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Anxiety and the Supernatural in The Awntyrs off Arthur

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Anxiety and the Supernatural in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*

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And riches over reymes withouten eny right,
Wynnen worshipp in werre thorgh wightnesse of hondes?"

(*The Awntyrs off Arthur*, ll. 263-4)

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 worshipp', when doing so 'withouten eny right' (ll. 263-4).¹ The use of 'wynnen worshipp' demonstrates the futility of the battle prowess intrinsic to chivalry; Gawain's faith in the ability to win praise of arms has been shrouded by the means used to achieve it. 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*, which is the anxiety of acting justly. There are several anxieties experienced by these characters that contribute to the poem's underlying existential threat, such as: upholding chivalric ideology and identity; the impossibility of determining what is the right; the justification of exorbitant wealth and a failure of charity; and the commitment to purity and chastity, and refusing the temptations of 'luf paramour' (ll. 213). The supernatural figure of Guinevere's mother plays a significant role in the poem's anxious terrain. Historian Saunders relates the modern concept of phenomenology to a foundation of medieval psychology, which observes the relationship between body, mind, and affect.² This connection informs the reading of anxiety in Arthurian romances, particularly in the *Awntyrs*, as the ghost's 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

¹ All quotations from *The Awntyrs off Arthur* are taken from *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, edited by 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.

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 Zawacki's essay on the *Awntyrs*, he engages with Becker's view that all 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 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 Arthurian romance genre, particularly within *The Awntyrs off Arthur*. The ghost delivers personal warnings to Gawain and Guinevere as well as admonitions for the wider Arthurian court but as they confront their own morality, the inevitability of death remains at the forefront of their exchange. In warning Gawain of Arthur's covetousness, the ghost refers directly to the Wheel of Fortune, indicating the predetermination of Arthur's downfall: 'May no man stry him with strenght while his whele stondes' (ll. 266). While the court should aspire to behave morally (or 'desire to live [well]'⁵), death itself is inescapable. By Zawacki's definition, anxiety also imposes a state of radical self-consciousness.⁶ This becomes problematised as Gawain and Guinevere's do not address many of the ghost's warnings in the second half of the text, negating the opportunity 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 century, chivalry emerged as method for controlling the increasing excess of militarily-trained men.⁷ 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:

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 Ibid.

⁷ 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. by Leah Tether, Johnny McFadyen, Keith Busby, and Ad Putter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017): 14.

“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)

In this quotation, 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 [...] course of direction’.⁸ Gawain asks how he and Arthur’s knights can continue on the same journey of taking land forcefully, when it necessitates casualties. This question is both rhetorical and genuine; he is at once expressing anxiety about the continual acquisition of land through these means, as they are doing so ‘withouten eny right,’ (ll. 263) and is also asking the ghost—a figure of divine knowledge and warning—with genuine concern for what he is meant to do in response to this new self-awareness. The footnote to the Rochester *Awntyrs* edition defines ‘defoulen’ as to ‘put down’,⁹ but the MEC defines it as to ‘trample upon’ and ‘to injure, abuse, torment,’ alongside numerous other terms depicting ruthless arrogation.¹⁰ Gawain’s use of this particular term intensifies the sense that he is worried about acquiring land by killing ‘folke on fele kinges londes,’ and this anxiety is worsened as they gain ‘riches over reymes withouten eny right’ (ll. 263). Gawain’s realization that perhaps 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: ‘Thou has wonen hem in werre with a wrange wile / And geven hem to Sir Gawayn - that my hert grylles’ (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 chivalrous reputation, because ‘To lese suche a lordshipp me wolde thenke laith, / And iche lede opon lyve wold lagh me to scorne’ (ll. 432-3). Gawain will be mocked if he willingly relinquishes his land, reflecting the ideology’s anxious reliance on the somewhat uncontrollable factor of public perception. As chivalry is so dependent on public interpretation, ‘chivalric self-identity is only

⁸ “Fāre,” in *Middle English Compendium*, University of Michigan Press.

⁹ Footnote to *Awntyrs*, ed. Thomas Hahn, ll. 262.

¹⁰ “Dēfōulen,” in *Middle English Compendium*, University of Michigan Press.

partly self-defined through personal action and choice, and to a large extent is hostage to fortune and to public events'.¹¹ Gawain's immediate decision to fight Galeron is complicated two-fold by the first half of the text: Gawain 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. Gawain volunteers to fight Galeron to uphold his reputation, though in doing so, yields to the possibility that the ghost's premonitions about his death will soon come to fruition. However, it is evident that 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). Gawain is foremostly a heroic character, and so fighting Galeron is rather a way of 'encountering and then repressing a basic animal fear of death';¹² immediately jumping to fight is thus a 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 morally acquiring land. The anxiety of the right is most exposed in the poem's second half, in the various ways in which Arthur responds to challenges to the court. When Gawain volunteers to fight Galeron, Arthur refuses: 'Thi lates ar light, / But I nolde for no lordeshipp se thi life lorne' (469-70). A deeper anxiety is present in his resistance when read against Gawain's view that 'God stond with the right!' (ll. 471). Arthur's anxiety towards this combat can be read in two distinct ways: firstly, that Arthur does not believe God stands with the right, and so the knowledge of which side God supports, or what is "right," remains fearfully ambiguous; secondly, that Arthur does believe this notion, and the scene suggests that 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 Kings, is unable to clearly ascertain who is in the right, reinforcing the anxiety of this moral uncertainty.¹³ To appease both men, Arthur returns Galeron's land, and replaces Gawain's now-lost property with land from Wales. The irony of this solution is further compounded by the ghost's earlier warnings of Arthur's covetousness, which Gawain seemingly does not pass on to his king. This resolution induces anxiety because it is clear that Arthur's future downfall, which will result from his covetousness, remains intact.

¹¹ Rouse, "Historical Context," 22.

¹² Zawacki, "A Dark Mirror," 97.

¹³ Glenn Burgess, "The Divine Right of Kings Reconsidered," *The English Historical Review* 107, no. 425 (1992): 837-861.

Arthur's "Band-Aid" solution indicates the cyclical problem of internal conflict within the aristocracy, which Rouse describes as a changing dynamic of chivalry as opportunities for military deployment decreased: 'there arose the problem of [...] modes of internal competition between knights for land and power'.¹⁴ This suggests that the combat between Galeron and Gawain is a symptom of the breakdown of the chivalric system at its core. Within Arthurian romance, 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;
 Her hode of a hawe huwe, ho that here hede hedes. (ll. 15-18)

The dense alliteration of these lines, each containing a minimum of four alliterating sounds, does not focus the sound on any particular word, but rather draws attention to the ornate nature of Guinevere's clothing. This reinforces the medieval notion of 'fashion as a cultural system,' with material wealth being indicative of class status and ranking.¹⁵ '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). In referencing the poor, the *Awntyrs* deviates from romance traditions, and in doing so, connects an otherwise mystical and fictitious tale to the real context of the fourteenth century.¹⁶ With famine at the onset and the introduction of the plague in 1348, the fourteenth century is often called the 'age of adversity,' for being one of the darkest periods in European history.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ The ghost's admonitions to be charitable are representative of

¹⁴ Rouse, "Historical Context," 14.

¹⁵ Andrea Denny-Brown, "Introduction," in *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2012): 8.

¹⁶ Jon Whitman, "Envisioning the End: History and Consciousness in Medieval English Arthurian Romance," *Arthuriana* 23, no. 3 (2013): 89.

¹⁷ Joan Nuth, "The Historical Framework," in *God's Lovers in an Age of Mysticism* (London: Darton, Londman, and Todd, 2001): 26, 27.

¹⁸ Nuth, "The Historical Framework," 26, 27.

concerns permeating the century in which the *Awntyrs* was published. Rouse states that ‘The aristocracy read or listened to the stories of Arthurian knights as they reflected the aspirational modes of life’,¹⁹ suggesting that the primary audience for this warning of taking ‘pité on the poer’ is the aristocracy itself. Arthurian romance was a principal mode for the aristocracy to process its own anxieties about power, morality, and conflict.²⁰ Knowledge of readership makes the ghost’s role the *Awntyrs* more deeply profound, as the warnings to Guinevere and Gawain are also admonitions to readers. Just as the ghost darkly mirrors Guinevere’s future death, the *Awntyrs* reflects the pressing concerns of the time in which it was produced.

The futility of wealth is best represented by the contrast between Guinevere’s mother and the ghost she embodies, described across fourteen lines. Her body is decayed and grotesque, and ‘On the chef of the cholle, / A pade pikes on the polle’ (ll. 114-5), the toads representing the adultery she committed while alive. Her mutilated form is contrasted with her physical state prior to death, when she was even ‘Gretter then Dame Gaynour, of garson and golde’ (ll. 147). The disparity between Guinevere’s mother’s splendor and her ghostly, degraded state challenges the medieval concept of phenomenology, the connection between body and mind and the interior Self and its external appearance. In the fourteenth century, the black plague was the most tangible reinforcement of this widespread notion, as many believed the plague was God’s punishment for wrongdoing.²¹ As phenomenology was thoroughly believed in the time the *Awntyrs* was written, the fact that Guinevere’s mother’s body does not accurately represent the state of her soul when she was alive (but rather indicated the opposite, given her material splendor) is significant cause for anxiety. If one cannot draw a reliable connection between the mind and bodily form, which includes clothing and adornments (which are, symbolically speaking, part of the body), 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 anxiety of purity and chastity is subliminally present in the *Awntyrs* through the figure of the ghost. While Guinevere’s unfaithfulness is not a topic of direct interest in this text, there is a clear reference to other texts in the genre that are concerned with their relationship,

¹⁹ Rouse, “Historical Context” 16.

²⁰ Lee Tobin McClain, “Gender Anxiety in Arthurian Romance” *Extrapolation* 38, no 3 (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997): 193.

²¹ Nuth, “The Historical Framework,” 27.

particularly the Stanzaic and Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The ghost's bodily state is the result of her own adultery: 'That is luf paramour, listes and delites / That has me light and laft loth in a lake' (ll. 213-4). The notion of 'luf paramour' is applied to a general context—producing anxiety of the unknown—as neither Lancelot nor Mordred are not mentioned in this next, except for a brief mention of the latter in relation to Arthur's downfall. The manuscripts of the *Awntyrs* are paired with the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, so readers of this poem are familiar with Mordred and Guinevere's relationship, just as they were likely readers of Arthurian romance and would also know about the Lancelot affair. The ambiguity of this admonition, paired with the poet's assumption of readership knowledge, creates an anxious foreshadowing of an ending not recounted in the *Awntyrs*. This connection of unfaithfulness between both Guinevere and her mother further reinforces the identity of the ghost as a future projection of Guinevere herself. If Guinevere does not take heed of these warning manifest in her mother's ghost's body, she too will be condemned to the same fate. The anxiety of Guinevere's adultery is active throughout the Arthurian romance genre, and is addressed in this text by the supernatural figure, whose premonition allows her to confront the anxiety in a way inaccessible to Guinevere herself.

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. In this transposition of time, Guinevere is confronted with the reality of her mortality, while also being given an opportunity to alter the future of her soul. Guinevere is told by the ghost to 'Muse on my mirroure' (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. The ghost's divine prophecies and her requests of Guinevere also reveal that 'human reform can temper the misfortune'.²² Guinevere and Gawain are given the opportunity to change their fates, and even the fate of Arthurian civilization, but as the second half of the poem reupdates many of these ghostly admonitions, the poet of *Awntyrs* asks what happens when they choose not to. Placing existential importance on humanity or even systems like chivalry, both of which are inherently fallible, produces anxiety. While the poet asserts that Guinevere performed the masses requested by the ghost ('Waynour gared wisely write into the

²² Whitman, "Envisioning the End," 89.

west [...] With a mylion of Masses to make the mynnyge' (ll. 703, 706).), no other divine warnings have been 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 exterior warnings. The characters initially respond anxiously to their admonitions from the ghost, which 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*, cutting through the idyllic overlay of Arthurian romance and imposing the underlying trepidation that one is never far from the dark woods.

Word Count: 3146

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