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# *The Awntyrs Off Arthure:* Beyond the Tapestry

Martin C. Connolly

## Introduction

*The Awntyrs Off Arthure*, an alliterative poem written in the North of England circa 1420, doesn't receive quite the attention it deserves, which is a pity, because it really is a gem of English Arthurian literature. Students of medieval English literature will invariably read and learn about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, *The Stanzaic Morte* and Malory before they ever come to the *Awntyrs*, if at all. There are probably a number of reasons for this. Perhaps it is because of the poem's reputation for being difficult to categorize: is it a knightly romance or an exemplum on Christian values? Interpretation is made problematic, many would say, because the poem seems to juxtapose religious and secular material in an unsustainable mix. Yet, whatever difficulties the poem does present the modern reader, there is no question that it is a poem of some importance in the Arthurian canon. The *Awntyrs* possesses obvious linkage to the *Alliterative Morte* and to the chronicle aspect of the Arthur story. It also shares a great deal of vocabulary and aspects of its literary composition with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Furthermore, its survival in no less than four manuscripts speaks volumes, if you'll pardon the pun, on the

poem's popularity in the early fifteenth century -the *Alliterative Morte*, the *Stanzaic Morte* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of course, survive in only one manuscript apiece.

The present essay attempts to train a little much-needed light upon this fine, if somewhat neglected, example of Northern English alliterative poetry. I will seek to disclose a little of the poem's rather original way with medieval literary conventions. We will look at, in particular, the way in which the writer draws attention to the fine garments and exquisite jewelry worn by the courtly characters, and discuss to what extent this approach leads toward a communication of the themes of the work as a whole. This is a rich area of inquiry for anyone even partially interested in the medieval world: it is often the hanging tapestries depicting medieval hunts or court life (in castles, museums and history books) which picture the medieval world for many of us. The various strands and braids of cloth help to convey a sense of pervasive luxury and finery, the very fabric of the untouchable realm of king, chivalric knight and fair damsels. In *The Awntyrs Off Arthure*, however, the poet appears to be doing more than just exercising his descriptive powers. Part of the thematic mechanics of the poem derives from contemporary notions of a meeting between the humbled dead and the prideful living, as related in poems, stories and even in sculptures; such a meeting is designed to present a stark contrast, within the terms of a Christian outlook, on the transiency of life and worldly concerns. And this is an aspect to the *Awntyrs* which is certainly valid. Yet, the poet appears to be doing more; ultimately, the poem's profligate foregrounding of the shiny exterior surfaces of the Arthurian kingdom can be also read as a critique of the very literary tradition it is using as the vehicle of its own transmission. This, in turn, may be accompanied by more than a touch of socio-political critiquing of contemporary medieval England. It is hoped the present investigation can

help to shed at least some light on the poetic mastery and thematic ambition inherent in the work.

### **Brief Description / Narrative<sup>1</sup>**

At the outset, however, a basic description of the story of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure* is in order. The poem survives in four manuscripts of the fifteenth century, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91 (often referred to as the ‘Lincoln Thornton’ manuscript as it was copied by famous book owner Robert Thornton), Lambeth Palace Library MS 491, the Ireland-Blackburn MS and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 324. These are all important collections, and the Thornton collection is one of the most important manuscripts in medieval English literature. The poem is 715 lines long and written in a series of thirteen line stanzas (fifty five in all) which end with four short lines (known as a ‘wheel’ in metric verse) similar to the way in which the stanzas in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are constructed. Note might also be made of the fact that the *Awntyrs*, in common with all the poems of the ‘Gawain poet’, exhibits a circularity of construction, with the last line echoing the first. The narrative structure of the *Awntyrs* is traditionally described as bi-partite, as the bulk of the poem comprises two distinct, and some would say, discrete, passages, one set in a forest, and the second set at court. As we shall see, however, this approach may be misleading; the poem’s narrative structure is a little more complex than that.

The poem opens by presenting the Arthurians in the midst of a hunt for deer in the Forest of Inglewood, in Cumbria, in the north of England. This is the kind of scene often depicted in medieval tapestries, and well known to readers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The reader is provided with rich descriptions of the costumes and finery worn by the protagonists and this illustrates that the poet was well acquainted with both the accoutrements



The Devonshire Hunting Tapestries: Deer hunt. (1440–1450, Netherlands)  
(Photo © Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

and the mechanics of a medieval hunt. The activities are soon interrupted, however, by the sudden and inexplicable darkening of the sun: at one point, Sir Gawain suggests this may be an eclipse. In fact, it is not, and Gawain knows this. He and Queen Guinevere have, for some reason which is not explained, become separated from the rest of the troupe, and must endure the worst consequences of this sudden interruption by themselves. What has occurred, in fact, is properly supernatural; Gawain witnesses a grotesque apparition rise from a small lake (named Terne Wathelyn, or Tarn Wadling) at the centre of the forest, and only makes the eclipse reference in order to allay the fears of his delicate charge. This is a little surprising, considering modern assumptions about medieval superstitions, but celestial phenomena are certainly easier to deal with, as they soon discover. The apparition, it seems, is not merely a random piece of protoplasm, but the spirit of Guinevere's deceased mother. Not only that, but she has come back from the grave, or somewhere not very wholesome beyond the grave, in order to berate the Arthurians for their high-living and ingrained self-indulgence.

This kind of meeting, as stated before, of the humbled dead confronting the prideful living, is associated in medieval literature with *De Tribus Regibus Mortuis*, or *The Three Dead Kings*, a version of which was composed by John Awdelay, relating the tale of three living kings coming face to face with three dead kings one day in the midst of a hunt. There are also a number of other possible analogues and sources wherein the dead meet the living, many of them of the ‘exemplum’ variety, as seen in works like the *Gesta Romanorum*. For the next few stanzas, the remainder of the whole first half of the poem, the ghost does her best to spoil whatever feelings of self-indulgence and sport Gawain and Guinevere may have been enjoying. Not only, she informs them, will all beauty and riches become rotting flesh and ash, but, in a kind of *non-sequitur* to beat all *non-sequiturs*, the entire Arthurian kingdom is destined to implode, resulting in total dissolution, and all due to the greed and reckless ambition of Arthur. She even makes implicit reference to the rising of Mordred, who is now just a child at court, innocently playing with a ball (309–12).

In riche Arthures halle,  
The barne playes at þe balle  
Þat outray shall you alle,  
Derfely þat day.

The ball, of course, can be read as a trope for the world, and therefore the activity of the innocent infant parallels that of the over-reaching king (in this case Arthur, who will indulge in a bit of territorial expansion all the way to Rome), thus inferring the cyclical nature of life under the Goddess of Fortune, to which she also makes reference. The *Awntyrs* comes closest here to the *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, which, of course, relays the end of

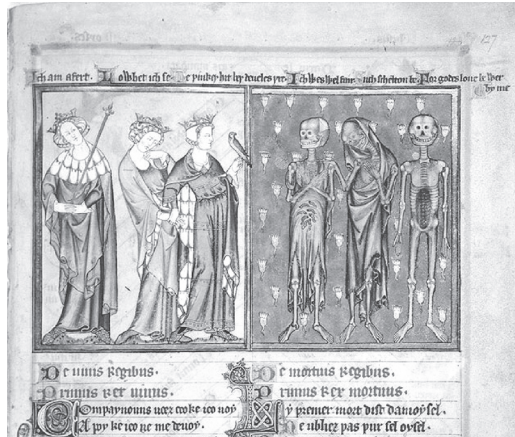


Illustration of 'The Three Living and The Three Dead Princes', in the *Psalter of Robert de Lisle*, in British Library MS Arundel 83 II f.127, c.1310–1320 © British Library

Camelot in great, and gory, detail.

The second episode opens back at the court of King Arthur. Everyone has returned from the hunt, and is doing their best to forget the strange interruption; this is a lot harder for Gawain and Guinevere, who decide not to ruin everyone's day even further by disclosing what they have witnessed. Indeed, no mention whatsoever is made of the incident again, except at the very end of the poem, and then in a way which does not disclose the dead mother's dire predictions. Guinevere remembers one very important point concerning her meeting with her deceased mother: the ghost had, in answer to her daughter's concern, explained that the saying of some special prayers would help alleviate her pain, as a tortured soul in purgatory. In the very final stanza, then, Guinevere dutifully takes the requested action, and delegates the saying of these prayers. They are called 'Trental' prayers, because, deriving from the French, they involve the saying of the chief ten feasts of the liturgical year three times each, bringing the total said to thirty.

It is well known that this aspect, as well as the returning of a deceased mother to speak with her child is indebted to *The Trentals of St Gregory*.

The main content of the second episode revolves around the claims of a stranger knight, a Scottish lord, Sir Galeron, who enters the court unexpectedly, together with his lady. They are both decked out in the finest cloths and jewels. He is seeking the return of lands, stolen from him, he says, by the king. Rather than simply dispatch the intruder without more ado, King Arthur displays high courtesy to him, and provides him with the means by which to obtain the satisfaction of his claim: a duel, with, it transpires, Sir Gawain, Arthur's doughtiest knight. This turns out to be a rather violent affair, one which claims the life of Gawain's beloved horse (by decapitation, no less), and almost ends with the death of both knights, and in the most messy, bloody fashion; at the critical moment, Guinevere intervenes on behalf of Sir Galeron, to plead mercy. It all ends amicably, if problematically, with Arthur praising the knight's courage and ceding him back his lands, and then re-granting Gawain other territories (which, of course, is the problematical part, as it will no doubt incur the wrath of another land-owner).

### **Worldly Duty vs. Spiritual Duty**

Considering the narrative as it is related above, it is perfectly understandable to think of the narrative structure as bi-partite, since it is largely composed of two sizeable self-contained episodes: the appearance of the ghost of Guinevere's mother in the first, and the appearance of Sir Galeron of Galloway in the second. Yet, this approach tends to de-emphasize the promise mechanism which helps to frame the episodes, and which I strongly believe would have been well noted by contemporary readers/listeners. This promise, or request, from the dead to the living, was based on



the verse legend, *The Trentals of St Gregory*, a fictional tale designed to promote the common liturgical practice of having thirty masses said in order to speed the soul's passage through Purgatory. In the *Awntyrs*, the ghostly mother informs Guinevere that the saying of 'thirtty trentales' (218) will effect her release from purgatorial suffering (a result of her own sin of prideful, non-spiritual living) and see her 'brought vnto blys.' (221) While reference to this promise is conspicuous by its absence until the very final stanza, it can be maintained that the promise mechanism creates a narrative frame. Critic Helen Phillips is very suspicious of the simple bi-partite description of the poem:

'The structure does not offer us simply two discrete sections which can be labelled secular or spiritual according to their subject matter, but a curious network of repetitions, recurrent patterns and episodes which become frames for other episodes, through which the secular becomes a context for the spiritual and the spiritual for the secular...'<sup>2</sup>

From there, Phillips emphasizes the importance, in contrast to the view of some, of the final stanza, in which Guinevere is seen carrying out the promise to her mother:

'However it [the final stanza] got where it is, it creates a frame, in this case a frame for the whole rest of the narrative.'

This view entirely accords with my own, and in a separate study, I sought to reveal precisely how indeed the final stanza 'got where it is'. Basically, I argue that the episode involving Sir Galeron and his battle with Gawain is a distraction from Guinevere's more important spiritual duty, to pray for her

mother, failure of which will condemn her mother to everlasting torment. This episode, which I termed a ‘promise-postponement device’, derives from a lesser-known version of *The Trentals of St Gregory*. In that poem, there is a long passage set between the giving of the promise and its completion (the full saying of the prayers), in which devils attempt to distract Pope Gregory from finishing his task. The passage, in contrast to the narrative up till then, involves a great deal of elements which seem derived from romance narrative traditions.

Without wandering down that particular avenue of inquiry too far, this ‘promise-postponement’ device appears to provide all the rationale that is needed to explain why, and how, two distinct generic modes can be accommodated within a single poetic frame. The promise mechanism would have been seen by contemporary readers as highly significant, not as an element introduced at one point, forgotten about, and then, in the words of one critic ‘just added by some kind soul to achieve the semblance of formal closure.’<sup>3</sup> Rather, the reader is lead to appraise the relative merits of one urgency over another: which is more pressing –the needs of Sir Galeron, or the needs of Guinevere’s deceased mother? The narrative structure which turns on the promise device provides the poem with a coherent poetic rationale, and also encapsulates a major contemporary medieval concern, that one’s spiritual duty –embodied in the need to fulfill the promise to the mother– should not be overridden by what are essentially less important, worldly concerns –embodied in the claim of Sir Galeron, which is an affair of state. It sets up an important contrast, or conflict, within the work, between the claims of the spiritual and the claims of the worldly. This contrast and conflict is woven into other aspects of the poem, not least the way in which beauty is to be perceived, as something physical (and worldly) or as something spiritual.

### Worldly Beauty vs. Spiritual Beauty

A significant poetic amplification of the theme of the competing claims of worldly and spiritual duty can be identified in the poet's use of clothes, apparel, jewelry, and armour, in such a way as to suggest the untrustworthy and purely superficial beauty of worldly things. This element sets up the poem's second main contrast –between worldly and spiritual beauty. Spiritual beauty, however, is only implied, contrarily, by the mother's sin-deformed ugliness, and by the hope that realization of the promise will bring about a transformation. In the *Awntyrs* and in the *Trentals*, she is described as grotesque. In all versions of the *Trentals*, the mother returns at the end of the poem; after all the cleansing prayers have been said she has now become transformed into a figure of such radiance that the pope mistakes her for the Virgin Mary. That such transformation does not occur at the end of the *Awntyrs*, in stark contrast to what happens in the *Trentals* source, suggests that redemption –for the mother and/or for the Arthurians– will not be so easily won. Either that, or the poet was unsure how to visually depict spiritual beauty after having spent most of the poem depicting the very worldly splendour of the Arthurian kingdom.

The poem's focus on dress, costume and armour has been noted by many. Commenting on the poet's emphasis on Guinevere's dress in particular, A.C. Spearing notes that this 'might seem to suggest that she is concerned only with externals, mere trimmings; and indeed the widespread tendency in medieval literature and art to convey courtly grandeur and luxury through exhaustive representations of costume must always have this as a potential meaning.'<sup>4</sup> Spearing's tentativeness ('might seem to suggest') reflects the fact that, unlike in many medieval works, this poem's use of clothes and externals –what I will term a 'clothing-motif'– as a way of

commenting upon moral standing, is not made explicit. It is not that kind of poem. The poet does, however, employ the ghostly mother to make things as clear as they need to be, conspicuously contrasting her present self – ‘Naxté and nedefull, naked on night’ (185)– with her former incarnation – ‘I was of figure and flesh fairest of alle,/ Cristened and crisomed with kings in my kynne’ (137–8). And now, adorned with only filth, writhing snakes and toads, she invites the fashionable Arthurians to take a good look at themselves (166–7):

For al þi fressh foroure,  
Muse on þi mirroure;

The sensitive reader, however, will have already picked up on this contrast, etched into the visual sumptuousness (of the Arthurians’ dress), and juxtaposed horror (in the grotesque appearance of the mother-spirit), of the poem’s designedly slow-paced narrative. Indeed, the densely wrought language of the poem itself, rich in repetitions and alliterative conventions, may itself call attention to the surface and superficialities of the world it describes.<sup>5</sup> As Thomas Hahn observes, ‘the cloisonné surface gives preeminence to pattern, to exteriority as meaning’.<sup>6</sup> He rightly calls attention to the ‘poem’s profligate consumption of formulaic phrases and type scenes, of nearly fetishized objects like tapestries, dress, swords, helmets, shields, or coats of arms...’ Lingering on the fine detail is one of the strengths of the poem, for the visual richness it brings, as well as the sense of ambiguous delight in the trappings of luxury.

The clothing-motif was employed in a variety of ways in both religious and secular medieval literature, –physical appearance providing the

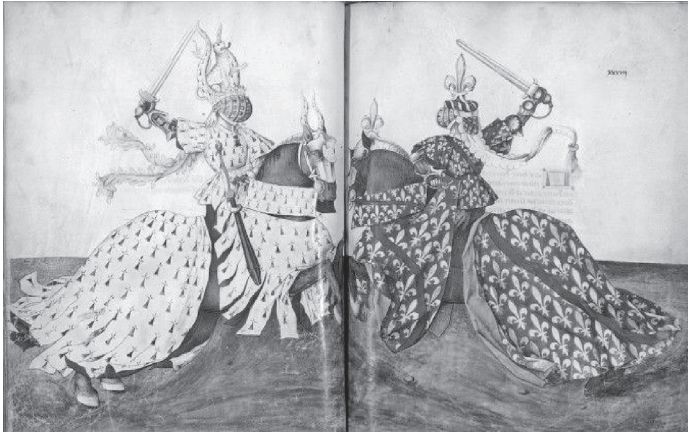
opportunity for oblique moral critique of a character, as in Chaucer's *General Prologue*, where the red and blue silk of his attire suggests the Physician's materialism, or as a way of contrasting past glories with present, usually post-mortem, decrepitude, as in some fifteenth century political pieces,<sup>7</sup> or allegorically, as in Passus XIII and XIV of *Piers Plowman*, in which Hawkyn, the man of the world, the *Vita Activa*, is depicted wearing a coat stained with all of the Seven Deadly Sins.<sup>8</sup> And the green girdle fatefully accepted from Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of course, is transformed by the end of that poem into the mark of Gawain's inescapably human imperfection. Revelation of this fact dramatically frames the immediately preceding episodes at the Castle Hautdesert, making the girdle an integral part of the poem's narrative structuring.

The *Awntyrs* poet may also be using the clothing-motif as a way of structurally unifying his poem. In the opening two or three stanzas of both the hunting scene and of the court scene (from 339) sustained and conspicuous attention is given to the sumptuous externals: e.g. 'riche ribaynes reuersset' (16), 'rybées of riall aray' (17), 'Al in gleterand golde' (27), and 'a sillor of silke dayntly di3t' (340), 'In pal pured with pane prodly pight' (353). Furthermore, the ninth line of the opening stanza of the court scene precisely echoes the ninth line of the poem's opening stanza in recycling the phrase, 'wlonkest in wede(s)', strongly suggesting a designedly symmetrical structural approach, which, incidentally, serves to counter any notion of narrative disjointedness. It is certainly a pattern of description which runs through the poem, knitting it together in the manner of a medieval wall tapestry. The more the exterior surfaces appear to shine, contrasted with, or rather, mirrored by, the spiritual ugliness of the ghost (who was once one of them), the more they appear to manifest a potentially dangerous shallowness.

### Beyond Passive Description

The *Awntyrs* poet, however, doesn't seem to be content with employing this as a purely passive element of his narrative: the fight between Gawain and Galeron can be read as a dramatic exposure of the shallowness of exterior, worldly, beauty, and, specifically, chivalric glory (although there is no critical consensus on this: see endnote 9). Extending the traditional romance writer's propensity to linger over the details provides the poet with a way of showing how the pursuit of chivalric customs –here, the gentlemanly duel– can quite literally undo the trappings of chivalric life.<sup>9</sup> It is an approach which rudely juxtaposes fine sensibility –evidenced by the use of approbatory or positive adjectives– with crude and violent action. Therefore, we read not simply that 'sheldes wer shred' (569) [shields were cut to pieces] but that 'Shene [beautiful, noble] sheldes wer shred', not that there were 'brenés bybled' (570) [coats of mail covered with blood] but 'Bright [radiant] brenés bybled'. The further detailing of precisely what is being destroyed or dislodged, coupled again with approbatory adjectives ('bright', 'fine') and phrases ('þat shene were to shewe') seems strangely meticulous if the focus is merely on the violent action of two battling knights. Also, one might reasonably ask, why does the poet need to explain that the decorative aspects of their armour are actually of little practical use? Is it to expose the essentially flimsy exteriority of chivalric trappings?<sup>10</sup> Lines 586–91:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Hardely þen þes hæpelese on helmes þey hewe;     | <i>Violently / warriors</i>                             |
| Þei beten downe beriles and bourdures bright.    | <i>beryls [gemstone] / decorative edge of mail-coat</i> |
| Shildes on shildres þat shene were to shewe,     | <i>Shields/shoulders that bright were to gaze upon</i>  |
| Fretted were in fyne golde, þei failen in fight. | <i>Adorned with jewels / prove deficient in battle</i>  |
| Stones of iral þey strenkel and strewe;          | <i>'iral' [gemstone] / scatter and strew</i>            |
| Stiþe stapeles of stele þey strike don stri3t.   | <i>Stout armour fastenings</i>                          |



An illustration from *Le Livre des Tournois*, Barthélemy d'Eyck  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Fr 2695. © BNF

In an action scene, such particularity, which stretches to the naming of precious stones, might seem inappropriate, unless it operates as a way of reminding the reader/audience of all of the jewels and finery encountered in earlier scenes. In this sense, then, the jewels we see this time are seen through a mirror, the mirror already proposed by the ghost of Guinevere's mother.

With the degeneracy of exteriority comes the degeneracy of the fight itself, from the fiction of the noble encounter between two chivalric knights observing rules of engagement into something more closely approaching an unruly, vicious, and potentially deadly, brawl. This battle has long been dismissed as 'stock romance' –in fact, it is a battle of such ferocity that by the end of the fight, with Galeron slashing haphazardly with his sword and Gawain pulling him up roughly by the collar, we might say that the 'lie' of chivalry as the noble art of fighting has been well and truly exposed. With the armour splattered with blood and precious stones strewn in all directions,

the scene may be read as a tableau of the ideality of the Arthurian/chivalric dream stripped of its veneer.

### **Socio-Political Aspect vs. Moral Aspect**

At this point, the modern reader of the *Awntyrs* might be forgiven for concluding that the poem is a piece of sophisticated didacticism, an attack on those who indulge in ‘delices of luxurie’, to quote Chaucer’s Parson. In some ways this is entirely understandable: the ghost’s appearance in the Forest of Inglewood casts such a shadow over all that follows, it is perhaps inevitable that her preachy didacticism will remain as the lasting image and semantic resonance of the poem for some readers. Yet, such a conclusion requires that the reader ignore the potentially political aspects of the poem, together with its curious emphasis on geographical particularity, a feature brought into sharp contrast by recent scholarship which speculates on the poem’s possible direct audience and sponsorship.<sup>11</sup> Stressing the purely moral aspect of the poem also, as Phillips points out, runs the risk of over-emphasizing the religious nature of the ghostly mother’s words.<sup>12</sup> Galeron, while potentially as much a target of criticism as the Arthurians, because he is of the same class and armigerous bent, is, however, sympathetically portrayed as a Scottish knight nursing a legitimate grievance against an English king. The issue raised by Galeron would have been seen as a symptom of a long-running unjust English territorial policy; and Galeron’s righteous anger would have struck a chord with readers who had their own grievances. If the author had wished to, of course, he could well have located his poem in more neutral or less identifiable territory, as the author of *Golagras and Gawain* does, transporting his dramatic critique of Arthurian policy to an overseas location. While the religious didactic aspect to the poem –the deliberate contrasting of worldly and spiritual duty and beauty–



helps to construct the narrative, it is less sure that it provides the defining principle of the poem. The *Awntyrs* is simply too particular in its references and potentially too political in its overall import to be purely religious in nature, a point which many critics now accept.<sup>13</sup> In this reading, then, the fierceness of moral censure is most likely harnessed, not to do the same thing as the literature it derives from –to preach Christian values– but rather to attack the policies and underlying value system of the ruling classes. The *Awntyrs* poet is less interested in creating a work of religious intent, a work which expresses the absolutes of moral judgement, and more interested in creating a work of literature that challenges the status quo, throwing out difficult questions rather than providing easy answers.

Concomitantly, the poem can also be seen as challenging the conventions of the Arthurian/secular romance tradition. Due to its complex prosody and the breadth of the sources employed, the *Awntyrs* reads as a very self-conscious piece of literature, and as such inevitably invites critical inquiry into the nature of the romance mode in which it is couched. The poet, it may be argued, is seeking to inject some maturity into a literary tradition, which, by this time, is beginning to look decidedly repetitive and formulaic –as the author of ‘The Wife’s Tale’ and ‘Sir Thopas’ would no doubt agree. Chaucer’s apparent wariness (or weariness?) concerning popular romance tradition indicates that the mode had, for some, become decidedly superannuated, perpetuating, among other things, a false representation of the armigerous classes. The unchivalric knight who commits rape at the opening of ‘The Wife’s Tale’ presents a jarring conflation of romance and contemporary realism. Philandering friars and unprincipled knights now displace the fairies and Arthurian heroes and the mythical by-gone innocence of yore –‘now kan no man se none elves mo’. The literature-derived fantasy of chivalric adventure and courtly love can no longer be tolerated in an

uncritical fashion.

The *Awntyrs* poet would no doubt agree, but his chosen narrative vehicle is Arthurian romance –complete with hunting scene, the long-established figure of Gawain, all the trappings of Arthurian glory and a battle-scene– and so his manner of criticism will necessarily be different. The introduction of a wholly alien literary element, the religious didactic, in the figure of the sin-deformed ghostly mother, constitutes by itself a challenge to the conventions of the secular romance mode. Through her, criticism can be levelled at the ethos of the Arthurian dream, or, translated into the political reality of the day, at the policies and practices of the present-day ruling class. Furthermore, and very significantly, because she represents an orthodox outlook –she is, after all, a revenant from the Christian underworld, pointing out standard orthodox ideas on the need for moral rectitude and responsibility– her words cannot be met with anything other than acceptance. Her status as spokesperson for what was the prevailing Christian ethos provides her with a kind of diplomatic immunity. Gawain, knight of the Round of Table, constrained by his courtesy to ladies (even ones from Hell, or Purgatory) and unspoken adherence to Christian principles, cannot but be accommodating, even to a fault. Therefore, his question to her is remarkable for the degree to which he empathizes with the spirit's negative view of chivalric conquest (261–4):

‘How shal we fare,’ quod þe freke, ‘þat fonden to fight,  
And þus defoulen þe folke on fele kinges londes,  
And riches ouer reymes withouten eny right,  
Wynnen worshipp and wele þorgh wightnesse of hondes?’

The universe, or realm, of medieval literary romance is nothing if not

hermetic and self-referential, existing within its own well-defined bubble, so to speak, or in parallel to, but necessarily divorced from, the reality of everyday life. Chaucer wishes to expose the stereotypical conventions of the romance tradition as flawed, and he does this by dragging in a dose of blunt reality, or, as in ‘Sir Thopas’, blunt parody. The *Awntyrs* poet wishes to puncture romance’s bubble also, but in a wholly different manner. He presents the archetypal situation of the Arthurians meeting a supernatural being in the forest, but this time, the weird creature is not merely from another world, it’s from another literary tradition, a tradition from which the poet is borrowing in order to confront the self-serving conventions of the Arthurian/chivalric tradition. The *Awntyrs*’ poet is nothing if not earnest; he is employing many of the elements of the romance, but in a manner which exposes their limitations. He is infinitely more respectful than Chaucer/the Wife of Bath, but no less aware that chivalric trappings, fine furs and shining jewels among them, gloss over a multitude of sins.

### Dedication

For Malcolm Andrew, who introduced me to the *Awntyrs*, and taught me so much

### Notes

- 1 The content of this section can be gleaned from any a number of sources, notably Hanna (1974), in the introduction to his edition of the poem; Moll (2003); Allen (2001).
- 2 Phillips (1993), 87–8, also for flowing quote.
- 3 Fichte (1989), 136.
- 4 Spearing (1985), 135.

- 5 Twu (2003), 111–2, details the poem’s use of concatenations, repetitions and  
‘semantically empty declarations’, which ‘impede[s] narrative progress’. She  
concludes: ‘The poem indulges itself and its aristocratic audience in the pure leisure  
of time passing through art for its own sake.’
- 6 Hahn (1995), 173, for both quotations.
- 7 Matsuda (1984) mentions ‘The Lament of the Duchess of Gloucester’, ‘The Lament  
of Queen Elizabeth’ and others of this type, commenting: ‘The nostalgic and uneasy  
remembrance of past beauty and luxury, the dramatic contrast with present misery,  
the delayed repentance of pride, and the warning to the living are all conventional  
motifs in such poems...’, 52.
- 8 Langland (2006), Passus XIII, from 271 to 459, the end of the Passus, the ‘sondri  
plottes’, or allegorically, sins, on Hawkyn’s ‘cote’ are the main subject of  
discussion, and carries on into Passus XIV. There are also other references to  
clothes throughout the poem, in the sense of appearance indicating spiritual  
integrity, many Biblical in origin.
- 9 Selection of critical opinion on the battle-scene. Note the wide, and sometimes  
conflicting, variety of opinions: Twu (2003): ‘The stripping away of exterior  
trappings of rank and wealth reveals the underlying, inner sameness of their  
morality, thus reminding us once again of the Ghost’s appearance in the rotting rags  
of its mortal remains...’, 115. Goff (1984): ‘The combat itself, though notable for its  
ferocity, is hardly an unqualified celebration of knightly prowess.’ 156. The battle  
suggests to Chism (2002) ‘the inadequacy of institutional ritual’, and to Haught  
(2010) ‘the primacy of ritualized violence as the premier form of masculine  
discourse’. Spearing (1985) sees it as possessing ‘a piquant aesthetic quality’, 138,  
as ‘an enactment of...aristocratic waste, a form of conspicuous consumption of the  
poet’s verbal substance and of his listeners’ leisure’, 139. Ingham (2001) develops  
this: ‘...the text is not particularly critical of militarism per se. The tournament  
battle between Gawain and Galleroun offers a beautiful scene of violent display,’  
186. Allen (2004) suggests that the fight can be interpreted as ‘light-hearted self  
idealization by northern magnates...’
- 10 Ingham (2001) quoting the same lines, comes to a different conclusion: ‘Armor  
glitters; shields glisten with golden filigree; the violence of warriors literally

showers the field with precious stones. Such a description foregrounds the pleasures of watching. Moreover, it suggests that warrior bodies explode in the heat of contest to produce showers of gold and gems, not bloody heaps of flesh.’ 186.

- 11 Allen (1996), Allen (2004), Goff (1984), 20–25.
- 12 Phillips (1993), 74 to end.
- 13 Schmolke-Hasselmann (1998), 287–8; Chism (2002), 253–4; Goff (1984), 72; Ingham (2001), 186–191.

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