

## The Threat of Animalistic Impurity in Cleanness

### William Pym

Taking a homiletic form, the alliterative Middle English poem *Cleanness* narrates several exempla from the Old Testament emphasising the themes of internal and external purity. Near the end of the poem is an episode taken from chapter four of the book of Daniel, wherein the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, as punishment for his pride, is driven to madness by God, and lives like an ox in the wild for seven years as a form of penance. This is accompanied by a dramatic animalistic physical transformation described in grotesque detail in *Cleanness*, that demonstrates the complex relationships between both human and animal and human and God that is reflected in the rest of the poem. This article will first interrogate the physical uncanniness of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation and the effect it has on the reader. It will then chart how this process of transformation relates to the poem at large, beginning with the earlier Flood episode, followed by its own placement at the end of Belshazzar's feast, to identify how this process moves its subject both further away from and then closer to God.

Nebuchadnezzar's mental transformation into an ox is primarily characterised by a dramatic physical transformation in which his human form is altered to something inhuman. The basis for this description appears in Daniel 4:33, which describes Nebuchadnezzar as growing hair like an eagle's feathers and nails like a bird's claws. However, it is greatly expanded by the poet:

Faxe fyltered and felt flossed hym umbe

That schad from his schuldered to his schyre-wykes

And twenty-fold twynande hit to his tos raght

Ther mony clyvy as clyde hit clyght togeder

His berde ibrad alle his brest to the bare urthe

His browes bresed as breres aboute his brode chekes

Holwe were his yyen and under campe hores

And al was grey as the glede with ful grymme clawes

[Tangled and matted hair drooped about on him, that fell from his shoulders to his groin, and twisting round twenty times, reached his toes, where many burs fastened them together like a poultice.

His beard covered his breast to the uncovered earth, His brows bristled like briars around his broad cheeks, his eyes were hollow and under thick hair, and all of him was grey as the kite, with the most dreadful claws]<sup>1</sup> (ll. 1689-1696).

Though the comparisons to birds of prey are retained from the original source, the poet otherwise makes no direct animal comparisons. *Cleanness*' additions instead emphasise the degree to which Nebuchadnezzar's human traits are obscured by his animal body – his body, cheeks and, most notably, eyes are covered up by his thick hair, lashes, and brows. Though the descriptions of thick, matted hair are naturally evocative of fur, the one comparative simile used by the poet is to briars, a plant. This disparity between Nebuchadnezzar's implied appearance and his semantic description increases the uncanniness of his form, moving him further away from the fixed categories of 'human' and 'animal'. Though Nebuchadnezzar's physical transformation has animalistic qualities, the process primarily obscures without completely removing his humanity. This is in keeping with other medieval depictions of Nebuchadnezzar, wherein he is closely associated with the trope of the 'wild man' famously

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<sup>1</sup> *Cleanness* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, ed. by J.J. Anderson (Everyman's Library, 1976). All subsequent references by line number and in parentheses are from this edition. All translations are the author's own.

utilised by the Pearl Poet in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>2</sup> Cathy Hume extends this comparison, likening *Cleanness*' Nebuchadnezzar to a romance wonder through his alienness while remaining an example of penance through the partial retention of his humanity.<sup>3</sup> The strangeness of Nebuchadnezzar's form draws the reader's attention towards it, and by extension to God, its architect. This in turn leads the reader to better comprehend God's power and Nebuchadnezzar's desire for penance. Neither aspect would entirely come through if his transformation was more banal and closer to an actual animal, so the physical change must therefore be incomplete. This incompleteness also compliments the juxtaposition that is already present in the Book of Daniel, where he gains the mind of an ox but the physical features of a bird. In emphasising and extending these contradictions, Nebuchadnezzar's transformed body is evidently an impure object, neither fully human nor fully animal, nor are his animal qualities those of a single animal but instead of an uncanny combination of several. As argued by Jennifer Garrison, though external and internal impurity are differentiated by the poet, one rarely exists without the other in *Cleanness*, and they are usually inseparable.<sup>4</sup> This episode is the poet's final and most extreme demonstration of this principle. The outwardly noble and courtly but inwardly prideful Nebuchadnezzar has his internal impurities forcefully externalised by God and must live as an outwardly unclean body until he finds humility. This is achieved through the uncanniness of Nebuchadnezzar's transformed body, and the inherent unnaturalness of his middle state between human and animal that he assumes while living as an ox.

The full description of Nebuchadnezzar's animal body runs for three stanzas, concluding with the couplet 'Til he wyst ful wel who wroght alle myghtes/And cowthe uchhe

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<sup>2</sup> Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (Yale University Press, 1974), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Cathy Hume, *Middle English Biblical Poetry and Romance* (Brewer, 2021), p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Garrison, *Challenging Communion: The Eucharist and Middle English Literature* (Ohio State University Press, 2017), pp. 60-61.

kyndam tokerve and kever when hym lyked' [Until he knew full well who created all miracles, and could carve each kingdom when he liked] (ll. 1699-1700). Unlike the acts of large-scale destruction present in *Cleanness*, the un-making of Nebuchadnezzar is temporary, and it concludes with Nebuchadnezzar gaining an understanding of God that he previously lacked following his seven-year transformation. Sarah Stanbury demonstrates how the poem depicts the means through which humans are capable of seeing God, as well as how the act of sin can obscure God's presence.<sup>5</sup> In this short episode, Nebuchadnezzar is both separated from and reunited with God through his transformation. This process of obscuration is especially pertinent to Nebuchadnezzar, as he is being punished for believing that he is equal to God. As explained by Monica Brzezinski, Nebuchadnezzar's station is lowered below that of humanity as a result of his placing himself above it.<sup>6</sup> Much like how his eyes are 'hollowed' by his transformation, he entirely loses his ability to comprehend or commune with God during this period. This separation is entirely reversed when he regains his intelligence, and is able to both understand and respect God to a greater degree than he was before. As has long been observed about *Cleanness*, and most succinctly summarised by Sandra Pierson Prior, most of the additions made by the poet from his biblical sources put a focus on the targets of God's wrath rather than on those that are saved.<sup>7</sup> Much like how the flood narrative is told mainly from the perspective of the doomed antediluvians, and the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative from the destroyed cities, the audience is expected to identify directly with Nebuchadnezzar in the poem's telling. In this sense, the destruction of Nebuchadnezzar's humanity is presented as an exemplum of divine punishment in the same

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 50-51.

<sup>6</sup> Monica Brzezinski, "Conscience and Covenant: The Sermon Structure of *Cleanness*," *The Journal of English*, 89.2 (1990), p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* (Michigan State University Press, 1996), pp. 69-71.

manner as the earlier narratives of larger civilisational destruction. See, for comparison, this passage from the Flood episode:

Ther was moon for to make when meschef was cnowen

That night dowed bot the deth in the depe stremes

Water wylger ay was wones that stryede

Hurled into uch hous hent that ther dowedled

Fyrst feng to the flight alle that fle might

Uuche burde with her barne the byggyng thay leves

And bowed to the high bonk ther brentest hit wern

And heterly to the hyghe hylles thay aled on faste

[There was moaning to be made when misfortune was recognised, that night brought nothing but death in the deep streams. The water constantly grew wilder, destroying homes, hurled into each house in which they dwelled.

First all that could flee took flight, each woman with her child left their homes, and went to the high hills that were the steepest, and quickly to the high hills they arrived with speed] (ll. 373-380).

Broadly, this passage focuses on the human loss caused by the Flood: firstly on the destruction of human dwellings, followed by the panicked escape attempts of women with their children. However, it most importantly begins with the destruction of the established social structure of the antediluvians in favour of death (implicitly, the power of God).

Notably, in the earlier description of antediluvian society, the poet tersely targets their value system instead of any specific actions: 'He was famed for fre that feght loved best/ And ay the biggest in bale the best was halden' [He was famed with nobility who best loved strife,

and always those greatest in misdeeds were best regarded] (ll. 275-276). The Flood is both an act of physical destruction and a spiritual cleansing, as God regains dominance over a world that has forsaken Him and His virtues. Likewise, the Nebuchadnezzar exemplum cleanses its subject of his sinfulness through his utter destruction and subsequent restoration. In relation to the other victims of God's wrath, Nebuchadnezzar occupies a dual role. He is a direct victim of unassailable and somewhat horrifying destruction through his physical and mental degradation while ultimately being restored and saved by God following his penance. Pierson Prior directly likens Nebuchadnezzar to Noah, describing him as a 'saved remnant' within the otherwise doomed Babylonian society.<sup>8</sup> The Nebuchadnezzar episode is therefore a succinct summation of God's vengefulness and mercy as it is portrayed within *Cleanness*, with Him being capable of both terrifying destruction against the sinful while still bringing about salvation for the worthy amidst that destruction.

The transformation also represents the final version of a motif present throughout the poem, the progressive separation between God and humanity. In a considerable alteration from its biblical source, Nebuchadnezzar's punishment is moved out of chronological order by the poet and is instead told retrospectively by Daniel to Belshazzar as a warning after he interprets the writing on the wall. This change makes Nebuchadnezzar's transformation the final act of God described in the entire poem, as well as the final punishment directly enacted by God (Belshazzar is killed by Persian invaders and not directly punished by God). Pierson Prior demonstrates how the poem charts God's progressive withdrawal from human and earthly affairs, going from bluntly conversing with Noah to communicating only with oblique signs to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.<sup>9</sup> By placing it after the writing on the wall, the various divine acts described in *Cleanness* are ordered from the most plain and transparent to

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<sup>8</sup> Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>9</sup> Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez*, pp. 125.

the most opaque. Throughout the Old Testament exempla, God goes from plainly conversing with His prophets (the Fall and Flood narrative) to relaying messages indirectly via emissaries (the Visitors in Sodom and Gomorrah) to communicating in messages that require translation (Belshazzar's Feast). In the poem's final act of communication with God, God communicates by separating Himself further from his subject, and therefore renders Himself visible by forcefully restricting Nebuchadnezzar's ability to communicate with Him. Furthermore, in its new context as an exemplum told by Daniel to Belshazzar, the warning directly plays into Belshazzar's pre-existing anxieties. Many of Belshazzar's concerns prior to receiving his warning from Daniel are ones of literacy. His inability to read the writing on the wall or to fully comprehend it even after having it translated is what fuels his paranoia in the final section of the narrative leading to his death.<sup>10</sup> Nebuchadnezzar's transformation is a form of total illiteracy, and thereby an inability to communicate with God and understand divine messages. David K. Coley argues that the non-chronological placement of the episode serves to 'bind the trauma of the past with the trauma of the future, while his overarching presence in the prophecy ensures that Daniel's brazen vision of the future resonates as a still unspoken lament for the past.'<sup>11</sup> Within the confines of communicability, this means Nebuchadnezzar had been both wiser and more ignorant than Belshazzar, having known both total ignorance of God and from this ignorance gained a greater understanding and deference towards Him. By embedding the description of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation within Daniel's interpretation and warning, the poet puts Belshazzar's strife throughout the larger exemplum into perspective. Nebuchadnezzar is unwillingly placed in greater ignorance than Belshazzar was, but this enforced ignorance becomes a form of penance that ultimately

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Gustafson, 'Fayre Formez: vernacular scriptural paraphrase and lay reading in *Cleanness*,' in *Readings in Medieval Textuality: Essays in Honour of A.C. Spearing*, eds. Christina Maria Cervone and D. Vance Smith (Brewer, 2016), pp. 47-63 (pp. 60-61).

<sup>11</sup> David K. Coley, *Death and the Pearl Maiden* (Ohio University Press, 2019), p. 45.

brings him closer to God, while Belshazzar's despair in the face of Daniel's interpretation drives him further away from repentance and reconciliation.

In conclusion, Nebuchadnezzar's madness and transformation in *Cleanness* is a multifaceted exemplum, both taken on its own and within the context of the poem at large. There is a distinct uncanniness to the physical change he undergoes in his years in the wild, in which he loses his humanity while not becoming entirely animal. This process of transformation is analogous to the other acts of destruction wrought by God throughout the poem, with Nebuchadnezzar serving a double role as both a victim and survivor of God's wrath. This doubleness is central to the exemplum's role within the poem, as Nebuchadnezzar acts as an example of both separation from and closeness to God in a world where God is largely separated from humanity. The placement of the episode near the very end of the poem also positions it as *Cleanness'* most forward-looking exemplum, as Nebuchadnezzar's penitence that relieves him of his punishment looks ahead to the salvation that will eventually be brought about by the incarnation of Christ.



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