



Controlling the Feminine Voice in
Cleanness
and
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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ne of the earliest Christian warnings against female speech comes from St. Paul, who writes to the Corinthians: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (I Corinthians 14:34–35).

It is not difficult to confirm that Paul’s disapproval of women’s speech remained the dominant view of authorities throughout the medieval period. Robert Mannyng, in *Handlyng Synne*, describes women who whisper in church during the sermon, while the devil sits on their shoulders, writing on a long roll of paper as fast as he can (Owst 387). The preacher John Mirk traces woman’s tendency to chatter to Eve’s garrulity in the garden of Eden. Eve’s willingness to talk showed the devil her weakness and opened the way to the loss of Paradise. By contrast, the Virgin Mary was sparing of her words. Mirk notes that the Bible records her speech on only four occasions: once to Gabriel, once to Elizabeth, once to her son in the temple, and once at the wedding in Cana. Mirk contends that these are not just Mary’s only *recorded* words, but the only words spoken by her—an ideal which proves linguistically her superiority to ordinary women (Lucas 123–24).

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Even outside the church, women were expected to remain quiet; for example, the Knight of La Tour Landry, writing a book of advice for his daughters, notes that “the wife ought to suffer and let the husband have the words, and be master, for that is her worship” (34). And the author of the thirteenth-century *Speculum Laicorum* posits an interesting analogy between women and dogs: “There are two kinds of dogs, for, some are well-bred, others low-bred. The well-bred, indeed, are silent and free from guile; the low-bred are ill-tempered and fond of barking. So is it with women...” (Owst 386–87).

These are just a few of many references to the dangers of allowing women free rein in speech—a stereotypical view which has persisted even to our own day. Considering this context, then, we should not be surprised to find that the *Gawain*-poet makes use of this motif, whether consciously or unconsciously, in his works. Specifically, I would like to examine first *Cleanness* and then *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to show how these poems illustrate the danger perceived to be inherent in the feminine voice.

For all the criticism devoted to *Cleanness*, its structure and purpose remain uncertain. If we do not make the assumption that the poem is designed to define *clannesse*, but instead look for clues in the exempla and homiletic links, it is not difficult to argue that the work deals with Judgment. Beginning with the parable of the Wedding Feast, the poem moves through various exempla drawn from the Old Testament: the Flood,

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God's visit to Abraham and Sarah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Babylonian Captivity, ending with Belshazzar's death and the fall of his kingdom. Interspersed with the exempla, which are narrative in form, are homiletic links, often referring to the New Testament and the idea of redemption from Judgment.

If we read the poem eschatologically, we can observe a basic principle of organization: each exemplum provides an illustration of increasingly greater social disorder as Judgment draws near. An important element in that disorder is the depiction of the female, and especially her use (or non-use) of language. The poet implicitly assigns value to the female voice as a barometer of the state of humanity: as the female voice becomes increasingly prominent—usually by escaping male control—social disorder increases and humanity moves further from God.

In the first exemplum, the story of the Flood, Noah's household is shown in perfect order, indicated at the most basic level by the fact that he has a wife and sons, who likewise have wives. The members of Noah's family differ from the other antediluvians, who "controeued agayn kynde contraré werkez" (line 266), even uniting with fallen angels to produce grotesquely giant offspring.

But an intact family structure is not the only signal that all is well within Noah's household. In addition, judicious use of language indicates the near-perfect state of this segment of humanity. Only Noah and God speak

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in this exemplum, and conspicuously absent is the traditional Noah of the cycle plays who complains of old age or an aching back as he grumbles about the burden of building an ark. Instead, Noah speaks humbly and obediently to God, limiting his words to a mere two lines.

In the same way, Noah's wife, his sons, and their wives follow his orders without question. As with Noah, the poet has chosen to ignore the traditional view of Noah's wife, a source of humor in the cycle plays because she is reluctant to enter the ark. For example, in the York play she wants to go back for her belongings, and she insists that her friends and relations must join them in the ark; in the Chester play she does not want to be taken away from drinking with her gossips; in the Towneley play she wants to finish her spinning (Woolf 135–40). Her silence in *Cleanness* emphasizes the order that reigns within Noah's household and helps explain why God has chosen to save this family.

In the next exemplum, we observe two righteous households; however, the words and actions of the females signify a loosening of the order that prevailed in Noah's time. When God visits Abraham in the form of three guests, Sarah eavesdrops on their conversation. While Noah's wife merely received her husband's orders and obeyed, Sarah (like Eve) is dangerously curious. Not wanting to be excluded from the circle of male language or power, she hides behind the door but cannot restrain her laughter when she hears the guests' pronouncement that she will conceive. (Typologically,

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of course, her reaction also contrasts with Mary's meek acceptance of Gabriel's annunciation.)

Sarah compounds her error by misusing language when confronted by Abraham and the divine guests; she denies her laughter, telling a deliberate falsehood. Most likely in deference to the hospitality they received from Abraham—and perhaps because Sarah lied merely to hide her own shame—the guests gloss over her fault. Sarah is not punished for her eavesdropping, her laughter, or her lie: but the contrast with Noah's wife is clear.

In addition, Sarah's offense invites contrast with that of Lot's wife in the continuation of this second exemplum. Lot, visited by two angels, finds himself in a position similar to Abraham's. All around him, society has given in to unnatural sexual desires—in this case, homosexuality—while Lot maintains a home with his wife and daughters, who have fiancés of their own. But the decline in the nature of humanity is demonstrated by a further decline in order in Lot's household. Sarah mocked her guests but then, ashamed, denied it; Lot's wife brazenly disobeys orders. Instructed to add neither leaven nor salt to their guests' food, Lot's wife mutters insults, going so far as to call the guests "unsauere hyne" (line 822).

Her penchant for disobedience recurs later that night, when the angels wake Lot and urge him to flee with his family. Appropriately enough, Lot's wife is turned to salt—the figure of her disobedience—when she ignores orders and looks back. Lot's daughters, however, are

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saved. Significantly, they utter no words throughout the exemplum but merely follow their father's orders, even though their fiancés have taken Lot's warning as a joke and stayed behind.

In the final exemplum, Belshazzar's feast, the poet illustrates yet a further decline in the human condition. The household we are shown—Belshazzar's court—is the inverse of the well-ordered household depicted in the opening of the poem, the parable of the Wedding Feast. We learn that the king has “a wyf,” “a worpelych quene” (line 1351), but also “mony a lemman... þat ladis wer called” (line 1352). When Belshazzar holds his feast, he expressly intends that his guests will “loke on his lemanes and ladis hem calle” (line 1370). Meanwhile, the queen herself is absent from the feast, for the poet tells us (lines 1586–90) that she knows nothing of the supernatural events in the hall until, from her chamber, she hears Belshazzar raging.

Thus the very circumstances of Belshazzar's feast depict the final deterioration of household order shown in the poem and constitute a mockery of the initial parable of the wedding feast, celebrating the lawful union of man and wife. But the poet goes further in his illustration of the sad state of human affairs. In the previous exempla, female virtue was indicated by silence and obedience; in the final exemplum, once again we find a virtuous female, but humanity has declined so far that her voice is more rational, more controlled, than her husband's. Her measured words calm Belshazzar and convince him to send for Daniel, an act of obedience to

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female wisdom. In this exemplum, then, the ultimate disordered household is shown through the transfer of rational speech from male to female.

Belshazzar's irrationality is further shown by the fact that he heeds his wife's advice to send for Daniel, but when Daniel interprets the signs written on the wall, Belshazzar does nothing to avert impending doom. Noah heard God's voice and obeyed; Abraham recognized God in his three guests and treated them courteously; Lot offered hospitality and protection to the angels that visited him; Belshazzar, however, ignores both God's visible warning and Daniel's spoken one. The fact that he responds reasonably only to one voice—his wife's—shows how far humanity has declined by the final exemplum. The proper order of language has been turned upside down, even as Belshazzar turned marital decorum upside down by holding a feast to honor his concubines.

Turning now to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we find that woman's voice is as dangerous in a secular as in a religious poem. Although the work portrays Arthur's court in its youth, the seeds of its destruction are already present, and focusing on language helps to make the court's latent weaknesses more apparent. Throughout the work, Gawain's reputation (and, by extension, the reputation of Arthur's court) is associated with skill in speech and with the ability to match words and actions. Indeed, our first sign that the court has been taken aback by the Green Knight's challenge occurs when no one speaks to take up his game, causing the

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Green Knight to ask mockingly, “What, is þis Arþures hous?” (line 309). The Knight goes on to intimate that the actions of Arthur’s knights do not match their proud speech: “Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes, / Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes?” (lines 310–11).

When Gawain offers to accept the adventure, he does so in a mincing speech of twenty-one lines, overblown with courtesy and false modesty, including his far-fetched claim, “I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest” (line 354). It is just this exaggerated concern with language and courtesy that later exacerbates his difficulties with Lady Bercilak, who knows how to play upon his concern for reputation and how to flatter him as the best possible instructor in “luf-talkyng.” Even the servants at Bercilak’s castle declare, when they learn that Gawain is their guest, “Wich spede is in speche vnspurd may we lerne” (line 918) and “I hope þat may hym here / Schal lerne of luf-talkyng” (lines 926–27). This is the sort of reputation which a knight of valorous deeds would not necessarily relish; indeed, Gawain’s attachment to speech and to manners puts him at risk of being identified with women, which is exactly what happens at Hautdesert—while the men spend their days hunting, Gawain is confined to the domain of the women of the castle. We see him contained within the private spaces, with limited opportunity for action: he attends mass, feasts, dances and makes merry, and sleeps. Forbidden to join the male fellowship and confined to the feminine sphere, he is obviously uncomfortable and

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awkward; within the castle, when the host is absent, his status is even lower than that of the ladies, who play with him at will. His only defense in this situation is language.

As we know, Gawain does not fare well in his battle of words with Lady Bercilak. She shames him into granting her kisses and even tempts him into breaking his agreement with Bercilak when he agrees to conceal the girdle. We can observe here a structural similarity between *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain*, with each work centered about a series of episodes that escalate in intensity. And in each series, the increasing intensity of the feminine voice signals increasing danger. As the feminine voice gradually grows stronger in the exemplar of *Cleanness*, so the lady's voice in *Gawain* becomes stronger, more importunate, on each successive morning that she wakes the knight.

Critics have analyzed the bedroom scenes in various ways—by correlating the interior to the exterior action, by analyzing the nature of the test Gawain undergoes here, by reading Lady Bercilak as a typical temptress or an atypical romance heroine. Part of our problem of interpreting what is going on is precisely Gawain's problem—the lady is a master of innuendo, of ambiguity. Of all the speakers in the poem, she is the most accomplished. Although Gawain believes that his quest involves a physical challenge, the real contest is a linguistic one, and without doubt he loses (as any mortal man would; witness Adam and Eve) to the woman, who by nature has a deceiving tongue.

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A simple line count reveals that on each morning Lady Bercilak speaks more than Gawain does. In their first encounter, she speaks 49 lines, he 28; on the second day, she speaks 39 lines, he 24; on the third morning, she speaks 33 lines, he 22. Although the reported length of their conversation diminishes each time, she always speaks at significantly greater length than does Gawain, and, except for the second morning, she initiates the conversation. In each case, she is the one who speaks of love, who puts their conversation on an ironic level where words suggest but do not make explicit each speaker's real intent. Even the kisses which punctuate their conversations show the lady's increasing power—not only do the kisses increase in number, but they change from kisses which Gawain *grants* (the first two kisses, at the end of the first morning and beginning of the second) to kisses the lady *takes* (at the end of the second morning, plus all of the kisses of the third morning—one of which she coyly *demand*s: “Kysse me now, comly,” line 1794). William Davenport has discussed Lady Bercilak's shrewd timing as well; she catches Gawain off guard just when he thinks it is safe to relax. For example, she first persuades him to kiss just as she seems on the point of leaving, and she begins the discussion of love-tokens only when she appears to have given up her attempt to make Gawain her lover (188). Then, in the same way that Eve tempted Adam with the gift of knowledge, Lady Bercilak finally tempts Gawain with the gift of survival. Eve promised that eating the forbidden fruit would make Adam like God; Lady

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Bercilak promises that wearing the girdle will make Gawain impervious to mortal blows—not immortality, but nevertheless a temptation to shed his human frailty. By contrast, it is anti-climactic when Gawain’s guide later tempts him by offering to keep Gawain’s escape secret. The guide’s offer holds no danger for Gawain; it is the woman who has artfully found the words to deceive him, allowing Gawain later to place himself in the same lamentable category as Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David.

Thus in both *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the feminine voice resonates with danger. Both works rely on an episodic sequence to reach a climax. In *Cleanness*, the exempla reveal increasing disorder in the world through an increasing prevalence of women’s speech and its perversion—from Sarah’s lie to the insults of Lot’s wife to the ultimate perversion, the rational speech of Belshazzar’s queen when Belshazzar himself can do nothing but rage. In *Gawain*, language itself is shown to be dangerous, but especially so in the mouths of women. Rather humorously, from the beginning the poem touts Gawain as a master of polite conversation. However, the events of the three mornings at Hautdesert reveal the lady’s triumph in the battle of witty speech; when she traps Gawain into accepting the girdle, his pact with her supersedes the pact he has made with her husband.

Finally, analyzing *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain* as I have done, by focusing on the dangers of language, makes us aware of the poet’s own concern for the

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proper use of language. Lady Bercilak at one point refers to God as “He that spedez vche spech” (line 1292). Although humans, especially women, are apt to corrupt language and to endanger others through their speech, language itself comes from God and, used rightly, can be a blessed gift. In *Cleanness*, the poet speaks of the dishes brought in at the end of Belshazzar’s feast as “pared out of paper” (line 1408); using the same phrase, in *Gawain* he describes Hautdesert’s crenellated towers as “pared out of papure” (line 802). I like to think of his poems in the same way, as having been “pared out of paper,” each word purposefully chosen, each structure carefully patterned. Both the form and the content of these poems illustrate a firm belief in the powers—and the concomitant dangers—of language. And if women are perceived to be the weaker sex, it should come as no surprise that their language holds even greater danger, as both *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain* suggest.

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