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Anxiety and the Supernatural in The Awntyrs off Arthur

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> "How shal we fare," quod the freke, "that fonden to fight,
> And thus defoulen the folke on fele kinges londes,
> And riches over reymes withouten eny right,
> Wynnen worshipp in werre thorgh wightnesse of hondes?"
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> (*The Awntyrs off Arthur*, ll. 261-4)

The Awntyrs off Arthur is concerned with critical introspection, manifesting in numerous unconsciously and consciously addressed expressions of anxiety. Gawain, speaking to the ghost of Guinevere's mother, wonders how he fights for other lords' land in an attempt to 'wynnen worship,' while doing so 'withouten eny right' (ll. 263-4).[1] While 'right' is used in this context as an entitlement to land, Gawain's word choice relates closely to another prominent anxiety within the *Awntyrs*: that of acting justly. There are several anxieties expressed by these characters which contribute to the poem's underlying existential threat, such as: upholding chivalric ideology and identity; the impossibility of determining what is "the right"; and the justification of exorbitant wealth and the failure of charity. The supernatural figure of Guinevere's mother plays a significant role in the poem's anxious terrain. Corinne Saunders relates the philosophy of phenomenology to a foundation of medieval psychology through which to observe the relationship between body, mind, and affect.[2] This connection informs the reading of the *Awntyrs*' ghost, whose decaying exterior represents a traumatized internal form that acts as both mirror and warning to Guinevere. In an age acutely anxious about the fragile relationship between body and mind, the supernatural becomes a vessel for addressing these concerns tangibly. This essay will argue that these various forms of anxiety establish the subterrain of the *Awntyrs* poem, and that the supernatural has the capacity to confront these anxieties in a way inaccessible to the human characters of the text.

Anxiety, as a psychological condition, is a relatively modern concept, but contemporary interpretations of the term remain effective when applied to a medieval context. In his article about the *Awntyrs,* Alexander Zawacki engages with Ernest Becker's claim that all of humanity is divided into 'a self-aware consciousness' and 'a corporeal, animal frame,' adding that, 'The desire to live and the knowledge of the inescapability of death produce a traumatic conflict in a

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[1] All quotations from *The Awntyrs off Arthur* are taken from *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales,* ed. Thomas Hahn (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1995).

[2] Corinne Saunders, "Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval English Arthurian Romance," in *Emotions in Medieval English Arthurian Literature: body, mind, voice*, ed. Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington, and Corinne Saunders (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2021), 31.

person's mind'.[3] This 'traumatic conflict' is precisely the experience of anxiety, born out of a tension between existential dread and 'the desire to live'.[4] This conflict permeates *The Awntyrs off Arthur*; while the ghost delivers personal warnings to Gawain and Guinevere, the inevitability of death remains at the forefront of their exchange. By Zawacki's definition, anxiety also imposes a state of radical self-consciousness.[5] This becomes problematised as Gawain and Guinevere disregard many of the ghost's warnings in the latter half of the text, negating opportunities for positive self-consciousness and personal change. Anxiety persists through to the end of the poem because many of its primary causes remain ignored.

As Europe consolidated into a stabler feudal system in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, chivalry emerged as method for controlling the excess of militarily-trained men.[6] Chivalry is a constant performance of conduct, and the anxiety of maintaining chivalric self-identity persists throughout the *Awntyrs*, most evidently in Gawain's character. Following his exchange with the ghost, he says:

> "How shal we fare," quod the freke, "that fonden to fight,
> And thus defoulen the folke on fele kinges londes,
> And riches over reymes withouten eny right,
> Wynnen worshipp in werre thorgh wightnesse of hondes? (ll. 261-264)

Gawain demonstrates an unusual level of self-awareness, anxiously criticising the Arthurian practise of acquiring land through violent means. In the Middle English Compendium (MEC), 'fare' is defined as the 'making of one's way from place to place'.[7] Gawain is asking where he will "go" in the afterlife if they continue to take land forcefully. This question is both rhetorical and genuine; he is at once gravely anxious about the continual acquisition of land 'withouten eny right,' (ll. 263) and asking the ghost with sincere concern what he is meant to do with his new self-awareness. The footnote to the Rochester *Awntyrs* edition defines 'defoulen' as to 'put down',[8] but the MEC defines it as to 'trample upon' and 'to injure, abuse, torment,' alongside

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[3] Alexander Zawacki, "A Dark Mirror: Death and Cadaver Tomb in the Awntyrs off Arthure," *Arthuriana* 27, no. 2 (2017): 96.

[4] Zawacki, "A Dark Mirror," 96.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Robert Rouse, "Historical Context: The Middle Ages and the Code of Chivalry," in *Handbook of Arthurian Romance: King Arthur's Court in Medieval European Literature*, ed. Leah Tether, Johnny McFadyen, Keith Busby, and Ad Putter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 14.

[7] "Fāre," in *Middle English Compendium,* University of Michigan Press.

[8] Footnote to *Awntyrs*, ed. Thomas Hahn, ll. 262.

numerous other terms depicting ruthless arrogation.[9] Gawain's use of 'defoulen' intensifies his sense of worry about acquiring land by killing 'folke on fele kings londes' (ll.262). Gawain's realization that they have not been acting in the right creates a rift between his individual moral code and the chivalric identity with which he has aligned himself. Chivalric anxiety for Gawain thus becomes a deeply personal anxiety of identity.

Enhancing the fear of chivalry's failure is the stake of public reputation. Gawain faces the threat of a tarnished reputation when he is indirectly challenged by Galeron to combat (ll.421-2). To refuse the fight is not only a sign of weakness, but also an acceptance that both Gawain and Arthur have acted wrongly; Gawain must engage to protect his chivalric reputation. Robert Rouse observes the danger of chivalry's dependence on public interpretation: 'chivalric self-identity is only partly self-defined through personal action and choice, and to a large extent is hostage to fortune and to public events'.[10] Gawain's decision to fight Galeron is problematized by the first half of the text, as he has just been divinely informed of his impending death, and he himself expresses concern that Arthur and his knights are not always in the right regarding land acquisition. While Gawain volunteers to fight Galeron to uphold his reputation, he yields to the ghost's premonitions about his forthcoming death. Gawain's too-eager response to Galeron's challenge is a symptom of something other than a radical forgetfulness of the ghost's demand to 'gete thee' (ll. 283). Instead, fighting Galeron is a way of 'encountering and then repressing a basic animal fear of death';[11] immediately jumping to fight Galeron is Gawain's deeply anxious psychological response to maintaining the performance of his chivalric self-identity.

The anxiety of the right in the *Awntyrs* is intimately connected with the anxiety of chivalry, evident in Gawain's fears about acquiring land morally. Arthur refuses to allow Gawain to fight Galeron, despite Gawain's claim that 'God stond with the right!' (ll. 471). Arthur's anxiety towards this combat asks be interpreted in two distinct ways: firstly, Arthur does not believe God stands with the right, and so the knowledge of what is "right," remains fearfully ambiguous; secondly, Arthur does believe this notion and he is not confident they are in the right. Arthur, who is closest to God according to the medieval notion of the Divine Right of

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[9] "Dēfôulen," in *Middle English Compendium,* University of Michigan Press.
[10] Rouse, "Historical Context," 22.
[11] Zawacki, "A Dark Mirror," 97.

Kings, is unable to ascertain what is the right, reinforcing the anxiety of this moral uncertainty.[12]
To appease both Gawain and Galeron, Arthur returns the latter's land, replacing Gawain's now-lost property with land from Wales. This solution ironically compounds the ghost's prior warnings of Arthur's covetousness, which Gawain seemingly does not pass on to his king. Arthur's solution indicates the cyclical conflict within the aristocracy, which Rouse describes as 'modes of internal competition between knights for land and power'.[13] Evidently, the combat between Galeron and Gawain is a symptom of the breakdown of the chivalric system at its core. Within Arthurian romance, and particularly the *Awntyrs*, a failure of chivalry necessarily implies a disruption to individual moral codes, including one's ability to determine the right.

Another significant anxiety present in the *Awntyrs* is the exorbitant wealth of the court and apparent disregard for the poor. In the second stanza, twelve lines are dedicated to Guinevere's appearance: 'In a gleterand gide that glemed full gay - / With riche ribaynes reversset, ho so right redes, / Rayled with rybees of riall array' (ll. 15-17). The dense alliteration of these lines draws attention to the ornate nature of Guinevere's clothing, reinforcing the medieval notion of 'fashion as a cultural system' in which material wealth indicates status.[14] The ghost advises Guinevere to be charitable, saying, 'Whan thou art richest arraied and ridest in thi route, / Have pité on the poer - thou art of power' (ll.172-3). This reference to the poor is a deviation from romance traditions and connects an otherwise fictitious tale to its fourteenth-century context.[15] With famine at the century's onset and the plague in 1348, the fourteenth century is often called the 'age of adversity' for being one of the darkest periods in European history.[16] In the years between war, groups of mercenaries pillaged and robbed the countryside, and the peasant's uprising of 1380 is evidence of the deep resentment held by the lower class against feudalism.[17] The ghost's admonitions to be charitable are representative of concerns permeating the century in which the *Awntyrs* was published. Rouse observes that 'The aristocracy read or listened to the stories of Arthurian knights as they reflected the aspirational

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[12] Glenn Burgess, "The Divine Right of Kings Reconsidered," *The English Historical Review* 107, no. 425 (1992): 837-861.
[13] Rouse, "Historical Context," 14.
[14] Andrea Denny-Brown, "Introduction," in *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 8.
[15] Jon Whitman, "Envisioning the End: History and Consciousness in Medieval English Arthurian Romance," *Arthuriana* 23, no. 3 (2013): 89.
[16] Joan Nuth, "The Historical Framework," in *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics* (London: Darton, Londman, and Todd, 2001), 26-27.
[17] Nuth, "The Historical Framework," 26-27.

modes of life',[18] suggesting that the primary audience for this warning of taking 'pité on the poer' is the aristocracy itself. Arthurian romance was thus a principal mode for the aristocracy to process its own anxieties about power, morality, and conflict.[19] Just as the ghost mirrors Guinevere's potential future, the *Awntyrs* reflects the pressing concerns of its own cultural context.

The futility of wealth is best represented by the contrast between Guinevere's mother and her own ghostly form. Before death, the senior Guinevere was even 'Gretter then Dame Gaynour, of garson and golde' (ll. 147). The disparity between Guinevere's mother's splendor and her presently degraded state challenges medieval notions of phenomenology, or the connection between body and mind and the interior self and its external appearance.[20] According to Joan Nuth, the black plague was the most tangible reinforcement of phenomenology in the fourteenth century, as many believed the plague was God's punishment for wrongdoing.[21] That Guinevere's mother's ghostly form does not accurately reflect her living splendor is significant cause for anxiety. If it becomes impossible draw a connection between the mind and body (including clothing and adornments), then one cannot make accurate conclusions about the state of one's soul. This disjunction, made apparent by the ghost being priorly greater than Guinevere, exposes anxiety about the fragility of this foundational concept.

The supernatural figure of Guinevere's mother confronts anxiety through her intimate corporeal connection to Guinevere and by highlighting existential concerns through her divine source of knowledge. The ghost is at once a figure of the past and future, embodying Guinevere's mother-in-death and Guinevere's foreshadowed future. Through such trans-temporality Guinevere is confronted with the reality of her mortality, while also being given an opportunity to alter the future of her soul's resting place. The ghost tells Guinevere to 'Muse on my mirrour' (ll. 167), evincing the literal mirror function she serves in the afterlife. However, this mirroring relationship between the ghost and Guinevere produces anxiety about the extent of the latter's capacity to change her future. While Guinevere and Gawain are given the opportunity to change their fates, and even the fate of Arthurian civilization, the poem's latter half reupdates

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[18] Rouse, "Historical Context" 16.
[19] Lee Tobin McClain, "Gender Anxiety in Arthurian Romance" *Extrapolation* 38, no. 3 (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997): 193.
[20] Saunders, "Mind, Body and Affect," 31.
[21] Nuth, "The Historical Framework," 27.

many of these ghostly admonitions. Although the poet asserts that Guinevere performed the masses requested by the ghost ('Waynour gared wisely write into the west … With a mylion of Masses to make the mynnynge' (ll. 703, 706)), no other divine warnings are fulfilled by the text's end. It is clear that the supernatural simultaneously embodies and confronts the *Awntyrs*' anxiety of determinism and inescapable fate.

Anxiety forms the undercurrent of *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, a poem acutely interested in the relationship between interiority and exteriority, and self-knowledge and divine premonition. The boundaries within these relationships are blurred, and the poet does not attempt to reconcile this ambiguity, but rather enforces the instability of these categories. The theme of anxiety permeates to the end of the *Awntyrs* because the characters do not address their causes of anxiety, reinforcing the disjunction between self-awareness and acting upon their warnings. The characters respond anxiously to their admonitions from the ghost, who is simultaneously anxiety embodied and a figure with the capacity to confront these fears in a way belonging solely to the ghost herself. Anxiety thus forms the terrain of the *Awntyrs off Arthur*, cutting through the idyllic overlay of Arthurian romance and imposing the underlying trepidation that one is never far from ghostly depravity.

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