, the most immediate form of narrative, are reserved by the poet for the most important aspects of his story.

The narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah is not immediately succeeded by a homily as usual. Instead the narrator supplies a transition passage describing in detail the Dead Sea and the ruined land that surrounds it all that remains of the once thriving cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as they look in his present. The effect of the passage is to underscore the devastation caused by God's wrath and again to link the fourteenth-century audience with the Biblical story. An extended homily then follows in which the homilist extols the cleanness of

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Christ and his mother and exhorts the audience to penance, reminding them of God's anger against those who, once clean, continue to sin.

The last example used to define cleanness in the poem is a series of narratives concerning Nebuchadnezzar, his son Belshazzar, and a disastrous feast. At the opening of the section on Nebuchadnezzar the narrator notes his indebtedness to the "dialogues and prophecies" of Daniel for his story, just as he refers to Matthew concerning the Beatitudes and the parable of the wedding feast at the beginning of the poem. In doing so, the poet may

be alluding to one power of the written word in comparison with the spoken: its durability. As the story is told, speech is used once again to contrast the clean with the unclean. Nebuchadnezzar praises God (1313) whom he learned about through the words of Daniel (1325-27). Belshazzar, however, calls on idols for help (1345), idols that are later described significantly as being dumb, unable to speak because their tongues are stuck (1523-24) a clear contrast to God. But the poet saves direct discourse for Belshazzar's fateful acts, the commands to his servants to fetch the temple vessels (1433-36) and to fill them with wine (1508). As a consequence of these speeches and actions, writing appears on a wall. Belshazzar is so frightened that he temporarily loses his power of speech and can only bellow like an ox (1543). Later, when his advisors cannot explain the significance of the words to him, he curses and calls them names. In contrast to these unclean and sometimes incoherent utterances, Belshazzar's queen offers words of wisdom, also using direct discourse: call Daniel, a man full of the spirit of God, a man who can unravel mysteries (1598).

Daniel arrives and proves that he is full of the spirit of God, not by immediately deciphering the writing as Belshazzar has asked

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but by telling a story. He tells of Belshazzar's father who, like Lucifer in the Fall narrative, calls himself the equal of God: "I am God on earth as God is in heaven" (1663-65). For his blasphemy, Nebuchadnezzar is turned into a grazing beast, a bull or an ox. It is a significant link with his son, but Belshazzar ignores the parallel. After seven years of suffering, Nebuchadnezzar repents, acknowledges the sovereignty of God, and is restored to his throne.

The narrative that Daniel tells plays an important role in the whole poem. Speaking of the oracle in *Oedipus Rex*, the French critic Gérard Genette notes that "This is not prophecy that comes true; it is a trap in the form of a narrative, a trap that 'takes'. Yes, the power (and cunning) of narrative. Some give life (Scheherazade), some take life "(243). Daniel's story is a narrative of this type; it is a trap. Belshazzar's response to the story will determine whether he lives or dies. If he can learn from his father's mistakes and repent as his father did, he can be saved as his father was. If he cannot learn from the narrative, he will be condemned. Belshazzar does not respond to the tale, so Daniel continues, explains the meaning of the words, and pronounces Belshazzar's doom. But Belshazzar doesn't even understand this message; he rewards Daniel and continues living as if nothing had happened until the night, when the fate prophesied by Daniel comes to pass. Belshazzar fails to heed either the spoken words of Daniel or the written words on the wall; he is unaware of their power of life and death. For his failure he is condemned.

The special use to which Daniel puts his narrative, Belshazzar's last chance to learn, repent, and live, provides a revealing way to look at all the narratives in *Cleanness*. The

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narratives by their very nature, by their mimesis, and through their direct discourse promote identification with their characters by the audience. The relevance of the narratives to the audience should be apparent. The readers and hearers of the poem experience with the characters the rewards of cleanness and the punishment of uncleanness. The narratives provide them, as Daniel's provides Belshazzar, with an opportunity to see themselves in the stories and repent. If the members of the audience have not made the connection between themselves and the characters in the narratives earlier in the poem, despite both the showing of the narratives and the telling of the homilist, they are given one last opportunity to do so with Daniel's narrative when they plainly see in Belshazzar's bloody fate the results of being an inattentive audience.

Besides being the key to interpreting the other narratives, Daniel's narrative is notable for other reasons. It is the longest speech in the entire poem, comprising 100 lines. Up to this point, God has been the principal speaker. Now God himself is absent; instead, he speaks through Daniel and his story. Moreover, by this act of story-telling Daniel is linked to both the homilist and the author of the poem, one telling, the other writing a series of narratives. Daniel the weaver of words is God-inspired; so also is the author of *Cleanness*. Through his art, through the power of his words, he claims kinship with the prophets of old and with the gospel-writers. Like Matthew, like Daniel, the *Cleanness*-poet speaks by the power of God.

Through *Cleanness*, then, the power of words and the power of narratives are amply illustrated. And the poet demonstrates his awareness of their power by his careful and deliberate use of both. Words destroy in the

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poem the writing on Belshazzar's wall and words create God's promise after the Flood. Words condemn Lucifer's blasphemy and words save Abraham's plea for Lot. In the poem, spoken words illustrate the state of a person's relationship with God; the ability to address God and be addressed by him indicates cleanness. The poet also reveals his awareness of the power of speech by reserving direct discourse for key moments in the poem. Similarly, he displays his sensitivity to the power of narrative by shifting voices in the course of the poem from homiletic to narrative. The homilist tells the audience, but the story-teller shows. And the stories told carry within them the seeds of the audience's damnation or salvation. No wonder, then, that the *Cleanness*-poet celebrates his own artistry, demonstrates his power of the written word, and proclaims himself a voice from God.

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