

**CLEANNESSE: AN ALLITERATIVE
TRIPARTITE POEM ON THE DELUGE,
THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM, AND
THE DEATH OF BELSHAZZAR; SELECT
EARLY ENGLISH POEMS VII-IX**

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SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ

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VII

CLEANNES

An Alliterative Tripartite Poem
on the Deluge, the Destruction of Sodom,
and the Death of Belshazzar,
by the Poet of *Pearl*



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CLEANNES

'DEPART YE, DEPART YE, GO YE OUT FROM THENCE, TOUCH
NO UNCLEAN THING . . . BE YE CLEAN, THAT BEAR THE VESSELS
OF THE LORD.'

Isaiah lii. 11.

PREFACE

The Manuscript. A brief description of the manuscript in which *Cleanness* is preserved, namely Cotton Nero A. x in the British Museum, will be found in the Preface to *Patience* in this series. The poem follows immediately on *Pearl* in that manuscript, and is in the same hand, though here and there occur corrections and retracings of letters in a later hand. I do not think any of the retracings can be definitely differentiated from the handwriting of the corrector.¹ There are two illustrations to *Cleanness*, namely, Noah and his family (in an open boat in lieu of the Ark), and Daniel before Belshazzar; the latter is reproduced in this volume, together with a specimen of the text. Large initial letters of blue, flourished with red, mark the chief divisions of the poem.

The Quatrain Arrangement. As was noted in the Preface to *Patience*, there can be no doubt that the author of these two poems planned his work on the basis of alliterative quatrains, and the manuscript indicates, by a slight mark in the left-hand margin, the beginnings of these stanzaic divisions, though in many cases these marks are now illegible. In the case of *Patience*, the quatrain arrangement of the printed text, with a break after each group of four lines, for the first time made clear the thought and movement of the poem, and the gain in its right understanding and interpretation must be generally admitted.

¹ See Textual Notes on the passages in question.

CLEANNESS

The present poem, more than three times the length of *Patience*, has been hitherto considered, in spite of its recognized merits, monotonous and discursive; and it is questionable whether it has ever been read in accordance with the poet's intention. It is confidently hoped that the present arrangement in quatrains may avail in respect of *Cleanness* as in the case of *Patience*. One thing is certain, that the interpretation of the poem from beginning to end is helped forward, and many difficulties are cleared up by the knowledge of the poet's metrical method.¹ It is, however, noteworthy that here and there he forgot or made a mistake in the matter of his quatrain arrangement. When he discovered his error, he made good without any drastic revision. I have indicated, in the latter case, *i. e.* in ll. 1541-92 and in ll. 1757-92, how the error came about and was rectified.² Evidently in *Cleanness* the poet was still imperfect in this effective device for giving to continuous alliterative verse something of the character of stanzaic poetry. In *Patience* he showed his skill wellnigh to perfection.

The poet's division into three main sections is carefully indicated by the scribe, and in the present text I have followed these divisions, save in respect of the Prologue, which in the MS. is not made a section by itself. The three sectional divisions are indicated by larger capital letters than those of

¹ It is an amazing fact that, in spite of my discovery of this key to the reading of these poems, Dr. R. J. Menner has not only printed *Cleanness* without the quatrain division, but has not seen the value of the poet's method for the punctuation and sense of the poem. As regards his view that 'the poem can certainly not be said to be written in four-line stanzas', the reader can judge for himself. For example, Dr. Menner, in saying that 'no definite arrangement can be traced' in ll. 1529 ff., shows that he has not seen how the poet, having made an error, corrected it; *cp.* my arrangement of ll. 1541-92.

² *Erkenwald* and *The Siege of Jerusalem* are both constructed on this quatrain system.