

Textual Voices: Self-Representation and Religious Instruction in the Works of the *Pearl*-Poet

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I. Introduction

The circumstances of the *Pearl*-poet, his audience and his works are largely unknown to us. Because of this, his texts are usually the subjects of stylistic studies that treat them as literary texts without considering the potential rhetorical strategies of the poet towards his audience. However, this rhetorical dimension is important for our understanding of the texts as interpretations of Christian doctrine. In a well-known study, John M. Bowers attempted to analyse *Pearl* as a socially conscious response to the poet's ideological and theological environment. However, Bowers's study lacks a systematic study of the text's self-representation and rhetorical strategies, which are essential to understanding how the poet attempted to influence his audience. Here, I intend to demonstrate that the poet was careful in maintaining a sense of both authority and humility while

attempting to guide his audience toward his own understanding of Christianity.

All of the *Pearl*-poet's works—*Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter *SGGK*)—survive in a single manuscript, Cotton Nero A.x. article 3. The codex is 118mm wide and 167mm high; the pages are vellum and the flourishing script is neatly written upon leader-lines. There are also some simple illuminations within the book, which might suggest that it was not only performed orally. All of the poems were written in the same dialect of Middle English which was probably spoken in the northwest Midlands.¹ All are alliterative, and *Cleanness*, *Patience* and the most of *SGGK* do not rhyme, while *Pearl* and the bobs and wheels of *SGGK* do.

It is virtually undisputed that at least the first four poems of the manuscript were written by the same author. Already in 1936, Israel Gollancz suggested that “[l]anguage, diction, thought, rhythm, power of description, moral teaching, vividness of fancy, artistic consciousness, and love of nature, all link [*SGGK*] to ‘*Pearl*,’ ‘*Cleanness*,’ and ‘*Patience*’; and for a right understanding of the poet and his work the four poems must be treated together” (Gollancz xxxvi). Since Gollancz, many editors and translators of the text, including E.V. Gordon, John Gardner, R.A. Waldon, and Casey Finch, have affirmed that all four poems were written by the same person.² In 1977, Derek Pearsall commented that “it has become habitual to attribute them [the first four poems of Cotton Nero A.x.3] to the same poet” (*Old English* 170). In 1986, J.A.W. Bennett reflected on scholarly consensus by saying that these four poems “are all in the North West Midland dialect and share some phrases and images; it is often assumed

¹ Osgood xi-xii; Gardner 4; Waldon 24; Bennett 202.

² There is much less agreement regarding the fifth poem of the manuscript, *St. Erkenwald*. Derek Pearsall states a popular opinion that any grounds for an association between this and the other four poems of the manuscript are “flimsy” (*Old English* 176 n41). For this reason, I have excluded it from the present study.

that they are by the same poet, but this cannot be conclusively proved" (202).

In all probability, the manuscript was written, like many works of the era, for both oral performance and a readership. Recently, Mark Amodio has suggested that, although the English tradition is performative, Middle English texts as we have them are non-performative because they are written. The *Pearl*-poet's works, although reflecting an oral tradition, must be recognised as written texts. Yet we cannot ignore their orality either. Amodio argues that we need a theoretical framework in which "the oral and the literate intersect with and deeply inform each other" (212). Such a framework has not yet been formulated, but we can at least consider the method of the poems' transmission in relationship to the *Pearl*-poet's rhetorical constructions. Students of these poems have largely concentrated on their textuality. There are many reasons for this; structural repetition and numerical patterning in *SGGK* imply that the author took advantage of the greater complexity of literate communication.³

If the *Pearl*-poet were to have performed the poems orally, this would have given him an opportunity to use the first-person pronoun of the narrative voice to alter his audience's perceptions of himself. Audiences always hold authors accountable for their works (Lanser 8, 132, 149, 150), and the conflation between the voices of narrator and author is most natural in circumstances where the poet is performing his own work (Foster 23-28). But we simply cannot know to what extent the author took advantage of these types of narrator-to-author conflations.

We are further limited by our ignorance of who the author was. The literary persona of the poems, being embodied in the text, is available to us, but the *Pearl*-poet's real-life identity is unknown. Attempts to identify the author of these poems have consistently failed.⁴ Embedded clues hint

³ See Howardt 430-33; Burrow 87-97; Hieatt 339-41; Condren.

⁴ See Casey Finch's statements in Andrew 1-3.

at the intended audience of the text, but these are fairly unenlightening. For example, the poet uses the image of grey eyes to conjure up the stock images of feminine beauty that held currency in Middle English romances (Benson 57). This tells us little more than that the *Pearl*-poet and his intended audience were familiar with the romance tradition — but this does not limit his audience's social, economic or political position. Other references to contemporary culture, such as the figure of the Green Knight, could inform our knowledge of the poet's audience if we knew more about who, during the late fourteenth century, was familiar with the Green Knight figure. It has been assumed that *SGGK* was written for the house of a magnate (Benson 33), but this is not necessarily true for all of the poems of the text, let alone for *SGGK*. Even if it were true, this would not tell us what the *Pearl*-poet's relationship to that magnate was. If we are limited by our ignorance of the author, we are equally limited by our ignorance of his audience.

For this reason, I shall limit my discussion to the first-person pronoun as it relates to the narrator as a character within the mimetic world of the poems and as it relates to the communicative situation between poet and audience. This means that I will concentrate largely on how the *Pearl*-poet manipulates his narrator figure to make his texts more appealing — not on how the *Pearl*-poet might have characterised himself as a social individual vis-à-vis his narrator. It must be recognised that this type of rhetorical play might be at work in the poems, but we are too far removed from the person of the *Pearl*-poet to recognise it. This leaves us with any endophoric self-deprecation, or any figures by which the author would comment on his own negative or insufficient capabilities as he wrote and communicated the subject of his text. I hope to demonstrate that the *Pearl*-poet did not in fact undermine his narrator in this way, and that he instead employs a rhetorical strategy that encourages his audience to see his particular understanding of Christianity as a universal, and true, didactic and

theological framework.

Context of performance and context of communicants are not the sole forces behind an author's construction of a rhetorical strategy within a text; the purpose and theme of a text are also central issues to the rhetorical form of any act of communication. These poems are unified by certain central themes, but their diversity in expression makes any definitive statement of their thematic ends an oversimplification. The expressed purpose of the middle two poems—*Cleanness* and *Patience*—is to instruct (cf. *Cleanness* 1-38; *Patience* 1-40). Implicitly, this also seems to be the purpose of *Pearl*, which is largely devoted to explaining how infants can reach Heaven, and the same applies to a large part of *SGGK* as well. Of course these are much more than didactic works, but one of their functions in the real world is certainly to instruct, often in powerful language, especially in *Cleanness* and *Patience*. For example, in *Cleanness* the audience is told that

Vnclannes tocleues in corage dere
 Of at wynnelych Lorde at wonyes in heuen,
 Entyses Hym to be tene, teldes vp His wrake;
 Ande clannes is His comfort, and coyntyse He louyes,
 And ose at seme arn and swete schyn se His face.

Uncleanness cleaves the centre of the heart
 Of that great Lord that lives in Heaven,
 Entices Him to be angry and wrathful,
 And cleanness is His comfort, and contrition He loves,
 And those that are seemly and sweet shall see his face. (1806-10)⁵

In *Patience*, the title virtue is similarly explicated in colourful terms because it “is a nobel poynt, tha3 hit displese ofte”, “is a noble disposition, though it often displeases” (530-531).

⁵ I am using the Andrew edition; all translations of the *Pearl*-poet's works are mine, although they do not deviate significantly from Finch's.

The virtue of cleanness is in many ways central to two other poems by the same author, *Pearl* and *SGGK*; in the first of these, the narrator begins his poem by lamenting his lost “pryuy perle withouten spot”, “precious pearl without a blemish” (*Pearl* 11). The jewel metaphor is continued throughout the first section of the poem, during which we are given hints of the fact, revealed later, that this pearl is the narrator's deceased two-year old daughter who has since become a queen of Heaven. The narrator's lamentation quickly becomes a dream-vision, in which he sees his daughter on the opposite bank of a river. What follows is an edifying explication of the parable of the vintner, which explains how it is possible for a two-year old who “neuer God nauer plese ne pray, / Ne neuer nower Pater ne Crede”, “never God pleased nor prayed to, / Nor learned the Pater nor the Crede” (*Pearl* 485-86) to become crowned a queen of Heaven within a day.

SGGK, like *Pearl*, is initially presented as one thing but quickly becomes something else. The poet immediately identifies the poem as a romance, yet in describing Gawain's adventure he also has a didactic purpose: namely, the work is an examination of earthly virtue. As Burrow argues, “Gawain's fidelity to his word, pledged to the Green Knight and later (in the Exchange of Winnings) to the Host, is variously endangered, in the dense fictional world of the poem, by such factors as his courteous weakness for women and especially his desire not to die. Out of all this the poet builds a hierarchy of moral issues...with 'trawthe' at the top” (Burrow 86-87). Although a complicated, multi-generic construction, the poem is still didactic, and the resolution of the conflicts between Gawain's idealism, his reputation, and his real nature uncovers the relationship between the story and its moral theme (Burrow 87; Liuzza 45, 51).

The lessons of these tales spoke to an audience entrenched in fourteenth-century English Christianity. Yet these ideals cannot be reduced to the author's socio-historical position—they are the poet's individual interpretation of the theological and ideological atmosphere around him.

Such a communicative situation naturally implies the utility of a particular code of rhetorics in order to gain the audience's goodwill and allow the process of co-adaptation to begin. Many strategies are suggested by medieval rhetorical doctrine, one of which is self-deprecation. As I say, I hope to demonstrate that the rhetorical strategies of the four poems do not centre on endophoric self-deprecation. In fact, the *Pearl*-poet consistently uses self-effacing rhetoric within the poems; he masks his unique agency in the texts and emphasises the presence of literate sources—in the case of *Cleanness* and *Patience*, this authority is the Bible. Partly, this move gives his work greater authority by ascribing its sense to *auctoritates*. It also allows a seemingly greater interpretative authority to his audience. By effacing his own instrumentality in the production of the works and by highlighting the instrumentality of his sources and audience, the poet suggests that there is a dialogue going on between the two, and that the poet's function in this communicative situation is minimal. This rhetorical positioning of the three parties is an attempt to make his audience more receptive to his doctrine without any alienating arrogance or over-confidence on his own part. Such a self-effacing rhetorical strategy is diametrically opposed to self-deprecation, which by its very nature is self-highlighting, even though both are different means of capturing an audience's goodwill.

II. *Pearl*: A Unified Audience and Poet

The first inexpressibility topos of *Pearl* can be found at ll.99-100, when the narrator describes the beauty of the woods in which he wanders: “þe derþe þerof for to deuyse / Nis no wy3 worþe þat tonge berez”; “the beauty therein can be devised / Not by any man that holds a tongue” (99-100). This is a conventional figure that is explicitly impersonal in its construction. It downplays the presence of the narrator, as it is not merely

he who is incapable of describing the beauty of the words; the same would apply to anyone. In his construction of an impersonal inexpressibility topos, the poet is deviating from the voice of the rest of the stanza, which is active and centers upon the actions of the narrator; the dreamer's motions throughout the dreamworld center upon the doings of the narrator ("me ferez . . . I welke . . . me derez . . . I wan to a water"), rather than on the dream itself having an effect upon the narrator. Yet when he proclaims how difficult it is to describe the forest, he switches to an impersonal construction.

Fifty-seven lines later, after describing the dream world's "crystal klyffez so cler of kynde", crystal cliffs so clear and natural, the fresh flourez of frytez, fresh flowers of fruits and the bonkez bene of beryl bright, banks that were of bright beryl (74; 87; 110), the narrator proclaims that More meruayle con my dom adaunt, more marvels did my mind daunt (157). Significantly, the poet states that it was his *dom* that was daunted. This word comes from the OE *dom* (which remains in Swedish as *dom*, meaning "judgment", and gives us the word "domesday"), and has a variety of meanings; the *Middle English Dictionary* defines it as, among other things, the "(a) ability to make judgments or decisions; the application of this ability, discrimination; (b) ability to control (dreams); (c) imagination; (d) ability to perceive; perception (of a stimulus)" (MED entry *dom*, 5b).

The question here is how personal judgement was for the poet. Perceptual and intellectual capability is partly personal—in that some individuals have greater capabilities than others—and, in a Christian context, partly universal; in 1 Corinthians 2:11, Paul asks, "quis enim scit hominum quae sint hominis nisi spiritus hominis qui in ipso est ita et quae Dei sunt nemo cognovit nisi Spiritus Dei", "what does man know of the things of man, but the spirit of a man that is in him? So are the things of God, which no man knows, but the Spirit of God." This becomes a question of an inevitable ignorance of things that cannot be known by any man;

human beings, when it comes to their knowledge of the divine, are limited. Augustine, in *De Vera Religione*, proclaims that eternal law is not the subject of the judgment of man (XXXI). Aquinas qualifies this with the argument that, although humanity cannot know the eternal law except by seeing God in his essence, we can know it in its reflection (part 2, q93, art2). Aquinas continues:

Ad primum ergo dicendum quod ea quae sunt Dei, in seipsis quidem cognosci a nobis non possunt, sed tamen in effectibus suis manifestantur.

Ad secundum dicendum quod legem aeternam etsi unusquisque cognoscat pro sua capacitate secundum modum praedictum, nullus tamen eam comprehendere potest: non enim totaliter manifeste potest per suos effectus. Et ideo non oportet quod quicumque cognoscit legem aeternam secundum modum praedictum, cognoscat totum ordinem rerum quo omnia sunt ordinatissima.

We cannot know of the things of God as they are in themselves. Nevertheless they are shown forth in their effects.

Though everyone according to his capacity knows about the Eternal Law in the manner indicated, nevertheless none comprehends it, for it is not completely manifested through its effects. The consequence does not follow that he who thus knows about it also grasps the whole scheme of things according to which all things are most excellently ordered. (Aquinas part 2, q93, art2).⁶

According to this theology, no human can have a full cognizance of God, but each individual can have at least some varying degree of awareness.

So is the *Pearl*-poet, in his reference to his narrator's "dom", referring to the limited capacity of his own judgment, or to the limited judgment of humanity as a whole? The latter seems more likely, since Aquinian and

⁶ The English translation is from Gilby's edition.

Augustinian texts were among the most widely read religious texts of the *Pearl*-poet's culture. In actual fact, the daughter later instructs the befuddled dreamer of the ways of Heaven—in other words, in that Eternal Law which, according to Aquinas and Augustine, is unknowable to all mortal men. The seemingly self-deprecatory reference to the narrator's *dom* actually highlights the narrator's inevitable human ignorance of the ways of Heaven. And, in *Pearl*, the forest is unequivocally above the Earthly plane:

More of wele watz in þat wyse
 þen I cowe telle þa3 I tom hade,
 For vrbely herte my3t not suffyse
 To þe tenþe dole of þo gladnez glade.

More of joy was in that place
 Than I could tell even if I had the time,
 For Earthly heart cannot contain
 Even a tenth of that joyous bliss. (133-36)

This passage, too, contains an inexpressibility topos. The author professes his inability to communicate the joy of the forest. He cannot really be faulted for it, though, because his excuses are more than understandable. Firstly, he does not have enough time. Secondly, and obviously more significantly, an Earthly existence hinders the comprehension of such bliss tenfold. Even though he uses the first-person pronoun, this inexpressibility topos is less immediately personal, because the audience could have assumed that he would describe such bliss if given more time and if he were not alive on Earth—a characteristic that is hardly unique to the speaker! This is the *dom* we find daunted two stanzas later—except that here we are explicitly told that the faculties for judgment which are befuddled are not unique to the narrator and author.

Another inexpressibility topos, employed in the narrator's description of

the Pearl, again underlines that the narrator is not the only one whose *dom* would be befuddled by the dream's wonders:

I hope no tong mo3t endure
 No sauerly saghe say of þat sy3t,
 So watz hit clene and cler and pure,
 þat precios perle þer hit watz py3t.

I believe no tongue might endure
 Nor secure words to speak of that sight,
 So was it clean and clear and pure,
 That precious pearl that was there put! (225-28)

It is due to the Pearl's nature, not to the speaker's, that the sight cannot be expressed in language; the use of the first-person pronoun in this address highlights the poet's presence as the reporter of events, but his presence is limited to just that. It is he who tells the audience what the Pearl seemed to be, and it is then up to her to describe exactly what she truly is. At no point in the poem does the narrator describe or explain the allegorical significance of anything except the final moral, and his function until that point seems to be to report and not to interpret, leaving a hermeneutic gap which can be filled by the audience. The poet is merely another human, and as wretched as any other.

The narrator says as much to the girl in the dream-sequence:

I am bot mokke and mul among,
 And þou so ryche a reken rose,
 And bydez here by þys blysfyl bonc
 And þa3 I be bustwys as a bose,
 Let my bone vayl neuerþelese.

I am merely among filth and dust,
 And you so rich a noble rose,

Who lives here by this beautiful bank
 And though I be as crude as a fool,
 Let my request be fulfilled [and let me be enlightened] nonetheless.
 (905-12)

This type of deprecating language is wholly Platonic and Augustinian in nature; it is universal, human, and unifying. There is no individual behind these words, but rather an earthly Christian addressing a holy spirit. The speaker's low status, so strongly emphasised, is due to his earthliness, as the phrase "mokke and mul" makes clear. The narrator is not alone in this condition, since the poet and his audience are also among the *mokke* and *mul*, and this passage reminds them of it. This is humility, which places the poet (and, by extension, his audience) in a position of servitude before God. Although there is little theoretical groundwork to make the distinction between self-deprecation and humility more than hazy, it is surely safe to say at this juncture that humility serves to position a human (or all of humanity, as we see in *Pearl*) beneath God, whereas self-deprecation serves to position a particular human beneath other humans. The drive to be self-deprecatory is summarised most succinctly by Ernst Robert Curtius: "In his exordium it behoved the orator to put his hearers in a favorable, attentive, and tractable state of mind. How do this? First, through a modest presence" (83). The motive toward humility is quite different; it was the way humans avoided pride, the greatest of the seven deadly sins. In *Pearl*, the narrator's inability to comprehend is due to his humanity—and the poet's expression of that humanity is his humility.

By the use of impersonal inexpressibility topoi, the poet positions himself as one of the members of his audience—they are all united and limited by their being in the *mokke* and *mul*. The poet is no different from them. His narrator's transformation into the inquisitive dreamer of the vision is only one way in which the poet identifies himself as a student,

and not a teacher, of Christianity. By using self-effacing inexpressibility topoi and emphasising the inevitable ignorance of humanity, the poet emphasises how, like his audience, he is merely one of those who need to learn the virtues of Christian ideology.

This strategy reaches its climax at the completion of *Pearl*, when the narrator says in a direct address to his audience:

He [Christ] gef vus to be His homly hyne
 Ande precious perlez vnto His pay.

He [Christ] let us be his humble servants
 And precious pearls to please Him. (1211-12)

The use of the plural first person pronoun is inclusive, and serves to put the audience and poet on equal footing. All are equal in their status as Earthly servants of God, and it is in this position that the poet speaks to his audience. His judgment was daunted because he happened to be the person who had the vision; but the same would have held for anyone else. This is a unifying, humanizing rhetoric based on Augustinian ideals of humanity. In this poem, self-deprecation, as I have previously defined it, is nowhere to be found.

III. *Cleanness* and *Patience*: Christian Rhetoric, the Preacher and Biblical Authority

Cleanness and *Patience* are similar in construction and theme — so similar that some cryptoanalysts have assumed that both poems can be unified as depictions of the Old World of Jerusalem which are framed by the New World of *Pearl* and *SGGK*.⁷ Both poems narrate Biblical stories of the Old Testament; in *Cleanness*, the story of Adam and Eve is followed

by the stories of Noah, of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah, and of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar; in *Patience*, the story of Jonah exemplifies the need for patience, which is, “a nobel poynt” (531). Both poems are explicitly didactic and homiletic in purpose. In *Cleanness*, the communicative situation is not expressed outright until the end of the poem:

I haf yow þro schewed
þat vnclannes tocleues in corage dere

I have thoroughly shown you
That uncleanness cuts to the core of the dear heart (1805-1806)

This passage, being a condemnation of uncleanness, is a counterpart to the opening lines of the poem, which are an exaltation of the virtue of *Cleanness*:

Clannesse whoso kyndly cowþe comende,
And rekken vp alle þe resounz þat ho by ri3t askez,
Fayre formez my3t he fynde in forþering his speche,
And in þe contrar kark and combraunce huge.

Cleanness: whoever would clearly commend
And explicate all the reasons it justly demands for
Will find fair forms in making his speech
While praising the impure is cumbersome indeed. (1-4)

As with the other three of the *Pearl*-poet's works, both the beginning and end lack any exophoric reference to author or audience; from a communicative and narratological standpoint, it is interesting that the poem begins without any deixis, or identification of author and audience. This

⁷ See Kooper 158n1-2 for a brief bibliography on the cryptanalytical tradition in relationship to Cotton Nero A.x.

may have been partly because the poet felt such framing devices unnecessary—that, to come to the poem as poet and audience, no positioning was necessary. Perhaps the relationship between author and intended audience was so intimate that real-world positions would suffice. Or perhaps he thought that the poem would be understood by any Christian, because he was confident in his theological position.

The introduction of *Cleanness* begins with the opposite of an inexpressibility topos—something that could be called an “expressibility topos.” The claim that cleanness is such a great virtue that it will give anyone rhetorical power is reminiscent of Mark 13:10-11: “And unto all nations the gospel must first be preached. / And when they shall lead you and deliver you up, be not thoughtful beforehand what you shall speak; but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye. For it is not you that speak, but the Holy Ghost.” This was the *ethos* of hagiographies of St. Catherine of Alexander, who was granted rhetorical might by God against the pagan tyrant Maxentius.⁸ The notion of Christianity empowering a believer with rhetorical finesse had a place in medieval theology, tending to suggest that recognised intellectual faculties were less important, if not even less necessary, to an individual than a power of faith. In this way individuality could seem of marginal value.

Unlike *Cleanness*, the beginning of *Patience* begins with self-highlighting rhetoric; the narrator uses the first person pronoun in the seventh and eighth lines of the poem, where he describes how patience can be a virtue and how the poet came upon this information:

þen is better to abyde þe bur vmbestoundes
 þen ay þrow forth my þro, þa3 me þynk ylle.
 I herde on a halyday, at a hy3e masse,

⁸ See Wogan-Brown and Burgess xxiii-xxiv, 133-68. In Britain, Saint Catherine was extremely popular, and numerous manuscript copies of her *vita* survive.

How Mathew melede þat his Mayster His meyny con teche.

Thus it is better to endure sometimes bitterness
 Than for me to gripe and complain, though I find it bitter.
 I heard on a holiday at a high mass
 How Matthew mimed what his Master had taught. (9-12)

This passage includes a rare instance in which we learn something about the narrator as an individual; we gather that he has suffered tragedies, and that he learned at a high Mass how misfortune can be borne. This is not a detailed description, but it does conform with what we know of the narrator from *Pearl*. The poet does not introduce this bit of introspection so that we will get acquainted with the narrator; as with the narrator's loss in *Pearl*, the *Patience*-narrator's knowledge of the virtue under discussion has a narrative function; in both cases, this is the impetus for the didactic message that follows. The source of this lesson is ultimately beyond the narrator. If it were not for the loss of his daughter, we would not have had the message of *Pearl*. Likewise, if the narrator had not learned the virtue of patience at mass, he could not have instructed his audience in the poem *Patience*.

But for the text of *Patience* to contain a truism relevant to all of humanity, authority must first be given to the truism's source. The author is put in the foreground as the narrator identifies himself as a theological authority:

Wyl 3e tary a lyttel tyne and tent me a whyle,
 I schal wysse yow þerwyth as holy wryt telles.

If you will tarry with me for a little while and hear me out,
 I shall instruct you therewith what the Holy Writ tells. (59-60)

The verb "wysse" can mean guide, instruct or teach. By choosing this term

the author has committed a face-threatening act which is uncovered at the level of this utterance's indirect speech act. By specifically saying that he (emphasised by the repeated use of the first person pronoun) will instruct his audience, he is implying that he has knowledge they do not have access to.

As a rhetorical construction, this could seem impolite, if we did not keep in mind that the rules of politeness in the middle ages were not the same as ours now. Authors constantly affirmed their authority in texts, especially when the text was theological or instructive. Minnis has noted that, for medieval writers, "the *auctor* remained an authority, someone to be believed and imitated" (5). Increasingly after the twelfth century, attention was paid not only to the author as an authority for exegetical understandings of the Bible, but also to the author's "individual literary activity and his individual moral activity" (Minnis 5). This resulted in what Suzanne Reynolds calls a "cultural anxiety", which conditioned the glossing of manuscripts (7). Any anxiety the poet may have had in his individual retelling of these Old Testament tales is difficult to find; the uniqueness of his contribution to Biblical exegesis is never made explicitly clear, nor is it, as far as I can tell, even hinted at. Instead, he tells his audience that he is well read in matters of virtue ("in resounez of ry3t red hit myseluen"; *Cleanness* 194) and that he has learned of the virtue of patience from a Mass (*Patience* 9-10). It is not his stories that are given authority, but their morals:

Me mynez on one amonge oþer, as Maþew recorderz,
 þat þus of clannesse vnclosez a ful cler speche:
 'þe haþel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre,
 For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere';
 As so saytz, to þat sy3t seche schal he neuer
 þat any vnclannesse hatz on, auwhere abowte

I think of one of those, as Matthew records,
 That thus of cleanness reveals a fully clear speech:

They who are clean of heart are blissful,
 For they shall look on our Lord with great joy.
 So he says, that sight will never be seen by he
 Who has any uncleanness about him. (*Cleanness* 25-28)

This is, in essence, the moral of *Cleanness*, and it is repeated at the poem's end (1805-10). We are told early on in the poem that the moral is, in fact, not the poet's own, but comes from one of the most authoritative of all sources—Matthew's Gospel.

In her study, Reynolds concentrates on teachers' glosses on academic texts; she concludes that these often reaffirm the authority of a work while mediating how audiences of pupils received texts. Her conclusion, that "if there is no distinction between text and gloss, between the voice of the *actor* and the voice of the glossator/teacher, both constitute 'authority'" (16), can be applied to the didactic poems *Cleanness* and *Patience*; if there is no distinction between the narrator's moral and the moral as it exists within the Bible, both will appear authoritative because they cannot be removed from one another. Such a rhetorical function does nothing to define the individuality of the author. His presence within the text is kept to a minimum.

Within the stories of both *Cleanness* and *Patience*, narrative voice is virtually non-existent. The narrator rarely uses the first-person pronoun, and direct addresses to an audience are scant. When they do occur, they are poignant and full of purpose:

To se þat Semly in sete and His swete face,
 Clerrer counseyl con I non, bot þat þou clene worþe.

To see that Beautiful One seated and His sweet face,
 Clearer council I cannot give: be you clean. (*Cleanness* 1055-1056)

This passage, which follows a gruesome re-telling of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, uses a direct address to make clear the didactic purpose of the poem. It does not emphasise the individuality of the poet or the audience as much as it highlights the importance of the poem's theme; the pronouns do no more than identify communicants, while the impact of the directness is not as much a face-threatening act as it is a dramatic proclamation of the poem's moral, which is also emphasised by the passage's position within the poem. The audience has just been told in graphic detail how Sodom was "plunged in a pit like of pich fylled," and how

Suche a roun of a reche rose fro þe blake,
 Askez vpe in þe ayre and vsellez þer flowen,
 As a fornes ful of flot þat vpon fyr boyles
 When bry3t brennande brondez ar bet þereanvnder.
 þis watz a uengaunce violent þat voyded þise places,
 þat foundered hatz so fayr a folk and þe folde sonkken.
 þer þe fyue cites wern set nov is a see called,
 þat ay is drouy and dym, and ded in hit kynde,
 Blo, blubrande, and black, vnblyþe to ne3e;
 As a stynkande stanc that stryed synne,
 That euer of smelle and of smach smart is to fele.

A rotten stench rose from the place
 Ashes up in the air and embers there flew,
 As a pit full of pitch that boils upon a fire
 Whose bright burning flames will ascend upon it.
 This was a violent vengeance that voided these places,
 That held so fair a folk who have now perished.
 There the five cities were set in what is now a sea called,
 That is so dreary and dim and dead in its way,
 Dark, bubbling and black, unkind to approach;
 As a stinking pool that sin destroyed (?)
 That ever of smell and of taste is painful to feel. (*Cleanness* 1009-1019)

The audience is told in no subtle terms to be clean. The gruesomeness of this passage and the lines that follow it is such that, by ll. 1055-56, after over forty-five lines of horrific detail, the audience will be more interested in learning how to avoid this fate than in identifying the level of authority of the person telling them the story. This too, then, gears their attention more towards the moral than the person conveying it.

As didactic poems, both *Cleanness* and *Patience* use narration and description to communicate the lesson; to ensure that this lesson is accepted, the poet uses various schemata, such as the necessary establishment of scriptural and literate authority. This rhetorical strategy de-emphasises the individuality of the (almost entirely uncharacterised) narrator and the poet. The true source of any authority the poet may have is not predicated on his individuality. It is based on his familiarity with the Bible.

IV. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Story, Rumour and Text*

Although I am here concentrating on its didactic functions, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, as Larry Benson notes,

first of all a romance, existing within a tradition...This is the first fact we learn as we read the poem, for the Gawain-poet does not begin his narrative until he has devoted two full stanzas, an unusually long "prologue". . . to an elaborate specification of the connection between his narrative and the romance tradition. (3)

The text is not limited by its genre, and it is by no means a typical romance, but the poet obviously wanted his audience to be aware of how the traditions of romance informed and influenced the poem (Benson 3-4). Because the poet constructs his poem within this tradition, it is fruitful to

study its narrative voice as it relates to other romances. Here I shall analyse *SGGK* as a romance with a didactic aim, and I hope to demonstrate how the poet's applications of and departures from the genre's proclivity to referring to written texts serve to hide his presence and emphasise his authority as an author.

In the second stanza, the poet addresses an oral audience in an invocation:

If 3e wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile,
 I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde,
 With tonge.
 As hit is stad and stoken
 In stori stif and stronge,
 With lel letteres loken,
 In londe so hatz ben longe.

If you will listen to this story for a little while,
 I shall tell it now as I heard it told in town,
 With tongue.
 As it is placed and fixed
 The story tried and true
 With letters inlaid
 In land it has been for a long time. (30-35)

The poet, as in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, is citing a source for his text. Such a move is typical of the middle ages; authors often gave a reference to an ancient source because this gave the text authority. As Minnis puts it, in the middle ages for a text "[t]o be old was to be good; the best writers were the more ancient" (9), and for an author to attach himself to an ancient text was to attach reliability to his work.

Minnis's theory works well to explain the references to ancient sources found in numerous medieval texts, but falls short with *SGGK*, mostly

because the allusion in this poem is unique. The poet's proclaimed source is not only contemporary but also unwritten, giving the story of his text even less authority. This allusion to the stories of the townspeople cannot have been motivated by the need for authority, since it seems to imply that the story of Gawain and his encounters with the Green Knight are actually rumours—stories townspeople tell one another that cannot be verified by a text, thereby bringing the fictionality of the story to the fore at the very beginning of the poem. Also, oral storytelling is given a space in the world of written texts; instead of authorising the text, as it were, the allusion to urban, oral storytellers gives those storytellers themselves a literary presence.

This might also imply that the poem isn't trustworthy; this implication is not corrected until line 690, when the author at last cites a textual source:

He [Gawain] made non abode
 Bot wy3tly went hys way.
 Mony wylsum way he rode,
 þe bok as I herde say.

He [Gawain] made postehaste
 And heartily went his way.
 Upon many wild roads he rode,
 The book as I heard says. (687-90)

This citation collides with the oral allusion of the introduction. Did the poet hear this story told in town or did he glean this information from a book? Even in this passage alone, the oral and written worlds intersect. Line 690 (“þe bok as I herde say”) is unclear, not only because of the text's dialect, but also because of its syntax and the manuscript's lack of punctuation. Does this sentence translate to “the book says, as I heard” (i.e., I have been told by a third party that the book tells us this) or “the book, as I heard,

says" (i.e., I heard the book being read aloud, so I know that it says this)? In either case, the narrator *heard* that the book tells of Gawain's swiftness. For the poet, the worlds of written and spoken stories are not disparate; they are connected in two ways. Firstly, and as this passage implies, texts were read aloud in the middle ages; secondly, the people who told the tale of Gawain in town will now have their stories written down in the *Pearl*-poet's work.

The fluidity between the oral and the literate, which is and always has been a reality, is reaffirmed by the *Pearl*-poet in this and the earlier passage quoted above. The conversation between books and speakers that the poet mentions involves third parties. The trading of stories is a communal activity, in which books and oral stories inform and influence each other. At line 690, the point in the tale where the audience is given the poem's first literary source, Gawain and we are certain that he is setting off on a journey which will end in his death. This passage narrates Gawain's lack of hesitation, which demonstrates his courage and virtue. It seems that the poet is not as concerned with his audience trusting the tale's veracity (in fact, if the Green Knight is a pagan image in the eyes of his audience, he may hope for the contrary) as he is with our believing that Gawain is as noble as he appears.

The poem's other reference to a written text comes at the end. The narrator concludes his poem by citing his literary authority:

þus in Arthurus day þis aunter bitidde—
þe Brutus bokez þerof beres wyttensesse.

Thus in Arthur's day these happenings ocured—
The Brutus books bear witness to this story. (2524-25)

That this literary reference occurs only at the end of the story is significant. After the import of the romance has unfurled and Gawain is enigmatically

reunited with the court of King Arthur, the author reaffirms his authority. The story, which began as the rumour told in town with tongue, is no longer the work of oral storytellers; it is a literate work to which the Brutus books bear witness. This coda, by its affirmation that the present story can also be found in books, gives an audience the final impression that this work and its author are authoritative.

V. Conclusions

The focus on distinguishing between rumors and authority in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was a preoccupation of fourteenth-century authors, and is clearly reflected in Chaucer's *The House of Fame*. Within the context of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, the need to make a distinction between rumor and authority is a reminder that religious instruction is only proper if it comes from a proper authority. Rumors on how to be clean, patient, or spotless as a pearl are limited, because rumors are unreliable. The authority of the book, however, is much more reliable.

The *Pearl*-poet's insistence that a book-based belief system is more preferable to the voices of men can be seen as another insistence on the veracity of the poet's own Christian viewpoint, and is another method of determining authority vis-à-vis the rumors of other men. Taken this way, the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a departure from the pious poems that precede it; rather, it is a reminder that the talk of the world is limited, and that texts are a much better guide. The poet, then, has a more authoritative vantage point, because he is a reader and a writer of texts.

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ABSTRACT**Textual Voices: Self-Representation and Religious Instruction in the Works of the *Pearl*-Poet****Michael Foster**

This paper explores the presence of a narrative voice in the poems preserved in Cotton Nero A.x commonly ascribed to the *Pearl*-poet. It argues that the poet constructs a series of cohesive themes in the four poems which all inform one another, and that the poet's authority is both implied and asserted by the author's manipulation of narrator personae and use of an absent or silent narrator in *Cleanness* and *Patience*. Meanwhile, the intimate narrative voice of *Pearl* functions to create a sense of shared theological and ideological positionality between audience and narrator, which this paper suggests is a rhetorical move to gain the trust and benevolence of an audience that may be otherwise hostile. Having captured the attention of the audience and made the theological arguments of *Cleanness* and *Patience*, the final poem invites the audience to trust in the *Pearl*-poet by differentiating the authority of texts versus rumors.

Key Words | *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*-poet, *Gawain*-poet, self-deprecation, narrative voice, authority, medieval theology, didactic poetry, religious poetry