

THE MIDDLE ENGLISH POEM CLEANNESSE  
IN RELATION TO THE OTHER THREE POEMS  
OF THE COTTON NERO MANUSCRIPT

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by

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AN ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript and finds arguments which favour the theory that Patience, Pearl and Sir Gawain are by the same poet, but cast doubt on the theory that Cleanness, too, is by the same man, or suggest that if it is by the same man, it is the work of a different part of his life.

The structural patterns of Patience, Pearl and Sir Gawain are found to be strikingly similar, while that of Cleanness differs markedly. Similar features are: the insertion of other material between the opening and the closing of episodes; a basic structure of an advance to the climax and a return through the stages by which it previously advanced; and skillful use of repetition. Cleanness interrupts episodes but less skillfully, has a different structural basis, and uses repetition in a rather random fashion.

Metrical tests are applied to the poems and a function is sought for the excessive alliteration, line lengthening and extension of the alliterating letter beyond one line, features common to all four poems. Patience, Pearl and Sir Gawain give evidence of deliberate artistic purpose for all these features. Cleanness seems less

purposeful in employing them, although they occur in it.

Stanzas are so important a feature of Pearl and Sir Gawain that evidence of stanzas is sought in the other two poems. A quatrain structure is found in Cleanness and in parts of Patience.

Cleanness is like the other poems in having informing images, but unlike them it relies almost exclusively on its informing images for unity. Like Patience it has static imagery, whose various features do not interact, as do those in Pearl and Sir Gawain, to produce a reconciliation in a new image. Incidental images in all the poems are drawn from life and not from literature. Some of the images for similar things occur in more than one poem.

The other poems shift the point-of-view in individual scenes and create an ambiguous impression by a subtle use of words, but Cleanness does not. All the poems fill in events with imaginatively conceived detail. All change tenses with artistic rather than grammatical logic. All present a crowded setting, but in Cleanness and Pearl a sense of detachment is induced by the distance between reader and action.

Use of substantival adjectives and unusual alliterative words suggests that Cleanness and Patience are not by the same author as Pearl and Sir Gawain. Use of ordinary words suggests that Cleanness and Sir Gawain are not by the same poet. A study of the handling of alliterative vocabulary shows a high degree of mastery, almost equally evident in each of the four poems.

The similarities which these tests have shown among Patience, Pearl and Sir Gawain seem to strengthen the contention that they

have the same author. The marked differences between them and Cleanness tell on the side of those who think it has a different author. These differences must be accounted for before the case for common authorship can be considered proved.

## PREFATORY NOTE

Quotations from primary sources used in this thesis are taken from the following editions: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960; Pearl, ed. E. V. Gordon, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958; Patience, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, Select Early English Poems in Alliterative Verse, I; London: Oxford University Press, 1924; Cleanness, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, Select Early English Poems in Alliterative Verse, VII; London: Oxford University Press, 1921. Marks indicating emendations will be omitted.

The letter g will be used for yogh when it represents a palatal g and the letter z where yogh is used for a final s. While these substitutions are not completely satisfactory, the yogh itself is not on a standard typewriter and the letters selected to represent it seem to be as close to the sounds represented by this Middle English character as can be found in the modern alphabet. To have written in the symbol would have interfered with an easy reading of the text.

I wish to express my very deep gratitude to Dr. Margaret Stobie who has offered willing help, advice and encouragement throughout the writing of this thesis.

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

The four poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript have proved a puzzle in many ways. They are obviously a part of the so-called alliterative revival of the second half of the fourteenth century, and they seem to have been written in the North-west Midlands where that revival flourished. Yet nowhere is mention made of their author or authors.

The date of composition is not quite so vague as the identity of the poet, yet it has been the subject of some discussion. The latest possible date for the composition of the poems, as has been pointed out in the Tolkien and Gordon edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,<sup>1</sup> is that of the manuscript, c.1400. On the basis of clothing described in Sir Gawain, Bateson<sup>2</sup> is inclined to set it at not much later than 1360, but on the same evidence Tolkien and Gordon place the poem in the last quarter of the fourteenth century and add to their argument the information that castles with numerous pinnacles, such as the one in which Bercilak entertained Sir Gawain, began to appear only in the last twenty-five years of the century.<sup>3</sup> Also on the subject of date, Gordon<sup>4</sup> says that the pearl-maiden's costume locates her in the second half of the fourteenth century, with the usual reservation that the

poet may not have kept abreast of fashion. Bateson says that Pearl must be later than 1360 since the Fourteenth Eclogue of Boccaccio, one of its sources, was written at that time. Gollancz<sup>5</sup> notes that a source for Cleanness, Mandeville's Travels, was written after 1357 and before 1371, the latter being the date of the oldest known manuscript of the work. He gives 1371-72 as the approximate date of another source of Cleanness, the Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry. Both Gollancz<sup>6</sup> and Bateson discount the influence of Piers Plowman (B), on Patience and Cleanness, feeling that the influence might just as easily have moved from them and been the cause of some of the differences which can be found between the first and second versions of Piers Plowman. Consequently, they deny that the date of Piers Plowman (B), sets the earliest possible date for these poems.

Thus, we have Pearl placed in the latter half of the fourteenth century and likely later than 1360. Cleanness is set later than 1357 and possibly than 1372, and Sir Gawain, in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. For Patience, evidence indicating date of composition is most scanty, and the query raised as to its debt to Piers Plowman (B) has discounted the old opinion that it must be later than 1377. In the light of these facts, it may be as well to accept the dates which Gordon<sup>7</sup> suggests when he places all four poems between the years 1360 and 1395.

Setting a date for the writing of these poems is often influenced by the assumption that they are by the same author, a theory which was advanced, on the basis of rather sweeping general-

ities, when scholars first examined these works. On similar grounds the poem St. Erkenwald was attributed by some scholars to the same author. More recently this assumption has been questioned and as a result the designation, "works of the Gawain-poet", for these poems has been regarded as unjustified. Many tests of authorship have been applied. Some scholars have made careful linguistic tests, striving to locate precisely the possible home of the poet. Some have examined the vocabulary with scholarly intensity and have produced results which are interesting in themselves and which have proved useful sources of material for future study. The claim of common authorship has not been successfully proved or disproved.

Nor has it been proved or disproved in this study. When this examination was begun it was with the expectation that the evidence would favour common authorship. A close study of each of the poems on grounds of structure, metrical treatment, imagery, diction and other elements of style did not confirm this expectation. As the study progressed, despite the close relationship it revealed between all the works, there appeared a growing body of evidence which set Cleanness apart from the other three poems. On the other hand, the study has, I think, revealed some of the artistic merits of the poems, and shown something of their relative merits. If the results seem at times to be to the detriment of Cleanness, it is to be regretted, for there are many ways in which it has excellence. However, many poems would suffer from comparison with works of the order of Sir Gawain and Pearl.

The matter will, perhaps, never be settled on internal evidence,

and, to date, external evidence is lacking. Meanwhile, it is a pleasure to study four of the liveliest poems which have come down to us from the Midlands of fourteenth century England.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. xxi.
2. Patience, ed. H. Bateson, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1918), pp. xxiii-xxxii.
3. Tolkien and Gordon edition, Sir Gawain, p. 95, note ll. 794 ff.
4. Pearl, ed. E. V. Gordon, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 56, note 1. 228.
5. Cleanness, ed. I. Gollancz, Select Early English Poems, VII (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), p. xiii-xiv.
6. Patience, ed. I. Gollancz, Select Early English Poems, I (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 7.
7. Gordon edition, Pearl, p. xliv.

## II

### CHARACTERISTICS OF STRUCTURE

Some light on the relationship of Cleanness to the other poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript may be shed by an examination of the methods by which the thought and action of each of them have been developed. It is not to be expected that the poems, even if they have a single author, will be identical in design. That is not even to be desired. Yet certain structural habits may be characteristic of a poet and may direct his arrangement of the parts within the whole.

Three very distinctive characteristics will be considered here. In Sir Gawain we find that an action is frequently broken off half-way, and a completely different episode is inserted between the beginning and the completion of that original action. Secondly, also in Sir Gawain, there is a very deliberate, almost architectural balance in the structure. A third characteristic, which is most noticeable in Patience, is that of repeating an action, stating it twice or oftener, with a result that that action is seen in greater depth and in new proportions. Each of these characteristics will be considered in turn. Examining first the work in which each characteristic is most obvious, we shall see whether it is to be found in the other two poems forming the group to be studied in

relation to Cleanness, and then whether or not it can be seen as a structural feature of Cleanness itself.

## i

Recently Sylvan Barnet<sup>1</sup> has called attention to the fact that the structural pattern of Sir Gawain is not dual, but triple. The notion of a dual structure arises quite naturally from the fact that the poem combines the beheading story with the love test. Barnet, however, finds that these two actions are united to form a triple structure: challenge, temptation, and conclusion of the challenge. He goes on to show that the habit of inserting a separate incident between the beginning and end of an episode can be found in the working out of details of the poem, as well as in the overall structure. Thus, the poet separates the end of each hunt from its outset, breaking off to return to the castle and show what is taking place there. In this way, the section of the temptation develops three sub-sections which all have a design similar to that of the entire action.

Since Sir Gawain combines two distinct actions, the beheading and the love tests, and since the love tests are combined with the hunting expeditions, the Gawain-poet<sup>2</sup> has greater opportunity for this interrupted form of narrative than has the Pearl-poet, for example, since Pearl relates a single event. Yet, though the action in Pearl is single, the poem does combine two themes of which the

approximate significance may be given under the phrases, the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, and, the manner by which that kingdom is attained. An examination shows that these two elements in Pearl interrupt one another in much the same way in which the actions and events are interrupted in Sir Gawain. The main difference is that the interrupting elements in Sir Gawain are actions, while those in Pearl are themes.

Most obvious, though least significant, is the insertion of the dream between two waking portions of the dreamer's life. It is least significant because, although it is possible to relate a dream by starting with the dream in progress, or by starting from the point at which the dreamer has just awakened, neither of these points of departure would have been as useful to the poet as the one he has used, since his purpose was to show the effect of the dream on the dreamer's attitude to life and to his loss. The order represents, therefore, less a technique of breaking and inserting than of recounting an event in the order in which it took place.

During the dream, however, when the dreamer's principal interest is to learn, "What lyf ge lede erly and late" (l.392), he is continually separated from full knowledge of the pearl-maiden's state by his own amazed questions as to how she could deserve such bliss after so little effort. The first of these intruding segments is very brief and comes after the pearl-maiden says that she has married "my Lorde þe Lombe" (l.413) and is a queen (l.415). The dreamer's protest on behalf of the Virgin Mary and the maiden's brief hymn of praise (ll.421-436) are interposed before the pearl-maiden continues her

description of the Kingdom of God as a region where all are kings and queens, all members one of another, and all without jealousy (ll.445-468). The dreamer's interest is once again deflected as he questions the maiden's right to her position, and the long passage of the parable of the vineyard and its explanation (ll.469-768) intervenes before the original question is answered. The topic of the life led in heaven is taken up again only when the maiden protests that she is maskelles but by no means makeles and goes on to sketch the scene in the Holy City (ll.781-793 and ll.845-900) which will be completed in the beatific vision with which the dream ends (ll.985-1152).

The interspersed segments develop the poem's second great interest,

"Lorde, quo schal klymbe þy hyg hylle,  
Oper rest wythinne þy holy place?"

(Pearl, ll.678-79)

Most important for this theme is the central section (ll.481-780), wedged between the courtesy rank of the inhabitants of the Holy City and an explanation that all of them hold that rank.

One of these interrupting passages deserves special attention. The dreamer, only partly convinced of the justice of the ease with which the pearl-maiden has achieved her position, asks,

Quat kyn þyng may be þat Lambe  
Dat þe wolde wedde vnto hys vyf?

(Pearl, ll.771-72)

However, the Pearl-poet has an instinct for indirection which leads him to give the dreamer words which deflect the answer and make it necessary for the pearl-maiden to correct his idea that she holds her position singly. As a result, the answer to this question does not

begin until twenty-two lines after it is asked, when the maiden returns to it, saying,

If þou wyl knaw what kyn he be,  
 My Lombe, my Lorde, my dere juelle,  
 . . . . .  
 Be profete Ysaye of hym con melle (Pearl, l.794-97)

There follows an account of the crucifixion which explains that the Lamb the dreamer asks about is the same one who suffered that crucifixion.

Another mortal misunderstanding which the dreamer is under, and its resolution by the pearl-maiden fall between her account of the Apocalyptic vision of the heavenly host, and the dreamer's own sight of it. The dreamer is confused by the pearl-maiden's use of the name Jerusalem for her dwelling since he knows Jerusalem to be in Judea (ll.919-22). Hence the distinction between the two Jerusalems separates the two adaptations of passages from Revelations.

While evidence of this technique of interrupting the train of thought or action is thus abundant in Pearl, it may be argued that the movement of the discussion between the pearl-maiden and the dreamer provides logical grounds for the shift back and forth. Such a foundation is in marked contrast to the movement of Sir Gawain where the hunt is coolly broken off with

Dus laykez þis lorde by lynde-wodez euez,  
 And Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed lygez,  
 here, the two themes are related to one another (Sir Gawain ll.1178-79)

However, though more logically motivated in Pearl, the interruptions can be quite as abrupt. An example of this abruptness occurs when the discussion of the numbers in the virgin thronng is brought in between

dreamer's eyes turn again to the Lamb's "meyny schene" (1.1145) in which he finds his own little queen.

As in Sir Gawain and in Pearl, there are two themes combined in the poem which has been given the name Patience. Here, however, the themes, poverty and patience, are not developed alternately for, as the poet says, "Pouerte & Pacyence arn nedes play-feres" (1.45). Yet the characteristic of inserting material, which is related but not necessarily successive, between beginning and end of action or train of thought can be found here as in the other poems. Thus the poet places the beatitudes and the ladies who personify them between the theme,

Den is better to abyde þe bur vmbe-stoundes,  
Den ay þrow forth my þro, þag me þynk ylle.

(Patience, 11.7-8)

and its development in the necessity of accepting poverty with patience (11.35-56).

Even such a straightforward story as the account of Jonah and the whale yields examples of this stylistic habit of inserting material between two closely related sections. The whale

.....swengez & swayuez to þe se-bopem,  
Bi mony rokkez ful roge & rydelande strondes,

(Patience, 11.253-54)

Then follows the entire section concerning Jonah's situation inside the whale and his coming to know God "in care þat coupe not in sele" (1.296). This finished, the poet moves, as it were, outside the whale again with

Ande euer walteres þis whal bi wyldren depe,  
Þurg mony a regioun ful roge, þurg ronk of his wylle,

(Patience, 11.297-98)

The whale's situation - and his queasy stomach - falls in its turn

between the two prayers of Jonah (ll.282-88 and ll.305-36). Another insertion, the tale of the woodbine (ll.433-88), occurs between God's patient

'Herk, renk, is þis rygt so ronkly to wrath,  
For any dede þat I haf don oper demed þe get?'

(Patience, ll.431-32)

and his longer but no less patient explanation of the truth about possessions and the need for patience, both human and divine (ll.490-527).

This practice of inserting digressions between one portion of an action and its completion which we have seen in three of the poems of this manuscript is only too apparent in Cleanness. In this work the poet suggests that even an earthly lord would be angry if a man came to his home for dinner and had not first made himself presentable (ll.35-48). He then states that the hyge kyng would have much greater cause for annoyance with those who "hyge . . . to heuen in haterez to-torne" (l.33). He prefaces his illustration of this admonition, however, by the tale of the guests who were bidden to the feast but refused to come, and their replacement by strangers from the highways and by-ways (ll.51-124). A second interruption occurs when the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is to be used to illustrate the modification which God has made in his punishment of uncleanness, from the extreme position He took in the Flood. Instead of moving the action directly to the ill-fated cities, the poet turns aside to tell how Abraham entertained God as his guest, and then how he bargained with Him for the safety of the city. These interruptions seem all the more

unsatisfactory because, although Abraham gains God's consent to his offer, he makes no move to find his ten just men (ll.601-780). A third great detour occurs after the poet has introduced the subject of the holy vessels. That which has once been made holy unto the Lord, he states, must never be defiled by careless or improper use. Then, before he relates the fate of Belshazzar who defiled the holy vessels, he gives a detailed account of the fall of Jerusalem under the assault of Nebuchadnezzar.

It would, of course, be easy to dismiss these intrusions as simply bad workmanship, to assume that the poet, finding the material arranged in this order in his biblical authority, was unable to select from his source such matter as was related to his very different purpose. Yet, if we examine the intrusive material, we will find that it is all related to a secondary theme of the poem, that of untrustworthiness or failure of loyalty. The invited guests ranked their own affairs as of equal importance with those of their lord. Abraham's zeal as host to God, and even the meekness of his manner in quarrelling with God, are examples of fidelity. Jerusalem is destroyed, not for uncleanness, but for following false gods. Even the minor interruptions are justified by their relationship to this theme: Sarah's laughter when she hears the prediction that she is to bear a child, and the disobedience of Lot's wife to her husband in the matter of the salt in the cakes. The latter is especially significant, for, unlike the other material, it does not occur in the scriptural account but has been added by the poet from a different source.<sup>3</sup> On another occasion, in the presentation of the distress of the victims of the Deluge, the poet deliberately