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“the gracioseste gome that vndir God lyffede”:
A Reconsideration of Sir Gawain in the
Late Medieval Middle English and Middle Scots Romance Tradition

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Declaration

This is to certify that that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

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Abstract

In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, King Arthur's nephew, Sir Gawain, is presented as a troublesome figure whose vengefulness hastens the collapse of Camelot. This characterization is unsurprising in the light of traditional French depictions of Gawain, but it is distinctly at odds with a rival, Anglo-Scottish tradition that depicts him rather differently as a figure of moderation, wise counsel, and courtesy. Indeed, throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this version of Gawain was used by a number of romance writers to explore themes of kingship, identity, and regionalism in England and Scotland.

This thesis attempts to explain the complexities and contradictions of Gawain's role in the Middle English and Middle Scots tradition. Chapter one establishes a "northern Gawain type", drawing on thematic patterns in four northern Gawain romances: *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, *The Avowyng of Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*. Gawain's popularity in the north, coupled with similarities in characterization and narrative focus, mark him as an important regional figure. This discussion continues in the second chapter, which examines *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, a poem specifically concerned with Arthurian kingship and imperialism. In Scotland, Gawain is used in romances to explore pertinent contemporary concerns with the recent loss of Scotland's kings and attitudes towards English expansion. The third chapter considers Gawain's role in two Scottish romances, particularly, *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* and *Lancelot of the Laik*. The final two chapters examine Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

By exploring these narratives in the context of the "northern Gawain type," these chapters offer new insights into Gawain's literary significance for late medieval writers. This thesis offers a reconsideration of Gawain's reputation in late medieval Middle English and Middle Scots literature. It suggests both why he was such a useful figure for the authors of the northern and Scottish romances and why Malory ultimately chose to reject their reading of him and followed instead the more critical and dismissive French tradition. The lasting legacy of Malory's Gawain has influenced his reputation and representation in post-medieval Arthurian literature. Yet, his popularity in the north of England and Scotland during the late Middle Ages, and his symbolic significance in discussions of governance, make him a character deserving of rehabilitation in the pantheon of Arthurian knighthood.

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Introduction

In the latter half of the fourteenth century, an anonymous poet writing in the north midlands of England described King Arthur's reaction upon finding the body of his beloved nephew, Sir Gawain, on the battlefield. The king's grief is all consuming as he cries, "For nowe my wirchipe es wente and my were endide;/ Here es þe hope of my hele, my happynge of armes-/ My herte and my hardynes hale one hym lengede" (3959-3961). Here in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (c. 1400), the death of Gawain signifies the death of Arthur's hope, as the man who "was worthy to be king" dies while defending his lord against Mordred's treachery. At approximately the same time, another anonymous poet in the northwest midlands of England, composed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1400), a poem especially curious about Gawain's reputation. There, in a series of courtesy tests, the lady of the castle attempts to seduce the chivalrous but anxiety prone knight, and upon leaving his bedchamber she chides, "Bot þat 3e be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!" [But that you should be Gawain I very much doubt] (1293), a veiled reference by the poet to Gawain's widespread reputation both within the narrative frame and in the broader Arthurian literary tradition.

These poems, widely considered the crown jewels of the fourteenth-century alliterative revival, treat Gawain with particular interest, and, taken together, suggest just how rewardingly adaptable a character Gawain was in this period. For the poet of the alliterative *Morte*, Gawain is a wise counsellor and celebrated warrior. In *Sir Gawain*, Gawain's reputation is more complicated, as his famed courtesy is not only recognized, but purposely tested in order to expose his own personal failings and the failings of Arthur's Round Table. Less than one hundred years later, Sir Thomas

Malory, writing from London, exemplifies the versatility of Gawain's character when he notes that he "was evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther" (225); a marked change from the more complimentary depictions found in the narratives written in the midlands and northern England and Scotland. The literary tradition surrounding Gawain's characterization is obviously complicated and his place in the canon of Middle English romances becomes increasingly variable throughout the period. For medieval writers and readers of Arthurian texts, Gawain is a popular literary figure whose characterization evolves depending on the geographical, political, and social environment of his makers. Because of Gawain's adaptability as a literary character, the richness of the romances related to him enable an especially rewarding examination of pertinent late medieval social and political issues.

My own interest in Gawain's literary evolution began in 2010 after I completed my MA thesis, which focused on aspects of the loathly lady motif in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While the main objective of that project was to study the role of women within the narrative, such a task proved to be impossible without also considering the actions of the poem's titular hero, Sir Gawain. Arthur's nephew experiences significant change and internal conflict in the course of the text. He begins as a humble knight of the Round Table, tasked with protecting the reputation of his king and kingdom through physical courage and courteous speech, but what follows is a series of tests that see Gawain's famed courtesy pushed to its limits and, in the end, found wanting.

When I began thinking about a doctoral thesis, my initial plan was to expand upon the findings of my earlier work and continue exploring the role of magical

women, like Morgan le Fay, in a broader context. With that in mind, I first read Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1470), but, once again, quickly became distracted by Gawain's presence in that text. Despite having no tale dedicated to him there, Gawain seems ever-present in Malory's great Arthurian tome. He arrives at court vowing vengeance for his slain father and then, on his first quest as a newly made knight, accidentally decapitates a lady. For the remainder of the text, up until his death at the hands of Sir Lancelot, Gawain is a volatile, dangerous, and problematic presence. The more I read, the more I found myself asking why this should be. Gawain's notable kinship bond with King Arthur, coupled with his literary origins in Welsh and Latin literature, give him strong ties to the Matter of Britain. Why would Malory, writing the most ambitious work of Arthurian prose in English, choose to characterize Arthur's nephew in such a negative manner?

This question became complicated when I considered what I knew of Gawain from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a brief reference in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c.1400),¹ and the anonymous poem, *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain* (c. 15th century). Chaucer remarks on Gawain's "olde curteisye" (95) and the anonymous poet of *The Weddyng* presents an especially chivalrous version of Arthur's nephew. At that particular juncture, my knowledge of Gawain consisted of seemingly contradictory representations in four Middle English works. He is at times an idealized representation of chivalry, at others, notably for Malory and the *Gawain*-poet, he proves a more complex figure. Chaucer's reference to his courtesy firmly establishes that by 1400, Sir Gawain was a well-known character for readers in England. His popularity, coupled with the question of Malory's characterization,

¹ Cf. "The Squire's Tale."

²Based on the Anglo-Norman *Roman de Brut* (c. 1150) by Wace, which was itself based on

signify that, although he may have enjoyed a strong presence in Middle English literature, that presence requires deeper analysis.

In the great pantheon of Arthurian knights, many feature in their own unique narrative traditions. Lancelot is, of course, the hero of French romance, and his forbidden love for the queen, when coupled with his famed courtesy, established for him an unparalleled literary fame and popularity. Others, like Kay in particular, were transformed from Celtic heroes into bawdy villains, notable for their poor temper and featured only in comedic interludes. Such characters become known for specific traits and behaviours. With few exceptions, Kay is always the foolish knight, Galahad the exemplar of chivalric piety, and Lancelot the flower of chivalry. Gawain, however, seems to be a character who appealed greatly yet diversely to writers and readers of Arthurian works. And thus, despite this popularity, he is a figure whose characterization becomes increasingly complicated throughout the period.

The overall goal of this project is to examine and reconsider the variety of ways in which Gawain is used in the Middle English romance tradition both as an exploration of knightly qualities and ‘character’, and as a tool to reveal the contemporary political and social concerns of late medieval readers and writers, particularly in the north of England and Scotland. The small collection of Gawain-related romances, written mostly outside of London, will provide the starting point for my exploration of Gawain’s literary success in the country of his literary birth. Because these poems were produced in the midlands and the north, I am especially interested in how and why themes of nationality and regionalism play into these narratives. In addition, I will examine how King Arthur is represented in these texts

in comparison to his nephew, which may uncover regional attitudes towards kingship. As a knight with strong ties to both England and Scotland, Gawain is a unique presence in the Arthurian matter and may enable a study of how contemporary late medieval history and politics played a role in shaping the tales connected to Gawain, the son of a Scottish lord and nephew of a king who is emblematic of a unified Britain. Because so many of the texts are romances, I will also question why this particular genre is such a suitable vehicle for stories pertaining to Gawain's life and adventures.

It is my hope that by studying Gawain in the place of his literary birth, I may discover new methods of understanding both Gawain's literary popularity and the underlying societal and political influences at play in these regional texts. The contradictory depictions of Gawain offer a unique glimpse into the importance of Arthurian characters to discussions of nation and identity in late medieval England and Scotland. The lasting influence of Malory's work, which comes so late in the period, at times overshadows the legacy of Gawain's role in the romance tradition, which is why a re-examination of earlier Middle English Gawain-related material is beneficial in any attempt to contextualize Gawain's place in the romances. Exposing how and why Gawain was used in Middle English romances may also shed some light on the authorial decisions made by the *Gawain*-poet, Malory, and numerous anonymous writers of Gawain-related texts. By doing so, this project aims to re-establish Gawain as a figure of great literary and historical importance to the Arthurian tradition in the north of England and beyond.

Chapter I

Knight of the North: The Gawain Romance Tradition Defined

This chapter will begin to explore Gawain's role in Middle English literature with an examination of the romances of the fifteenth-century. These romances portray a Gawain who is an exemplary knight, a reputation derived from early Latin and Welsh texts, and provide an intriguing contrast to the French tradition where Gawain is seen as a chivalrous, but inherently flawed figure. In the Middle English tradition, Gawain plays a particularly important role in defining both the nature of Arthur's kingship and the themes of national identity. As a knight who is often called upon to counsel his king and to represent him in tricky acts of diplomacy, Gawain is also a central element in these romances' exploration of kingship, chivalry, and nationhood.

The chapter will begin with a brief account of Gawain's literary history to provide a context for his role in romance, before looking more closely at four northern Gawain poems: *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle for helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*, *The Avowyng of Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*. Through a close reading of these texts, I will discuss common themes, patterns and characterization specific to romances featuring Gawain.

Gawain and Genre: The Place of Romance

In her book *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, Geraldine Heng argues that,

If romance did not begin in the Middle Ages, the genre is nonetheless so indelibly marked by the Middle Ages – when it was arguably the most prominent, sophisticated, and widely disseminated species of literary

narrative – that romance seems virtually synonymous with medieval time itself [...]. (Heng 2)

The genre, which gained popularity during the twelfth century in France, before moving into Anglo-Norman and English-speaking Britain between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries (Cooper 3), has also become synonymous with King Arthur and his Round Table. The importance of romance to the Arthurian mythos cannot be overstated, and while Arthur appears in chronicles throughout the period, it is the romances of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that give birth to what would become, arguably, the most enduring work of Arthurian literature in English, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1470).

Defining 'romance' is not without complication, as it seems to comprise less a genre and more a series of motifs grouped together to create common patterns and themes. As Helen Cooper writes,

There is a word for such things now: a 'meme', an idea that behaves like a gene in its ability to replicate faithfully and abundantly, but also on occasion to adapt, mutate, and therefore survive in different forms and cultures. These motifs and conventions grew up with the genre of which they formed a part and which they helped define. (Cooper 3)

Furthermore, "...whilst romance motifs remain superficially the same, sometimes even down to verbal detail, the usage and understanding of them changes over time, rather in the way that a word may change meaning" (Cooper 4).

One reason for the popularity of romance was that it allowed writers to discuss societal and political concerns in a codified manner. The motifs common to romance made the genre a perfect form for understanding the world of politics, honour, and secular morality through literary representations. I will argue that Gawain himself becomes a motif – not simply a character *in* romances, but a construction *of* romance. His multiple appearances are often informed by *where* the

text has been produced, rather than any narrative necessity. As Arthur's nephew, he is an integral character in the Arthurian mythos. But his presence is often symbolic in and of itself. Unlike Arthur, who is made a figure of political importance, Lancelot, who is so strongly associated with the French that he can never be a point of English solidarity, or Galahad, a figure so closely associated with piety that his mere presence allows Arthurian literature a temporary theological importance, Gawain is always a secular hero. He is not a historical figure, deployed by English kings and their apologists to prove their ancestral claims to the throne. While he is heavily influenced by the French literary tradition, he is never French, which allows him the opportunity to fulfill certain national obligations. And while often portrayed as pious, he is not a figure associated closely with the knightly ideal of piety. Ultimately, Gawain is a romance motif, a character that firmly belongs in the Otherworld of romance, whose presence suggests historical or political realities, but always through a literary lens.

Gawain is often appropriated by romance writers to suit their individual narrative needs. Certain Gawain-romances are in obvious dialogue with contemporary political movements. Others, however, are more interested in social issues such as gender and chivalry, and do not seem concerned with particular political or historical moments. At the center of these romances, however, is Gawain, who, as I have noted above, is more suited for the genre than his fellow knights or even Arthur. Cooper writes that, typically, romances show,

a concern less with the communal good than with the individual hero's inward thoughts, feelings, and aspirations, and, frequently, those of the heroine too; and a happy ending as normative, that ending often incorporating a return from an encounter with death – a symbolic resurrection. (Cooper 10)

In what follows I will be interested in the idea of communal concern versus focus on “the individual hero.” For, at the heart of the northern Gawain-romances, is always a heroic journey for its titular character. Whether Gawain departs for a long quest or whether his task is a simple tourney, the focus remains on his words and his actions. He sometimes adventures alone, but he nonetheless repeatedly becomes the representative for the Arthurian whole. His deeds reflect and protect Arthur’s kingdom, even when Arthur himself cannot do so. In many romances, his presence is a symbolic representation of Arthur’s golden reign and the potential for Gawain’s death is thus of grave concern for romance writers. He is both an individual knight on a journey of self-discovery *and* a representation of the Arthurian community. I will discuss the romances individually throughout this dissertation, but the key to understanding Gawain’s importance in these texts lies in first acknowledging his unique place as both a hero of romance and a part of the very fabric that makes the genre. If romance is a combination of common elements, appropriated by different writers and audiences to suit their literary and cultural needs, then Gawain is, I argue, one of the key elements that creates the genre and guarantees its lasting popularity in Middle English and beyond.

Gawain’s Literary History

Gawain was, arguably, a fully realized character at the time the Gawain-romances were composed in England. In order to understand the changes made by English authors to this existing figure, however, it is important to trace his literary history and the basis for certain characteristics that are adopted and, at times, changed in the Middle English texts. The earliest references to a figure named Gawain come from the Welsh tradition. As Thomas Hahn writes,

Tales in the Welsh *Mabinogion*, and scattered allusions from other Celtic works, suggest that Gawain was well-established in oral narratives as the nephew, companion, and defender of the great king...Behind those earliest surviving stories there may lurk traces of divinity or superhuman stature, linking Gawain to solar heroes whose strength surges before noon, and wanes with the setting sun' (Hahn 218).

While Gawain appears in numerous Welsh and Latin texts, his most important moment of conception is the twelfth century *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey's work lends Gawain the early markers of what he will eventually become, as, although the *Historia* is a chronicle rather than romance, we can find within it most of the character traits that will make him a hero of and for romance.

In Geoffrey's *Historia*, Gawain is the son of King Lot and Anna, Arthur's sister. As Arthur's nephew, he is granted the important position of counsellor to the king. He is primarily a warrior, tasked with fighting for Arthur in his campaign against the Roman emperor, Lucius, and perishes in the final battle against his brother Mordred. Additionally, Geoffrey describes Gawain's education in Rome, where he serves in the household of Pope Sulpicius and is made a knight. These attributes provide the foundation for all future depictions of Gawain. The most important of these are his close relationship with Arthur and his martial skill. While his reputation changes over time, the Galfridian contribution serves as a permanent reminder of Gawain's British heritage. Hereafter, he is forever Arthur's nephew, a great warrior, and an integral member of the king's inner circle of advisors.

After his appearance in Geoffrey's *Historia*, Gawain's next moment of literary importance comes in the work of Chrétien de Troyes and the anonymous French poets who created the Vulgate Cycle. This is not to say that Gawain does not

appear in earlier Latin or English texts – such as William of Malmesbury's *Gestaregum Anglorum* (1125) and Layamon's *Brut*²(c. 1200), but the French invention of the romance genre is a crucial moment in the evolution of Gawain's character. The most influential of the French writers is Chrétien de Troyes, whose romances adopt Gawain and permanently turn him from a hero of the chronicles to a chivalric, but flawed, member of Arthur's legendary Round Table. As Norris J. Lacy notes, however,

Chrétien seems to take a more critical attitude toward Gawain and the way of life he represents as his career progresses, and particularly in *Lancelot* and *Perceval* he is unfavorably contrasted with the hero and made the butt of some burlesque humor. Chrétien seems particularly concerned with Gawain's blind adherence to custom and frivolous attachment to the opposite sex. (Lacy 178)

Where Geoffrey of Monmouth presented a warrior knight, Chrétien's Gawain is notable for his staunch adherence to the chivalric code and his love of women. Gawain's dedication to chivalry becomes problematic in these French tales, as instead of an attribute to be admired, his strict obedience makes him, at times, potentially 'tedious' and overly idealized (Schmolke-Hasselmann 105). This idealization is jeopardized, however, when Gawain's flirtatious behaviour becomes an increasingly problematic character trait.

Perhaps this is most clearly depicted in Chrétien's *Yvain*. Yvain, newly married, is asked to join the king who must depart after a weeklong celebration of the wedding. Gawain attempts to sway Yvain and explains why he should leave his new wife and his newly acquired lands:

What! Would you be one of those men...who are worth less because of their wives? May he who diminishes his worth by marrying be

²Based on the Anglo-Norman *Roman de Brut* (c. 1150) by Wace, which was itself based on Geoffrey's *Historia*.

shamed by Holy Mary! He who has a beautiful woman as wife or sweetheart should be better for her; for it's not right for her to love him if his fame and worth are lost. Indeed, you would suffer afterwards for her love if it caused you to lose your reputation, because a woman will quickly withdraw her love – and she's not wrong to do so – if she finds herself hating a man who has lost face in any way after he has become lord of the realm. A man must be concerned with his reputation before all else! Break the leash and yoke and let us, you and me, go to the tourneys, so no one can call you a jealous husband. Now is not the time to dream your life away but to frequent tournaments, engage in combat, and joust vigorously, whatever it might cost you. He who hesitates achieves nothing! Indeed, you must come along, for I'll fight under your banner. See to it that our friendship doesn't end because of you, dear companion, for it will never fail on my account.³ (326-327)

Gawain's arguments are revealing of his own feelings towards women, marriage, knighthood, and fellowship. For him, reputation is synonymous with chivalry. A knight who keeps his chivalric oaths is a knight who maintains his reputation. But for Gawain, adhering to his chivalric oaths means engaging in knightly pursuits. Marriage has no place here, and while he acknowledges the importance of love, he views knightly fellowship as a more beneficial relationship. His assertion that he will not be responsible for their broken friendship is a strikingly unreasonable statement, as Yvain is now forced to choose between his new bride and his friendship. According to Gawain, the only way to be a good knight is to actively partake in tournaments, combat, and jousting. It would be improper for a knight to stay behind with his wife and his lands in Gawain's chivalric philosophy.

These statements are not surprising, however, in light of Chrétien's overall treatment of Gawain. Unlike Sir Lancelot or Sir Tristram, Gawain is never associated with a single love interest (Schmolke-Hasselmann 120). He does not marry, or if he does, the marriage is isolated to a single tale and not referred to elsewhere. This

³ Translation by William W. Kibler from Chrétien de Troyes. "The Knight of the Lion (Yvain)." *Arthurian Romances* (1991).

behaviour is met with “affection” and “critical irony” (Schmolke-Hasselmann 129), for the authors of these French romances both celebrate Gawain’s knightly deeds and criticize him for his human failures. Gawain tells Yvain

...for if I had as beautiful a lady as you have, my dear friend, by faith I place in God and the saints, I’d be very reluctant to leave her! I know I’d be infatuated myself. But a man, unable to heed his own advice, can give good counsel to another, much like those preachers who are sinful lechers, but who teach and preach the good that they have no intention of practicing themselves! (327)

While Gawain acknowledges the temptation of women, he feels that they are a distraction, which is ironic for a knight who seems constantly distracted by damsels whom he cannot resist. Chrétien does not give Gawain a wife or a tale of his own, so he is never the hero of these romances. This is not to say that he is an overtly negative figure; as we shall see, he is arguably one of the most popular literary figures to come out of the Arthurian mythos, but there is a distinct lack of emphasis on Gawain in the works of Chrétien, which leaves gaps in his literary development.

After Chrétien, the most influential French work in the development of Gawain as a knightly figure is the thirteenth-century Vulgate Cycle, or Prose *Lancelot*. This five volume work of prose covers a vast array of Arthurian tales, including the history of the Holy Grail (*Estoire del Saint Grail*), the history of Merlin and Arthur’s birth (*Estoire de Merlin*), the adventures of Lancelot (*Lancelot en prose*), the quest for the grail (*Queste del Saint Graal*), and the death of Arthur (*La Morte le roi Artu*). In addition, the Post-Vulgate Cycle re-examined and edited these tales, providing extra content and inspiration for Middle English authors. Once again, Gawain is not given his own tale, but he does feature prominently in these stories. The thirteenth century also saw the development of the *Perceval* Continuations, sequels to the original stories of Chrétien de Troyes. Both the Vulgate Cycle and the

four Continuations expand Gawain's role in these familiar tales, but he is always a secondary character. This does not mean that Gawain was not a popular character, however, quite the contrary. It seems that the lack of stand-alone Gawain stories led to a surplus of Gawain-related romance verse (J. Taylor 65). As Jane H.M. Taylor notes, there are around twenty-eight of these romances, all heavily based on the work of Chrétien, and many featuring Gawain as the protagonist (J. Taylor 65).⁴

Schmolke-Hasselmann argues that "a study of the later Arthurian romances, especially those of the Gawain group, suggests that in subsequent generations both authors and their public begin to react in some measure against the excessive and therefore rather tedious idealization of Gawain" (105). His characterization in these poems is also of note as "Gawain appears, consistently, as a flirt if not an outright seducer, offering enthusiastic kisses (but never love or marriage) to passing ladies, escaping irate husbands by a hair's breadth" (J. Taylor 65). In many of these romances, Gawain is faced with numerous familiar romance motifs. Taylor uses the late twelfth/early thirteenth century *La Vengeance Raguidel* as an example, a poem where Gawain faces "a challenge to Arthur's knights conveyed by a dead body, a decapitation machine, a cloak only to be worn by men whose wives are faithful..., intelligent greyhounds, [and] a lady who has vowed to ride her horse backwards until she meets Gawain" (65). By the end of the thirteenth century, Gawain had gained increasing popularity in French and Continental literature. He is the protagonist of many poems and often at the center of comical and supernatural narratives.

The legacy of the French writers is, then, the establishment of Gawain's at times problematic combination of a dedication to the chivalric code *and* a highly

⁴ According to Taylor, these are "often known as the epigonal romances" (65).

flirtatious nature. For non-English writers, Gawain was a popular character, deserving of more attention. He is adapted and evolved to suit his audience, which explains the at times burlesque nature of the Gawain poems. This is not to say that *all* poems featuring Gawain outside of England were bawdy, but the character allowed a certain artistic and tonal freedom late in the period. As a knight, he was celebrated for his chivalry and often sent on fantastical quests, encountering numerous romance motifs that would later be adopted by English writers. As a man, however, he was prone to error, making him an interesting dichotomy of knightly ideals and human failings. What begins to emerge is a figure of great literary popularity who is chosen again and again as a central figure in numerous texts. This response is clearly seen in the continuations of Chrétien and the many short romances dedicated to Gawain later in the period. But even more compelling is how this affects Middle English writers who begin to create their own translations and variations of French sources. Gawain, who for the French is a figure of chivalry and bawdy humour, transforms once more as English writers reclaim the legend for England.

Gawain in the Middle English Tradition

There was a flourishing of Middle English Arthurian, and to a lesser extent, Gawain-related literature during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England and Scotland. British writers had to balance numerous motifs related to Gawain, as his longevity as a literary character provided many possibilities for interpretation. As we have seen, the most important works relating to Gawain's characterization are Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* and the later French writers, so that authors writing in Middle English or Older Scots had to amalgamate and adapt these varying

versions of the same character to create something uniquely British. Gawain's earliest origins, which emphasized his nobility and martial prowess, were easily accepted by Middle English authors. The legacy left by French writers, however, proved an interesting challenge and the purposeful changes made by authors in English tell us much about how Gawain was perceived in England and why he became increasingly popular throughout the period. As Lacy explains,

There is in the Middle English a marked reluctance to take over any of the negative features of the French Gawain, and the Middle English romance in many ways restores Gawain to a position of respect and dignity. [...] One possible explanation for this is that English authors and audiences regarded Gawain as a British hero and that it was considered unseemly to show such a figure in a poor light. (Lacy *Arthurian* 178)

In an attempt to amalgamate the popular French traditions with its problematic Gawain and the earliest Latin characterizations, Middle English authors combined aspects of each Gawain-type to create something new. The gap left by the French writers, who present an at times tedious knight, is met with British poets interested in reclaiming the character for both literary and nationalist purposes. In addition, the creation of a uniquely English Gawain speaks to changes in romance writing in England and Scotland. The French invention of romance was eagerly adopted and where previously in England, Gawain had been a figure of mostly chronicle or epic poetry, he was now evolving into a hero of the *English* romances.

Arguably, the most important and influential romances relating to Gawain begin to appear at the end of the fourteenth century. Just as French Arthurian work became popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Arthurian literature flourished in England towards the late middle ages. Some of these works were heavily based on French sources, while others were unique creations, incorporating numerous

romance motifs and allusions to British political and social concerns. The romances dating to the late fourteenth century include unparalleled works of Arthurian literature, including the alliterative and stanzaic *Morte Arthure*, *Ywain and Gawain*, a Middle English translation of Chrétien's *Yvain, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Carle of Carlisle*, most likely the earliest of the Gawain-centric romances I will discuss in this dissertation. These fourteenth century texts are varied in their content, as some, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Carle of Carlisle*, feature Gawain as their protagonist, while others, while not focused primarily on him are translations of French works that feature important developments for Gawain's character.⁵

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the best known of the fourteenth century texts, although its fame is a modern development. I will discuss *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in more detail in chapter four, as despite its problematic reception history, it remains a crucial addition to the romance tradition surrounding Gawain and includes many characteristics of Middle English Gawain-centric narratives. Its date of composition, however, is roughly the same as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and Gawain's minor inclusion in this text proves that by the end of the fourteenth century, his popularity was widespread throughout England and Scotland.⁶

⁵ In addition, *The Jeaste of Gawain*, a poem that survives in multiple manuscripts and printed editions (the earliest from 1564), is an adaptation of the continuation to Chrétien's *Perceval*. The popularity of this particular poem is notable, as it contains a traditionally French depiction of Gawain instead of the newer Middle English version of the character. Gawain's dalliance with a lady leads to the death of her father and brothers. Although Gawain kills them in order to protect the lady from harm, his involvement with her leads to this troubling, albeit comical, situation. Cf. chapter three for a discussion of *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*, which also adapts this episode from *Perceval*.

⁶ Gawain is mentioned very briefly in *The Squire's Tale* where Chaucer notes "his olde curteisye,/ Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye" (95-96).

The fifteenth century saw even more works devoted to Gawain, as the majority of Gawain-romances were composed during this period. These include *The Avowyng of Arthure*, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*. *The Awntyrs* is the most popular of these, as it survives in four manuscripts and seems to have enjoyed widespread distribution during the period, despite its northern dialect. In addition, two important works of Arthurian prose were produced in this century: *The Prose Merlin* (mid fifteenth century), a translation of the *Estoire de Merlin*, and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1470). Both of these works feature Gawain in a major role, but Malory's *Morte* is of particular interest, as it depicts a flawed Gawain, marking a distinct change from the usual English interpretation.⁷ This survey is, of course, incomplete, but the works listed here mark important moments in Gawain's literary history. While the works of Chaucer and Malory were created in London and differ from the more northern poems, they show that Gawain was, at the very least, an irreplaceable presence in Middle English Arthurian literature. The more northern works, which include the alliterative *Morte Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and numerous Gawain-romances, however, present a uniquely English Gawain who is an amalgamation of the earlier Latin texts and the French tradition. The northern Gawain is heroic, noble, and always closely tied to Arthur, but more notably, he is known for his courtesy, wisdom, prudence, and skilful diplomacy. It is this version of Gawain that emerges during this late period in England and Scotland.⁸

⁷ I will discuss this at length in chapter five.

⁸ Many of these poems were adapted into ballad form during the sixteenth century, which further emphasizes Gawain's popularity as the subject of literary works. These ballads include *The Green Knight*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, and *The Carle of Carlisle*, which are adaptations of the earlier *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. These three poems are collected in the Percy Folio, an eighteenth-century

The Gawain Romances

As Philip Boardman explains, “The Gawain romances tend to be relatively short and they come into increasing prominence late in the period, so we can say that Gawain himself, while always centrally present in the Arthurian materials, gains stature as an individual English hero as the English romances establish an identity separate from the French cycle” (P. Boardman 257). The positive portrayal of Gawain in the romances is a purposeful reclamation by English poets who adapted the French texts and characterizations to address a lack of unique Arthurian works in Middle English. The French tradition was evidently the dominant one in the European Arthurian literature, as we can see from the printer William Caxton’s discussion of the genre in the preface to his edition of Malory. He justifies the decision to print Malory’s great Arthurian work, noting, “consydering that [Arthur] was a man borne wythin this royaume, and kyng and emperor of the same, and that there ben in Frensshe dyvers and many noble volumes of his actes and also of his knyghtes” (Caxton 815). He then states, “And also [Arthur] is more spoken of beyonde the see, moo books made of his noble actes, than there be in Englund; as wel in Duche, Ytalyen, Spaynysshe, and Grekysshe, as in Frensshe” (Caxton 816). The lack of English texts is referenced once more in Caxton’s prologue, as he concludes, “And many noble volumes be made of hym and of his noble knyghtes in Frensshe, which I have seen and redde beyonde the see, which been not had in our maternal tongue. But in Walsse ben many, and also in Frensshe (and somme in Englysshe, but nowher nygh alle)” (Caxton 817). Even so late in the period, Caxton

collection of ballads and poems (many of these poems date earlier than the date of the manuscript compilation). In addition to the adaptations mentioned above, the Percy Folio also contains *The Turk and Sir Gawain*.

makes particular note of the lack of Arthurian texts in English. The authors of the Gawain romances were filling this need, while simultaneously moulding Gawain into a specifically English (and, at times, Scottish) hero. In order to discuss the Middle English characterization of Gawain, it is first necessary to acknowledge his apparent lack of characterization in certain texts.

The four romances⁹ I will discuss in this chapter, *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* (c. mid fifteenth century), *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (c. 1400), *The Avowyng of Arthur* (c. late fourteenth, early fifteenth century), and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* (printed 1508) share numerous thematic similarities. Many feature elements of the supernatural or fantastical, a possible reference to Gawain's Celtic origins and a direct contrast to Lancelot and his Christian milieu. Yet, although the Gawain romances are populated with ghosts, giants, hags, and other magical creatures, they also explore the world of courtly politics. Gawain often finds himself at the center of tournaments, land exchanges, marriage arrangements, and threats to the precarious social hierarchy of late medieval England. Furthermore, the composition of the Gawain romances occurred outside of London, in the midlands and the north, which creates a sense of continuity and shared landscape throughout the varied texts. With the exception of *The Jeaste of Gawain*, Gawain is the heroic figure of each poem. He is the pinnacle of chivalry, the best of Arthur's knights, and the knightly embodiment of Arthur's Round Table. As Boardman explains, "Gawain represents for the individual knight both the belief in perfectibility and the standard of perfection" (P. Boardman 259). Gawain's courtesy,

⁹ *The Awntyrs off Arthur* will be examined in chapter two while *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* will be concluded in part of chapter three, alongside the Middle Scots poem, *Lancelot of the Laik*.

good manners, and political and strategic savvy (on and off the battlefield), exemplify all the best qualities of the ideal Arthurian knight.

The Gawain of the English romances is overwhelmingly successful in his quests and deeds. Yet, as Hahn states,

The consolidating pressure that emanates from Gawain arises not, however, through some novelistic sense of “character,” dependent upon a unique and consistent personality with individualized traits, complexly drawn motives, or psychologized feelings. Instead, Gawain plays a *role*; he routinely facilitates the extravagant adventures that happen around him, and does so to such an extent that one might even think of him almost as a narrative function. (Hahn 223)

Hahn’s argument is compelling. Unlike Lancelot, who excels in the French texts despite his many earthly flaws, the English romances, according to Hahn, present a Gawain without much in the way of human failings or faults. Boardman supports this notion when he writes, “Through all the romances in the early Arthurian tradition, Gawain filled a structural role as foil or standard against which other knights could be measured.” (P. Boardman 258) Yet, I believe both Hahn and Boardman have oversimplified Gawain’s behaviour in the textual tradition, as, although he is often portrayed as an ideal, his qualities are often revealed only in response to testing situations and complex, often subtle, negotiations. Hence his role varies quite markedly depending upon the nature of the text within which he appears. This subtle variation upon a theme is quite deliberate and suggests one of the reasons why Gawain became such a popular and important literary figure of national significance

Characterization in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain*

In *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*,¹⁰ Gawain plays the traditional role of the loathly lady's knight on behalf of his king. Although the text presents a typical loathly lady tale, his role in the narrative makes *The Weddyng* somewhat unique to the genre. As Mary Leech writes, "Unlike other knights in the Loathly Lady tales, Gawain has no obvious flaw. Gawain never acts unchivalrously; he is never discourteous to anyone, not even the hideous Dame Ragnell; he never argues with Arthur, nor does he sway from his duty to his king" (Leech 213). The typical structure of a loathly lady tale¹¹ features a knight who has committed any number of sins.¹² This knight is then tasked with a quest; usually he must answer the question, "what do women most desire?" A loathly woman will then appear to the knight and offer him the answer to this question in exchange for a sexual favour. After the knight agrees to this exchange, the lady tells him that all women desire sovereignty. Once his life has been spared, the knight must fulfill his part of the bargain. The loathly lady usually offers him a variation of this bargain: she will either be beautiful by day and ugly by night, or she will be beautiful

¹⁰ All further quotes will be from the Stephen H. Shepherd edition of the text. I will refer to the text as *The Weddyng*, from this point forward. The poem is dated to the mid-fifteenth century. It survives in a single manuscript, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C. 86, which is dated to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century (Shepherd 243).

¹¹I refer here specifically to the Middle English loathly lady tales: Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and John Gower's "Tale of Florent."

¹² Chaucer's knight in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is an unnamed rapist who is brought before Arthur's queen for punishment. The rapist knight is unique to Chaucer's loathly lady tale and may, in fact, be a subtle allusion to Gawain due to his popularity in the English romances and Chaucer's familiarity with the motif.

by night and ugly by day.¹³ The knight leaves the decision up to her, thus granting her sovereignty, and the loathly lady transforms into a beautiful maiden.¹⁴

As Leech notes, Gawain is without sin in *The Weddyng*. It is King Arthur who is challenged with the question of discovering what women most desire. While hunting, Arthur meets Sir Gromer-Somer Joure, a knight who claims Arthur has stolen his lands and given them to Gawain. Sir Gromer delivers the “loathly lady question” to Arthur, and the king reacts with much fear and agitation. Sir Gromer threatens him with certain death if Arthur cannot accomplish his quest. Gawain is the only knight mentioned by name in the text, and he enters the narrative with the sole purpose of helping Arthur. He notices the king’s unease and immediately adopts the challenge as his own. He tells Arthur, “And I shall also rydean oderwaye/ And enquire of every man and woman, and get what I may” (187-188). Arthur responds, “Ytt is well advised, Gawen the good” (192) and the two ride off in opposite directions, asking men and women the question “what do women most desire?”

Gawain’s willingness to help Arthur continues once the king comes face to face with Dame Ragnell, the proverbial loathly lady. Once again, the typical narrative structure of a loathly lady tale is changed here so that Dame Ragnell promises to help Arthur in exchange for marriage with Gawain. When the lady makes her request, Arthur replies,

I maye nott graunt the
To make warraunt Syr Gawen to wed the;
Alle lyeth in hym alon –
Butt, and itt be so, I woll do my labour
In saving of my lyfe to make itt secur;
To Gawen woll I make my mone. (291-296)

¹³ Once again, Chaucer offers a variation of this bargain. His loathly lady offers the knight a choice between beauty and disloyalty, or ugliness and loyalty. As a reward, she becomes both beautiful and loyal to the reformed knight.

¹⁴For a discussion of the loathly lady motif in Malory’s “Tale of Gareth,” cf. chapter five.

[I cannot promise you to guarantee that Gawain will wed you; all depends upon him alone – but, if he will, I will take pains in (the interest of) saving my life to secure it; I will make my complaint to Gawain.¹⁵]

Arthur cannot speak *for* Gawain, but he promises to speak *to* Gawain in an attempt to save his own life. Despite his reservations, Arthur knows his knight well, and admits aloud, “For [Gawain] wol be loth to saye naye” (305). Once again, Gawain’s response to Arthur’s woeful request is overwhelmingly cheerful, even, perhaps, foolhardy. Arthur tells him about his meeting with Dame Ragnell and her marriage request, to which Gawain responds:

Ys this all? [...]
 I shall wed her, and wed her agayn!
 Though she were a fend –
 Though she were as foulle as Belsabub –
 Her shall I wed, by the Rood;
 Or ells were nott I your frende –

For ye are my Kyng with honour
 And have worshypt me in many a stowre;
 Therfor shall I nott let.
 To save your lyfe, lorde, itt were my parte –
 Or where I false and a great coward –
 And my worshypp is the bett. (342-353)

[Is this all? [...] I shall wed her, and wed her again! If she were a fiend – If she were as foul as Beelzebub – I will wed her, by the Cross; or else I would not be your friend. – For you are my King with honour, and have honoured me in many a battle; therefore, shall I not hold back. To save your life, lord, [it] is my duty – or else I [would be] false and a great coward – and my honour is better than that.]

Gawain’s hyperbolic exclamations regarding his upcoming nuptials are juxtaposed with his desire to honour his king. Despite the arguments advanced above by Boardman and Hahn, Gawain’s defining characteristic in these romances is, arguably, his loyalty. Here, in *The Weddyng*, Gawain’s loyalty to Arthur is blind. He

¹⁵All translations from *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain* are my own, with additional material by Stephen H.A. Shepherd from *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure. Middle English Romances*, unless otherwise noted.

does not care that Dame Ragnell is hideous, nor does he care that Arthur has included him in this one-sided bargain. Rather, his focus remains on saving Arthur's life in an effort to prove his worthiness and worship. This is emphasized when Gawain further assures his king that he will marry Dame Ragnell:

I woll wed her att whate tyme ye woll sett.
 I pray you make no care,
 For and she were the most fowlyst wyght
 That ever men might se with sight,
 For your love I woll nott spare. (367-371)

[I will wed her at whatever time you appoint. I pray you do not worry, for (even) if she were the foulest creature that ever men might look upon, for your love I will not hold back.]

Gawain literally entrusts Arthur with his future. He will marry Dame Ragnell at the time of Arthur's choosing. He does not care what she looks like; he will do anything for Arthur's love – a love easily granted by Arthur once Gawain agrees to the marriage.

The anonymous author of *The Weddyng* makes no mention of Gawain's initial reaction to his new bride's repulsive appearance. She is brought to court and, while Guinevere and the courtiers react with horror, Gawain seemingly has nothing to say regarding the loathly creature he must marry. Once the marriage ceremony and feast are complete and Gawain is left alone in his bedchamber with the Dame, his loyalty to Arthur never wavers. Despite the fact that he is alone with Dame Ragnell, free from witnesses, he continues his display of overwhelming enthusiasm for his bride. When Dame Ragnell says, "Yett, for Arthours sake, kysse me att the leste/ I pray you do this att my request" (635-636), Gawain replies, "I woll do more/ Then for to kysse, and God before!" (638-639). Ragnell's evocation of Arthur's name is interesting here. It is as if she reminds Gawain that he must do all that she asks

because Arthur demands it. Yet, Gawain's lack of disgust at her appearance, coupled with his willingness to do more than kiss her, shows an extraordinary display of loyalty. His obedience, both to Arthur and his new wife, separates him from the typical knight of the loathly lady tales. It is Arthur who has sinned, yet Gawain willingly accepts the king's punishment and, in the process, proves that, unlike Arthur, he is the worthiest knight in Camelot.

The question remains, however, do these episodes of overt obedience show Gawain to be simply an archetype? Gawain's lack of reaction to Dame Ragnell, indeed his lack of repulsion, seem to indicate a man without any sense of individuality or opinion. By contrast, the Wife of Bath's knight reacts with horror upon learning he must marry the loathly lady. He cries, "Allas and weylawey!/ I woot right wel that swich was my biheste./ For Goddes love, as chees as newe requeste!/ Taak al my good, and lat my body go" [Alas, woe is me! I know full well that was my promise. For the love of God, make a different request! Take all my goods, and leave my body free (299).] (1058-1060).¹⁶ When the loathly lady refuses to release him from his promise, he moans, "Nay, my dampnacioun!/ Allas, that any of my nacioun/ Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!" [No, my damnation! Alas that any of my family should be so appallingly socially shamed! (299).] (1067-1069). The knight is repulsed by the lady's appearance and deeply ashamed that his new wife will tarnish his family's reputation.¹⁷ His outburst continues in the bedchamber once he is left alone with his new wife. He tells her, "Thou art so loothly and so oold also,/ And therto comen of so lough a kynde,/ That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and

¹⁶All translations from "The Wife of Bath's Tale" are by Colin Wilcockson, unless otherwise noted. Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales: A Selection* (2008).

¹⁷Let it not be forgotten that the knight's crime in the text is the rape of a maiden. He shows little concern for the initial crime, but displays outright hysteria when faced with his "punishment."

wynde./ So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!” [You are so loathsome and so old,/ and what is more, of such low birth,/ that it is little wonder if I toss and turn./ I wish to God my heart would break! (233).] (1100-1103). Not only does the knight find her appearance disgusting, he is horrified by her low social standing. Although the knight is eventually rewarded once the lady transforms into a beautiful maiden, he does not silently accept his fate, unlike Gawain’s taciturn willingness to marry Dame Ragnell and, in the process, secure Arthur’s life and reputation.

Despite the comedic nature of the poem, it does include a marked change in the typical treatment of Gawain’s romantic love interests. He is said to have “weddyd oft in his days, Butt so well he never lovyd woman” (832-833). For a character who is rarely given a consistent love interest, it is notable that the poet of *The Weddyng* grants him this temporary marital happiness. Furthermore, the reference to his many paramours is likely a nod to the French characterization, yet here the poet uses Gawain’s infamous philandering to show the uniqueness of Ragnell and their marriage. Unlike the French texts, the poet is markedly showing how his work is different. Gawain may marry often, but here in this Middle English poem, his marriage is meaningful and not a cause for bawdy laughter. Loyalty in the text is used for comedic effect, as Gawain’s enthusiastic acceptance of his new bride seems a relatively unimportant example of his devotion to Arthur. Yet even this speaks to his famed diplomacy in these narratives. Regardless of his adversary – be it a foreign lord or Arthur himself – Gawain shows an innate understanding of how to behave. Here in *The Weddyng*, his loyalty and quiet resolve enable Ragnell’s transformation, Gromer’s peace with the king, and Arthur’s political future. Gawain’s loyalty is explored with more seriousness elsewhere, but here it provides an example of his

famed diplomacy and willingness to represent and rescue the realm, whatever the cost.¹⁸

Loyalty Exemplified: *The Avowyng of Arthur*

This depiction of Gawain as loyal to his king is not unique to *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain*, as he also appears in a similar role in *The Avowyng of Arthur*.¹⁹ The narrative of *The Avowyng* consists of four vows made by Arthur, Gawain, Kay, and Baldwin. Although *The Avowyng* is considered a Gawain romance, the poem's second half focuses entirely on Baldwin and his oaths. As Gillian Rogers notes, however, “[Gawain’s] role here, as so often, is that of the ‘yardstick’, the standard by which other knights’ behaviour may be measured, and as such, he is a completely appropriate figure to carry the burden of the ‘romance’ ideal of chivalric practice as distinct from the ‘real’ ideal that Baldwin represents” (Rogers “Folk” 214). Once again, Gawain seems to be present in the text only as a representation of a “good knight” or a knight that always fulfills his chivalric oath. In *The Avowyng*, Gawain offers to “pay” Kay’s ransom after Kay, the perpetually boorish knight, finds himself the prisoner of Menealf.²⁰ Kay assures Menealf that Gawain, “wold pay my rawunsone/ Wythowtyn delees” [He will pay my ransom/ without delay²¹] (343-344). Gawain gladly agrees without a moment’s hesitation and proceeds easily to best Menealf in battle. After jousting once more on behalf of Menealf’s prisoner (a

¹⁸ I will discuss the poet’s arguably negative portrayal of Arthur later in the chapter.

¹⁹ There is only one surviving copy of the text, MS Ireland Blackburn. According to Thomas Hahn, the poem “dates from about the third quarter of the fifteenth century, though *Avowyng* may have been composed as early as the later quarter of the fourteenth century” (Hahn 117). I will use Thomas Hahn’s 1995 edition, unless otherwise noted.

²⁰ Kay has previously vowed to ride through the forest and fight those who challenge him. While fulfilling this vow, he discovers a weeping maiden and her captor, Menealf, who has, in his own words, “wan” her in battle.

²¹ All translations from *The Avowyng* are by Thomas Hahn, with additional translation by me, unless otherwise noted.

captured lady), Gawain, Kay, Menealf, and the freed lady return to Carlisle where Menealf will face the queen's judgment.

In *The Avowyng*, Gawain is referred to as Guinevere's knight. He is praised by Arthur, who rejoices not only in his prowess on the battlefield, but, more importantly, in his adherence to the chivalric code: "Grete God, [...] / Gif Gawan gode endinge, / For he is sekur in allekynne thinge, / To cowuntur wyth a knyghte!" [Great God [...] / Give Gawain a happy ending, / For he is trustworthy in all things, / to enter combat with a knight!] (525-528). Guinevere also praises Gawain, praying for his safekeeping: "God almyghte, / Save me Gawan, my knyghte, / That thus for wemen con fighte - / Fro wothus him were!" [God almighty, / Save Sir Gawain for me, my knight, / Who fights for women - / Protect him from harm] (557-560). The Queen's words imply that not only is Gawain in her service, a position the French tales traditionally reserved for Lancelot, but he is also a protector of women. And it is true that after fighting on behalf of Kay, Gawain immediately offers to free Menealf's lady, and his intervention saves her from rape, or at the very least, imprisonment. This is a marked change from the French tradition where Gawain's interactions with women are often problematic, despite his vows in the Post-Vulgate Cycle to show mercy towards gentlewomen.²² Once again, Gawain exemplifies his talent for diplomacy, this time by keeping his chivalric oaths and earning the respect of a potential enemy.

²² I will discuss Gawain's role as Knight of Maidens in more detail in Chapter five. While Malory exploits Gawain's poor treatment of ladies for his narrative, *The Avowyng* removes any negative connotations from Gawain's role of protector of women.

Once Arthur and Guinevere praise Gawain and release Menealf,²³ the text shifts to the tale of Baldwin and his three vows. Gawain has seemingly played his part in the story, offering a glimpse into proper chivalric conduct and the justice system operating at Arthur's court. Gawain fades into the background, which could possibly imply that his position in the text is no longer useful as Baldwin has no need for a chivalric champion while performing his vows.

I do not believe, however, that Gawain simply represents the knightly archetype here, despite the examples above. While it is true that much of the narrative in both *The Avowyng* and *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain* depicts Gawain as little more than a living embodiment of the knightly ideal, I believe that his presence in the romances serves a greater purpose. Ultimately, the notion that Gawain is not distinct or is simply included in the narrative to play a role seems too simplistic when faced with the overwhelmingly rich tradition of Arthurian romances centered on him. By comparing Gawain to his fellow knights and Arthur, his unique qualities become apparent. According to Schmolke-Hasselmann,

Gawain has a particular function in which he is as irreplaceable as Arthur, Kay or Guinevere, whereas the same cannot be said of Erec, Yvain, Lancelot or Perceval. These protagonists of Chrétien's romances are replaced in each of the later romances by the new hero of that particular text, and thus their role in Arthurian narrative after Chrétien is just as peripheral as it was in the earlier texts that Chrétien himself drew upon. (104)

While some of Gawain's characterization may seem archetypal or lacking variety, his popularity in the literature, as I have suggested, exemplifies the fact that he is more than just a stereotypical knight. The wealth of Gawain-centric romances suggests that writers found him both adaptable and imperative to their storytelling.

²³ He is made a knight of the Round Table by Arthur because he has behaved chivalrously in his battles with Gawain.

Furthermore, Gawain exhibits three character traits in all the Gawain romances, including the longer works like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*: he is always shown to be skilled in battle, a wise counsellor, and an able diplomat. As we shall see, these three aspects of Gawain shape the character and lend insight into his evolving popularity in England and Scotland.

Gawain and Sir Kay

Gawain distinguishes himself in the romances by his deeds, especially in comparison with those of his fellow knights, and even of Arthur himself. In many of the Gawain romances, Gawain takes part in quests and games involving Sir Kay and Bishop Baldwin.²⁴ In order to establish Gawain's status as the greatest knight of the realm, it seems that the anonymous authors of the Gawain-romances use the misdeeds of others to show how truly noble Gawain is. Sir Kay suffers greatly from these comparisons, as he is always depicted as a boorish, boastful knight who finds himself in constant need of Gawain's aid.

Like Gawain, the characterization of Kay suffered in the hands of French authors, especially in the work of Chrétien de Troyes. As Harold J. Herman remarks in his character study of Kay, Kay's connection to King Arthur predates Gawain's appearance in the literature. The earliest reference to Kay is in the tenth/eleventh century Welsh *Black Book of Caermarthen*. Kay is also mentioned in the early Welsh legend *Culhwch and Olwen*, where he is granted supernatural powers (Herman 1-2). Both Gawain and Kay began their literary lives as figures of great heroism and prowess. The tradition attributes supernatural power and impressive strength of arms

²⁴ Baldwin is sometimes described as a bishop, while in other poems like *The Avowyng*, he is described as Sir Baldwin of Britain, a knight of Arthur's court.

to both knights, power and strength that are replaced in the French traditions with a less than flattering portrait of Arthurian knighthood. In describing Chrétien's treatment of Kay, Herman writes that the French Kay is, "a rude, abusive, sarcastic troublemaker, a constant disparager of others' merits, one who invariably suffers humiliating defeat" (Herman 8). Kay retains these characteristics in the English Gawain romances, providing a necessary foil for Gawain's inherent virtue and wisdom.

The source of Kay's negative reputation has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate and disagreement, but as Christopher Dean compellingly suggests,

Kay as a bold fighter is only one of many similar figures at Arthur's court and in this role he tends to be overshadowed by more illustrious champions. He is, thus, easily overlooked or forgotten. As the bad tempered knight, however, he stands alone and has attention focused upon him. In this capacity he is a striking and memorable individual. (Dean 133)

The Kay of the Gawain romances has much in common with the troublemaking knight of the French texts. Although his position as Arthur's seneschal may be a cause for disdain in the French sources, the English authors of the Gawain romances seem to adopt these negative aspects of Kay's personality while ignoring his more prestigious origins. As Norris J. Lacy writes of Chrétien de Troye's characterization of Kay, "[he] is strangely favored by Arthur, an attitude that is very likely traceable to Celtic sources" (Lacy *Arthurian* 313). This "strange" connection between Arthur and Kay may also provide further explanation of Gawain's prominence in the romances in comparison to his comedic legacy in Arthurian literature. Although he is Arthur's seneschal and foster-brother,²⁵ he is not a blood relative. Gawain, alternatively, is Arthur's nephew, a fact that often grants him respect and honour. In

²⁵Arthur is raised by Sir Ector, Kay's father.

the ballad version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,²⁶ for example, Kay is the first knight to accept the Green Knight's challenge. Before Arthur grants his request, however, Gawain stands and says, "That were great villanye/ Without you put this deede to me,/ My Leege, as I have sayd./ Remember, I am your sisters sonne" (166-169). Arthur grants the quest to Gawain without any further discussion. This late, popular version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* establishes both Kay's minor role as a knight of the Round Table and Gawain's prominence and importance as Arthur's nephew.

In the Gawain-romance tradition, if Gawain is a figure of wisdom, Sir Kay often acts as an agent of folly in the Arthurian world. Kay's moments of boastfulness are usually played for comedic effect, as Gawain must always subsequently rescue him from his own boorish behaviour. Kay's misdeeds serve to highlight and emphasize Gawain's dedication and adherence to the chivalric oath of knighthood. Gawain recognizes the importance of fair speech, diplomacy, and courtesy, often acting more like a politician than a warrior knight. In many ways, this recognition of Gawain's greatness is at Kay's expense. Kay and Gawain share similar origins and a similar loss of reputation in the French romances, yet here in the northern Middle English romances, Gawain is made the hero at the expense of Kay.

In *The Avowying*, Kay acknowledges his own shortcomings when he calls to Gawain, "I, Kay, that thou knawes/ That owte of tyme bostus and blawus" [I, Kay, whom you know/ that at the wrong time boasts and brags] (354-355). Once Gawain accepts Kay's ransom, Kay is left to watch as Menealf and Gawain partake in a very courteous tournament. It becomes evident quite quickly that Gawain and Menealf are

²⁶*The Greene Knight* survives in the Percy Folio which dates to circa 1650 (Hahn 311).

following strict rules during their battle. Although Gawain easily bests Menealf, they both remain courteous and even friendly. Gawain strikes Menealf from his horse, and Kay quickly proclaims, “Thou hase that thou hase soghte!/Mi raunnsun is all redy bought;/ Gif thou were ded, I ne roghte!” [You got what you asked for!/ My ransom is completely paid;/ If you were dead, I wouldn’t care!] (393-395). Both Menealf and Gawain ignore Kay’s taunt and begin negotiations once Menealf offers Gawain the chance to rescue the lady. Once again, Gawain strikes Menealf from his horse and once again, Kay responds with scorn: “Thi leve hase thou loste/ For all thi brag or thi boste;/ If thou have oghte on hur coste,/ I telle hit for tente” [You have lost your beloved/ For all your bragging and boasting;/ If you had spent [time] on her cost,/ I consider it lost] (429-432). This time, Gawain responds to Kay’s mocking words with a warning, “A monshappe is note ay;/ Is none so sekur of assay/ Butte he may harmes hente” [A man’s good fortune is not everlasting;/ None is so sure of [his] mettle/ [that] he may [not] receive harm] (434-436). Menealf is greatly offended by Kay’s taunts and the anonymous poet notes, “Kay wurdus tenut him mare/Thenne all the harmes that he hente thare” [Kay’s words grieved him more/ Than all the mischance that he received] (439-440).

For Menealf and Gawain, fair speech is as important as skill in battle. This is a common theme found in the Gawain romances; Gawain often chooses diplomacy over violence in these narratives. Kay repeatedly ignores Gawain’s request for respect and continues challenging Menealf, joking that not only has Menealf lost his lady, he may indeed lose his life.²⁷ Gawain’s response is telling, as it reveals his opinion of both Menealf and Kay. He tells Kay, “God forbade,/ For [Menealf] is a

²⁷“Butte thou hast lost thi fayre may/ And thi life, I dar lay” [“But you have lost your faire maiden/ and your life, I wager”] (446-447). Because Menealf lost his fight with Gawain, he will be taken back to Carlisle to receive judgment from Guinevere.

dughti in dede,” [God forbid,/ For Menealf is doughty in deed] (449-450)

emphasizing his respect for the defeated knight. Despite Menealf’s inability to defeat Gawain, he has behaved with courtesy and, therefore, has earned his respect. Gawain apologizes for Kay’s behaviour and accompanies Menealf, Kay, and the lady to Carlisle. Because Menealf is a courteous knight and because Gawain helps defend him before the king and queen, Guinevere and Arthur show mercy and Menealf is made a knight of the Round Table.

This sequence in *The Avowyng* is quite typical of Kay’s role in the Gawain romances. He seems always on the outside looking in, always in the wrong where Gawain behaves in the appropriate manner. Kay’s mockery of Menealf is unwarranted, as not only has Menealf defeated Kay in battle, he also proceeds to show great courtesy in allowing Gawain to “pay” Kay’s ransom. Kay’s behaviour is comical, and it was likely written for comedic effect, but it also emphasizes the true qualities of Gawain, who, when compared with Kay, is the living embodiment of the chivalric ideal.

Perhaps the clearest example of Gawain and Kay’s rivalry is seen in the poem *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*.²⁸ The poem tells the story of Gawain, Kay, and Bishop Baldwin, who are separated from Arthur’s party and forced to take shelter with a fearsome Carle.²⁹ The poem begins with a description of Arthur’s hunt, noting which knights and barons join the king. The anonymous poet notes the presence of Sir Lancelot and Sir Percival, although they play no dramatic role in the

²⁸The poem is dated to circa 1400, while the manuscript, Porkington MS 10 (Harlech MS 10 or Brogyntyn MS) is dated to approximately 1460 (Hahn 83).

²⁹The Middle English Dictionary defines “Carl” as, “(a) A man (usually of low estate); often patronizingly or contemptuously: fellow; (b) a contemptuous term of address: fellow, knave, rascal.”

narrative and are not mentioned again. Interestingly, Sir Lot³⁰ is also mentioned, yet the poet does not connect him to Gawain's family (unlike Sir Ywain who is noted as "the Uyttryan"³¹ ["son of Urien"]). Gawain is described as "Stwarde"³² of [Arthur's] halle" but no bonds of kinship are noted between Gawain, the knights, and Arthur. Even Mordred is mentioned here, uniquely referred to in this text as Arthur's uncle. This lack of kinship groupings for Gawain is curious, as despite the poem's focus on Gawain, the poet devotes six stanzas to a biographical description of Sir Ironside, a knight who has no bearing on the plot or the remainder of the poem. This long and seemingly irrelevant description of Sir Ironside draws attention to the surprising lack of detail given to Gawain, despite his central role in the text. Thomas Hahn posits that the story of Ironside is borrowed from a lost popular tale – a tale also known by Malory who presents Ironside in "The Tale of Sir Gareth" as Gareth's final knightly encounter (Hahn 107).³³ Yet, perhaps the significant question is not why Sir Ironside's lineage and family are described at such length, but why Gawain's are not. And here the explanation may lie with the poem's audience or readers. Throughout the Gawain romances and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the knowledge of Gawain's reputation and popularity is presumably a well-established fact. There is no need for further explanation, or in this case, biographical detail, because the audience

³⁰Sir Lot, usually referred to as King Lot of Lothian or Orkney, is Gawain's father. Cf. chapter three.

³¹All translations from *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* are by me, with additional translation by Thomas Hahn, unless otherwise noted.

³²The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "steward" as, "An official who controls the domestic affairs of a household, supervising the service of his master's table, directing the domestics, and regulating household expenditure."

³³ Cf. chapter five for a lengthy discussion of Malory's *Gareth*.

is *already* aware of Gawain's kinship ties, traditional coat of arms,³⁴ and numerous victories in battle.³⁵

The inclusion of Ironside's biography also points to the richness of the political structure of the Camelot depicted within the poem. Arthur's world is diverse and decentered, a notion repeatedly emphasized in the Gawain romances, where Arthur remains in the background while his knights experience wonder and adventure in disparate parts of the realm. Arthur's courtiers are described in detail here despite their non-existent role in Gawain's upcoming adventure because their presence points to the numerous characters inhabiting Arthur's court and kingdom. Each character may represent a separate potential narrative or adventure, so that while Gawain is away with Kay and Bishop Baldwin, Arthur's knights might be assumed to be active on their own, unseen, errands. This expands the Arthurian universe and provides a wealth of sources for further exploration in the romances. And in political terms it hints at a world that is both diverse and complexly structured. The characters encountered are not simply a supporting cast designed to highlight the heroes' exceptionalism, they are political agents in their own right, individual warriors and landlords with their own histories, territories, and agendas which Arthur and his knights need to respect and negotiate their way around. As we have seen, romance is especially adept at adapting to shifting political situations. *The*

³⁴In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, Gawain appears with a red shield bearing a gold pentacle – a heraldic emblem unique to this poem. His horse is also named by the *Gawain*-poet and, as noted earlier, his kinship bond to Arthur is used for motivation throughout the tale.

³⁵The poet does note that Sir Libeus Disconus (Syr Lebyus Dyskonus) and Sir Fair Unknown (Syr Ferr Unkowthe) are present. 'Libeus Disconus' is Gawain's son, Gyngalene who is sometimes also known as the "Fair Unknown," or in French, "Le Bel Inconnu." Gyngalene is featured in his own poem, the fourteenth century Middle English *Libeaus Desconus*, which is based on the 'Fair Unknown' motif and the thirteenth-century French tale, *Le Bel Inconnu*. The poet of *The Carle* does not name Gyngalene, which once again is likely a sign of his audience's familiarity with the character. In *The Weddyng*, Dame Ragnell is Gyngalene's mother.

Carle provides the opportunity to explore Arthur's royal court and the difficult negotiation process required in the face of a potentially dangerous foreign adversary.

The remainder of the poem is devoted to Gawain's adventures with the Carle of Carlisle. It is evident from the very beginning that only Gawain understands how best to behave when approaching the Carle's lodgings. As Rogers writes, "Only Gawain seems to understand the principle involved; his abiding virtue of courtesy uniquely equips him to succeed where Kay and Baldwin fail in the series of tests which follows their admittance to the Carle's castle" (Rogers 205). Bishop Baldwin hopes the Carle will offer them shelter from the misty forest. He also warns that the Carle is fearsome, to which Kay immediately responds with scorn, finding the notion that the Carle may reject them preposterous. He exclaims,

Be the Carle never so bolde,
I count hym not worthe an har.
And yeyf he be never so stoute,
We woll hym bette all about
And make his beggyng bar.
Suche as he brewythe, seche schall he drenke;
He schall be bette that he schall stynke,
And agenst his wyll be thar. (155-162)

[Be the Carle never so bold, I consider him not worth a hair. And if he is not so bold, we will beat him thoroughly and make his stronghold bare. Such as he brews, such shall he drink; he shall be beaten [so fiercely] that he shall stink, and he will not wish to stay.]

At this very early point in the text, Kay is already choosing the wrong course of action. His boasting exposes his own failings as a knight: Kay believes the Carle's social standing is below him, yet his own words reveal a shocking lack of chivalry for a man of high standing in the royal court of a king. Yet, what Kay finds in the Carle's domain is a world where kings and their knights must negotiate their way through subordinate jurisdictions and cannot take their writ for granted. Gawain's

response to Kay and Baldwin affirms his desire for fair language and a show of courtesy:

I woll not geyst yn ther magreys,
 Thos I might never so well,
 Yefe anny fayr wordus may us gayn
 To make the larde of us full fayn
 In his oun castell.
 Kay, let be thy bostfull fare;
 Thow gost about to warke care,
 I say, so have I helle. (164-171)

[I will not stay against his wish, though I might easily do so, if any fair words may avail us to make this lord pleased [to have] us in his own castle. Kay, stop your boastful behaviour. You go about to make trouble, I say, so I may prosper.]

Gawain emphasizes the importance of showing respect for the Carle in his own castle, ignoring Kay's negative social commentary regarding his status. He, unlike Kay and Baldwin, has an innate understanding of how to behave in this unfamiliar and unknown territory. Once the three companions summon the Carle's porter, Gawain speaks with courtesy, making his request with fair speech and flattery. The porter warns that no knight is safe within the Carle's home, which, once again, prompts an outburst from Kay. He intrudes in Gawain's conversation with the porter, stressing his status as a knight of King Arthur and threatening to tear down the gates should the Carle refuse admittance to him.

The narrative structure proceeds in this pattern: Gawain attempts to flatter the Carle with fair speech and courtesy, but Kay intrudes or insults the Carle with mockery or violent acts. Each time the Carle tests the knights, Gawain triumphs while Kay and Baldwin fail. As Rogers explains, "Gawain's survival depends, essentially, upon obedience, upon a passive acceptance of every situation his host devises to test him without demur, no matter how extreme it may seem" (Rogers "Folk" 205). The Carle's tests do indeed range from the subtle to the extreme. The

first once again exposes the problematic social commentary present in the text, when Kay and Baldwin mistreat³⁶ the Carle's horses because they believe his animals inferior to their own. Gawain is similarly tested, but manages to exemplify true courtesy and diplomacy when faced with the Carle's wandering foal. He brings it in from a storm, feeds it, and covers it with his own mantel. Seeing Gawain's kindness, the Carle thanks him for his good deed and the next test begins. Each test emphasizes the Carle's respect and desire for courteous behaviour. Both Kay and Baldwin try to use their high social standing as an excuse for claiming exemption from the Carle's punishment. Each excuse is challenged by the Carle, who notes their hypocrisy, observing that such highborn men *should* act with courtesy, yet they seem incapable of courteous behaviour and speech.

The Carle's tests for Baldwin, Kay, and Gawain, are not an attempt to teach humility, but rather, an attempt to glean which of Arthur's men is *already* courteous. Once Gawain shows his compassion to the Carle's foal, the Carle chooses Gawain as his champion, or, more specifically, as the man who is worthy of further testing. Arguably, Gawain does not learn any specific lesson while under the Carle's roof. He is a proponent of fair speech before meeting the Carle or entering his hall. His speech before the Carle's gates proves that he already has an innate understanding of how to behave in these circumstances. The Carle's tests are not concerned with offering lessons or wisdom, they are designed to test whether Gawain will behave obediently in his hall. The Carle comes close to finding Gawain's weakness, and the inclusion of the Carle's beautiful wife and daughter are certainly a reference to the French Gawain's widespread reputation as a famous lover, but the Carle's domain is

³⁶ Baldwin moves the Carle's foal away from his horse and Kay strikes the Carle's warhorse. The Carle challenges both men, hitting Baldwin and knocking Kay to the ground.

one more accepting of such flaws. Ultimately, Gawain “passes” the Carle’s test not because he learns anything; he passes because he already bears the knowledge needed to behave with courtesy and honour in the house of a foreign lord.

Gawain’s time in the Carle’s home is spent carefully negotiating each test that he creates. Once Gawain succeeds and proves himself worthy, the Carle invites King Arthur to a feast in celebration. When the party returns to Arthur, they describe their adventure and Arthur expresses great relief at Gawain’s return. Kay seems to resent Arthur’s focus on Gawain and adds, “And I, Syr Kynge, [...] / That ever I scapide away unslayne / My hert was never so lyght” (586-588).³⁷ The poem ends with the wedding of Gawain to the Carle’s daughter, and the Carle’s re-admittance into the Arthurian court. He is made a knight of the Round Table and given the county of Carlisle. The poem concludes with a description of the Carle’s building projects (an abbey and a cathedral in the city of Carlisle). Despite the humorous overtones of the poem, especially relating to Gawain’s test in the Carl’s bedchamber and Kay’s behaviour, *The Carle of Carlisle* ultimately depicts Gawain as bringing order and balance to the Arthurian world. The Carle, like the Green Knight, is a figure of dangerously unsettling trickery. His motives and desires are difficult to understand, yet Gawain is able to manoeuvre within the Carle’s territory and, ultimately, return the Carle and the Arthurian universe to order.

Because the genre is so conducive to adaptation based on the particular interests of its readers and writers, romance is uniquely suited to explore matters of politics and societal concerns. The juxtaposition of Kay and Gawain has previously

³⁷In the later ballad version of the poem, it is Arthur who remarks, “I thanke God [...] cozen Kay, / That thou didst on live part away” (453-454), humorously implying that Arthur is aware of Kay’s penchant for troublemaking and boorish behaviour. His surprise at Kay’s survival speaks further to Kay’s widespread reputation amongst Arthur and his knights.

been used to emphasize Gawain's chivalry, but it may also be seen in the context of contemporary late medieval political interests. *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*, a Middle Scots text, is deeply concerned with kingship and sovereignty. The poem contains two narratives which feature Sir Kay and Arthur as figures of negative authority and responsibility.³⁸ In the first portion of the text, Arthur, his knights and noblemen, are on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Lacking food and deeply exhausted, the party decides to stop in a city and ask its lord for shelter. Kay volunteers to bring Arthur's message to the lord and enters his hall in search of food. He immediately sees a dwarf carrying food and,

Schir Kay ruschit to the roist, and reft fra the swane,
Lightly claught, throu lust, the lym fra the lyre.
To feid hym of that fine fude the freik wes full fane.
Than dynnyt the duergh, in anger and yre,
With raris, quhil the rude hall reird it agane. (81-85)

[Sir Kay rushed to the roast and wrested it from the servant, lightly caught, because of hunger, the limb from the body,³⁹ disdainfully through greed, tore the limb from the joint [of meat]. Then clamoured the dwarf, in anger and ire, with roars which resounded in the Great Hall.⁴⁰]

The dwarf's angry rant brings the lord to the hall, and upon seeing Kay with the stolen food, he furiously says, "Me think thow fedis the unfair, freik, by my fay!/
Suppose thi birny be bright, as bachiler suld ben,/ Yhit art hi latis unlufsum and
ladlike, I lay" [I think you wrongfully feed yourself, man, by my faith! Even if your
armour is bright, as a knight's should be, yet your manners are offensive and
churlish, I declare] (93-95). The lord calls attention to Kay's armour, noting that
despite his fine armour – which identifies him as a knight of the Round Table – his
behaviour is "ladlike," which Hahn translates as "ignoble." Just as the Carle of

³⁸I will discuss this text in great detail in chapter three.

³⁹Translation by Thomas Hahn.

⁴⁰All translations from *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* are by Thomas Hahn, additional translation are my own, unless otherwise noted.

Carlisle suggested that both Baldwin and Kay *should* behave in a more chivalrous manner because of their station, the lord's words imply that Kay has failed to live up to the reputation of Arthurian knighthood.

It is here, once communication has broken down between Arthur's party and the lord that Gawain steps in. He advises Arthur to send "ane man, mekar of mude,/ That will with fairness fraist frendship to fynd" [some man, more deferential (meeker) in demeanour, who will with fairness attempt to seek [out] friendship with the fiend] (120-121). Arthur, of course, chooses Gawain, and what follows is a detailed depiction of the careful political negotiation between Gawain and the lord.

Gawain enters the hall and introduces himself. He explains,

I am send to your self, ane charge for to say,
Fra cumly Arthur, the King, cortesse and fre
Quhilk prays for his saik and your gentrice,
That he might cum this toun till
To by vittale at will,
Else deir as segis will sell,
Payand the price. (137-143)

[I am sent to you on an errand from noble Arthur, the King, courteous and free; who prays for his sake and your own courtesy that he might come into this town, to purchase supplies, as he wishes. We will pay whatever price the people will sell [them for].]

Gawain's speech is a fine example of political manoeuvring. He presents himself as Arthur's knight, immediately shifting the focus from his own needs to the desires of his king. There is no mention of the fact that Arthur is the lord's overlord and can rightfully take what he desires. Rather, Gawain shows the utmost respect for the lord's sovereignty. He notes that Arthur would like to enter the town and purchase goods, emphasizing that Arthur is willing to pay the lord's people for their services.

Thomas Hahn describes this exchange as an example of the "gift economy of an idealized honor culture" (281). Yet, Gawain's language while negotiating with the

lord indicates, not an example of the exchange of gifts, but a recognizable account of a request for “purveyance.” “Purveyance,” as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is, “The requisition and collection of provisions, etc., as a right or prerogative; [...] the right of a monarch to acquire provisions, labour, or transport for a royal household by means of compulsory purchase at a price fixed by a royal official.” During the thirteenth century in England, “the old right of purveyance or prise-taking, which permitted the king, members of his family, royal officials, and the greater nobility to preempt foodstuffs and requisition carriages for their personal use, was transformed into an elaborate mechanism for supplying English armies fighting in Scotland and France” (Jones 300). The request for purveyance became increasingly problematic throughout the century, as both the price and quantity of provisions were set by the government, rather than the merchants and farmers selling their goods. Purveyance became an arbitrary practice, as technically, the entire kingdom was at the mercy of the Crown’s needs (Jones 303). As Given-Wilson explains it, the process of purveying created a number of individual and political tensions:

the purveyor was the man in the middle: caught between, on the one hand, the expectation that he would enforce the king’s (often technically illegal) rights to the hilt, and on the other hand, hatred and resistance-often violent resistance-from those whose livelihoods he threatened, it is not surprising that he became almost a symbol of royal oppression in late medieval England, or that whole villages apparently trembled at his approach. (Given-Wilson 159)

The abuse of purveyance became increasingly problematic until the Statute of 1362, which regulated purveyance laws and ensured closer supervision of purveyors and their practices (Given-Wilson 154).

The anonymous author of *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* explores the role of the purveyor in this first part of the narrative. The poem is set “en route to Jerusalem” (Hahn 228) and as Hahn notes, “The location is ostensibly France west of the Rhone, though the descriptions of landscapes and fortifications, here and in [the territory of Golagros], conform strikingly to the border areas between Scotland and England, where the poem originates” (Hahn 227). Despite the “foreign” setting, therefore, this episode is actually concerned with domestic lordly politics, rather than foreign wars.

As seneschal, Kay acts as the purveyor on Arthur’s behalf. He enters the lord’s hall and steals food from the dwarf, a symbolic act that shows Kay, and by extension, Arthur, abusing the right of purveyance. Alternatively, Gawain exhibits all the marks of a good and fair purveyor. When Gawain says, “To by vittale at will,/ *Alse deir as segis will sell,/ Payand the price,*” he allows the lord’s merchants to set prices for their goods, highlighting his adherence and respect for the request of purveyance and his understanding of the hardships and abuses commonly associated such a request.

By introducing the controversial matter of purveyance into the narrative, the anonymous author creates a sense of nation beyond Camelot. The poem may be set far from England, but the historical connotations of purveyance and its abuses linger, making *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* another example of the genre calling attention to complicated matters of social significance. Here, Gawain serves as both a literary and political figure of importance, making him, once again, an ideal depiction of Arthurian knighthood, but crucially, an example with a particular point of purchase on contemporary political culture. Kay has proven himself unworthy and

Gawain ably steps in, negotiating on Arthur's behalf and maintaining peaceful relations between the king and his vassals. Once more, Gawain proves that diplomacy and fair speech over violence are a more productive method of political negotiation.

Gawain and King Arthur

Although Sir Kay is the primary example of unchivalrous behaviour in the Gawain romances, he is not the only member of the Round Table used to emphasize Gawain's qualities. Perhaps more compelling are the poems that explore Arthur's role in Gawain's adventures. In the texts I have discussed above, Arthur is always present in the background. Norris J Lacy writes, in reference to the French Gawain poem *La Vengeance de Raguidel*, that "...Chrétien de Troyes's predilection for pairing heroes, using one as a model, positive or negative, against which the comportment of the other can be measured" ("Convention" 69) is a common feature of romances and, importantly for Gawain romances, this hero pairing often involves the king himself.

The kinship bond between Arthur and Gawain is established in the earliest examples of Arthurian romance. Yet, in the later Middle English romance tradition, this bond is often used to highlight Arthur's failings as a king in contrast to Gawain's exceptional chivalry. The northern romances perceive Arthurian kingship with suspicion. He is not seen as a celebrated symbol of British unity, but rather as a threat to regional interests. I will discuss this issue again with reference to the Middle Scots poem *Golagros and Gawain* in chapter three, but Arthur's behaviour in *The Weddyng* also marks an important example of the Arthur/Gawain dynamic used in the Gawain romances.

During his first meeting with Sir Gromer Somer Jour, Arthur engages in a long debate about honour in battle. Sir Gromer would very much like to fight Arthur where they stand, but because the king is unarmed, such a battle would be disrespectful. As Arthur says, “Yf thou sle me nowe in thys case,/Alle knyghtes woll refuse the in every place -/ That shame shall never the froo” [If you slay me now in this case, all knights will shun you in every place, that shame shall never go from you] (67-69). Sir Gromer is not easily dissuaded, however, and only agrees to spare Arthur if the king engages in a riddling challenge. The knight is very specific in setting out the rules for his challenge: not only must the king correctly answer the standard ‘loathly lady’ question in twelve month’s time or else face certain death, but also, “That of thy knyghtes shall none com with the, by the/Rood,/Nowther fremde ne freynd” [That none of your knights shall come with you, I swear by the Cross, neither stranger nor friend] (96). The final stipulation for the arrangement, and arguably the most important to a discussion of Arthur’s character, is when Sir Gromer tells Arthur, “Abyde! Kyng Arthure, a lytell whyle - /Loke nott today thou me begyle,/And kepe alle thing in close” [Stay! King Arthur, a little while – see that you do not deceive me today and keep everything to yourself] (109-111, my emphasis). Arthur readily agrees, saying, “Untrewe knyght shalt thou never fynde me; To dye yet were melever” [You will never find that I am an untrue knight; I would rather die] (116-117).

As we have seen, the tone of the *The Weddyng* is comical, especially once Dame Ragnell, the loathly lady, becomes the central focus of the narrative. But Arthur’s agreement with Sir Gromer is crucial when looking at the poet’s presentation of kingship and chivalry. Arthur has readily agreed to Gromer’s

stipulations: he will return in one year, alone, and he will keep their agreement secret. For a king who spent much of this scene arguing the finer points of chivalric exchange, it is surprising that his immediate action is to break his oath by telling Gawain about Gromer's proposal. This may seem superfluous, due to the comedy of the poem, but Arthur's actions speak to a larger problem with his kingship and character. As king, Arthur *should* be the exemplification of leadership and chivalry. It is clear that he understands the concepts of chivalry and diplomacy, but he is incapable of upholding them. Instead, Gawain must step in and behave as Arthur should, but cannot.

Arthur's fault is arguably minor here. He even explains to Gawain that Sir Gromer, "chargyd me I shold hym nott bewrayne;/ His counsell must I kepe therefore,/ Or else I am forswore" [And ordered me [that] I should not betray him; his secret I must, therefore keep, or else I am perjured] (146-148). Obviously Arthur has understood Gromer's request, but in telling Gawain, the king breaks the oath he has just sworn to keep. While this demonstrates his obvious reliance on Gawain, and the fact that Gawain is so close to the king that Arthur may not consider his oath broken, it also reveals a king who is an oath-breaker and incapable of succeeding in his own quest. Gawain readily agrees to help Arthur, and as we have seen, this leads to his marriage with the loathly Dame Ragnell.

The marriage marks a shift in power in the narrative. No longer is Arthur the central figure of political and narrative control, as Ragnell and, by extension, Gawain become empowered through their bedroom exchange. Ragnell's transformation from loathly lady into beautiful damsel is a result of Gawain appropriating Arthur's position as the typical loathly lady knight. His dedication to her causes confusion for

Arthur who cannot understand why his most loyal knight, “never wold he haunt justyng aryght” [He would no longer properly attend jousting.⁴¹] (809).⁴² Throughout the narrative, Arthur is presented as a flawed monarch, incapable of keeping his oaths or completing his quests. And while the comedic tone of the text makes the king’s indiscretions seemingly mild, the depiction of Arthur as a flawed monarch is common in the northern tradition and cannot be ignored.

The poet of *The Weddyng* depicts the major difference between Arthur and Gawain, despite the poem’s humorous narrative. While Arthur is capable of recognizing his faults and even improving them, it is Gawain who must always step into the symbolic role of ‘king’ in order to rescue Arthur, the kingdom, or himself. Arthur, therefore, is a passive figure in these texts, whereas Gawain is the active embodiment of good kingship. We will see this more clearly depicted in the Scottish romances, but *The Weddyng* provides a comical but striking representation of the popular juxtaposition of Arthur’s failings with Gawain’s triumphs. This juxtaposition is even clearer in the *Golagros*, where the poet’s concern with purveyance laws points directly to problematic kingship. The king is not a trusted figure and his behaviour becomes increasingly troublesome throughout the text, which I will discuss at length in chapter three. Once again, we see romances transforming and adapting to fit both the narrative and the poet’s concerns. In order to promote Gawain as an ideal English knight, the poet uses Arthur to emphasize *why* he is such an idealized figure. Where Arthur fails, Gawain succeeds, which speaks to larger issues surrounding ‘good’ kingship, feudal law, and diplomacy.

⁴¹Translation by Stephen H.A. Shepherd.

⁴²As we have seen, this is a role typically played by Gawain in Chrétien’s tales, as Gawain chides Yvain for his dedication to his wife over chivalric pursuits.

In each of the texts Gawain intervenes to prevent a possible calamity falling upon the king, and thus the realm. This danger is subtly presented in *The Weddyng*, where Arthur's behaviour is concerning and Gawain must shoulder the responsibility for his king's safety. In both *The Avowyng* and *The Carle of Carlisle*, Gawain exemplifies chivalry and, in *The Carle*, he is responsible for maintaining order and returning the Carle to Arthurian society. But perhaps the most important aspect of Gawain in these texts is the responsibility he accepts and *why* he must always do so.

As we have seen, Gawain is often compared to Kay in order to emphasize his own chivalric qualities. The more important comparison, however, is Gawain's juxtaposition with Arthur. The representation of Arthur varies in these texts, so that although he is always presented as a great king, he is often flawed and even prone to moments of cowardice, ignorance, or rashness – traits more commonly associated with the French characterization of Gawain and, later, Malory's own depiction of Arthur's troubled nephew. Gawain, by comparison, is depicted as an example of bravery, wisdom, and prudence. This connection between Gawain and Arthur is integral and, arguably, is at the center of every Arthurian story featuring Gawain.

The king and his nephew are intrinsically linked. From the earliest stories, Gawain is at the king's side. While their relationship evolves and shifts in subsequent tales, the two men are always connected. Arthur's actions inform and influence Gawain's behaviour. Gawain does the same for the king. In a tradition that often romantically links two characters – Guinevere and Lancelot, Isolde and Tristan, for example – Gawain and Arthur represent the closest homosocial and familial bond in the literature.

Gawain often shoulders responsibility for the king's reputation and that of the Round Table. By taking responsibility for the Arthurian world, Gawain is almost always risking his life, and the potential for his death represents another threat to the honour of the court. As Arthur's representative, he is the best of Camelot: chivalrous, brave, courteous, and wise. But as a literary figure, he is all those traits and more. Arthur's failures, when compared to Gawain's triumph, emphasize concerns about kingship and the future safety of the Arthurian realm. Like Gawain's comparison with Kay, the popular juxtaposition of Arthur and his most important nephew appear often in the Middle English and the Middle Scots romances, highlighting the text's fixation on the precarious office of king and the ideal image of what a king should be.

Romance functions as a means to interpret social and political moments and Gawain inhabits this space as an exemplification of chivalric ideals *and* a quintessential romance protagonist. Medieval poets used him in the same way that chivalry and romance were used to represent and explore difficult questions pertaining to kingship, politics, and societal concerns. His strong attachment to Arthur, then, speaks to Gawain's unique role in the romance tradition. He is not the king, nor will he be king, but in comparison to Arthur, Gawain represents the ideal English knight and, by extension, the possibility, of an ideal English king.

While it is impossible to argue that Gawain is not at times presented as the archetypal knight, I believe he is much more than a stand-in or simple representation of Arthur's greatest warrior. It is Gawain who is chosen by the anonymous authors of these poems to represent and protect the Round Table. Unlike Kay, Baldwin, or even Arthur, Gawain is uniquely capable of navigating the difficulties of battle, politics,

and the occasional supernatural entity. He instinctively knows how to behave and how to react, relying on a strict adherence to the chivalric code, but also on an innate knowledge of the physical world around him. When the court ventures out into the dangerous margins of the realm or beyond, it is frequently Gawain's role to be their envoy and guide. As Margaret Robson compellingly argues in her essay "Local Hero: Gawain and the Politics of Arthurianism," "[...] Gawain *belongs* to these marginal areas and texts while Arthur does not" (Robson 86). Despite the often-fantastical appearances of ghosts,⁴³ loathly ladies,⁴⁴ and giants,⁴⁵ Gawain is capable of negotiating difficult and unfamiliar power structures where Arthur is incapable of action. It is as if the Gawain of the early Welsh stories and the Gawain of the romances merge in these texts, creating a figure capable of inhabiting the strict world of the court and the more ambiguous landscape of a non-Christian Otherworld with equal confidence. Although the romance world is one peopled by magical, Otherworldly things, its rules and values are, as I have suggested, recognisably those of a feudal kingdom of the fifteenth century. Robson suggests that, "These stories form a complex, which serves to relocate Arthur in a world that is pre-Christian, magical, enchanted, foreign, located outside normal civilization: the place from which he had come and to which he no longer belongs" (Robson "Local" 91), yet, as I hope to have shown, the otherness of this world is always tethered in issues familiar to the fifteenth century.

⁴³In the poem *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, Gawain and Guinevere meet the fearsome ghost of Guinevere's mother who prophesizes the end of the Round Table. *The Awntyrs* is an exploration of the problems surrounding Arthurian conquest and will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

⁴⁴It should be noted that in the ballad version of "The Carl of Carlisle," the Carl has been placed under a spell and transformed into a loathsome *man*. The ballad survives in the Percy Folio Manuscript, which dates to the mid seventeenth century (Hahn 374).

⁴⁵In the early sixteenth-century ballad "The Turke and Sir Gawain," Gawain visits the Isle of Man, which is inhabited by a race of giants.

Gawain's characteristics, the warrior-knight, the skilled politician, and the mythological hero are exemplified throughout the Gawain romances, making him a unique figure with strong ties to the North of England and Scotland. He is not only the living embodiment of Arthur's greatest knight, but he is also a figure used to explore and reveal northern attitudes towards Arthur and kingship. Thus, in the alliterative poem *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, Gawain faces supernatural and political foes, bringing into focus Arthur's problematic imperial ambitions and their cost. The next chapter will consider Gawain's role as the Round Table representative and how the poet of *The Awntyrs* uses romance tropes and Gawain's reputation to question the king's actions.

Chapter II
Dark Knight:
Conquest and Catastrophe in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*

In this chapter, I will continue my examination of Gawain's unique role in the northern cycle of Gawain romances by specifically focusing on the alliterative fifteenth-century poem *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Gawain found in the northern romances is a figure associated with great skill in battle, diplomacy, and the politics of the Arthurian court, which often reflect contemporary fourteenth and fifteenth-century political issues. The same is true of *The Awntyrs*, whose problematic structure has caused considerable scholarly debate. But what I wish to suggest in what follows is that Gawain acts as a unifying figure in this text, and that our understanding of his political role within it serves as its unifying principle. The common character attributes discussed in the first chapter are also present here, which makes Gawain uniquely qualified to face both a supernatural entity and, later, a potentially dangerous political enemy. In a literary tradition that questions the role of centralized kingship, Arthur's nephew is not only the protagonist in the poem, but also serves as an integral point of symbolic resonance.

The Awntyrs is a poem that successfully uses multiple romance motifs to propel its narrative forward. As we will see, these multiple motifs create meaning throughout the narrative and enable a discussion of kingship and power pertinent to fifteenth century readers. The poem is especially concerned with social and political issues pertaining to northern England, Anglo-Scots border relations, and the dangers of violence and imperialism. Through the varied structure of romance, the anonymous poet explores these issues and more, using supernatural motifs as a lens

through which to view them with at times startling clarity. Although *The Awntyrs* is not overtly focused on the idea of “northernness,” it nonetheless reveals itself as a poem with particular regional concerns. Gawain often faces supernatural foes in the romances, and the poet uses this pattern with great purpose. By using familiar motifs, intertextual knowledge of Arthurian works, and Gawain as the poem’s unifier, the poet offers insight into popular late medieval Arthurian literary tropes and the nuances of Anglo-Scots diplomacy in the fifteenth century.

The critical study of *The Awntyrs off Arthur* is marked by an abundance of material relating to its structure, form, and thematic unity. The poem, arguably the most popular of the Gawain romances (as it survives in four separate manuscripts),⁴⁶ has caused considerable academic debate. The earliest editor of the poem, Hermann Lübke, believed *The Awntrys* was actually two distinct texts (Twu 104), a position later supported by Ralph Hanna, who divided the poem into *Awntrys A* and *Awntyrs B* (Phillips 64). A.C. Spearing disagreed with this assertion, arguing for the poems unity and calling it a ‘diptych,’ “with stanzas twenty-seven and twenty-eight in its center” (Phillips 64).⁴⁷ It is also important to note, especially for this study, that the language of the poem is indicative of northern composition, likely in the northwest of England close to its border with Scotland. The four manuscripts are distinct, however, and each was composed in a different region of England, including London, which speaks further to the poem’s widespread popularity (Hahn 169). The

⁴⁶ The four manuscripts are: MS Douce 324 (Oxford, Bodleian Library), MS 491.B (Lambeth Palace Library), Thornton MS (MS 91) (Lincoln Cathedral Library), Ireland Blackburn MS (Robert H. Taylor Collection, Princeton, New Jersey). I will use Thomas Hahn’s edition, which is primarily based on MS Douce 324, with amendments from the remaining three manuscripts.

⁴⁷ This is only a small selection of the academic debate concerning the poem’s structure and unity. For more see Helen Phillips, “*The Awntyrs off Arthure: Structure and Meaning. A Reassessment*”; Margaret Robson, “From Beyond the Grave: Darkness at Noon in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*”; Krista Sue-Lo Twu, “*The Awntrys Off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne: Reliquary for Romance.*”

sophisticated alliteration and lexis further separate it from the ballad tradition, making *The Awntyrs* an interesting and unique addition to the collection of Gawain romances.

For this project I will read *The Awntyrs* as a single poem, composed by a single author. While I do not discount the importance of structural research, my interest in *Awntyrs* lies primarily with its narrative. This narrative, endlessly dissected by critics in an attempt to discover thematic unity, is of crucial importance to the northern Gawain cycle and emphasizes Gawain's place as a knight with strong ties to the north and to Arthur's court.

A.C. Spearing offers a reading that sees Arthur as the unifying factor in the poem (Robson "Grave" 221). While it is indeed true that Arthur is present in the beginning, middle, and final stanza of the narrative, he is a relatively minor character in the piece as a whole. I wish to offer an alternative reading that sees Gawain as the unifying factor of *The Awntyrs*. Unlike Arthur, Gawain is present throughout the narrative and plays many roles in the course of the poem. In the first narrative section, Hanna's *Awntyrs A*, Guinevere and Gawain meet the ghost of Guinevere's mother. In the second part, Hanna's *Awntyrs B*, a knight enters Arthur's court and claims that the king has stolen his lands and given them to Gawain. A violent tournament follows, concluding in a land exchange between Gawain and Galaron of Galloway. These seemingly unrelated sections, when read with Gawain as the unifying factor, represent the dual aspects of Gawain's northern identity. He is faced with a supernatural being while protecting the queen, but also fights a very human foe, exhibiting feats of chivalric prowess and political negotiation. My study of Gawain and *The Awntyrs* will show Gawain as a unifying figure in the poem and

argue for Gawain's widespread reputation as a knight associated with the north, its politics, and its local legends.

Ghostly Introduction

The Awntyrs off Arthur is set in Inglewood Forest, a royal forest until the reign of Henry VIII, situated close to modern day Carlisle. Arthur arrives at Carlisle and immediately departs for the forest, bringing his court along for a hunt. Although the forest provides the initial setting of the poem, the meeting between Guinevere and the ghost occurs at Turne Wathelan (Tarn Wadling), a lake located in Inglewood forest, which was drained in the nineteenth century and has since vanished from sight. During the fifteenth century, however, the lake was, according to Andrew R. Walking, associated with "spectral apparitions" (Walking 105). The ghost appears at mid-day and is preceded by a mysterious darkness: "The day wex als dirke/ As hit were midnight myrke"⁴⁸ [The day became as dark as it were murky midnight]⁴⁹ (75-76). Gawain and Guinevere⁵⁰ are separated from Arthur's hunting party and forced to face the frightening specter alone. Although Arthur is alarmed by the sudden darkness, the poem follows the common thematic pattern of a Gawain romance: Arthur's concern is secondary to Gawain's actions, and Gawain is prepared to face the ghost on his own. The importance of the ghost is twofold: her words reveal a dark future for the Arthurian court, while her physical appearance links her to other literary ghosts found in the Middle English romance tradition. I will begin by discussing her words and follow with an examination of the ghost's importance to the second half of the poem and future of Arthur's kingdom.

⁴⁸ All quotes from *The Awntyrs off Arthur* are from Thomas Hahn's *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁹ All translations by Thomas Hahn. Additional translations by me.

⁵⁰ Here Gawain serves as Guinevere's knight, again taking Lancelot's traditional role in the romances.

Gawain's initial confrontation with the ghost is hesitant, as he is mindful of Guinevere's presence and wishes to protect her from the potentially violent spirit. The ghost adamantly wishes to speak with the queen, however, and once Gawain brings her forward, the ghost reveals her true identity: "Welcom, Waynour, iwis, worthi in won./ Lo, how delful deth has *thi dame* dight!" [Welcome, Guinevere, indeed, worthy among your people. Lo, how grievous death has left *your mother*] (159-150, my emphasis). Upon learning that the ghost is Guinevere's deceased mother, the danger surrounding the specter dissipates, but the sense of foreboding increases. She has not appeared to harm Guinevere and Gawain, but rather, to warn them of potential disaster and chaos.

The Three Dead Kings: The Motif of the Three Living and Three Dead

It is helpful to note here that the appearance of a ghostly parent is not unique to this text. Although there is some debate about the source of this section of *The Awntyrs*, it most certainly borrows heavily from the motif of 'the three living and three dead,' and perhaps, as Margaret Robson argues, "the 'Adulterous Mothers topos'" (Robson "Grave" 229). This motif often features a man faced with the ghost of his mother who confesses that during her life she committed the sin of adultery and is now trapped in Purgatory. As Robson explains, "What these 'Adulterous Mother' narratives are essentially about is the holiness of male children and the fleshly evil nature of their mothers (and perhaps, by implication, of the whole female sex)" (Robson "Grave" 230). Guinevere's mother makes a similar confession, telling her daughter, "That is luf paramour, listes and delites / That has me light and laft logh in a lake" [[The cause] is sexual love, pleasure and delights/ that has brought me low and left me deep in a lake] (213-214). While elements of the "adulterous

mother” motif are certainly present in the text, it is not the only literary motif used in this section and should be considered as part of a larger literary construct. As we can see, familiar romance tropes are used to lend meaning in a new way. While they may be recognizable, they are also adaptable, allowing for new interpretation. Helen Phillips explains,

...we should not see [the ghost] as exclusively representing women, or moral issues of special interest to women; she is present from the beginning very much as a representative of the ruling and territory-controlling class. [...] Though her feminine gender is significant we should not let this aspect of her identity eclipse response to the fact that she functions also as a *dead royal*: equivalent to one of the crowned skeletons who meet their living similitudes in *memento mori* works like *The Three Dead Kings*. (Phillips 75)

The ghost’s words, when read as an extension of the “adulterous mother” motif and “the three living and three dead” motif, illuminate the poem’s thematic and narrative importance. This meaning is directly connected to Gawain’s presence during the ghost’s speech and his own action during the second part of *The Awntyrs*.

The motif of “The Three Living and Three Dead” found popularity in England during the thirteenth century.⁵¹ As Fein notes, “This popular *memento mori* theme enacts a moment in which three noblemen (often kings) come face to face with uncanny mirror-images of themselves as they will be in death (often, their actual dead fathers walking abroad as animated corpses)” (Fein 321). *De Tribus Regibus Mortuis*, or *The Three Dead Kings*, is a fifteenth-century Middle English poem attributed to the Shropshire Priest, John Audelay. The manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302, was compiled in c. 1426, which makes it a

⁵¹ “Images and stories of this iconic encounter seem to have migrated to England from France in the thirteenth century, and expressions of it, more often visual than verbal, are found dispersed throughout the Continent. In medieval England its typical media were pictorial, that is, wall painting in numerous parish churches (c. 1300 to c. 1550) and just a few manuscript illuminations (c. 1290 to c. 1335)” (Fein 321-322).

contemporary of *The Awntyrs*. Both poems are part of the alliterative revival and *The Three Dead Kings* is the only English retelling of the *memento mori* theme common in art of the period. There is much textual evidence to support the connection between Guinevere's ghostly mother and the rotting corpses of *The Three Dead Kings*. Both poems use similar language in their description of the ghosts, focusing intensely on the decomposing bodies and the supernatural warnings of impending doom.

In *The Three Dead Kings*, three ghosts warn three kings that their earthly behaviour will cause endless suffering in the afterlife. Like Gawain and Guinevere, the living kings become separated from their hunting party by a mysterious darkness.⁵² Robson traces the origins of this 'darkness at noon'⁵³ to the biblical apocalypse (Robson 11). The identical setting for *The Three Kings* and *The Awntyrs* lends further evidence to their similarities, and a comparison of the three dead kings and Guinevere's mother also reveals remarkably similar descriptions of the ghostly form. For this study, however, I wish to focus on the ghostly words, rather than the ghostly image.

The ghosts in *The Three Kings* and other 'three living and three dead' depictions share the same message. In two fourteenth-century manuscript

⁵² Robson makes note of Lowe's argument that the sudden disappearance of the sun may reference Gawain's traditional supernatural strength, which is intrinsically tied to the sun (Robson "Grave" 228). Darkness, therefore, would weaken Gawain and strip him of this supernatural ability.

⁵³ The concept of the "noonday demon" is biblical in origin. Psalm 91:5-6 reads, "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day;/ Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness;/ nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday." In the medieval period, the "noonday demon" (or "noontime demon") is found in literary texts including the Orpheus myth (cf. *Sir Orfeo*) and Walter Helton's *Ladder of Perfection* (Kaulbach 553). The "noonday demon" is also commonly associated with the sin of sloth. Cf. *Piers Plowman*. In the early fourteenth century lay, *Sir Orfeo*, while Queen Heurodis sleeps beneath a tree at midday, the Fairy King appears and demands she join him at his palace. The king takes Heurodis, thus beginning Orfeo's self-exile from his kingdom.

illuminations produced in England,⁵⁴ this message is painted over an image of the three corpses: “Ich wes wel fair./ Such sheltou be./For Godes love, be wer by me” (Fein 322). The message, “I was fair, such shalt thou be. For God’s love, be warned by me” is presented in more detail by Audelay in *The Three Dead Kings*. There each ghost is given a stanza to share his warning. The first ghost describes his appearance along with the sins of the three living: “Those that bene not at your bone – ye beton and byndon;/ Bot yef ye betun that burst, - in bale be ye bondon”⁵⁵ [As you beat and bind those that defy your command; so will you be beaten and bound in torment unless you atone.] (96-97). The second ghost provides the crucial message, saying, “Thagh ye be never so fayre, - thus schul ye fare!” [though you be never so beautiful, such [as I am now in death] shall you be.] (110). The final ghost exposes the Living King’s sins, warning that they must repent to avoid a similar fate. Guinevere’s mother bears a similar message for her daughter. She begins by explaining Guinevere’s sins and failures:

Have pite on the poer – thou art of power.
 Burnes and burdes that ben the aboute,
 When thi body is bamed and brought on a ber,
 Then lite wyn the light that now wil the loute,
 For then the helps no thing but holy praier.
 The praier of poer may purchas the pes. (173-178)

[Have pity on the poor – you have the power [to do so]/ Servants and women surround you, when your body is embalmed and borne on a bier, then little wish [them] to comfort you, who now will flatter you, for then nothing helps you, nothing but holy prayer. The prayer of the poor may purchase you peace.]

She then warns Guinevere against adultery, and her words, “Thus am I lyke to

Lecefere: takis witnes by mee!/ For al thi fresh foroure,/Muse on my mirror;/ For,

⁵⁴ British Library MS Arundel 83 II (De Lisle Psalter) and British Library MS Yates Thompson 13 (Taymouth Hours).

⁵⁵ All quotations from *Three Dead Kings*, in *John the Blind Audelay, Poems and Carols* (Oxford Bodleian Library MS Douce 302). Edited by Susanna Greer Fein. Translations by me, with additional translations by Fein.

king and emperor,/ Thus dight shul ye be” [Thus am I like Lucifer: take warning by me!/ For all your fur garments, think on my mirror; For, king and emperor, you shall be treated thus] (165-169) indicate that Guinevere will share (or already does share) her mother’s gravest sin. The emphasis on Guinevere here indicates that she will play an important role in the ghost’s prophecy. Her actions directly impact not only on her future (in this life and the next), but also, on the future of the kingdom. Guinevere’s place alongside Gawain in this section of the narrative marks her as a figure of power in the Arthurian universe – her actions will directly affect the future, just as Gawain’s question for the ghost will implicate his own part in the fall of the Round Table. Gawain’s importance to this first narrative section becomes increasingly clear once the ghost turns her focus from Guinevere to Arthur.

The Ghost Speaks to Gawain

The ghost’s message to Guinevere is personal in nature; it is a mother’s warning to her daughter, a direct exchange of information with *seemingly*⁵⁶ little impact on the Arthurian universe as a whole. When Gawain requests information from the ghost, however, the importance and meaning of her previous speech, and Guinevere’s involvement in the disastrous future of Arthur’s kingdom, become abundantly clear. Gawain asks, “how shal we fare [...] that fonden to fight/ And thus defoulen the folke on fele kinges londes,/ And riches over reymes withouten eny right,/ Wynnen worshipp in were thorgh wightnesse of hondes?” [How shall we fare who undertake to fight/ And thus put down the people in diverse kings’ countries,/ And enter realms without any right/ Achieving renown in warfare through prowess

⁵⁶ I will discuss the importance of intertextuality later in this chapter. Although Guinevere seems to play a minor role here, her presence is important (as discussed above).

of arms?]) (261-264). The wording of Gawain's question is curious, given his emphasis on the act of conquering. The phrase, "withouten eny right," is especially intriguing, for why would the greatest knight of Arthur's court express any reservations about the legality or morality of his king's conquests?

Randy P. Schiff argues, "In revealing to the ghost his reservations about his career as a military man profiting from the arbitrary dispossession of others, the Gawain of the *Awntyrs* gives voice to a regional anxiety produced by the central role of militarization in the economic life of the borderlands" (Schiff 617). Furthermore, he writes that "The Anglo-Scottish border stands as the key site for literary meditations on the dangers of imperialism stems from the particularly nefarious brand of expansionism practiced by the English" (Schiff 618). Gawain's line of questioning, in light of the poem's northern composition and Gawain's popularity in northern romances, certainly points to the problematic realities of the Anglo-Scottish border in the fifteenth century and marks Gawain as a figure who shares northern concerns and values. This also speaks to the functionality of romance, where a motif is used to symbolically suggest contemporary social meaning. The poet relies on his readers' familiarity with the genre in order to emphasize questions regarding imperial expansion. The motifs of 'The Three Living' and 'The Adulterous Mother' are recognizable and each has its own set of symbolic meanings, but when used together in the context of Arthurian expansion, the poet is able to exploit his readers' recognition of these motifs and create something new. While the basic structure of the motifs remains the same, their symbolic significance adapts, and *The Awntyrs* becomes a romance fixated on the cost of violence and warfare, despite its use of the supernatural to propel the narrative. By employing these supernatural motifs in the

first part of the poem, the reader is subtly prepared for the second part, which focuses on contemporary concerns pertinent to a fifteenth-century northern audience.

After the Battle of Otterburn (1388), the Scots did not wage a full-scale war against the English, although cross-border battles certainly occurred throughout the fifteenth century. Fear of attack from Scotland was very much part of the northern psyche. Being northern meant living with the need for constant defense. A.J. Pollard writes, “The true frontier zone itself, the borders, covered only a relatively narrow band of territory. In this zone a unique clan-based and lawless society of cattle thieves and reivers had emerged in the wake of the Anglo-Scottish war” (Pollard “North-East” 20). These reivers descended from Scotland into the marches, causing widespread panic and igniting old fears of the savage northerners. While skirmishes between Scotland and England did occur during the later half of the fifteenth-century, the early fifteenth century was a period of relative peace, or as Pollard writes, of a “fragile truce.” This truce was delicate and required constant effort to maintain, as cross-border thieving could easily turn to conflict without careful negotiation (Pollard “North-East” 219). In his discussion of *The Awntyrs off Arthure and Golagros and Gawain*, Schiff writes, “The *Awntrys* and *Golagros* speak to the continuing alarm of a reversion to an age of unbridled imperialist activity, with the *Awntrys* seeming to grow out of the especially violent marcher wars of the fourteenth century, while *Golagros* speaks to fears that what Michael Brown and Steve Boardman have called the “cold war” of the Anglo-Scottish fifteenth century might heat up and again embroil the region” (Schiff 618).⁵⁷ This sense of alarm or foreboding permeates the first section of *The Awntrys* and further underlines

⁵⁷ For a more detailed discussion of *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*, cf. chapters one and three.

Gawain's subtle fear concerning the consequences of imperial conquest and expansion. It is a remarkable moment, therefore, when Arthur's greatest knight, an active participant in the king's global conquest *and* a northerner, stands before the prophetic specter during a time of delicate peace, and openly questions his fate.

The ghost's response to Gawain, in comparison to her rather short reply to Guinevere, is long and detailed. Her speech reveals a vision of doom for Arthur's kingdom and provides evidence of the poet's knowledge of contemporary fifteenth-century military campaigns and his heavy reliance on previous works of Arthuriana.

The ghost says:

Your King is to covetous, I warne the sir knight.
 May no man stry him with strenght while his whele stondes.⁵⁸
 Whan he is in his mageste, moost in his might,
 He shal light full lowe on the sesondes.
 And this chivalrous Kinge chef shall a chuanche:
 Falsely Fortune in fight,
 That wonderfull wheelwryght,
 Shall make lordes to light –
 Take witnesse by Fraunce.

Fraunce haf ye frely with your fight wonnen;
 Freol⁵⁹ and his folke, fey ar they leved.
 Bretayne and Burgoyne al to you bowen,
 And al the Dussiperes of Fraunce with your dyn deved.
 Gyan may grete the were was bigonen;
 There ar no lordes on lyve in that londe leved.
 Yet shal the riche Romans with you be aurrone,
 And with the Rounde Table with rentes be reved;
 Then shal a Tyber untrue tymber you tene.
 Gete the, Sir Gawayn:
 Turn the to Tuskayn.
 For ye shul lese Bretayn

⁵⁸ Fortune's Wheel is likely a reference to Arthur's dream in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which I discuss later in the chapter. In the dream, Fortune tells Arthur that he will soon suffer a great defeat, thus ending his reign. Here, the ghost's words mirror this prophecy, noting that Arthur will fall at the hands of a traitor.

⁵⁹ Frolo: In both Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and Wace's *Brut*, Arthur defeats Frolo, ruler of France (this event takes place before the events of Arthur's Roman war). The reference to Frolo here reinforces the intertextuality of the work, but also situates Arthur's future battle in France amongst the literary chronology of the Arthurian legend. *The Awntyrs* is set before the Roman campaign, but the reference to Frolo indicates a previous war in France.

With a knight kene.⁶⁰

This knight shal keenly crouse the crowne,
 And at Carlele⁶¹ shal that comly be crowned as king.
 That sege shal be sesede at a sesone
 That myche baret and bale to Bretayn shal bring.
 Hit shal in Tuskan be tolde of the treson,
 And ye shullen turne ayen for the tydyng.
 There shal the Rounde Table lese the renounce:
 Beside Ramsey⁶² ful rad at a riding
 In Dorsetshire shal dy the doughtest of alle.
 Gete the, Sir Gawayn,
 The boldest of Bretayne;
 In a slake thou shal be slayne,
 Sich ferlyes shull falle.

Such ferlies shull fal, withoute eny fable,
 Uppon Corneywayle coast with a knight kene.
 Sir Arthur the honest, avenant and able,
 He shal be wounded, iwys – wothely, I wene.
 And al the rial rowte of the Rounde Table,
 Thei shullen dye on a day, the doughty bydene,
 Suppriset with a suget: he beris hit in sable,
 With a sauter engreled of silver full shene.
 He beris hit of sable, sothely to say;
 In riche Arthures halle,
 The barne⁶³ playes at the balle
 That outray shall you alle,
 Delfully that day. (265-312)

[Your king is too covetous, I warn you sir knight. No man may overthrow him by force while Fortune holds him high on her wheel. [Just at the point] when he is in his majesty, most in might, he shall fall full low on the sea-sands. And this chivalrous king shall receive his fate; Falsely Fortune in strife, that wonderful wheelwright, shall make lords fall – take the example of France:

⁶⁰ Mordred. This is likely a reference to the alliterative *Morte Arthur*. During Arthur's campaign in Rome, Mordred usurps the throne and takes Guinevere as his wife. Guinevere's affair with Mordred predates the French introduction of Lancelot and the ghost's references to Guinevere's potential adultery likely relate to Mordred. In *The Awntyrs*, Mordred is just a child, but the threat looms.

⁶¹ The poet of *The Awntyrs* names Carlisle as the centralized seat of Arthur's power. The northern Carlisle, and not the southern London, is Arthur's stronghold and a symbol of his strength, which is perhaps an allusion to northern followers/political alliances.

⁶² Likely a reference to Romsey, a small town in Hampshire. Matthews argues that this is close to the location of Arthur's final battle in the alliterative *Morte*. The ghost's knowledge of Arthur's future is alarmingly accurate, as she pinpoints the exact location of Arthur's death (Hahn 211).

⁶³ Mordred. Rosemary Allen posits that this may be a reference to the young Henry VI, who was born in 1421 and would have been an infant at the time of the poem's composition ("Place-Names" 194).

France have you completely conquered with your fight; Frolo and his troops are left dead. Brittany and Burgundy have yielded to you, and all the twelve peers of France are stunned by your war-cry. Aquitaine may rue the war; there are no warriors left alive in that land. Yet shall [sovereign] Rome be overrun by you, and by the Round Table [her] revenues [will be] taken over; Then shall the treacherous Tiber (Rome) cause you woe. Take heed, Sir Gawain: go quickly to Tuscany, for you shall lose Britain through a bold knight.

This knight shall boldly seize [the] crown, and at Carlisle shall that nobleman be crowned king. That knight shall be empowered at a time that shall bring much strife and sorrow to Britain. [The treason] shall be announced in Tuscany, and you will come back again for the news. There shall the Round Table lose its renown: Beside Ramsey suddenly at a battle in Dorsetshire shall die the boldest of all. Take heed, Sir Gawain, the boldest of Britain; in a valley shall you be slain, such wonders shall occur.

Such wonders shall occur, without any falsehood, upon Cornwall coast because of a fierce knight. Sir Arthur the honourable, gracious and powerful, he shall be wounded, indeed – lethally, I believe. And all the royal company of the Round Table, they shall die on a single day [the brave ones together], overcome by [one of the king's own men]: he bears a black coat of arms, with a bright silver cross. He bears it of black, truly to say; in noble Arthur's hall, the child plays with a ball that shall undo you all, sorrowfully that day.]

The reliance on intertextual familiarity in this section enhances the accuracy of the ghost's prophecy and guarantees the audience's understanding of the severity of the situation. In addition, the motifs of "the three living" and "the adulterous mother" offer both hope and despair. Through repentance there is hope for a better future, yet the appearance of these rotting corpses serves as a reminder of the inevitability of death and decay. While the queen and Gawain may learn important lessons from the ghost, disaster seems inevitable.

This is further emphasized by the poet's reference to the wars in France. The realities of the Hundred Years War permeate the text, creating a sense of realism and underlying doom. In order to understand the imminent danger and cost of warfare discussed by the ghost, the anonymous poet constantly reminds his audience of the true impact of war. Readers of the text would recognize these references to battles in

France and, furthermore, understand the effect such battles have on society (both from an economic and political point of view). While Arthur's battles may be the stuff of fiction, the fighting in France provides a crucial context for the poem's readers. Rosamund Allen dates *The Awntyrs* to c. 1424-5, and while the reference to Arthur's victory over Frolo certainly derives from the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Allen argues that the "specific reference to Brittany and Burgundy [...] refers to a fragile alliance between Brittany, Burgundy and England, made in April 1423 and already endangered by June 1425" (Allen "Place-Names" 190). Allen continues, "The truce was broken in December 1425. Whoever wrote the ghost's warning in *The Awntyrs* was deeply conscious of the deaths since 1415⁶⁴ of many of the nobility of France, Burgundy and Scotland, especially in the Battle of Verneuil in 1424 where over 7,000 French and Scots were killed, the Scots almost annihilated" (Allen "Place-Names" 190). The poem's setting - close to the Scottish border - and its concern with conquest, further emphasize the connection between the ghost's words and the realities of fifteenth-century warfare. The poet criticizes Arthur and by doing so, casts doubt on England's endless campaigns against France in the south and Scotland in the north. Regardless of Allen's dating, the specificity of the ghost's examples indicate an Arthurian world reflective of Henry V's campaigns in France. Gawain's question, therefore, casts doubt not only on Arthur, but on the current political and military climate in England and, perhaps, Scotland.

Gawain's presence further complicates the prophecy because he is not directly responsible for Arthur's covetousness. "The three living and three dead" motif repeatedly emphasizes the symbolism of the mirror. The three dead kings are a

⁶⁴ Battle of Agincourt.

direct reflection and, indeed, a grotesque embodiment of the three living kings. The sins of the three living are made manifest in the rotting bodies of the three dead. They are a mirror image, a dichotomy, a conspicuous symbol of what *will* become of the three living. Guinevere's mother is also a mirror, her life, appearance, and deeds all in direct correlation to the life, appearance, and deeds of her daughter. Gawain, however, is not mirrored in the ghost, nor are her words directed to him. She specifically says, "Your *king* is too covetous," shifting the focus from Gawain onto Arthur. The lessons of the ghost are directed at Arthur, but Gawain is made the witness, bearing the knowledge of an apocalyptic future for Arthur's kingdom. As we have seen, Gawain is often called upon to act as the representative of Arthur. As a living embodiment of the Round Table, he is once more shouldering responsibility and accepting the lethal repercussions of his king's ambition.

Arthur's Problematic Pride and The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*

As I discussed in the first chapter, Arthur is at times portrayed negatively in the Gawain romances. Here, the burden of failure is placed squarely on his shoulders, connected directly to his covetousness. Arthur is very much a minor figure in *The Awntyrs*, yet his problematic pride is repeatedly discussed by the ghost and, later in the text, by Sir Galaron, a knight who claims that Arthur has stolen his lands. The king is judged harshly, as, despite these claims, he is not actively covetous during the poem's narrative. Both the ghost and Sir Galaron speak of deeds that *will* happen in the future or that *have* occurred in the past. The Arthur of *The Awntyrs*, however, does not behave in an overtly proud manner, making these claims of the king's great sin somewhat puzzling and further evidence of the poet's reliance on his audience's familiarity with preexisting Arthurian texts.

In his discussion of Henry V and kingship, G.L. Harris describes the role of the king as follows: “The king stood at the apex of human society, looking to God immediately above and to his subjects below him. To God he should be humble and obedient, for only thus could he expect the obedience of his subjects. To his subjects he should appear magnificent, just, and benevolent, representing to them the qualities of the Godhead” (Harris 10). Arthur’s kingship becomes the point of contention when Gawain specifically asks the ghost about conquerors. If Arthur is to be a good king, an *ideal* king, he must adhere to the rules of good kingship. The king must be wise, just, willing to accept counsel, and to lead his people both spiritually and politically. While Arthur exhibits many of these behaviours in *The Awntyrs*,⁶⁵ his fatal flaw is repeatedly noted and emphasized in order to bring attention to where he fails. While he does not necessarily exemplify this behaviour in *The Awntyrs*, the ghost’s prophecies and Gawain’s words bring attention to a major concern of many Arthurian narratives: the king’s ambition.⁶⁶

The theme of Arthurian conquest or, specifically, Arthur’s ambition, is not unique to *The Awntyrs*. The poem’s narrative follows Geoffrey of Monmouth’s plot for Arthur’s rise and fall, using Mordred as a symbolic reminder of the eventual collapse of his kingdom. Geoffrey’s telling of the Arthurian myth sees Arthur ride to war against Rome and, in his absence, Mordred usurps the throne, marries Guinevere, and begins a war that will lead to the end of Arthur’s reign. The allusion to Geoffrey’s story influences Rosamund Allen’s suggestion that *The Awntyrs* may be a prequel to the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The alliterative *Morte*, a fourteenth

⁶⁵ I will discuss these examples later in the chapter. For examples of negative Arthurian kingship, cf. chapter one where I discuss *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen* and *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*.

⁶⁶ In chapter three I will discuss the specificities of Scottish kingship and Gawain’s unique role in Scottish Arthurian romance.

century poem, has often been connected to *The Awntyrs*, as the only surviving copy of the *Morte* is in the Thornton Manuscript, which also contains a copy of *The Awntyrs* (Krishna 1).⁶⁷ Allen's argument is twofold: the setting of *Awntyrs* likely alludes to future events detailed in the alliterative *Morte*. Yet, this timeline is flawed because Mordred is a child in *The Awntyrs*, but in the alliterative *Morte*, the narrative begins with Arthur handing control of his kingdom to an adult Mordred (Allen "Jests" 130). Allen asks, "Why remind the audience of a familiar story, and apparently call their attention to a particular version of it, only to create a disjunction by means of a time-warp?" (Allen "Jests" 130). She goes on to answer this question, arguing that:

this misfit is a deliberate device to call attention to a political sub-text in the prophecy. Embedded within the ghost's account of Arthur's campaigns in France [...] are apparent allusions to English conquests in France from 1415-1424. These, together with the specific references to places near Carlisle, establish the poem in the context of the Anglo-French and Anglo-Scottish wars of the first quarter of the fifteenth century and locate it in the Border politics of northern England, the northernmost front of the Hundred Years' War. (Allen "Jests" 131)

Allen's argument is compelling as it implies that the author of *The Awntyrs* has infused his poem with both historical and literary allusions in order to remind the audience of the Arthurian context for the ghost's prophecies *and* real examples of military conquest. The ability of romance to map current events is used with great success in *The Awntyrs*, as regional concerns about expansion and governance are imbedded as both a ghostly prophecy and later, a problematic land exchange.

Although Arthur is a fictional figure, he represents idealized British kingship and unity, or, at the very least, a way to discuss what idealized kingship *should* be

⁶⁷ The Thornton Manuscript, Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91, is thought to be the work of a single scribe, Robert of Thornton. The manuscript is dated to approximately 1430-1440, although the poem's date of composition is unknown. Cf. Matthews.

through the lens of literary symbolism. As G.L. Harris writes in his discussion of Henry V's wars in France, "There was no virtue in foolhardiness; indeed true 'hardiness' lay not in heroic sacrifice but in perceiving the military advantage and fighting hard to secure victory for the *just cause*" (Harris 20, my emphasis). The notion of a "just cause," especially in relation to Arthur's campaigns is imperative, as the ghost, Gawain, and later Sir Galahad, all question the validity of Arthur's desire for military adventures in *The Awntyrs*. Furthermore, Harris notes, "At the end of his life Henry's vision, or ambition, stretched beyond that of the majority of his subjects, from whom he may have been in danger of becoming isolated" (Harris 28). Just as Henry V's wars in France caused tension amongst his subjects, Arthur's fictional campaigns on the Continent seem, in the context of the Gawain romances, a point of debate and confusion.

The ghost of Guinevere's mother denounces Arthur's ambition, while characters like Sir Golagros of *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*, Sir Galahad, and Fortune highlight the terrible cost of Arthur's greed. *The Awntyrs* precedes the events of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, yet Arthur's sin has already set in motion the fall of his kingdom. Military conquest and expansion, whether real or fictional, comes at a great personal cost and the Gawain romances are acutely aware of this problematic component of kingship. While the historical context for the text is certainly of great import, especially in any attempt to date the poem, I will now turn to the literary context presented by the alliterative *Morte Arthure* in order to illuminate the ghost's words and the inevitable path to Continental war, a path which always leads to Arthur's undoing.

The alliterative *Morte Arthure* provides a fascinating character study for any work on Arthur and, indeed, Gawain. As I argued in chapter one, the northern Gawain romances often depict Arthur as an absent or foolhardy king. The Arthur of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, however, is exactly what one would expect in an ideal king. He is noble, powerful, and, for the most part, wise. His reputation reaches far beyond the borders of England and his hold on power is unquestioned. When two messengers from Rome arrive demanding tribute and subservience from the Holy Roman Emperor, Arthur silences them with the fierceness of his visage alone. The Roman senator exclaims, “Pare voute of thi visage has woundyde vs all!/ Thow arte þe lordlyeste lede þat euer I one lukyde;/ By luyng, withowttyn lesse, a lyon the semys!”⁶⁸ [[Arthur] the look on your face has stricken us quite;/ You are the most lordly man that ever I looked on;/ By staring, nothing less than a lion you look!⁶⁹] (137-139). Like Galaron’s minstrel, the Roman messengers beg mercy from Arthur, arguing that, should the king treat them poorly, his reputation would be damaged. In response, Arthur provides lavish sleeping quarters and safe passage for the messengers the following day. The narrative of the alliterative *Morte* shows the Arthurian kingdom at the height of its power, followed by its collapse into ruin. This rise and fall, predicted by Arthur’s oft-cited dream of Fortune’s wheel, is reflected in the early part of *The Awntyrs*. While the ghost warns Guinevere against adultery, her true message highlights Fortune’s role in what is to come.

In the alliterative *Morte*, Arthur’s dream comes after he has successfully defeated the Emperor Lucius. Despite this success, Arthur does not return to England, rather, he takes his army to Tuscany, where his campaign continues. In the

⁶⁸ All quotations from the alliterative *Morte Arthure* are from Valerie Krishna’s critical edition (1976).

⁶⁹ All translations from the alliterative *Morte Arthure* are by Valerie Krishna, unless otherwise noted.

midst of conquering large parts of Tuscany, Fortune appears to him in a dream vision. Once the dream is interpreted, Arthur's philosophers explain,

Freke [...] thy fortune es passed;
 For thou sall fynd hir thi foo – frayste when the lykes,
 Thou arte at þe hegheste, I hette the forsothe;
 Chalange nowe when thou will, thou cheuys no more.
 Thou has schedde myche blode and schalkes distroyede,
 Sakeles, in cirquytrie,⁷⁰ in sere kynges landis.
 Schryfe the of thy schame and schape for thyn ende;
 Thou has a schewynge, Sir Kynge – take kepe 3if the lyke;
 For thou sall fersely fall within five wynters. (3394-3402)

[Sire [...] your good fortune has passed:/ You shall find [Fortune] your foe – test her out as you wish;/ You are now at your zenith, I tell you in truth;/ Take what challenge you wish, you will achieve nothing more./ You have spilled much blood and destroyed many men./ All sinless, by your pride, in sundry kings' lands./ Shrive yourself of your sins and prepare for your end;/ You have had a sign, Sir King, please take heed,/ For you shall fall fearfully within five winters.]

The interpretation of the dream vision emphasizes Arthur's gravest sin: his pride.

Here, at the moment of his greatest triumph, Arthur is told that he will fall. Despite

Allen's assertions that *The Awntyrs* does not fit within the alliterative *Morte's* timeline, I suggest the similarities between Arthur's dream and the ghost's prophecy prove a strong thematic connection. After all, the ghost's words in *The Awntyrs* mirror Arthur's dream closely: "Your King is to covetous, I warne thee sir knight./ May no man stry him with strenght while his whele stondes./ Whan he is in his mageste, moost in his might/ He shal light full owe on the sesondes./ And this chivalrous Kinge chef shall a chaunce" (265-269) In both texts, Arthur's covetousness is the catalyst for the collapse of his kingdom. Despite Mordred's

⁷⁰ The Middle English Dictionary defines "surquidré" as, "Arrogance, pride; presumptuousness; also *person*; also, conceit; (b) *theol.* as a branch of the deadly sin of pride: presumption, arrogance, self-importance; (c) intellectual presumption; (d) overconfidence." The *Gawain*-poet uses the same term in explaining the Green Knight's plot of Arthur's court: "For to assay þe surquidre, 3if hit soth were/ Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table" (2456-2457). [To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth/ Of the great reputation attached to the Round Table.] Once again, the topic of Arthur's pride is of great concern. Cf. chapter four.

usurpation and Guinevere's adulterous affair, it is Arthur who bears the ultimate responsibility for the Round Table's end.

Exit: The Ghost

This first section of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* ends ambiguously. The ghost disappears and the mysterious darkness dissipates. Gawain and Guinevere re-join Arthur, where Guinevere, "... sayes hem the selcouthes that thei hadde ther seen" [tells [the court] of the wonders they had seen] (333). The court reacts with bewilderment, but the poet gives only one line to their reaction and follows with Arthur's feast and the entrance of Sir Galaron of Galloway. The ghost's prophecies are not mentioned again, with the exception of the poem's last stanza where Guinevere arranges masses in honour of her deceased mother.⁷¹ It is here that the question of the poem's unity becomes problematic, because the second half of the narrative seemingly "forgets" the events of the first half. Gawain does not mention the ghost's warning against covetousness and indeed seems to partake in what the ghost would find a troublesome land dispute. Yet, the events of the first part of *The Awntyrs* are, I believe, meant to inform the second half of the narrative. Gawain's important role as the ghost's messenger is actually emphasized by his silence in the tournament against Galaron. Because Gawain is the direct recipient of the ghost's prophecy, his presence in the second half of the poem serves as a reminder to readers

⁷¹ It is unclear whether Guinevere shares the ghost's prophecies with the court or if she simply tells Arthur and his courtiers that a ghost appeared over the lake. There are early signs of trouble in Arthur's kingdom, however, regardless of Guinevere and Gawain's silence following the ghost's appearance. After the ghost departs, the court feasts at Rondolsette Hall. Andrew R. Walking posits a definition of "Halle" from the Old French *hale*, which refers to a tent or open pavilion (Walking 114). If Rondolsette Halle is indeed a temporary dwelling, the center point of the poem features the image of Arthur and his court in a temporary space, located in the supernatural wilderness of Inglewood Forest. Rather than the imposing permanence of his seat in Carlisle, Arthur spends this precarious moment in the poem seated, unprotected, in the wild. The emphasis here is on the temporality of his kingdom, as prophesized by the ghost, and later proven by the entrance of Galaron.

that these prophecies exist and remain crucial to the narrative, which further enhances Gawain's unifying presence in the text.

As Krista Sue-Lo Twu writes, "The power of the Ghost's warnings and prophecies depend on the vast fund of previous Arthurian literature to provide the poet and audience with a shared discourse on the genre... Likewise, the juxtaposition of the court at its noon described in the present of the poem and its ruinous future, as prophesied by the Ghost, generate an apprehension of loss" (Twu 118). This apprehension is carried by Gawain from the Tarne Wadling into the second half of the narrative. Just as the ghost embodies Guinevere's sin, as signified by her rotting corpse, so Gawain embodies the ghost's warning against covetousness, his chivalric display on the battlefield a living example of the ghost's prophecy. What better way to validate the ghost's warnings against covetousness than the entrance of Galaron, a knight whose lands have been taken through conquest and expansion by Arthur and handed to Gawain? The fight that follows is a tableau presented by Gawain and a wronged Scottish knight to expose the cost of Arthur's pride.

Enter Galaron

After the dramatic episode with the ghost in the Tarne, Galaron's entrance into the text is rather unassuming. There is only one stanza separating the ghost's exit and the entrance of Galaron. He is preceded by a female minstrel, who brings him before Arthur and announces his presence: "Mon makeles of might,/ Here comes an errant knyght./ Do him reson and right/ For thi manhede" [My sire without equal, here comes an errant knight. Treat him with reason and justice for your manhood] (348-351). The emphasis on Arthur's reputation serves as a reminder of the ghost's warnings and echoes the Roman messengers from the alliterative *Morte* who inform

the king that should he treat them poorly, his reputation will be tarnished. Arthur's pride will cause ruin and here the ghost's preoccupation with conquest, especially unjust conquest, is quickly recalled. Although the characters do not refer to the ghost directly, the actions of *Awntyrs B* serve as physical evidence for the basis of the ghost's prophecy. When asked why he has come to court, Galaron responds:

Whether thou be cayser or king, her I the becalle
 For to finde me a freke with my fille.
 Fighting to fraist I fonded fro home.
 [...]
 Mi name is Sir Galaron, withouten eny gile,
 The grettest of Galwey of greves and gyllis,
 Of Connok, of Conyngham, and also Kyle,
 Of Lomond, of Losex, of Loyan hilles.
 Thou has wonen hem in were with a wrange wile
 And geven hem to Sir Gawayn – that my hert grylles.
 But he shal wring his honed and warry the wyle,
 Er he weld hem, ywys, agayn myn unwylles.
 Bi al the welth of the worlde, he shal hem never welde,
 While I the hede may bere,
 But if he wyn hem in were,
 With a shelde and a spere,
 On a faire felde.
 I wol fight on a felde – thereto I make faith –
 With eny freke upon that frely is borne.
 To lese suche a lordshipp me wolde thenke laith,
 And iche lede opon lyve wold lagh me to scorne. (410-433)

[Whether you are an emperor or king, here I challenge you to find me an opponent to fight to my satisfaction. I set out from home to seek combat.[...] My name is Sir Galaron, without any trickery, the greatest of Galloway of thickets and ravines, of Connok, of Conyngham, and also Kyle, of Lomond, of Losex, of Loyan hills. You have taken them in war unjustly and given them to Sir Gawain – that angers my heart. But [while I am alive] he shall wring his hand[s] and curse the time [we fought together], before he rules these lands, indeed, against my resistance. By all the wealth in the world, he will never rule [the lands], while I [am alive], unless he wins them in combat, with shield and spear, on a fair field. I will fight on a field – there I make my oath – with any warrior upon earth who is nobly born. To lose such lordship over those lands to me would seem hateful and every warrior alive would laugh me to scorn.]

In her exhaustive study of place names in *The Awntyrs*, Rosamund Allen has made a valiant attempt to identify Galaron's disputed lands. They are all certainly located in Scotland. As Allen notes, "The territory thus surveyed comprises: the earldom of Lennox, the lordship of Stewartry, the Black Douglas lands of Bothwell, the lordship of Galloway (east of Wigtown), the old earldom of Wigtown (the Rhins of Galloway) and the earldom of Carrick, with the baronies of Cunningham and Kyle in Ayrshire, Cumnock lying at the eastern edge" (Allen "Place-Names" 185). These numerous earldoms and lordships cover the modern day regions of Dumfries and Galloway, Ayrshire and Arran, and Lanarkshire. Galaron's lands, lying in southern Scotland, are conveniently situated in close proximity to Arthur's northern stronghold, Carlisle. By using actual places, the anonymous poet once again brings a sense of immediacy to the text. Just as the first half of the narrative recalls English battles in France, making Galaron a Scottish knight reflects the realities of Anglo-Scottish border politics in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁷²

Despite the heavy emphasis on conquest in wartime, Galaron's presence at court does not initiate a cross-border battle, nor is it an all out declaration of war. Galaron's claims are personal and his dispute is with Arthur and, by extension, Gawain. His primary concern is his *own* reputation, as losing these lands again in fair combat would lead to embarrassment. As Patricia Clare Ingham writes, "Land signifies both the glorious wealth of aristocratic privilege and the unbelievable breadth of a realm" (Ingham 181). It should also be noted here that the Arthurian court, as presented in *The Awntyrs*, is enjoying a period of peace. Not only does Arthur remark, "We ar in the wode went to walke on oure waith,/ To hunte at the

⁷² As noted earlier, the "auld alliance" of France and Scotland is again emphasized here as, presumably, as a Scotsman, Galaron would fight against the English in Arthur's French Wars. Cf. Chapter 3.

hertes with hounde and with horne./We are in oure gamen; we have no gome graithe,” [We are in the woods to proceed on our hunt, to hunt the deer with hounds and with horns. We are at our games; we have no man ready] (434-436), an indication that the court is better equipped to hunt than to fight men of war, but Galaron also arrives without armed troops. Indeed, his arrival is marked by pageantry, as he is preceded by his lady, and a solitary female minstrel. Galaron’s knightly appearance is also described at length, giving the impression that he is an aristocrat and certainly not a wild and unruly Scotsman from the north. As Twu notes, “the poem clearly identifies Galaron not as an outsider, but as a fully-fledged member of the aristocracy in its description of his arrival with entourage” (Twu 27). He is a worthy opponent for any of Arthur’s knights, an equal member of the nobility, whose heraldic identifiers and fair entourage further imply that his cause is just and Arthur has wronged a fellow member of the aristocracy.

Tournament Warfare

Galaron’s arrival and subsequent demand for a fair fight lead Arthur to arrange a tournament. This seems tame in light of the ghost’s earlier prediction, and historically, a joust between Scottish and English noblemen would not be out of place. As Anthony Goodman notes, “The frontier aristocracies were in the habit of holding joint chivalrous sporting fixtures” (Goodman 23) in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. This time of relative truce was conducive to such tournaments, and Goodman remarks on two notable examples: a tournament held at Carlisle in 1404 and another in 1414 where Sir William Douglas of Drumlanrig was allowed to joust at Carlisle and Berwick (Goodman 23). The focus on Carlisle as a center for tournaments and as Arthur’s northern seat speaks to the lack of what A.J.

Pollard calls “royal presence” in the north. At the end of the fourteenth century, Carlisle was the only major center of royal power in the West Marches (Pollard “Characteristics” 138). This changed somewhat after 1405 as, “the Lancastrian usurpation extended the direct royal presence in the north,” (Pollard “Characteristics” 138), yet the royal lands in the West Marches were largely dispersed to the powerful Neville family, thus lessening Henry VI and Edward IV’s hold on the north (Pollard “Characteristics” 138). Carlisle and nearby Inglewood forest, therefore, would be familiar to the audience of *The Awntyrs* as a setting for cross-border jousts and a suitable location for Arthur’s northern stronghold.

Yet, despite the historical evidence for cross-border tournaments, Guinevere’s mother did not warn against Scottish aristocrats demanding a fair tourney during peacetime. Nor did she bemoan the court’s love of tournaments as a precursor to an Arthurian collapse. Thus the questions must be asked, what is the significance of the tournament and why would the author of *The Awntyrs* choose a joust between two knights as the thematic echo of the ghost’s prophecy? To answer the first question, I turn to Maurice Keen’s seminal work on chivalry in the Middle Ages. According to Keen, “First and foremost, tournaments were undeniably good training for war” (88). Tournaments served as a practice arena; warfare in a controlled, highly organized environment complete with rules, regulations, and customs. In addition, “The tournament was an exercise for the elite, and simply to appear there, armed and mounted and with his own squire or squires in attendance, was in itself a demonstration of a man’s right to mingle in an elite society, of his social identity” (Keen 90). Galaron strikes an interesting figure in *The Awntyrs*, as unlike Sir Gromer Somer, a knight with a similar land dispute, Galaron’s aristocratic

bearing and adherence to the rules of tourney mark him as an equal and suitable opponent to Arthur and his knights. The accuracy of this detail emphasizes why the anonymous poet chose to highlight the tournament as a mirror of the ghost's words. Although Galaron does not declare war, by engaging in the tournament, he and Gawain are given the opportunity to *play* at war. This is the dress rehearsal, so to speak, the precursor to what *will* occur when the tournament ends and the real battle for land begins.

Gawain in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*

Before turning to Gawain's battle with Galaron, I will first consider his important role in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Because *The Awntyrs* is purposely using aspects of the *Morte* to create thematic echoes, Gawain's place in this text provides a glimpse into his future and the future of the Round Table. The *Morte* also provides an important connection between Gawain's role in *The Awntyrs* and the literary tradition surrounding his responsibility for Arthur's actions. Gawain appears in the text as Arthur's greatest knight and his actions show him, arguably, at his most heroic and most noble. After Arthur, Gawain's narrative is the most detailed in the text, as he is charged with many important battles during Arthur's quest for glory in Rome. His death at the hands of Mordred's army is met with intense grief and despair by Arthur and even Mordred himself. When Gawain falls on the field of battle, it is Mordred who offers the first eulogy: "Had thow knawen [Gawain], Sir Kyng,⁷³ in kythe thare he lengede,/ His konynge, his knyghthode, his kindly werkes,/ His doing, his doughtynesse, his dedis of armes,/ Thow wolde hafe dole for his dede

⁷³ Mordred is speaking to King Frederick of Friesland who remarks that Gawain had, nearly singlehandedly, destroyed his troops.

þe dayes of thy lyfe” [Had you known him, Sir King, in the country he came from,/ His wisdom, his valor, his virtuous works,/ His conduct, his courage, his exploits in arms,/ You would weep for his death all the days of your life] (3882-3885). Mordred is so overcome by his grief that he “went wepand away and weries the stowndys, / Pat euer his werdes ware wroghte sicke wandrethe to wyrke” [rode off crying and cursed the hour/ that ever his fate was written to work such woe] (3888-3889).

Mordred’s lament for Gawain is a poignant show of respect for the fallen knight and an acknowledgment of Fortune’s cruel hand. Yet Mordred’s show of grief is eclipsed by Arthur’s horror upon discovering his nephew’s corpse. He cries, “Was neuer sorowe so softe that sanke to my herte;/ Itt es full sib to my selfe, my sorowe es the more./ Was neuer so sorowfull a syghte seyn with myn eyghen;/ He es sakles supprysede for *syn of myn one*” [Never did such sharp sorrow sink into my heart,/ and grief is close kin to me – my care is the more./ Never was so sorrowful a sight seen by my eyes;/ unsullied, he is destroyed, and all for my sins] (3983-3986, my emphasis). The death of Gawain is, in many respects, the precise moment of Arthur’s defeat. The king acknowledges that it is because of *his* sin that Gawain has fallen. This self-awareness, coupled with Arthur’s overwhelming grief for his nephew and all his fallen knights, emphasizes Arthur’s inherent goodness and leadership. Although it is too late for forgiveness and repentance, the Arthur of the alliterative *Morte* learns Fortune’s hard lesson. In the end, he accepts the blame for his actions with humility, while his grief, and ultimately his death exemplify the cost of his sin.

It is arguable, then, that the alliterative *Morte Arthure* marks the pinnacle moment in Gawain’s history as a literary figure. Nowhere else is he given such

esteem or respect;⁷⁴ even his sword is named in the text, an honour usually reserved for Arthur alone. Arthur's lament for Gawain is revealing of the king's true feelings for his most beloved knight:

Dere kosyn o kynde, in kare am I leuede,
 For nowe my wirchipe es wente and my were endide;
 Here es þe hope of my hele, my happyng of armes –
 My herte and my hardynes hale one hym lengede,
 My counsell, my comforthe, þat kepide myn herte.
 Of all knyghtes þe kyng þat vndir Criste lifede,
 Pou was worthy to be kyng, þofe I þe corown bare;
 My wele and my wirchipe of all þis werlde riche
 Was wonnen thourghe Sir Gawayne and thourghe his witt one.
 (3956-3964)

[Beloved kinsman in blood, cursed am I left;/ for now my glory is gone and all my wars ended./ Here lies my promise of ease, my prowess in arms;/ my heart and my strength hung wholly on him./ My counsellor, my comfort, who carried all my hopes./ King of all knights that lived under Christ,/ you were worthy to be King, though I wore the crown./ My good and my glory throughout all this great world/ were won through Sir Gawain, through his wisdom alone.]

If *The Awntyrs* alludes to the alliterative *Morte* to provide historical and literary references in the text, let me posit that it is *this* Gawain, Arthur's most glorious knight, who appears in *The Awntyrs*. Arthur's focus on his kinship with Gawain and Gawain's worthiness as a knight are especially relevant to *The Awntyrs* and its place in the northern Gawain romances. Gawain, in many, if not all, of his literary appearances, is gifted and cursed with the responsibility of upholding the Round Table's reputation. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, this responsibility sees him die for his king. Yet his reputation is renowned, marking him as the worthiest knight in Arthur's kingdom. If the Gawain of *The Awntyrs* is the Gawain of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Gawain's joust with Galaron represents an early indication of

⁷⁴ Although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is arguably the most famous surviving Gawain romance, the question of his worthiness is at the forefront of the poem's concern. Gawain must prove himself to both the Round Table fellowship and the Green Knight, his esteem dependent on his ability to pass the Green Knight's test. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, however, Gawain's reputation is unquestioned. He has nothing to prove.

Gawain's personal importance to Arthur and his greater role as the embodiment of the Round Table.

Gawain, Galaron, and the Deadly Joust

Despite these important literary connections with the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the thematic connection between the first part of *The Awntyrs* and the second narrative section needs further clarification. As we have seen, Gawain's role in the early part of the text seemingly has no bearing on his part in Galaron's tournament. Yet, if we accept that the Gawain of *The Awntyrs* echoes the figure present in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, then Gawain's importance as an embodiment of the Arthurian kingdom must also be at work in the poem. Gawain's presence is indicative of the health, welfare, and state of affairs in Arthur's court. When he asks the ghost about Arthurian conquest, his words directly indicate the potential problem with Arthur's rule. When Gawain accepts Galaron's challenge, he does so on behalf of Arthur and all the Knights of the Round Table. Should Gawain win the joust, Arthur's reputation and, by extension, the kingdom, will remain intact. Should Gawain lose, the Arthurian world begins to crumble. In order to understand the significance of the first part of the poem, the second part must be read in the knowledge that Gawain *is*, metaphorically, the kingdom embodied, and what happens to Gawain during the tournament is indicative of the future of the Arthurian world.

Gawain's involvement in such a tournament should come as no surprise to any reader familiar with the northern romances. His task in these works is often to represent Arthur in individual jousts. He is, as David Crouch defines, a

“preudomme,” a pre-thirteenth century idea of idealized medieval knighthood.

Crouch explains,

...there was an ideal of conduct amongst knights and barons, and it did surface on the tournament field. [...] The idea of a medieval male was then generally called the ‘preudomme’ (ultimately from the Latin *probus homo*), ‘upstanding fellow.’ [...] He was hardy, that is he was tough and uncomplaining. He was loyal to his master, but not subservient. A preudomme was valued for his independent and sound judgment, and he would tell his lord precisely what he thought in any situation. (Crouch 149-150)

The Gawain of the alliterative *Morte* is most certainly a preudomme, a man tasked with defending Arthur’s armies and providing much needed counsel for the king.

Gawain in *The Awntyrs*, however, exemplifies these behaviours through his physicality, rather than his words.

Despite Gawain’s confident announcement that “God stond with the right!” (471), the ensuing fight is brutal and bloody. Both knights show no mercy and both suffer grievous injuries. As the fighting begins in earnest, Galaron, “swapped [Gawain] yn at the swyre⁷⁵ with a swerde kene;/ That greved Sir Gawayn to his dethday” [Galaron struck Gawain in the neck with a sharp sword; that [wound] grieved Gawain to the day he died] (514-515). This un-healing wound, obtained so early in the tourney, reveals that Gawain’s confident assertion of victory may be undermined by Galaron’s skill. If “God [is] with the right,” Galaron’s first thrust proves that “the right” may not ultimately be Gawain and, by extension, Arthur. Gawain’s body is permanently marked and this body – emblematic of the Arthurian kingdom - has sustained a blow that will remain with him as permanent evidence of the cost of Arthur’s conquests. The sense of danger escalates as the fight is

⁷⁵ Gawain’s injury to the neck is notable here, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he is struck in the neck by the Green Knight as an everlasting reminder of his failure in the Green Knight’s test.

permeated by the screams of Galaron's lady, whose horror serves as a reminder that the joust will end poorly for one (or both) of these worthy knights.

Perhaps the most shocking moment of this tournament is the death of Gawain's horse. "Grissell the goode," Gawain's noble steed, is beheaded by Galaron in a fit of anger. Gawain reacts with overwrought mourning: "Grissell, [...] gon is, God wote!/ He was the burlokest blonke that ever bote brede/ By Him that in Bedeleem was borne ever to be our bote,/ I shall venge the today, if I con right rede" [Grissell [...] is gone, God knows!/ He was the hardiest horse that ever [lived]./ By Him that was born in Bethlehem, ever to be our salvation/ I shall avenge you today, unless I'm mistaken] (546-550). This hyperbolic promise of vengeance seems humorous to the modern eye.⁷⁶ Yet, the death of his horse, a horse so important that the poet gave him a name,⁷⁷ serves to further emphasize the danger of the tournament and the ultimate cost of Gawain's fight. Twu remarks that, "the loss of the horse strips the very terms of the knight's aristocratic identity, taking the *cheval* out of the *chevalier*" (Twu 115). This emotional outpouring from Gawain marks a unique moment in the poem. For the first time, Gawain articulates the personal cost of violence, a loss keenly felt with the death of Grissell. This loss is notable, as in the tournament setting, the loss of his horse places Gawain on uncertain ground. He is at the precipice of losing here, his moment of inconsolable grief halting the battle with Galaron. Just as Arthur's grief for Gawain in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* forces a

⁷⁶ In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, Gawain reacts with similar horror when his greyhounds are killed. His anger leads to the accidental beheading of a maiden. Cf. chapter five.

⁷⁷ Gawain's horse is named in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Gringalott. Although his horse is not named in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, his sword bears the name "Galut," emphasizing Gawain's importance and prominence as a warrior. The Middle English Dictionary defines "Grisel" as a "grey horse," although Gawain's repeated reference to his horse seems to indicate that "Grissell" is indeed the horse's name (in addition to his colour). "Galut" is the Hebrew word for exile, often in reference to the forced exile of Jews.

pause in the fight against Mordred,⁷⁸ Gawain's emotions threaten his hope for victory and the reputation of Arthur and his kingdom.

As Twu notes, "[...] the fight lapses into earnest violence with the potential for permanent injury. Furthermore, as the physical damage mounts, the brotherly love fades. [...] The *Awntyrs* dismantles the aristocratic privilege supposedly informing the tournament, as it dismantles the ostensible signs of their aristocratic privilege, their armor and horses" (Twu 114). There is something sinister in the fight between Galaron and Gawain, a sense of mounting dread, which serves to echo the frightening, sudden appearance of Guinevere's mother in the first part of the narrative. The action pauses after the death of Grissell, with Gawain weeping on the field of battle and Galaron frozen, unsure of how to proceed: "[Galaron] drough him on dreght for drede of the knight" [[Galaron] drew himself away because of uncertainty about [Gawain]] (562). Gawain's grief and Galaron's anger mark a shift in tone for the tournament. No longer is the joust a simple meeting of two noblemen attempting to right a perceived wrong; the joust now transforms into a fight to the death. The danger is palpable as the violence escalates.

Galaron's patience with the weeping Gawain grows short and he threatens "Thus may thou dryve for the day to the derk night!" [Thus may you throw away the

⁷⁸ In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Arthur's knights beg the king to stop weeping, saying "Blyne, [...] thow blondirs þi selfen;/ Þis es botles bale, for bettir bees it neuer./ It es no wirchipe, iwysse, to wryng thyn hondes;/ To wepe als a woman it es no witt holden./ Be knyghtly of contenance, als a kyng scholde,/ And leue siche clamoure, for Cristes lufe of Heuen!" ["Have done! [...] You are losing your reason;/ This is bottomless woe, for it will never be better;/ It is not worthy, in truth, to be wringing your hands;/ To weep like a woman is not deemed wise./ Be manly of mien, as a king must,/ And cease this clamour, for love of Christ above!"] (3975-3980). His overwhelming personal grief seems to have no place on the field of battle, especially when the cost of losing is so high. Gawain's arguably inappropriate reaction to Grissell's death mirrors Arthur's moment of weakness on the battlefield in the *Morte*.

day to the dark night] (564), mocking Gawain's inability to carry on with the fight.⁷⁹ The poet writes, "The son was passed by that midday and mare" [The sun had passed by that [time] midday and more] (565), making particular note of the time: it is past midday, the exact time of the ghost's appearance over the Tarne the day before.⁸⁰ The specificity of the tournament's timing to coincide with midday, marking both the ghost's entrance into the poem and now Gawain's moment of great loss, serves as a crucial connection between the first and second part of *The Awntyrs*. The ghost's warnings are realized by the two feuding knights, as despite the familiar trappings of the tournament, it seems her words bear truth, Gawain and Galaron suffer woefully as a consequence of Arthur's wrongful possession of Galaron's land. As the fight continues, both Gawain and Galaron come close to death, Gawain surviving at one point by "the brede of an hare" (585). The poet's repeated references to violence enhance the growing threat of death as he describes, "bright brenés bybled" [bright mail-coats stained with blood] (570) and the knights "beten downe beriles" [beating down gems] (587).

The seemingly endless violence also causes a change in the tournament's spectators who shift from an excited audience into a concerned and somewhat horrified crowd. The poet notes, "many doughti were adred" [many brave warriors were afraid] (571) while watching the fight. Later, "Bothe Sir Lete⁸¹ and Sir Lake⁸²/ Miche mornying thei make" and Guinevere "gret for her sake" [lamented for their

⁷⁹ Galaron had previously offered one of his horses to Gawain in order to continue the joust on horseback, but Gawain refuses the gift.

⁸⁰ The reference to midday may also recall Gawain's Celtic origins. In these early tales and in Malory, his strength increases before noon, but wanes with the setting sun. Setting the tournament after noon indicates that Gawain's strength may fail him.

⁸¹ Likely King Lot of Orkney, Gawain's father.

⁸² Although it may be tempting to read "Sir Lake" as a reference to Lancelot du Lac, Thomas Hahn notes that it is likely referring to King Lac, father of Erec. Hahn also remarks, "Medieval forms of address almost never make use of the last term (derived from a place or family name) in a knight's title, so that an allusion to Lancelot de Lake [...] could not be intended here" (221).

sake] (597). Yet, despite the mounting risk to both Gawain and Galaron, Arthur remains silent. It may be argued that he is simply adhering to the rules of the tournament: one man must yield (or die) in order to end the dispute over land. *The Awntyrs*, however, is a poem deeply concerned with conquest and its cost. The risk of losing Gawain should outweigh Arthur's pride and force the king's hand to call a draw. Because Gawain *is* for all intent and purpose representing the Arthurian kingdom, and because at this crucial moment in the text Gawain is failing, both physically and mentally, the survival of Camelot is threatened. Although temporary defeat may cause shame for Gawain, his survival matters more to the future of the kingdom. The King *should* step in and save his knight, humbly admitting his fault and returning the contested land. But he does not and Gawain is forced to endure further injury – proving once more that Arthur's pride often supersedes his sense of reason. This flaw, according to the ghost, will ultimately prove fatal.

The battle eventually ends after Galaron's lady, who "skirilles and skrikes," begging Guinevere for help. Guinevere's place here is important, as she and Gawain were the only two characters present to receive the ghost's message. The lady notes Guinevere's "might," begging her to save Galaron from Gawain's sword. This moment of feminine power and justice is worth noting, as the poem's focus on Fortune's wheel and Fortune's ability to control fate, bestows great power upon a female figure. Galaron's lady begs for mercy, placing Galaron's fate in the hands of Guinevere, not Arthur.⁸³ The queen "caught of her coronall and kneled him tille" [pulled off her crown and kneeled to (Arthur)] (626), re-enacting the movements of Fortune's wheel and creating a tableaux of humility and mercy. Bereft of her crown

⁸³ This is certainly not the first time Guinevere is granted the role of justice. In Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale," Arthur's unnamed queen is tasked with doling out punishment to the raping knight.

and kneeling on the ground, Guinevere humbly asks Arthur for mercy on behalf of *Gawain*, not Galaron. Despite Galaron's imminent death (as at this point Gawain has him by the throat), Guinevere uses Arthur's love for Gawain to sway the king's hand. She twice laments "the grones of Sir Gawayn," emphasizing the knight's pain and suffering. Furthermore, she provides a detailed account of the physical cost of this tournament: "thes burnes in the bataile so blede on the bent,/ they arn wery, iwis, and wounded ful ille" [These knights in battle bleed on the field/ they are weary, surely, and wounded grievously] (629-630). Guinevere shows humility and wisdom, and provides wise counsel – perhaps an indication that her mother's lessons have had some influence on the kneeling queen. She also exhibits the signs of good kingship, reinforcing the poem's interest in powerful female figures and Arthur's problematic inaction.

Before Arthur has a chance to respond to the queen's request, Galaron yields, marvelling at Gawain's strength. He says, "Here I make the releyse, renke, by the Rode, And, byfore thiese ryalle, resynge with my right" [Here I grant you quit-claim, sir, by the Cross, And before these royal [persons], [I] resign [to you] my right [to these lands]] (640-641). It is only once Galaron has bowed and made homage to the king that Arthur finally speaks. He allows Galaron to keep his Scottish lands, but in exchange bestows Gawain with

[...] gerson and golde,
 Al the Glamergan londe⁸⁴ with greves so grene,
 The worship of Wales⁸⁵ at wil and at wolde,

⁸⁴ South-eastern Wales.

⁸⁵ Hahn makes an interesting note here, writing, "In granting Gawain *The worship of Wales* Arthur seems close to endowing Gawain with the principality of Wales. From the time of Edward III (fourteenth century, a generation or so before the composition of *Awntyrs*), the eldest son of the king was created Prince of Wales by the monarch to signify his status as heir to the throne" (224). Although Arthur never refers to Gawain as his heir outright in *The Awntyrs*, it would be in keeping with Arthur's great love for Gawain depicted in the alliterative *Morte*, where Arthur suggests that

With Criffones Castelles Curnelled ful clene;
 Eke Ulstur Halle⁸⁶ to hafe and to holde,
 Wayford and Waterforde, wallede I wene;
 Two baronrees in Bertayne with burghes to bold. (664-670)

[together with treasure, all of Glamorganshire with groves so green, the lordship of Wales at his will and command, with Criffones Castles crenelated full clean; also Ulster Hall to have and to hold, Wayford and Waterford, fortified [towns] I guess; two baronies in Brittany with fortified cities.]

This land exchange is extremely troubling, as “the poem implies that this might only be another turn in the cycle of violence perpetuated in these territorial feuds.

Somewhere in Wales, we can imagine another displaced lord arming himself for another trial by combat” (Twu 121). The northern romances are deeply concerned with illegal land seizures, as *The Weddyng*, like *The Awntyrys*, features a knight whose lands have been taken by Arthur.⁸⁷ Arthur’s inability to recognize this dangerous pattern is certainly a reminder of the ghost’s words. In addition, Gawain’s appearance at the end of the battle, his “bles wex blak” from blood and bruising, mirrors the ghost’s appearance: a black-faced corpse, weak in body and spirit.

At the end of *Awntyrys*, despite a seemingly happy moment of land exchange and the wedding of Galaron to his oft-screaming lady, the ghostly presence of Guinevere’s mother lingers. The timing of the tournament to coincide with her appearance over the lake, coupled with Gawain’s bruised appearance, call to mind her presence and her words. Additionally, Guinevere’s command that all “prestes with procession to pray were prest,/ with a mylion of Masses to make the mynnynge”

Gawain is worthy to be king. Arthur’s heir in the alliterative *Morte*, is Constantine, in keeping with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s original Arthurian material. Arthur’s gift of “the worship of Wales” also speaks to Gawain’s elevated status in the northern romances. Cf. chapter three for a discussion of Gawain and kingship.

⁸⁶ Both Thomas Hahn and Rosamund Allen suggest that Ulster Hall and Waterford may refer to Irish place names.

⁸⁷ In *The Avowyng of Arthure*, Baldwin tells the tale of a Spanish conquest and the capture of a Sultan’s lands. This is reflective of *The Knightly Tale of Sir Gologras and Sir Gawain*, where Arthur attempts to take Gologras’s land by force.

[Priests with processions were urged to pray,/ with a million Masses perform the memorials] (705-706) remind the audience that the queen has remembered her deceased mother's wishes. Yet, despite this remembrance, *The Awntyrs* implies that Arthur's kingdom is surely doomed. The haunting prophecies made manifest by Galaron and Gawain's brutal battle are an indication of the danger to follow. Arthur's conquests will continue and Gawain, the thematic centerpiece of this text, bears the physical wounds of the king's ambition on his person. Once again, Arthur's inability to perform his duty, to protect his knights and abide counsel, makes Gawain a tragic figure. He is a man burdened with both love for his king *and* the knowledge that this love will lead to certain doom. *The Awntyrs* ends on a note of ambiguity, "in the tyme of Arthore," whose precarious hold on power seems to be slipping as Fortune's wheel cruelly turns against him.

Ultimately, *The Awntyrs* provides an intriguing example of how romance writers used the genre to instill their works with meaning relevant to the time and place of composition. The survival of *The Awntyrs* in four separate manuscripts speaks to its literary and thematic popularity. As we have seen, the structure relies heavily on Gawain as a figure of unification. His role in *Awntyrs A* directly mirrors his later actions in *Awntyrs B*. The poet's use of two familiar motifs and his reliance on intertextual recognition make *The Awntyrs* a particularly interesting addition to any discussion of the Gawain romance tradition. In order to fully appreciate the poem, it would have been necessary for readers to identify the symbolic significance of the literary motifs and this presumed familiarity speaks to the widespread appreciation for romance works throughout the Middle Ages. The poem ultimately emphasizes two important points that will carry through the remainder of this

dissertation. Gawain's unique position as representative of the Round Table is seen repeatedly in numerous Gawain romances and becomes a markedly familiar aspect of his character in the Middle English works. While he often represents Arthur in battle or political negotiation, he is also the metaphorical representation of the king's court, as any injury or wound signifies damage to the reputation of Arthur and his knights. Furthermore, Arthur's problematic imperialism is, as we have seen, an integral concern of *The Awntyrs*. The king's thirst for conquest permeates many of the poems related to Gawain's adventures, as the king's nephew is often involved in his uncle's wars abroad. The northern composition of *The Awntyrs*, however, makes Arthur's greed especially interesting because it exposes regional opinions about King Arthur, both the literary figure and the representation of "idealized" kingship. Arthur is not seen favourably in many of the Gawain romances and despite the king's widespread reputation, it is most often Gawain who must step in and defend his king, both with his words and his actions. King Arthur, the monarch of a unified Britain, is viewed with suspicion in the northern texts while his nephew Gawain, a man with strong ties to the region, becomes the more popular protagonist of Arthurian adventures.

The Awntyrs off Arthure, a poem written in the north and situated in Cumbria, is heavily concerned with more than just Arthur's inevitable end. The political and societal themes in the poem speak to the realities of living in the north of England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While Gawain is certainly an example of a northern *English* knight, Galaron's arrival as a representative of the Scottish aristocracy provides a pointed juxtaposition. Gawain's connection to Scotland is not unique to this poem and certainly the narrative of *The Knightly Tale of Sir Gawain*

and *Sir Gologras*, a Middle Scots work, also emphasizes Gawain's relationship with Scottish nobles and the land itself. *The Awntyrs* does not examine the connection between Gawain and Scotland further, choosing instead to close with the happy marriage of Galaron and the "peaceful" land exchange. Yet the question of Gawain's relationship with Scotland remains.

Gawain's literary origins show that the character originates from further north than Carlisle. King Lot, Gawain's father in many Arthurian tales, is the King of Lothian (and sometimes Orkney), a Scottish kingdom, which likely makes Lot a Scottish king. If Gawain descends from a line of Scottish monarchs, why is he a figure of heroism in northern England? In *The Awntyrs*, Gawain's "northernness" is never overtly emphasized. The text is northern and, therefore, without any further elaboration, Gawain is presented as a heroic figure. Looking at Gawain and, by extension, Arthur from a Scottish point of view, however, provides further questions about Gawain's connection to the north of England and Scotland. In the following chapter I will examine Arthurian literature written in Scotland with the goal of examining Gawain from a Scottish perspective. Although Gawain is present in Scottish chronicles, his unique role in the Scottish Arthurian romances once again emphasizes his importance to the genre. The Gawain of the Middle English romances is a figure of exceptional martial skill and diplomacy and these traits are adapted by Scottish writers in order to explore themes of kingship, imperialism, and anxiety surrounding the loss of Scotland's kings and, by symbolic extension, Sir Gawain himself. The chapter will consider Gawain and Arthurian kingship in the context of contemporary fifteenth-century Scottish political concerns.

Chapter III
“Schir, I knaw be conquest thow art ane kynd man”:
Gawain in the Scottish Romance Tradition

In this chapter I will examine Gawain’s role in the Scottish Arthurian romances. This will involve a brief overview of the Arthurian material in three Scottish chronicles, which will contextualize Gawain’s presence in the Scottish literary tradition. For Scottish writers, he was not a political figure so much as a literary one and this distinction is central to the argument of this chapter. I will suggest that Gawain’s presence in the Scottish romances reflects how the genre adapts and transforms to accommodate political and historical symbolism based on the nationality of its author and audience.

There are few surviving examples of Arthurian literature written in Scotland. For this chapter, I will examine *Lancelot of the Laik* and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*. I will suggest that Gawain’s popularity in these Scottish romances and his relatively minor role in the chronicles is directly connected to his unique position as a figure of idealized knighthood and kingship. Although Gawain is not a king, in dialogue with Arthur he nonetheless suggests a model for proper kingship and a symbol for a potential Scottish renaissance rooted in the historical present. By examining both Arthur and Gawain as they appear in the Middle Scots romances and their sources, I will argue that the Scottish Arthurian romances use both figures, the king and his knight, as a symbolic means to discuss and negotiate the often-complicated relationship between the sovereign and his subjects.

In order to understand how Gawain functions as a character in both the Scottish chronicles and romances, it is important first to understand the differences between these two genres. In his study of the structure of romance, Northrop Frye

argues that there are two types of stories “in the middle of society’s verbal culture” (*Secular* 7). This division, between what Frye calls ‘the mythical’ and ‘the fabulous’ will aid in our understanding of the differing functionality of chronicles and romances. For Frye,

...myths stick together to form a mythology, a large interconnected body of narrative that covers all the religious and historical revelation that its society is concerned with, or concerned about. [...] as part of this sticking-together process, myths take root in a specific culture, and it is one of their functions to tell that culture what it is and how it came to be, in their own mythical terms. Thus they transmit a legacy of shared allusion to that culture. (*Secular* 9)

Chronicles are a part of this mythical meta-genre and their societal function is vastly different from romances, despite their similarity in appearance and content. For Scottish chroniclers, the transmission of history through myths and legends was integral in defending Scotland’s right to exist by tracing the country’s history and exposing its superiority to England’s own origin myths. Their inclusion of Arthurian material is a direct response to Arthur’s important place in English chronicles. As an integral part of *British* culture, Arthur must be dealt with by Scottish writers, who negotiate the frequently precarious political symbolism associated with this traditionally English monarch. The appropriation of England’s hero becomes a cornerstone of future Scottish chronicles and provides Scottish writers of romance with new methods of characterizing Arthur and his knights.

Romances, alternatively, serve a different purpose. Frye, who believes that they are “directly descended from folktale” (*Secular* 15), writes that,

Folktales by themselves, at least at first, lead a more nomadic existence. They travel over the world through all the barriers of language: they do not expand into larger structures, but interchange their themes and motifs at random [...]. But as literature develops, “secular” stories also begin to take root in the culture and contribute to the shared heritage of allusion. (*Secular* 9)

For writers of Scottish Arthurian romances, who inherited characterizations from the native chronicles and French sources, the ability to explore beyond the confines of structure enables a vast difference in symbolic resonance and meaning. The imaginative freedom of romances, which Frye believes “brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction” (15), is responsible for the success of Gawain in the Scottish narratives, when compared to his relative insignificance in the chronicles. Or, as Frye states, “we have distinguished myth from romance by the hero’s power of action: in the myth proper he is divine, in the romance proper he is human” (*Anatomy* 188). For Scottish chroniclers, the pseudo-historical mythical Gawain, whose strength and loyalty are his most defining features, is ultimately a less intriguing figure than Arthur and Scotland’s rightful heir, Mordred. For the writers of romance, however, Gawain’s humanity, his wisdom, his prudence, and mercy make him an invaluable figure, whose acts and words form the backbone of the surviving Arthurian romances of Scotland.

In the years following the Scottish Wars of Independence, writers began examining Scotland’s history and legends through the creation of Scottish chronicles. These chronicles, as Alexander Grant notes, “were justifying the country’s right to exist by producing a definitive history for the people of Scotland” (Grant 74). The chronicles, partially political propaganda and partially ancient legend, provide the historical evidence needed to justify and strengthen the established independence of Scotland. Arthur was a problematic literary figure for Scottish writers and audiences in the late middle ages. As an English king, he suggests a multitude of possible historical and cultural signifiers. This profusion is seen in the Scottish chronicles, where the figure of Arthur frequently causes debate and confusion. It should be noted

that, arguably, the most influential non-Scottish source for these chronicles is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Geoffrey's Arthurian material is certainly not the first work to mention Arthur, but it serves as an important moment of origin for any discussion of Arthur, Gawain and Mordred. As Juliette Wood notes, "the dominant image of Arthur in Scottish chronicles is that of an historical king embedded in the Galfridian myth of British unity" (Wood 11). Geoffrey's emphasis on this idea of unity was of obvious concern to medieval Scotland, as despite Scotland's independent sovereignty, obtaining both political and ideological freedom from the constant threat of English domination was paramount to ideas of nationhood and independence.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, "writing from the Anglo-Norman power base of southern Britain" (Wood 11), creates a unique Arthurian world, "which sees the island of Britain as an ancient unity under a king whose power of office is symbolized by the crown in London" (Wood 10). Arthur's place in the context of this unified Britain is clear: he is an English king, seated in the South, ruling over unified kingdoms. As Northrop Frye argues, "Myths stick together because of cultural forces impelling them to do so: these forces are not primarily literary, and mythologies are mainly accepted as structures of belief or social concern rather than imagination" (*Secular* 12). For Scottish chroniclers then, the Galfridian material had to be adapted in order to suit uniquely Scottish societal concerns. The fact that the basis of the Scottish Arthurian material is actually English creates the opportunity to study directly how the Scottish chronicles negotiated the convergence of an English Arthur and his British kingdom. While much of Geoffrey's work is preserved by the

earliest chroniclers, subtle changes to Arthur's parentage and the role of his sisters' sons create a new mythology specifically suited for Scottish readers.

Gawain's role in Geoffrey's early text firmly cements his origins as being far from this southern base of political power. His father, King Lot, is a Scottish nobleman, who plays an integral role in confirming Gawain's Scottish roots. Gawain's parentage is of crucial import to Scottish chronicle writers, and the later romances also adopt Geoffrey's characterization of Lot as lord of Lothian and later Orkney. This connection between Gawain, the Scottish lowlands, and Orkney becomes increasingly popular in the literature throughout the Middle Ages, and by the late fifteenth century, Malory refers to Gawain and his brothers as knights of Orkney. Geoffrey of Monmouth's early affirmation of Gawain's Scottishness becomes a permanent fixture of Gawain's character.

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Matter of Britain

In his description of Arthur's ascent to the throne, Geoffrey of Monmouth notes Arthur's allies, including, "...three brothers sprung from the royal line, Loth, Urian and Auguselus, who had been Princes in those parts before the Saxon victories" (Geoffrey 221).⁸⁸ Geoffrey goes on to describe Arthur's intentions for his allies:

Arthur was determined to do for them what he had done for the others: that is, to grant them back their hereditary rights. He returned the kingship of the Scots to Auguselus; to Urian, the brother of Auguselus, he gave back the honour of ruling over the men of Moray;⁸⁹ and Loth, who in the days of Aurelius Ambrosius had married that King's own sister and had two sons by her, Gawain and

⁸⁸ All translations are by Lewis Thorpe in *The History of the Kings of Britain* (1966).

⁸⁹ A northern province of Scotland, although it was considered a separate kingdom from Scotland until the thirteenth century.

Mordred,⁹⁰ he restored to the dukedom of Lothian and other near-by territories which formed part of it. (221)

Loth's connection to the north is further emphasized when Arthur later conquers Norway and grants its kingship to Gawain's father. Geoffrey's early version of Gawain's family firmly establishes their prominence in Arthur's northern territories. Their kingdoms, Lothian, Scotland, and Moray are all in modern day Scotland. Gawain descends from this line of Scottish kings and it is this genealogy of northern and Scottish ancestry that survives in the later Continental literature. Lot's history with Arthur, however, changes dramatically in the French literature, which emphasizes a further shift in Gawain's familial reputation.

Despite Gawain's traditional ties to Scotland, his presence in the Scottish chronicles is minimal, and confined to brief references in John Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (1360), Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygnale Cronykil* (1406), and Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* (1447). I have chosen these particular chroniclers because they are arguably the earliest and most influential of the Scottish historians. Their work highlights the changes made by Scottish writers to English sources and provides the foundation for future characterization in later chronicles. While the portrayal of Arthur varies in these chronicles, his presence is notable for understanding Scottish ideas concerning English kingship and literary figures. The minimal appearance of Gawain, however, speaks more to how Gawain was seen by Scottish chroniclers. The duality of Gawain's identity, partially Scottish and partially English, and the historical focus of the chronicles, makes him an interestingly

⁹⁰ In Geoffrey's text, Mordred is Arthur's traitorous nephew, as opposed to his son. While Arthur is away fighting the Roman War, Mordred usurps his throne and has an adulterous affair with Guinevere. Arthur returns from Rome and defeats Mordred in a bloody battle. He then departs for Avalon, leaving the crown to his cousin Constantine. The shift from son to nephew in the Scottish works further distances Mordred from Arthur and enables a more compelling, and less problematically incestuous, claim to Arthur's throne, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

marginal figure in the Scottish chronicle tradition in comparison to his leading role in the surviving Scottish Arthurian romances.

Fordun and the *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*

John Fordun, a fourteenth century priest, provides one of the earliest Scottish chronicles in his *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*. His Arthurian material begins with a description of Uther and his brother Aurelius. In Fordun's work, Uther is poisoned and his son, Arthur, is made King of the Britons. Fordun's treatment of Arthur is generally positive. At the time of his coronation, Arthur is "a youth of fifteen years, of singular courage and bounteousness, to whom his innate goodness lent such a charm that he was beloved by almost all men" (Fordun III.xxv).⁹¹ Fordun also notes, however, "...Arthur, by the contrivance of certain men, succeeded to the kingdom; which, nevertheless, *was not lawfully his due*, but rather his sister Anna's, or her children's" (Fordun III.xxiv.101, my emphasis). Gawain, or "Galwanus" as he is called in the *Chronica*, is mentioned for the first time here as the son of Arthur's sister, Anna. Anna, married to Loth, "a Scottish consul, and lord of Laudonia (Lothian)," is the mother of Galwanus and Modred, and her children are, according to Fordun, Uther's rightful heirs. Fordun's source, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, also mentions Anna and her two sons, yet Fordun changes the narrative here, noting that Arthur should not be king.

Fordun frames his Galfridian content with questions regarding Arthur's legitimacy. Susan Kelly notes, "The really interesting aspect of Fordun's interpretations of his source at this point is that in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*

⁹¹ All translations are by Felix J.H. Skene from *John of Fordun's Chronicle of the Scottish Nation. The Historians of Scotland Vol. 4.*

Arthur's legitimacy is never questioned, nor are Anna and her sons mentioned as contenders for the throne" (Kelly 432). Fordun preserves Geoffrey of Monmouth's praise of Arthur and also includes Geoffrey's version of Gawain's biography. In both the *Historia* and the *Chronica*, Gawain (Galwanus/Walwanus) is sent to the fictional Pope Sulpicius by Arthur at the time of Arthur's coronation. Fordun's purpose for this inclusion, however, is more of an attempt to solidify Anna's position in Arthur's family than to provide any insight into Gawain's character. Geoffrey calls Arthur's unnamed sister the wife of Aurelius, Lot's brother as well as the mother of Gawain and Mordred. Later in the *Historia*, Gawain is referred to as Lot's son, which leads to much confusion for Fordun. In his attempt to legitimize Gawain and Mordred, however, Fordun remarks,

Geoffrey... writes that Modred and Galwanus were the sons of Anna, sister of Aurelius, Arthur's uncle. He says: Lot, who, in the time of Aurelius Ambrosius, had married his sister, of whom he begat Galwanus and Modred. But, further on, he calls Arthur the uncle of Galwanus [...]. But it is clearly certain that neither Aurelis nor Uther survived up to that time;⁹² therefore, we may gather that Arthur was this uncle of [Gawain's]. That is Geoffrey's account. I, however, refer this point to the sagacity of the reader to deal with; for I do not see my way easily to bring these passages into harmony with each other. I believe it to be nearer the truth that Modred, as I have read elsewhere, was Arthur's sister's son. (Fordun III.xxv.102-103)

The discrepancies in Geoffrey's text allow Fordun to legitimize Mordred's position as Uther's rightful heir. Although Fordun invites his readers to decipher the passage as they choose, he also clearly states his own opinion: Mordred is Arthur's sister's son, making him (and Gawain) the true heirs of Britain.

The question of Arthur's right to the throne, or more specifically, why Arthur was made king instead of Gawain or Mordred is explored later in the text when

⁹² Here Fordun refers to Gawain's time at the court of Pope Sulpicius.

Fordun compares Geoffrey's version of events with his own understanding of the Arthurian legend:

We can, however, gather quite well, from the progress of Geoffrey's narrative, that at that time Gaulwanus, who is also called Waulwanus, and his brother Modred were boys under the age of puberty. For we start with the understanding that Arthur, as we have mentioned above, was fifteen years of age when he was adopted as king; then sundry hostile outbreaks were, in the meantime, brought about by him against the Saxons; and Geoffrey, after declaring the battles which were so fought from the time of his accession to the throne, goes on to speak thus: After these events, when and a little further on: Walwanus, the son of the aforesaid Loth, was then a youth of twelve years, and was handed over to the service of Pope Sulpicius by his uncle, from whom he received arms. Such are his words. And, therefore, on so strong a necessity suddenly arising, they were justified in electing a youth verging on manhood, rather than a child in the cradle; and it was haply, for this reason, that Modred stirred up against Arthur that war where both met their fate. (Fordun III.xxv.102)

Arthur's ascent to the throne, according to Fordun, is a matter of convenience and necessity. Gawain and Modred are too young at the time of the Saxon invasion and Briton needs a king to lead them through the wars.

Fordun's *Chronica* sets the tone for Scottish chronicles dealing with the Arthurian matter, as his assertion that Arthur is not the rightful heir, but an heir of convenience, is adopted and adapted by future chroniclers. While Fordun's treatment of Arthur is mainly positive and the question of his legitimacy pertains more to the timing of his coronation than his parentage, the *Chronica* plants the first seeds of doubt in the Scottish Arthurian matter. Unlike Geoffrey's work, however, where Gawain is depicted as a great warrior and an ally to Arthur, Fordun dwells on Gawain only to remark on his lineage and his right to the throne. It is Mordred, Gawain's brother, who gains notoriety for his war against Arthur. In Fordun, Gawain is a relic of Geoffrey's *Historia* and, to a lesser extent, evidence for Arthur's illegitimacy.

The Chronicles of Andrew of Wyntoun and Walter Bower

Andrew of Wyntoun, a canon of St. Andrew's, was a contemporary of John Fordun. Wyntoun's *Orygynal Cronykil of Scotland* (c. 1420) treats the Arthurian legend differently than Fordun, focusing on the problematic sources for the story, rather than questioning Arthur's legitimacy. Wyntoun's Arthur is a fifth century monarch:

Kyng off Brettane wes Arthowre,
That wan all Frawns, and Lumbardy,⁹³
Gyane, Gaskoyn, and Normandy,⁹⁴
Burgoyne, Flawndrys, and Braband,⁹⁵
Henawnd, Holand, and Gotland,⁹⁶
Swes, Swethryk, and Norway,⁹⁷
Denmark, Irland, and Orknay;
And all the Ilys in the Se. (Wyntoun XII.4272-4279, p. 11)

The notable exception in this list of conquered lands is Scotland. Yet, Wyntoun does not elaborate on Scotland's absence from Arthur's list of kingdoms, nor does the text indicate whether or not "Brettane" includes Scotland. As Nicola Royan observes, "It would be misguided to read Wyntoun's account as unequivocal, however, particularly in its attitude towards Arthur's relationship with the Scots. Firstly, Wyntoun is keen here, as in the earlier parts of the narrative, to stress his position as a mediator, and to focus his attention on his source" (Royan 46). His source is the mysterious "Huchoun," an unknown author responsible, in Wyntoun's words, for a "Gest Hystorialle," a "Gest off Arthure," "the Awntyre off Gawane," and "The

⁹³France and Lombardy (Italy).

⁹⁴Guyenne, Gascony and Normandy.

⁹⁵Burgandy, Flanders and Brabant.

⁹⁶Hainaut[?], Holland and Gotland.

⁹⁷Sweden [?], Scandinavia [?] and Norway.

Pystyll als off Swete Swsane.”⁹⁸

Wyntoun finds error in Huchoun’s assertion that in the time of Arthur, Lucius Hiberius was Emperor. Much of the Arthurian material is dedicated to a discussion of this historical discrepancy, and Wyntoun only returns to retelling Arthur’s story after listing Huchoun’s works and comparing him to Friar Martin,⁹⁹ a twelfth century historian; Vincent of Beauvais, a Dominican friar, and Orosius, a historian, theologian, and student of St Augustine. While this discussion of historical accuracy does much to emphasize Wyntoun’s knowledge of historical and literary works, it does little to highlight his opinions regarding Arthur and his kingship. Gawain is only mentioned in reference to the “Awntyre off Gawane,” an unknown romance. Wyntoun includes one stanza detailing Arthur’s war in Rome and the end of the Round Table, brought down by the treason of “Modred hys systyr sone” (XII:4360, p. 13). Arthur is gravely wounded and “efftyre he wes se[yn] na mare” (XII:4374, p. 14). Following Arthur’s death, Wyntoun writes that Sir Constantine, the son of Sir Cador was made King of Britain, an exact reiteration of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s conclusion.

Wyntoun’s entry into the Arthurian Scottish chronicle material is notable for its lack of politicization surrounding Arthur’s birth and parentage. Where Fordun, and later Bower, call attention to Arthur’s legitimacy, Wyntoun is far more concerned with the historical accuracy of his source. Wyntoun’s catalogue of Huchoun’s works functions as a bibliography, not a historical record. It reveals that the source for Wyntoun is the author of “gests” and “awntyrs.” Unlike Fordun, who

⁹⁸ The reference here to *The Pistil of Swete Susan* only increases the mystery of Huchoun’s identity. *The Pistil*, a fourteenth century poem written in the dialect of south Yorkshire (Peck 1), seemingly has no connection to a Scottish writer or to Wyntoun.

⁹⁹ Unknown reference.

relies solely on the historical writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wyntoun embraces what Steve Boardman calls “the cosmopolitan glamour of the *Brut*” (S. Boardman 50). Juliet Wood argues that Arthur’s “standing as a romance figure and his function within folk narrative tradition, influences Scottish chronicles, and [...] attempts to balance these different and complex images [...]” (Wood 13). While I hesitate to call Arthur a folk hero at this time (especially in Scotland), Wyntoun’s acceptance of his dual nature – a historical king and a hero of romance – speaks to the influence of Wyntoun’s literary sources over the historical material of the chronicles. Arthur’s popularity as a literary figure overrides his problematic English identity, a political symbolism rarely overlooked and ignored by Scottish chroniclers. Arthur’s popularity also speaks to the functionality of romance. Despite his problematic political allusions, his literary popularity at times outshines these societal concerns.

Walter Bower, the Abbot of Inchcolm, completed his *Scotichronicon* in the late 1440s (Kelly 431). The *Scotichronicon* is largely based on Fordun’s *Chronica*, but Bower’s additions to the Arthurian material are notable, as, arguably, Bower’s chronicle is the most influential Scottish chronicle to be discussed in this chapter. While certain sections of the *Scotichronicon* are copied directly from Fordun, Bower embellishes his text with anti-Arthurian sentiment, explicitly noting the king’s illegitimate origins and celebrating the offspring of Anna and Lot.

In his description of Arthur’s conception, Bower writes,

Now when Uther king of the Britons like his brother Aurelius of happy memory had died of poisoning through Saxon treachery, his son Arthur succeeded to the kingdom through the machinations of certain individuals. The kingship was not strictly his by right since he had been born out of wedlock, the son of Ygerna wife of Gorlois duke of Cornwall in the castle of Tintagel by the unheard of art of the prophet Merlin, as Geoffrey [of Monmouth] bears witness in an extended passage in his book *The Brut*, whereas the kingdom should

rather have gone to Aurelius's sister Anna or her children.¹⁰⁰ (III. 14-22, p. 65)

The unequivocal accusation of adulterous conception forms Bower's primary argument against Arthur's right to the throne. As Susan Kelly writes, "What Bower has done is to build on Fordun's suggestion of Arthur's illegitimacy, making it clear that the British hero was the offspring of an adulterous relationship fostered by magical arts" (Kelly 433).

In addition, Bower discusses Anna's family, adding crucial details to their familial history, which serve to paint Arthur as a usurper. Bower writes that Anna's husband was, "*Loth Scoto domino Laudoniae et regi Norwagie* (III. 18-19, p. 64)" [the Scottish earl Loth, lord of Lothian and king of Norway], a marked change from Fordun who disregards Lot's connection to Norway. He also makes Mordred the elder brother, referencing Gawain once as "*Galvanum nobilem*." By specifically stating that Mordred is the elder of Anna's offspring, Bower indicates that Mordred is the rightful heir to the throne.¹⁰¹ Mordred's rebellion against Arthur, therefore, is justified, or as Kelly writes, "Mordred's hostility toward Arthur... becomes more meaningful in the light of Bower's revelation of the peculiar circumstances surrounding the latter's conception and birth and his assertion that the Scottish prince is the true king of Britain" (Kelly 435). The outright anti-Arthurian sentiments mark a shift from Fordun, who is more lenient in his explanation for Arthur's eventual ascent to the throne. Yet, like Fordun and Wyntoun, Bower seems less interested in Gawain than in his elder brother, his parents, and Arthur. Further examination of Gawain's minor role in the chronicles will highlight his importance as a literary

¹⁰⁰ All translations by John and Winifred MacQueen in *Scotichronicon* Volume 2.

¹⁰¹ Bower also notes that Anna is the grandmother of Thanos, the mother of St Kentigern. In Scotland and parts of northern England, St Kentigern is known as St Mungo, the patron saint of Glasgow. The inclusion of this genealogy serves to strengthen Mordred's regional claim to the throne.

figure rather than a political symbol.

Gawain in the Chronicles

Gawain's minimal presence in the chronicles is not surprising in light of his literary popularity. While Arthur and Mordred are presented as political figures by Fordun and Bower, Gawain is not seen as integral to matters of succession or governance. This is nowhere clearer than in Wyntoun's work, where Arthur and his kin are not politicized, making way for an overview of literary materials relating to the legend and Gawain himself. Ultimately, Gawain's popularity in the literature and his minor role in the chronicles is a question of genre. Frye writes,

The romance is nearest of all literary forms to a wish-fulfillment dream, and for that reason it has socially a curiously paradoxical role. In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villain the threats to their ascendancy. (*Anatomy* 186)

Chronicles claim to represent historical fact, despite their reliance on mythologies. Readers and writers of chronicles, therefore, saw them as important tools in tracing both the history of nations and the genealogical rights of kings. Alternatively, literary sources provide the opportunity to examine a world beyond fact, where symbolism and ideals are made manifest in fictional characters. Gawain, who is depicted as an ideal knight and an ideal counsellor in the Scottish romances, represents the possibility of change for an idealized Arthurian world. As a figure connected to both England and Scotland, he also serves as a symbol of potential alliance or, at the very least, temporary peace between the two nations. Gawain is best suited for the literary sphere, where his deeds make him a representative of a world that *could* be, rather than the realities presented by the chroniclers. This is clearly seen in the favouritism

given to Mordred in the chronicles. While Mordred may be favoured by Scottish historians, his literary legacy is tarnished, making him unsuitable for the romances. He may be Arthur's, or more accurately, Scotland's rightful heir in the chronicles, but in the romances, Gawain – Arthur's champion and most beloved knight - is granted that honour, as we shall see as we turn to the literature and Gawain's important role in the Scottish Arthurian romances, *Lancelot of the Laik* and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*.

The Scottish Arthurian Romances

The two surviving Scottish Arthurian romances, *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* and *Lancelot of the Laik*, are both fifteenth-century texts. The notion of uniquely Scottish romances is complicated, due in part to the small number of surviving manuscripts and, as A.S.G. Edwards notes, because, "All the surviving Scottish works termed romances have in common the fact that they are quite late" (Edwards 64). Arthurian matter in Scotland, especially content relating to Gawain, is further confused by Wyntoun's reference to the lost works of Huchoun.¹⁰² While it is impossible to know exactly which texts Wyntoun is referring to when he cites "a gret Gest of Arthure" or "The Awntyre of Gawane," these references serve as tangible evidence that certain Arthurian romances written in Scotland have likely been lost. William Dunbar, a late fifteenth-century Scottish poet, notes in his poem "*Timor mortis conturbat me*," that a certain "Clerk of Tranent...made the anteris of Gawane" (Edwards 63). Like Wyntoun's Huchoun, the identity of Dunbar's clerk is unknown, but again, there is evidence here for works of Arthurian romance, particularly

¹⁰² The mysterious Huchoun proves an irresistible character for the nineteenth-century editors who attributed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to him (Edwards 63).

pertaining to Gawain that no longer survive. While it is possible that both Wyntoun and Dunbar are referring to a single *awntry*,¹⁰³ the fact remains that Arthurian romances were being developed in late medieval Scotland, and these romances gained enough exposure to be mentioned in Scottish chronicles. Despite the lost sources, it remains evident that Gawain was a popular figure for Scottish writers. His large role in the two surviving romances, in addition to his lost *awntyrs*(s), emphasizes the obvious fascination and focus on Gawain and his deeds in the Scottish Arthurian milieu.

The two surviving Scottish Arthurian romances, *The Knightly Tale of Gologros and Gawain*, which survives in a 1508 printed edition, and *Lancelot of the Laik*, usually dated to c.1490, are both deeply concerned with the matter of kingship, borrowing heavily from the Mirror of Princes tradition, which was popular in Scottish romance throughout the period. Kingship, specifically what it means to be a “good” king, is integral to these two romances, as they are both influenced by fifteenth-century Scottish politics. While both *Gologros* and *Lancelot* rely heavily on French sources, it is the unique changes made to the French narratives that provide important insight into distinctly Scottish ideas about kingship, governance, and Gawain himself. Furthermore, I will discuss aspects of Scottish kingship as they apply to the romance depiction of Arthur, specifically contemporary fifteenth-century topics relating to the reign of James III and the early reign of James IV. Once I have discussed Arthur, I will turn to an examination of Gawain’s important role in

¹⁰³ Wyntoun’s work is obviously earlier in the period than Dunbar’s poetry, but it is still possible that the “Adventure of Gawain” refers to the same text. The nineteenth-century editor Frederic Madden, for example, believed the fourteenth century *Awntyrs off Arthure* was Dunbar’s “anteris of Gawane” (Edwards 63). While it is obviously impossible to state this with certainty, the *Awntyrs* date of composition could potentially align with Wyntoun’s work. While I acknowledge the temptation to claim *Awntyrs* as the missing Gawain text, it seems curious that Wyntoun and Dunbar, two Scottish writers, would claim the English *Awntyrs* as a Scottish romance.

the Scottish romances where he is portrayed as an idealized knight, counsellor, and potential heir to Arthur. As both of the Scottish texts are concerned with kingship, Gawain provides an interesting example of “good kingship” from a uniquely Scottish perspective, often outshining Arthur’s own attempts to govern the kingdom. He is not only a symbolic figure of English knighthood, but a popular figure of Scottish romance, a role that contrasts greatly with his minimal presence in the Scottish chronicle tradition.

Both Scottish Arthurian romances have been influenced by the contemporary political and social culture of fifteenth-century Scotland. Flora Alexander argues, citing the works of B.J. Vogel and Karl Heinz Goller, that in *Lancelot of the Laik*, “...the scrutiny of Arthur’s defects as a king arises out of the particular difficulties of the reign of James III of Scotland” (Alexander 27). Alternatively, she notes that, “the view of King Arthur in *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* is much more likely to have been influenced by defensive attitudes to the English” (Alexander 28). The central role of Arthur in both texts speaks to particular regional concerns regarding the unified British kingship Arthur represents, concerns shared by many northern Gawain romances. *Lancelot of the Laik* begins as a story of Lancelot’s earliest adventures before he joined the Round Table, yet the narrative quickly becomes heavily focused on Arthur’s leadership and his premonition of doom for his kingdom. Likewise, *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* features Gawain as an important figure of knightly prowess and political cunning, but Arthur looms large in the background as he ignores the advice of his counsel and becomes representative of failed kingship. The Scottish writers choose to reject the courtly love tradition so popular in the French sources, and replace these romance aspects

with a treatise on kingship. While the Scottish writers make notable changes from their French sources, this change in focus is yet another recognizable aspect of the genre.

Kingship in Late Medieval Scotland

Defining what was understood as “good kingship” in fifteenth-century Scotland is not an easy task. Scotland’s political history is so intertwined with the intrusion of English kings and armies that understanding Scottish notions of kingship requires an understanding of the unique role of a Scottish king. The king’s primary responsibilities, in the most basic terms, were defense of the realm and the maintenance of justice (Mason 127). Roger Mason defines the unique form of justice associated with kingship, noting,

...justice implies rather more than the simple provision of legal remedy through the king’s courts. As the fount of justice the king’s judicial role was obviously of the first importance; but equally clearly the concept of justice has much wider connotations which in the later middle ages led it to be interpreted as nothing less than the maintenance of a stable social and political order. In this more comprehensive sense, justice may be equated quite simply with good governance. (Mason 128)

In addition, Scottish kings were tasked with unique challenges in defending the realm from invasion and attack. Mason continues,

Of course, in a Scottish context, the conventional belief in the king’s duty to defend the realm was more than usually significant. The English claim to feudal superiority over Scotland, although acted upon only intermittently, was an ever-present threat to the status of Scottish kings and thus to the integrity of the Scottish kingdom. By definition, therefore, the defense of the realm entailed a repudiation of English pretensions and an unqualified insistence that the king of Scots owed allegiance to no superior but God alone. (Mason 128)

For Scottish kings, the threat of English expansion and invasion was a constant concern, often outweighing matters of internal governance. Current scholarship on

late medieval kingship notes the relative stability of the Stewart line in comparison with the tumultuous wars of succession in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Robinson 142). Mason argues that late medieval Scotland was not without its political conflict. Specifically, “James I was assassinated in 1437, James II was forcibly defied by the house of Douglas in the early 1450s and James III faced a series of rebellions culminating in his death in arms against his own subjects in 1488” (Mason 127). Yet, Mason also remarks that these moments of rebellion, “hardly compare with the catalogue of rebellions and depositions which punctuate the history of contemporary England” (Mason 127). The stability of the Stewart line, compared to the battle for succession in England, likely derives, at least in part, from the understanding that political instability in Scotland caused weakness and this weakness gave potential English invaders the opportunity to occupy Scottish territory.

The war between Robert Bruce and his English counterparts in the early fourteenth century had lasting effects on Scotland’s conception of kingship. Both King Robert’s grandfather and John Balliol had a claim to the Scottish throne through the descendants of King David I (Robinson 141) and in 1291 the decision to choose the next king of Scotland was left to the English king, Edward I. Edward’s motives were understandably self-serving, and in 1292, he ruled in favour of John Balliol’s claim to become King of Scots (Robinson 141). This agreement included Scotland’s subjugation to England, but Edward’s successful political manoeuvring was short lived. After an invasion of Scotland by Edward I in 1296 that saw John Balliol resign the crown, Scotland was ruled by a council until the inauguration of Robert Bruce in 1306 (Robinson 142). The Balliol/Bruce conflict came to an end

during the reign of David II (1329-1371), the son of Robert Bruce, and the line of Stewart succession was unbroken for the next two hundred years (Robinson 142).¹⁰⁴

The lasting impact of the Balliol/Bruce struggle may account for the relative political stability of the late medieval period in Scotland. Robinson argues that Scottish kings experienced little criticism “because direct criticism of any particular Scottish king endangered the stability of the line of kings (thus leading to the possibility of the loss of independence from England)” (Robinson 143). Thus, Scottish kingship and the role of the king in Scotland were heavily concerned with maintaining this stability. After all, the relationship between the King of Scots and the King of England was often difficult, especially when the King of England openly desired Scottish land and, by extension, Scottish subservience. The stability of the Scottish throne strengthened the kingdom, allowing the king to focus on good governance within his borders.

Despite the relative security of the Stewart succession, the fifteenth century was a period of great instability within the monarchy. The sudden death of James II in 1460 thrust Scotland into a period that saw the country ruled by regents until the young James III came of age. The connection between the reign of James III and the Scottish Arthurian literature of the late fifteenth-century has been noted by scholars who see evidence of James III’s numerous misdeeds in the actions of the literary King Arthur. Karen D. Robinson, for example, argues “that by using Arthur as an exemplar and commenting on issues of interest while James III was on the throne, *Lancelot of the Laik* was directed toward the young James IV, who in 1488 had inherited a kingdom in need of having order quickly reestablished” (Robinson 139).

¹⁰⁴ Although the Balliol claim was given up in the 1350s and the Stewart dynasty was established in the 1370s, the English claim to dominion over Scotland and open conflict between the two kingdoms carried on intermittently into the fifteenth-century.

While it is impossible to say with certainty whether the poets of *Lancelot of the Laik* and *Golagros* were specifically calling attention to James III and his problematic reign, the influence of both James III and his son, the future James IV, is evident in both romances. Rather than implicate the Scottish kings in their narratives, however, Scottish writers used familiar tropes to allude to these events without directly referencing them. The Scottish romances politicize their French sources by using familiar and popular romance memes. Romance's adaptability is evident here, as the transformation of French stories about courtly love and romance into Scottish tales preoccupied with kingship, highlights the genre's flexibility. By mapping contemporary fifteenth century Scottish political concerns onto earlier French stories, the Scottish writers were able to exploit the familiarity of their audience with both the literary tropes and their symbolism and the recent historical references found therein.

For the purpose of this study, I wish to call attention to two major events that occurred during the reign of James III. As Robinson notes, much of the historical information concerning James III is a product of the sixteenth century (152), which makes any account of the king's actions a potential result of late propaganda. Yet, despite the lack of sources, there is some truth to the legend surrounding James III. Robinson explains that according to this legend, James III "was no leader in war, was guilty of amassing great wealth for himself at the expense of his subjects, and was negligent in carrying out his duties, particularly in the field of criminal justice" (152). Jennifer M. Brown writes that because Scotland's fifteenth century government was less sophisticated than the governments of England and France, and lacked the economic resources of a larger country (38), Scottish kings "relied heavily

on the personal cooperation of their most powerful subjects, more heavily than other fifteenth-century monarchs. [...] Thus when they were involved in war, they depended on the landowners using their personal power to turn out their men. This did mean that they had problems not faced by kings who could pay their troops” (Brown 39). The king’s relationship with his feudal lords, and more to the point, his popularity, were integral to the defense of the realm. A popular king, who carefully chose his military campaigns with the full support of parliament, could rely on his lords for soldiers and supplies. An unpopular king, like James III, would struggle to earn the loyalty of his men and support from his counsellors and parliament.

In early May 1482, James III’s exiled brother Alexander, duke of Albany, returned to England from France, allied himself with Edward IV, and prepared to declare himself King of Scotland (MacDougall 152). Albany’s scheme would see him pay homage to Edward IV and he promised the English king that in exchange for his help in defeating James III, he would concede possession of Berwick to England and break Scotland’s alliance with France (MacDougall 153). Their agreement was sealed in the treaty of Fotheringhay in May 1482: “The English king, by the treaty of Fotheringhay, was committing himself to full-scale invasion of Scotland in the interests of a pretender, to the overthrow of the existing regime north of the border, and a measure of control in southern Scotland” (MacDougall 143). Joined by Richard, duke of Gloucester, Albany raised an army and began the march north.

James III reacted immediately, attempting to raise his own army in response to Albany and Gloucester’s approach. In what MacDougall describes as “an event without parallel in fifteenth century Scottish political history,” (158) James III was

seized at Lauder Bridge by his magnates, led by his two uncles – the earls of Atholl and Buchan – while marching towards Berwick on 22 July 1482. This shocking turn of events speaks to James III's failures as king. As MacDougall explains,

Thus James III, as he summoned the Scottish host to Lauder, was calling up men who must have been aware that an enormous invading army was on its way, who may well have discovered on arrival at the muster point that Berwick town had fallen without a struggle and that the English were less than thirty miles away, and who were being asked to risk their lives in support of a monarch whose domestic policies were offensive to many and whose foreign policy had produced the almost certain military disaster which they now saw staring them in the face. (155)

The events of Lauder Bridge allowed Albany to enter Scotland unchallenged.

Following his capture, James III was imprisoned in Edinburgh castle. Albany and Gloucester arrived at Edinburgh to find the king locked away. Gloucester agreed to leave Edinburgh peacefully with his army in exchange for money to repay Edward IV, who had sent a dowry for his daughter Cecilia who was to be married to Prince James Stewart (Fradenburg 37). The disastrous turn of events forever tarnished the legacy of James III. Indeed, "the crisis at Lauder became a feature of later accounts of the reign, with most writers seeking to explain it in terms of James III's failure to do his duty as a king and take proper counsel from his nobility – a curious verdict on a man who at Lauder was surrounded by magnates and was attempting to fulfill one of the vital tasks of a medieval king, acting as a leader in war" (MacDougall 158).

Although James III was released on 29 September 1482, Lauder Bridge proved to be a foreshadowing of things to come. The king's increasingly difficult behaviour in the 1480s led to his death at the Battle of Sauchieburn on 11 June 1488. His divisive rule resulted in rebellion from a group of his feudal lords. These rebels included the young Prince James, whose willing involvement with the defectors is

questionable. James III had begun showing favouritism to his younger son James, Marquis of Ormond (who was made Duke of Ross in January 1482, further evidence of James III's preference towards his second son). Yet, while Prince James may or may not have fully supported the rebels' ideals, he apparently gave orders that the king, his father, should not be killed (MacDougall 259). The king's death is shrouded in mystery, as although he certainly died at Sauchieburn, it is unknown precisely *how* he died. The parliamentary record notes that he died in battle, while a second source states that he was killed by unknown persons following the battle (MacDougall 259).

The most interesting aspect of James III's death for the purpose of discussing Scottish Arthurian romances is the involvement of his son, the future James IV. His order to spare James III became the hallmark of his early reign. The rebels attempted to disassociate themselves from James III's demise, relying on the mystery surrounding his death to ingratiate themselves to the new king. Furthermore, James IV's order to spare his father put him in an enviable position as the new king of Scotland. While he was certainly involved in the rebellion against James III, he was not personally responsible for the king's unfortunate end, and indeed appeared to react justly and mercifully toward him. The legend surrounding James III, especially concerning his unpopularity, his inability to listen to counsel, and his habit of choosing favourites, only aided James IV in separating himself from his father's sins. The young James IV, therefore, came to represent a new beginning, a chance to forget the difficulties of James III's reign and move into a potentially successful future.

The connection between James III, James IV, and the Arthurian material in Scotland will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter. Yet the lessons of

what makes a good king clearly come from the contemporary fifteenth century examples provided by James III and his struggles. He was a king incapable of instilling loyalty or raising a proper army. His closest kinsmen, his uncles, his brother, and his son, all turned against him. And, in the end, his legacy is that of the cost of bad kingship. As we shall see, the influence of James III's life on the character of King Arthur, and the similarities between James IV and Sir Gawain, are compelling and influential aspects of Arthur's literary legacy in Scotland.

Arthurian Kingship

While Scottish kingship faced unique challenges born of a long-standing historical conflict with England, the Scottish romances nonetheless adopt Arthur as a way to examine what makes a "good king." Although Arthur is never considered a Scottish king – he maintains his Englishness in both surviving romances– he serves the Scottish romance writers as an emblem of kingship and the concerns surrounding what constitutes a "good king." This is not unique to Scottish romances, however, as English writers also viewed Arthur as a template for kingship, and his faults as king are often at the forefront of the romances.¹⁰⁵ The Scottish romances, however, do not depict a uniquely Scottish version of Arthur as king; his characterization is borrowed and adapted from both the French sources and English depictions. Yet, while Arthur does not transform into a Scottish king, the problems and concerns he faces *are* arguably, Scottish. The two surviving Arthurian Scottish romances provide a fascinating opportunity to examine two different depictions of Arthur in the context

¹⁰⁵As I discussed in chapters one and two, there are numerous examples in the Gawain romances that exemplify Arthur's successes and failures as a king. In *The Weddyng*, Arthur's cowardice and inability to adhere to his oaths place Gawain in direct danger and create conflict. Arthur's thirst for conquest is also highlighted repeatedly in the romances, notably in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

of Scottish political and ideological theories of kingship, so I will now discuss Arthurian kingship in *Lancelot of the Laik* and *Golagros* followed by a discussion of Gawain's importance to the concept of Scottish kingship and what defines a "good king" according to these romances.

Kingship in *Lancelot of the Laik*

Lancelot of the Laik, a late fifteenth-century poem written in "a Scottish dialect" (Lupack 1), is a Scottish re-telling of an early section of the Prose *Lancelot*. The only surviving manuscript is incomplete, making any critical analysis of the romance difficult. Even the dating of the poem is problematic, as Bertram Vogel argues that the poem was composed in 1482, while others, such as R.J. Lyall, find the specificity of Vogel's dating suspect (Robinson 151). Vogel's dating is an attempt to place the composition of the poem within the reign of James III, whose time as King of Scots proved politically complicated. Alan Lupack notes "criticism of *Lancelot of the Laik* has generally promoted two opinions about the poem" (Lupack 3). The first of these dismisses it due to its, arguably, poor composition. As Lupack notes, Helaine Newstead, Robert Ackerman and Roger Sherman Loomis have all criticized the poem as insignificant and poorly composed. Others, like Vogel, believe its merits lie with its potential political connection to James III and kingship (Lupack 3). While it would be presumptuous to dismiss these critical examinations of *Lancelot*, the often-negative discussion of the romance's literary merit and political message distracts from the importance of the poem as a Scottish Arthurian romance. The incomplete manuscript makes it especially difficult to say with certainty what the anonymous poet's true intentions were for his retelling of the

French source, but an exploration of the poem's focus on kingship and chivalry prove notable for this study of Arthur, Gawain and Scottish political power.

While Lancelot is certainly featured heavily in *Lancelot of the Laik*, the romance does not solely focus on the early days of his career as a knight. In a marked change from the French source, the poem's prologue borrows heavily from a "Chaucerian dream vision" (Archibald 74), detailing the poet's agonizing love for his lady. Suffering with his unrequited love, the poet decides to tell a story of "boith...love and armys"¹⁰⁶ and his subject for the tale is Sir Lancelot. Before the narrative properly begins, however, the poet lists the numerous tales of Lancelot he will *not* share, including the story of his birth, his childhood with the Lady of the Lake, and his youthful adventures. There is a sense of purpose and direction in the prologue. The author shows his obvious familiarity with the French source, but specifically chooses to skip much of Lancelot's story. The expectation, then, is for the narrative to begin with a young Lancelot pining for Guinevere. As Lupack remarks,

The tale of Lancelot is selected because it is the story of a great lover. The implied simile is that the poet's love for the woman for whom the poem is written is like Lancelot's love for Guinevere. Given this context, it would be totally inappropriate for the author to write a courtesy book or to have political advice as his primary emphasis. In fact, the poet explains in the Prologue that Arthur's war with Galiot is important because Lancelot was the reason for Arthur's victory and won the most honor in those wars. (Lupack 5)

Upon the completion of the prologue, however, the poem immediately turns to King Arthur at Carlisle. Lancelot does not appear for nearly six hundred lines, further confusing our sense of the poet's intentions. The prologue clearly focuses on courtly love, and Lancelot, as Lupack states, is chosen as a fictional representation of the

¹⁰⁶ All quotations are from the TEAMS edition of *Lancelot of the Laik*, edited by Alan Lupack.

courtly lover. Rather than turn immediately to this idealized portrait of amorous knighthood the text instead first examines Arthur's troubling dream and the introduction of Galiot. Although Arthur's war with Galiot is mentioned in the prologue, it is his dream that occupies the early narrative of Book One.

Arthur's recurring dream is cause for great concern. He obsessively wishes to know its meaning and shares his fears with numerous people, including the queen. He is so distracted that his journey from Carlisle to Camelot must be delayed while he loses sleep and worries. Upon sharing his fears with the queen, she says, "To dremys, sir, shuld no man have respek./ For thei ben thingis veyn, of non affek"¹⁰⁷ [You should not take heed of dreams, sir, for they are worthless things of no significance¹⁰⁷] (381-382). Despite the Queen's dismissive attitude, Arthur believes the dream has been sent by God and, therefore, wishes desperately to have it explained. He calls for a clerk, who listens to the dream, but ultimately responds,

Shir, no record lyith to such thing;
Wharfor now, shir, I praye yow tak no kep
Nore traist into the vanyteis of slep.
For thei are thingis that askith no credens
But causith of sum maner influens,
Empriss of thought, ore superflueytee,
Or than sum other casualitytee. (388-394)

[Sir, there lies no proof, for now, sir, I pray you, take no heed, nor trust the vanities of sleep. For there are things that call for no credence, but are caused by some manner of influence, pre-occupation of thought, or superfluity [of humours] or some similar trifle].

Once more, Arthur's fears are dismissed and the king is assured that his dream is meaningless. Arthur's response, however, indicates his determination and growing annoyance with these flawed counsellors. He tells the clerk, "I sal nocht leif it so" [I

¹⁰⁷All translations are my own with additional translations by Alan Lupack from the TEAMS edition of *Lancelot of the Laik*.

shall not believe it so] (395) and demands that his bishops gather learned men at Camelot who can interpret the dream.

These men, described by the poet as “maistris of astronomy,” listen to Arthur’s dream, and, unlike the queen and the clerk, find cause for concern. Their response to the king, however, reveals that his true worry should be in his chosen counsellors rather than his subconscious visions. The wise men listen to Arthur’s dream, and:

Thei fon it wonder hevy to the King,
Of wich thing thei waryng into were
To shew the King for dreid of his danger.
Of ane accorde thei planly have proponit
No worde to show, and so thei them disponit. (442-446)

[They found [the dream] very troublesome for the King, and were hesitant to [reveal] its meaning to the King for fear of his power. Because of [their fear] they plainly [and] unanimously proposed to say nothing, and so they did].

When Arthur asks for their analysis, they lie and say, “Shir, of this thing we can no thing recorde,/ For we can nocht fynd intil our sciens/ Tweching this mater ony evydens” [Sir, we cannot report anything about [this dream], for we cannot find in our learning any evidence concerning this matter] (450-452). This episode reveals the inner machinations of Arthur’s government. He cannot trust his advisors. Even his queen is suspect.¹⁰⁸ When he asks his bishops to gather learned men, they deliver cowardly astrologers who lie rather than face the king’s wrath. It is only after Arthur threatens the clerks with death that they reveal the true meaning of his dream, a meaning reflected in the actions of his most trusted counsellors. The clerks tell Arthur, “All erdly honore ye nedist most forgo/ And them the wich ye most affy intyll/ Shall failye yow, magré of ther will” [You will necessarily lose all earthly

¹⁰⁸ Her poor advice to Arthur here is, perhaps, an early indication of trouble in their marriage.

honour, and those in whom you put most faith shall fail you, despite their [best] intentions] (498-500). While this dream is an obvious allusion to the calamitous affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, it also indicates a political concern for Arthur. He cannot trust the people around him, and, although he does not know that his dream refers to his wife and Lancelot,¹⁰⁹ he now understands that he is destined to lose his honour and, ultimately his kingdom. Arthur's fears that those closest to him will betray him echo the disastrous events at Lauder Bridge in 1482. Captured by his uncles and invaded by his brother, James III found himself at the mercy of those who should have been his closest allies. Unlike King James, however, Arthur is forewarned, giving him the opportunity to repent and, possibly, avoid the dark prophecies of his dream.

Galiot's arrival marks an end to Arthur's dream analysis until the beginning of Book Two. Once again, the narrative veers away from the expected focus on Lancelot's deeds in order to examine Arthur's flaws. This is a change from the Prose *Lancelot*, where the anonymous author details Lancelot's adventures and imprisonment by Lady Malehault. While the poet of *Lancelot of the Laik* maintains much of his French source, the subtle changes – mainly his lack of focus on Lancelot's individual deeds¹¹⁰ – refocuses the narrative and reveals the specifically Scottish interests of the text.

Book Two opens with a sleepless Arthur, haunted by “[...] the apperans of his wo,/...his deith, his confuscione,/ And of his realme the opin distrucione,/ That in his wit he can nothing provide/ Bot tak his forton thar for to abyd” [the vision

¹⁰⁹ At this point in the narrative, Arthur has yet to meet Lancelot.

¹¹⁰ This is not to say that *Lancelot of the Laik* completely ignores Lancelot's story. He spends much time imprisoned by the Lady Malehault and his time in her company is given some focus. Compared to the Prose *Lancelot*, however, where each story appears in the context of Lancelot's adventures, *Lancelot of the Laik* very clearly maintains its political tone by following Arthur's personal narrative.

of his shame, his death, his destruction, and the destruction of his realm that, to his knowledge, he can do nothing about except accept his fate] (1284-1288). The next day Arthur meets a clerk, Master Amytans, who proceeds to analyze his dream and impart crucial knowledge that may save Arthur from his prophesied fate (in the Prose *Lancelot*, an unnamed holy man visits Arthur and chastises him for his faults).¹¹¹ The poet of *Lancelot of the Laik* greatly expands this section, making Amytans a crucial figure of trusted counsel and wisdom for a king sorely lacking in both. Amytans is a layman (“non orderis had he or relegioun” (1300)), but “Famus...of gret excellent/and rycht expert in al seven science/ Contemplatif and chast in governance” [Famous and of great excellence, and an expert in the seven sciences, contemplative and careful in conduct] (1301-1303). Elizabeth Archibald writes that, “in the view of many critics, [Amytans’ advice for Arthur] turns the poem from a love story into a poem in the Mirror of Princes tradition which was so popular in late medieval Scotland, a tract on good kingship with a secondary plot about love” (77). In addition, she notes,

it is unusual in the British tradition for an Arthurian story to be used as a vehicle for extensive general political and ethical advice in this manner. [...] The discourse on good kingship in the Prose *Lancelot* and *LL*¹¹² is not connected to the traditional ending,¹¹³ and seems disproportionate to the immediate context. Yet its length and its central position in *LL* (as far as we can tell) mark it as very significant, even though it has nothing to do with the declared subject, Lancelot’s prowess and his love for Guenevere (Lancelot is himself a king, but never functions as one). (77)

¹¹¹ The poet of *Lancelot of the Laik* includes much of the source material found in the Prose *Lancelot* in Amytans’ advice to Arthur. The impetus for the wise man’s arrival in the French source, however, is markedly different from the narrative found in *Lancelot of the Laik*. During the first battle with Galehot’s army, Arthur’s men begin to abandon him, which leaves the king terrified. The wise man explains that this abandonment has been God’s will. The emphasis on this section is twofold: Arthur must reform his ways, but more importantly, he must confess his sins. Amytans’ advises the same, but the focus here is Arthur’s relationship to his people. These scenes can also be read as an allusion to James III’s difficult relationship with his feudal lords and kinsmen.

¹¹² Archibald’s contraction.

¹¹³ The first meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere.

Because *Lancelot of the Laik* is incomplete, studying the Amytans section is a task that must be performed seemingly out of context. Without knowing the poet's intentions for the poem's ending, it is difficult to discern why the section on advice for Arthur has been so greatly expanded in a romance dedicated to Lancelot. In his introduction to *Lancelot of the Laik*, Alan Lupack argues that,

[...] the consideration of the significance of Amytans' advice cannot be understood without imagining it as part of a larger whole and without considering its relationship to that larger whole. No doubt scholars have been drawn to this passage because it is complete and the full content of Amytans' speech can be analyzed. But to see it in isolation distorts both the poem in which it appears and the passage itself.

Projecting the completed work makes it clear that *Lancelot of the Laik* is not a courtesy book but a romance in which the advice plays an important but subsidiary role. (Lupack 4)

While it is true that *Lancelot of the Laik* must be imagined as part of a larger text, to say with certainty that the poem is not a courtesy book or that the advice plays a subsidiary role is dismissive of the sections that have survived. What remains is important in a greater context, beyond the physical pieces missing from the manuscript. How this text is interpreted relies heavily on who was writing it, where it was written, and for whom it was written. In the French source, the section on advice appears as a small footnote in the larger story of Arthur's war with Galehaut and Lancelot's first meeting with Guinevere. In *Lancelot of the Laik*, however, the same section, which shares so many similarities to its source, changes meaning *because* it is written by a Scottish writer for a Scottish audience. The inclusion of this section, despite its appearance in an incomplete manuscript, speaks to the popularity of certain literary tropes in Scotland and pertinent concerns that would be recognizable to a Scottish audience. *Lancelot of the Laik* is not *only* a courtesy book, but also a

romance that acknowledges matters of kingship in the context of Scotland's own history by including aspects of what would traditionally be considered a courtesy book. The French source, then, is re-imagined without any major shifts in textual content, as its contextual significance comes from the location of its composition and readership.

This struggle to contextualize Amytans' speech is arguably the most compelling aspect of an otherwise standard Lancelot romance. Amytans provides Arthur with a long list of his faults, but also instruction for how a good king should behave towards his people. Initially, he notes Arthur's divine right to the throne, but reminds him that only God has the power to grant him this right: "It cummyth al bot only of His might/ And not of the nor of thi elderis richt/ To the discending as in heritage,/ For yow was not byget onto spousag" [It comes only from [God's] power and not from you or from your ancestors' right, descending as an inheritance, for you were not begotten in wedlock] (1331-1334). This obvious reference to the Chronicle tradition is perhaps the most markedly Scottish aspect of Amytan's advice for Arthur. While the counsellor acknowledges Arthur's illegitimacy, however, he uses this fact to reaffirm and remind Arthur of God's role in kingship. Arthur is king because God made it so, in spite of the fact that he has no legitimate dynastic claim to the throne.¹¹⁴ His ancestry does not matter, because he is subservient to God's will, which reinforces Amytans statement that Arthur "aucht His biding to observe/ And at thy mycht yow shuld Hyme pless and serf" [ought to obey God's bidding and should please and serve God as far as you are able] (1335-1336). While Arthur's origins are still negatively portrayed here, Amytans is able to use this potential

¹¹⁴The French source also notes that Arthur was born "in the great sin of adultery" (231), but as we have previously seen, the Scottish chronicle tradition informs the context and power of this statement in *Lancelot of the Laik*.

shame as an opportunity for instruction. His first piece of advice for Arthur is to obey God. Once this crucial lesson is taught, he moves on to discuss Arthur personal flaws.

The flaws are numerous and worrying. According to Amytans, after obeying God, Arthur must maintain justice and punish the wicked, two responsibilities Arthur “dois nothing bot all in the contrare” [does nothing but the contrary] (1347). Arthur ignores the suffering of the poor and only listens to flatterers. With each flaw Amytans reveals, he reminds Arthur that God “is bycummythi fo” [is becoming your enemy] (1383) and “Thi pupleis hartis haith thow tynt” [you have lost the hearts of your people] (1384). Amytans emphasizes the need for Arthur to listen to good counsel and, by accepting his advice and confessing his sins, he has the chance to repent and potentially reverse the dream’s dark prophesy. The overarching theme of Amytans’ counsel is to ensure that Arthur pays attention to those around him: the poor, his knights, and his subjects. He is told to be generous, to uphold the law, for “the most trespass is to subvert the low” [for the greatest fault [of a king] is to subvert the law] (1642), to take counsel, and travel throughout his realm, taking the time to meet and generously provide gifts and rewards for his loyal citizens, regardless of their economic or social status.

The counsel of Amytans is the main subject of Book Two, distracting from Lancelot’s prowess in arms. Instead, Arthur and his counsellor focus on how to improve the kingdom, and more specifically, how Arthur can improve himself. This section comes at an interesting time in the narrative; Galiot, a foreign lord and son of

a giantess,¹¹⁵ intent on defeating Arthur and taking his land, has called off his war due to the small size of Arthur's army. According to Galiot's messengers,

[Galiot] has gret wonder that yhe ar
 So feblé cummyne into his contrare
 For to defend your cuntré and your londe,
 And knowith well yhe may hyme nocht withstonde.
 Wharfor he thinkith no worschip to conquere
 Nore in the weris more to persyvere. (1559-1564)

[Galiot greatly wonders why you [Arthur] have so inadequately come against him in his country, to defend your country and your land, and he knows that you cannot withstand him [Galiot]. Therefore, he thinks there is no honour in conquering you, nor [is there honour] in persevering in these wars.]

Galiot graciously grants Arthur a year to gather a larger army and return. While this action reflects positively on Galiot as a great warrior and man of honour, it ultimately proves to be a humiliating moment of weakness for Arthur. Although his men fought well in the first battle, they were only saved by the mysterious Red Knight – a disguised Lancelot - who rescues them from defeat. After the battle, the Red Knight departs and Arthur's greatest champion, Gawain, lies horribly wounded. It is at this point that Amytans arrives to provide his counsel. Yet, despite the blow to Arthur's reputation, Galiot's truce and Amytans' harsh words are not meant to portray Arthur as a bad king. He has obviously made many errors, and his flaws are numerous, but in this Scottish romance, Arthur is given a chance to redeem himself – both on the field of battle and as a king.

Arthur's flaws in *Lancelot of the Laik* are quite different from his characterization in the French source. While Amytans and the wise man express similar concerns, the Arthur of *Lancelot of the Laik* is granted the opportunity for self-improvement and redemption. As Flora Alexander explains,

¹¹⁵ In the French source he is said to be the son of a giantess, which may explain the Scottish poet's use of the phrase "sone of the fair Gyonde" (302).

In the French romance Arthur is depicted as far from perfect. Apart from his glaring faults as monarch, which are made very prominent because of the amount of space that is devoted to the clerk's reproof and advice, he is guilty of adultery with the enchantress Camille, and in the false Guinevere episode he is at fault in allowing himself to be deceived, and incurs the displeasure of the Pope for leaving his wife and taking a new one. [...] In *Lancelot of the Laik*... it is Arthur's faults as ruler that are considered, since the poet broke off long before he came to the Camille and False Guinevere episodes. [...] the treatment of Arthur is more restrained in the Scottish poem. (Alexander 24-25)

Indeed, Amytans refers directly only to Arthur's mistreatment of King Ban,¹¹⁶ while the rest of his remarks are general, without specific examples of Arthur's previous behaviour. All evidence of adultery is removed from the Scottish poem in favour of a discussion of political philosophy; Amytans seems almost exclusively concerned with Arthur as a political figure. They do not discuss Arthur's marriage, and Guinevere is only mentioned when Amytans suggests that the queen should also be generous to her subjects.¹¹⁷ Yet, despite the Scottish poet's dismissal of the courtly aspects of the text, by including Lancelot as a figure of knightly perfection, the poem maintains aspects of the French romance. As Sergi Mainer writes,

As the thematic axis of romances lies in good kingship, the narrative framework minimizes the paramount importance of chivalry and courtesy and makes them subservient to Arthur's preservation of his kingdom. The result of the situation could not be more ironic inasmuch as Arthur's victory over Galiot can occur only if Lancelot intervenes. But the successful intervention of Lancelot will mean Guenevere's subsequent surrender to his advances. Consequently, whatever the outcome of the battle may be, the monarch is going to lose either his kingdom or his wife's fidelity. (203)

¹¹⁶ Amytans says, "left thow aght behynde/ Of Albenak the uorschipful King Ban./ The wiche that uas into thy service slan,/ And of his wif disherist eft also?/ Bot of ther sone, the wiche was them fro,/ Ne spek Y not" [Did you leave anything out [of your confession] about Albenak the worshipful King Ban, he that was killed in your service, and his wife deprived of her inheritance? But of their son, that was theirs, you did not speak] (1446-1451). As the wise man of the Prose *Lancelot* also mentions King Ban of Benok, this reference is likely an exact reiteration of the French source.

¹¹⁷ The inclusion of Guinevere is reminiscent of *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. Cf. Chapter two.

The return of Lancelot to the narrative brings a return of his unrequited love certainly, but Amytans' advice is not forgotten. As Amytans says, "Or have thi court of vertewis folk or fullis./ Sen yow art holl maister of the scoullis,/ Teichith them and thei sal gladly leir--/ That is to say, that thei may no thing heir/ Sauf only vertew toward thyn estate" [Either have your court full of virtuous folk or sinners. Since you are the master of the schools, teach them and they shall gladly learn – that is to say, that they may hear nothing except only virtue about your position] (1991-1995). The people look to Arthur for an example of how to behave, and Arthur must be virtuous in order for his people to be the same.

After Amytans departs, Arthur does just this, travelling amongst his people, giving them gifts, and upholding the law. Through the advice of Amytans, he is given the opportunity to become the king the people deserve. His focus remains on them until Gawain recovers from his wounds, and they must prepare for war against Galiot once more.¹¹⁸ The poet writes, "So discretly his puple he haith cherit/ That he thar hartis holy haith counquerit" [So discretely he gladdened his people that he wholly conquered their hearts] (2154-2155). It is only after Arthur practices Amytans' advice that he is ready to face Galiot. The Scottish poet suggests that although the poem is a romance, and Lancelot's presence may signal inevitable doom for king and kingdom, it is not Arthur's sins that will bring about the fall of the Round Table. Arthur has proved himself to be a redeemable king because he listens to counsel and repents. Unlike the French source, where Arthur's flaws show moral weakness, the Arthur of *Lancelot of the Laik* is a repentant man who places the needs of his people and his kingdom at the forefront of his thoughts.

¹¹⁸ While Arthur similarly works towards bettering himself in the Prose *Lancelot*, his thoughts quickly stray to the mysterious Red Knight who will save the king from Galehot's superior army. I will discuss this episode later in the chapter.

The Mirror of Princes Tradition in *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*

If *Lancelot of the Laik* is a study of kingship in the context of Arthur's court and contemporary fifteenth-century Scottish monarchy, *Golagros* is very much an examination of failed kingship and English expansion. As I discussed in chapter one, Arthur and his entourage initially depart on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but the king's focus is consumed with Golagros' free, autonomous, landholdings. As Schiff notes, "*Golagros*, while it may well be informed in part by "Scottish" affinities, clearly signals its more fundamental interest in the transnational issue of imperialist activity by centering its attention upon a mobile Arthurian army traversing foreign territory" (629). Yet, separating these "Scottish affinities" from the narrative of *Golagros* would be nearly impossible, as the tale of an English king demanding subservience from a foreign lord has obvious connections to the continuous power struggle between England and Scotland, especially for Scottish readers. *Golagros* is intensely focused on representations of good leadership, as Arthur and Golagros are contrasted through their actions on and off the battlefield.¹¹⁹

The impetus for Arthur's journey is a pilgrimage, albeit a curiously brief one. This is a notable difference from the poem's French source, where Arthur and his knights depart for the Chastel Orgueilleus, which in the Scottish text becomes Golagros' castle, in order to rescue the imprisoned Sir Girflet, who has been a captive of Riche Soudoier for three years.¹²⁰ While Arthur's purpose for travelling

¹¹⁹ At the time of *Golagros*' publication (1508), England and Scotland enjoyed a period of relatively peaceful relations. In 1502, James and Henry VII signed the Treaty of Perpetual Peace, which saw James IV marry Margaret Tudor, Henry VII's daughter. The treaty would not be broken until 1513. *Golagros*, included in the Chepman and Myllar Prints of 1508, coincided with James IV's grand tournament of the Wild Knight and Black Lady, held in 1507 and again in 1508. In 1509, James named his infant son Arthur, in honour of the late Prince of England and in likely reference to James' great love of chivalry and the Arthurian legend.

¹²⁰I will discuss further changes from the source material later in the chapter, but the Scottish poet's decision to reimagine the reason for Arthur's journey changes the implications of his actions. In the

has seemingly nothing to do with conquest, it is clear the king is not wholly focused on his sacred mission. Upon discovering Golagros's castle, Arthur obsessively vows to return from pilgrimage with the intention of forcing Golagros into feudal submission. Arthur's decision goes against the counsel of Sir Spynagros, a knight who acts as Arthur's military counsellor throughout the text. Spynagros warns Arthur,

A! Lord, sparis of sic speche, quhill ye spear more,
 For abandonit will he nocht be to berne that is borne.
 Or he by strenyeit with strength, yone sterne for to schore,
 Mony ledis salbe loissit, and liffis forlorne.
 Spekis na succedry, for Goddis sone deir!
 Yone knicht to scar with skaitht, ye chaip nocht but scorne. (274-
 279)

[Oh! Lord, cease from such speech until you inquire more, for [Golagros] will not be subject to any knight that is born. Before he [the warrior yonder][may] be constrained by force, many men shall be lost, and lives forfeited. Speak no false pride, for God's dear Son! [If] you threaten yonder knight with harm, you will not escape without shame.].

Spynagros's counsel specifically calls attention to the king's pride. While Amytans spends much of *Lancelot of the Laik* reciting a treatise on 'good kingship,' covering topics from faith to generosity, Spynagros focuses more closely on Arthur's problematic ambition, a flaw commonly associated with the king and partially responsible for the eventual collapse of Arthur's kingdom.

Arthur's response to Spynagros's warnings is telling, as the king chooses not to heed his counsellor's advice. He responds, "In faith...trou ye full traist,/ My hecht sall haldin be, for baill or for blis:/ Sall never my likame be laid unlaissit to sleip,/ Quhill I have gart yone berne bow" [In faith...[I] believe you truly, [but] my promise

French text, he leaves in order to right a wrong, as the king is not pleased that Girflet has been left a prisoner for so long. In *Golagros*, however, Arthur's pilgrimage makes his actions all the more worrisome. He is supposed to be on a spiritual journey, yet his mind is on conquest, a poor indicator of his devotion to God and his men.

shall be kept, for woe or for bliss: My body shall never be unarmed to sleep, until I have made yon knight bow down] (291-295). Arthur's "serquidre,"¹²¹ his pride, is the central concern of *Golagros*. This is, of course, not the first Arthurian narrative to highlight Arthur's prideful ambition, yet the inclusion of his pilgrimage, as opposed to crusade or war, makes it a noteworthy text. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Arthur travels to the Continent with the goal of defeating his Roman enemies, but his desire for more land sees him conquer Italy, leaving Mordred to usurp the crown and steal Guinevere in his absence. The author of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* distinctly emphasizes the connection between Arthur's pride and the loss of his kingdom. Yet, in *Golagros*, Arthur's initial desire to make pilgrimage is quickly forgotten in light of an opportunity for conquest, highlighting the king's obsessive territorial ambition. He abandons spiritual fulfillment in favour of political and military glory.

Spynagros's advice for Arthur and his knights is purely strategic in nature. Once it is clear that Arthur will attempt to battle Golagros, Spynagros changes his initial counsel, choosing instead to guide Arthur, despite his misgivings about the king's plan. In an attempt to prepare Arthur's messengers for their meeting with Golagros, Spynagros warns, "Lordingis in le,/ I rede ye tent treuly to my teching,/ For I knaw yone bauld berne better than ye" [[My] lords on earth, I advise you to truly to listen to my advice, for I know yon bold warrior better than you do] (341-343). He then advises them to,

...meekly with mouth mel to that myld,
And mak him na manance, bot al mesoure.
Thus with trety ye cast yon trew under tyld,

¹²¹ The word "serquidre" is also famously used in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when the Green Knight tells Gawain that he was sent to Arthur court, "For to assay þe surquidre, 3if hit soth were/þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table" [To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth of the great reputation attached to the Round Table] (2456-2457). Translations by James Winny. For further discussion of this term as it applies to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, cf. chapter four.

And faynd his frendschip to fang with fine favour.
It hynderis never for to be heyndly of speche. (354-358)

[speak meekly to that warrior, and make no threat against him, but [show] moderation in all things, thus with diplomacy [should] you act [toward] that true [knight] in his castle, and obtain his friendship with fine favour. It never hinders to be pleasing of speech].

Here Spynagros establishes two important points of focus. He clearly states his expertise, giving Arthur and his knights reason not only to trust him, but to listen to his counsel. Furthermore, he encourages diplomacy over war. Spynagros is a proponent of compromise and patience, always advising against physical violence. This advice, born of knowledge and recognition, continually calls attention not only to Golagros's standing as a powerful warrior, but also to the potential danger for Arthur. Spynagros repeatedly indicates that in a military situation, Arthur's men will fall to the might of Golagros.¹²² This is notable in contrast to Galiot in *Lancelot of the Laik*, who spares his own reputation by giving Arthur one year to gather greater forces. Arthur's army is not strong enough in either of these texts to face the overpowering Scottish¹²³ lords. In *Lancelot of the Laik*, Arthur spends his year's reprieve amongst his people, improving himself and, by extension, his office. In *Golagros*, Arthur ignores the good counsel of Spynagros, sending his men to fight a superior enemy – a desire fuelled by his pride and his ambition.

The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Its French Source

Unlike *Lancelot of the Laik*, where the changes made to the French source are minimal, the poet of *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain* made many significant changes to his narrative. The poem is based on two episodes in the First

¹²²An echo to *Lancelot of the Laik* where Arthur's men indeed succumb to the superior Galiot.

¹²³Golagros' "Scottishness" is never firmly established, but the obvious political undertones of the text indicate that both Golagros and his land holdings are Scottish. For further discussion see chapter one.

Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*, and while some of the story remains the same, the differences change the tone and focus of the text, especially when looking at Gawain's role in each tale. The two sections that make up *Golagros* are found in a single source, as in the First Continuation, Arthur and his knights also briefly stop in a castle where Kay is chased by a dwarf.¹²⁴ But the section that the second part of *Golagros* is based on, despite being from the same source as the Kay episode, is vastly different compared to the Scots version of the same tale. In *Perceval*, a previous dalliance with a maiden in a tent leads to conflict for Gawain and Arthur. Gawain's actions become the central focus of this section, so Arthur's eventual arrival at the castle of a foreign lord is juxtaposed with scenes of Gawain paying for his past sins.

The Scottish poet removes any reference to Gawain's fight with Sir Bran de Lis, a knight whose sister slept with Gawain.¹²⁵ In the First Continuation, after he discovers their tryst, Gawain kills the lady's father, and her brother, Bran de Lis, vows vengeance. Later, while Arthur goes to rescue Girflet,¹²⁶ his retinue stops at yet another castle for food, but unbeknownst to them, the castle belongs to Bran de Lis. As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner explains, "Forced to explain to Arthur why he was suddenly armed for combat in some unknown castle, Gauvain relates how he came upon a damsel sleeping in a tent and forced himself upon her in spite of her resistance" (107).¹²⁷ Upon realizing that Gawain has entered his castle, Bran de Lis

¹²⁴Cf. chapter one.

¹²⁵ An English version of this story appears in an incomplete manuscript dated 1564 (Hahn 395) called *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*. While this Middle English ballad re-tells Gawain's affair with Bran de Lis' sister, the writer also promotes Gawain's nobility, as his actions (fighting her father and brothers) are done to protect her from their wrath.

¹²⁶ A knight of the Round Table who in the Prose *Lancelot* is tasked with returning Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake after the final battle.

¹²⁷Gawain's retelling is not exactly true, as the lady was a willing participant in their union. When her father and brother hear of this, they immediately blame Gawain, who offers to marry her to make

rushes to fight him and they battle fiercely until Gawain's young son, whose mother is Bran de Lis' sister, takes hold of their swords. This eventually leads to reconciliation between Gawain and Bran de Lis and they both join Arthur in his attempt to free Girflet.

The Scottish writer ignores these sections entirely, using only the episodes about Sir Kay and the dwarf and then the battle between Arthur's knights and Riche Soudoier, the lord of Castle Orguelleus (where Girflet is imprisoned), whom he renamed Golagros. Gone are any references to Gawain's womanizing and the cost of his indiscretion. Bran de Lis is replaced by Spynagros, as in the French source, he helps Arthur during the fierce fight at Riche Soudoier's castle (although he does not act as the king's counsellor in the same way as Spynagros).

In the French narrative, once Gawain and Riche Soudoier meet on the field, Gawain agrees to join him in his castle, but unlike the Scottish text, where this agreement is based on courtesy and Golagros' wish to consult his people, Riche Soudoier fears that should he appear to be captured or slain, his lady will die of grief. He asks Gawain to join him in his castle so they can explain the situation to his lady privately and in exchange for this act of kindness, Riche Soudoier and his people will surrender to Arthur. This major departure from the source material completely changes the tone of *Golagros*. In the First Continuation of *Perceval*, the narrative is deeply concerned with damsels and their knights, as evidenced by Riche Soudoier's focus on his lady, the continuing feud between Gawain and Bran de Lis, and the surprise appearance of Gawain's son, the result of his affair with Bran de Lis' sister. By removing these aspects from *Golagros*, the Scottish poet re-focuses the text on

amends for the perceived wrongdoing. When her father and Bran de Lis refuse, a fight ensues (Bruckner 106-107).

conquest and good kingship. The French characterization of Gawain, as a womanizing knight who confesses to rape, is replaced by the traditionally northern Middle English characterization. There is no room for Gawain's lady, her vengeful brother, or his son;¹²⁸ for the writer of *Golagros*, these events would only serve to distract from the poem's overall focus on the importance of proper kingship.

Gawain and Good Kingship

Despite Arthur's questionable leadership, *Golagros* is still a narrative very much concerned with good kingship. It is Gawain, however, who accepts the role of exhibiting the characteristics of a good king, as Arthur is unwilling, or perhaps more accurately unable, to fulfill his duty in the narrative. Rhiannon Purdie argues that, "by giving Arthur the curious dual role of exemplary well-advised king and greedy attacker of a noble independent nation, *Golagros* satisfies fans of the most Anglophobic of the Scottish chronicles, as well as those (and they may be the same people) who prefer their Arthur as a representative of ideal kingship" (Purdie 107). Arthur certainly *is* well advised in *Golagros*, yet it is not primarily he who takes this advice, but rather, Gawain. Arguably, Arthur does not represent ideal kingship in this text, thus allowing Gawain to step in: the ideal knight shouldering the responsibilities and actions of an ideal king. The choice to use Gawain in this role is not, however, surprising given his prominence in northern romances and his Scottish heritage.¹²⁹

As I have noted previously in this chapter, Gawain's popularity in the romances emphasizes his position as an idealized figure of knighthood. Romance allows an exploration of a different outcome for the future, a marked change from

¹²⁸Gawain's son, Gingalain is a popular figure in Middle English romance. The most well known of these texts is *Libeaus Desconus*. In *The Weddyng*, Dame Ragnell is said to be his mother (although this seems to be a unique occurrence).

¹²⁹ I will discuss Gawain's role in *Lancelot of the Laik* later in this chapter.

the historical tales told in the chronicles. In both the Scottish Arthurian romances, Gawain steps in where Arthur cannot. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, upon discovering Gawain's body on the battlefield, Arthur mournfully cries that "Þou was worthy to be kyng, þofe I þe corown bare" [You were worthy to be king, though I bore the crown] (3962). The idea that Gawain *could* be king, that he is *worthy* to be king, permeates both of the Scottish romances. In *Lancelot of the Laik*, Gawain is Arthur's champion and closest counsellor, a position that makes him seem like Arthur's obvious heir. In *Golagros*, Gawain is given advice by the king's counsellor and subsequently is treated as if he were king during his scenes of exchange with Golagros.

In her study of James IV of Scotland, L.O. Fradenburg writes that, "In its drive both to recapture a lost past and to legitimate ambitions for the future, it is as characteristic of romance to bring the son to the father, as it is to articulate relations between friends and enemies" (157). James IV, a proponent of chivalric ideals, embodied this notion of both an idyllic medieval past and potential greatness for the future. As Katie Stevenson explains, "Under James IV a strong emphasis seems to have been placed upon chivalry in day-to-day court life. In both his personal qualities as a king and in his administrative rule, James IV seems to have sought a revival of the glory days of chivalry based loosely around the ideals of the Arthurian legend, reworked and refashioned since the twelfth century" (Stevenson *Chivalry* 188).

Fradenburg continues,

Like Arthur, James has been associated with "newness" – freshness, youth, impetuosity, "new monarchy triumphant." He has also, like Arthur, been associated with the past, the lost idyll, belatedness (he is "late medieval"), outworn forms of war (his desire, as at Flodden, to

fight in his own person, or to go on crusade, “the aureate age and its end” (157).¹³⁰

Fradenburg associates Arthur with these ideas of youth, “newness,” and potential, but the writers of Scottish Arthurian romances did not see Arthur as an ideal king. It is Gawain who steps into the role of “the ideal,” both in his worthiness as a knight and his seemingly effortless understanding of diplomacy and governance. Like James IV, he is the heir and kinsman of a problematic king. While it is certainly true that *Golagros* and *Lancelot* depict concern over “outworn forms of war” – as both texts emphasize the potential for Arthur’s undoing due to his ambitious military activities – the king and his knight are always shown at odds on these matters. Arthur’s desire to fight is met with Gawain’s wish for prudence, patience, or, if the battle must take place, caution and courage. While Gawain is always willing to fight for his king, he does so with the awareness that fair speech and courtesy are usually the best course of action. Gawain is, then, both an imagined champion from a lost golden age *and* the symbolic hope for a better future, but this hope is always tinged with regret at the inevitability of his loss. It is only after Gawain is dead, or thought to be going to die, that Arthur or others discuss Gawain’s potential to have been king. The realization that Gawain *could* be a great king always comes too late, as with his passing, all hope for Camelot’s survival is lost. His greatness is always juxtaposed with his imperilled survival, which becomes a constant reminder of the fragility and temporality of an already fading Arthurian golden age. Nowhere is this more relevant than the concluding episodes of *Golagros*.

¹³⁰ Fradenburg uses chapter titles from Ranald Nicholson’s *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages Volume 2* in quotation marks throughout this citation.

After a long exchange that sees numerous knights captured or slain, Golagros decides personally to “seik to the feild” (773), overcome by grief for his lost men. In Arthur’s camp, Spynagros tells Arthur to choose a valiant knight to oppose him, and Gawain volunteers for the task. The scene is notable as it establishes a new power dynamic between Arthur, his counsellor and his knight. Despite Arthur’s presence during these scenes, he remains on the sidelines, an unnecessary figure in the information exchange between Spynagros and Gawain. Spynagros’s disapproval of Arthur is abundantly clear as he mourns for Gawain once the knight has volunteered for combat. Arthur’s desire for war has led to this moment and Spynagros “mekil mayne maise” [makes much lament]¹³¹ (796) at the thought of Gawain’s possible, and in his opinion, likely, defeat.¹³² While Spynagros’s advice is again purely centered on combat skill, he reminds Gawain to “Wirkis with counsale” [act with counsel] (814), concluding his strategy session with the crucial warning, “But gif ye wirk as wise, you worthis that wrang” [Unless you work as advised, you deserve that misfortune] (833). This statement, warning those who do not act with counsel that they face misfortune, is an accusation towards Arthur disguised as good advice for Gawain. While Arthur has sought counsel, a sign of good kingship, he has also chosen to ignore it. Arthur may *know* how to be a good king, but his actions are contrary to this knowledge.

The battle between Gawain and Golagros is most notable for its conclusion. Upon his eventual defeat, Golagros asks Gawain, “Wald yow denye the in deid to do my devis:/ Lat it worth at my wil the wourschip to wale,/ As I had wonnyn the of were, wourthy and wis;/ Syne cary to the castel, quhare I have maist cure” [If you put

¹³¹ I will discuss the anxiety surrounding Gawain’s mortality later in this chapter.

¹³² In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the court disapproves of Gawain’s quest, worrying that Arthur has sent the knight to his death. Cf. chapter four.

yourself at risk to follow my plan: I will ensure that you gain worship if you act [as if] I had overcome you in combat, worthy and wise one; then go [off] to the castle, where I have guardianship] (1095-1098). Initially, Golagros's request appears to be a way for him to save his own reputation and honour while accepting Gawain's victory. Gawain adamantly does not want to kill such a noble and worthy knight, which is why Golagros's plan seems to be wholly based on an attempt to save face and avoid humiliation. Yet, in reality, the plan has far broader political significance than salving the bruised reputation of a single lord. Sergi Mainer notes that "The idiosyncrasies of Scotland during the late Middle Ages suggest that notions of self-government and kingship created a specific political milieu which conditioned and contextualized ideas of identity, freedom and nationhood" (41). The scene that follows Golagros' battlefield agreement with Gawain is an example of this "self-government," in action as he allows his subjects to choose their political fate. The plan, then, is twofold: it allows Golagros to maintain his reputation, but more importantly, Gawain's courteous acquiescence grants Golagros the opportunity to return to his castle where he may take counsel with his people. While he represents the role of kingship, and arguably contrasts with Arthur's negative depiction of the office, it inevitably rests with the men and women of his realm to decide how best to proceed in the fight to maintain independence from Arthurian, and symbolically, English, subjugation. Although the poet never clearly states that Golagros is a Scottish king, the heavy emphasis on an independent king struggling against an imperialistic enemy indicates the strong political focus of *Golagros* and its ties to ideas of Scottish independence and nationalism.

When Golagros speaks to his people, he shows himself to be a noble and fair ruler. He is honest, quickly explaining Gawain's role in this fabricated moment of victory. He then presents his subjects with a choice: "Say me ane chois, the tane of thir twa,/ Quhethir ye like me lord, laught in the field,/ Or ellis my life at the lest lelely forga,/ And boune yow to sum berne, that might be your beild?" [Tell me one of these two choices, whether you prefer me lord, [having been] captured, or [should I] consider my life loyally forfeit, and you [can] bind yourselves to another lord, who might be your protection?] (1181-1184). Golagros is loved by his people and they choose to pay homage to Arthur, lest Golagros lose his life. While this may appear to be detrimental to Golagros's honour and a problematic statement on the continuous power struggle between Scotland and England, it also emphasizes the importance of a good king. Golagros's honour lies in his reputation, and his success as a lord is made manifest in the love his people have for him. Above all else, they want him to live and their respect signifies the impact of good leadership.

While the people's love for Golagros promotes the concept of positive kingship, it also highlights the importance of Gawain to this moment of unity and fellowship. Once the decision has been made to accept Arthur as king, Golagros explains how his plan to feign defeat was made possible thanks to Gawain's honour:

In sight of his soverane, this did the gentill:
 He has me savit fra syte throw his gentrice.
 It war syn, but recure,
 The knightis honour suld smure,
 That did me this honoure,
 Quhilk maist is of price.

I aught as prynce him to prise for his prowese,
 That wanyt nocht my wourschip, as he that al wan;
 And at his bidding full bane, blith to obeise
 This berne full of bewté, that all my baill blan,
 I mak that knawin and kend, his grete kyndnes,

The countirpas to kyth to him, gif I can. (1201-1212)

[In the sight of his sovereign, this gentle knight [did this]: He has saved me from grief through his nobility. It was lost without remedy, [anything which] the knight's honour should besmirch, who did me this honour, is worth this prize. I ought to praise him [as if he were a] prince for his prowess,¹³³ that [he] did not diminish my honour, as he that won; and at his bidding full eager, glad to serve this knight full of nobleness, that all my trouble [he] relieved, I make known and affirm [in view of] his great kindness, I will show him the same if I can].

These scenes between Gawain and the court of Golagros highlight Gawain's crucial role in preserving Arthur's reputation and enabling Golagros to maintain his honour.

Shichtman argues that,

Gawain, who appears in the Scottish poem as the sole influential voice of reason in a court dominated by proud, overzealous, and foolish men, solves a problem for Golagros, a nobleman faced with the prospect of yielding to Arthur's imperialism, he simultaneously solves a problem for the poet, who must in some way domesticate a hostile Arthurian tradition. ("Sir Gawain" 240)

This aspect of Gawain's characterization is prevalent in the northern romances.

However, here in *Golagros*, it has been adopted by the Scottish poet to make him an intermediary between his English king and a Scottish nobleman. Gawain is, of course, always Arthur's loyal knight, but these scenes in Golagros's court mark a shift in his political alliances. Gawain represented his king on the battlefield, but here, in the political arena of a foreign court, he becomes more than a simple representative. Golagros and his people decide to pay homage to Arthur *because* Gawain's nobleness and generosity have swayed them to accept defeat. Spynagros' advice to be diplomatic and careful of speech is already a distinct feature of Gawain's characterization in the northern romances. As the knight who listens to and enacts good counsel, Gawain succeeds where Arthur fails. Arthur is a distant figure

¹³³ Once more, Gawain's worthiness inspires the notion of what he *could* be: a prince, with the obvious connotation that Gawain is potentially Arthur's heir or, if not, the implication of a potential golden age with Gawain as king. Unlike the chronicles, which favour his brother Mordred for this role, the romance poets see Gawain as the ideal heir to Arthur's kingdom.

of imperial power here, but a figure of little importance in this careful exchange between the noble Golagros and the equally worthy Gawain.

Before he departs to meet Arthur, Golagros pays homage directly to Gawain:

Schir, I know be conquest thow art ane kynd man;¹³⁴
 Quhen my lyfe and my dede wes baith at thi will,
 Thy frendschip frely I fand;
 Now wil I be obeyand,
 And make the manrent¹³⁵ with hand,
 As right is, and skill” (1214-1219)

[Sir, I know by [your] conquest you are a gracious man; when my life and my death were both at your will, I freely found your friendship; Now will I be submissive and do you homage with my hand, as is right and reasonable].

The later scene of Golagros submitting to Arthur’s rule seems less integral to the narrative, as Gawain takes Arthur’s place as the symbolic representation of ‘good’ kingship. Rogers argues,

The doubling of the scene in this way is not so much a stylistic defect as the *GG* poet’s way of emphasizing the fact that it is not Arthur’s aggression that has subdued Golagros, but Gawain’s magnanimity. It seems only fitting that Golagros should first pay homage to the knight who has enabled him to preserve life, honour and lordship by subordinating his own honour to that of his conquered opponent. (“Illuminat” 108)

Golagros’s willingness to yield to Arthur speaks more to Gawain’s diplomacy, so that even after Arthur releases Golagros from all feudal obligation, the symbolic connection between the Scottish Golagros and the English Gawain remains the

¹³⁴ Gillian Rogers refers to this line as “[...] one of the simplest, yet also one of the most impressive tributes that [Gawain] ever receives in the whole of his chequered literary career” (“Illuminat” 107-108), a further indication of Gawain’s importance and esteem in this text.

¹³⁵ “Manrent” is a uniquely Scottish concept that appears late in the period. Jenny Wormald explains that the term “is a word which began in Anglo-Saxon England as a term for a general relationship, then swung towards the ‘feudal’ concept of an act of homage both in England and, in its initial stage, in Scotland, and finally diverged to return to its original sense in the very different world of late-medieval Scotland” (18). In the late fifteenth century, ‘manrent’ seemed “to describe service of a lord for life [...]” (Wormald 19). For more on ‘manrent,’ cf. Wormald, Jenny. *Lords and Men in Scotland: Bonds of Manrent, 1442-1603*. Golagros’ agreement to “make the manrent” to Gawain is notable, as Wormald notes, “The emphasis in ‘homage’ may have been on the act, in ‘manrent’ on the long-term obligation” (20).

lasting message of the narrative. Gawain, who listens to counsel, shows mercy in battle, and understands that fair speech is more effective than violence, is able to re-establish order and stability for both Arthur and Golagros. As Shichtman writes, “The protagonist of *Golagros and Gawain* virtually has to redefine proper knightly behavior before he can achieve his goal. He has to show two great and wilful lords the necessity for tempering courage with wisdom. For the Scottish poet, Gawain’s benign actions represent a rehabilitation of an otherwise hostile legend” (“Sir Gawain” 242).¹³⁶ *Golagros* is a narrative about kingship, but although two great lords are present to emphasize the good and bad qualities of the office, it is Gawain who replaces Arthur as the symbolic potential for positive English kingship and, by extension, possible peaceful alliance between the English and Scottish.

Gawain in *Lancelot of the Laik*

As discussed earlier in the chapter, much of *Lancelot of the Laik*’s narrative is centered on the advice for princes trope. The sections detailing Arthur’s battle against Galiot, however, affirm Gawain’s popularity and respectability for the poet and his audience. Shichtman argues that, “the author of *Lancelot of the Laik* obviously admired the knightly qualities of loyalty, prowess, and daring; it was obviously his desire to showcase these attributes in the character with whom his audience felt most comfortable, Sir Gawain” (“Sir Gawain” 244). Gawain’s military and political expertise once again highlight his worthiness and importance to the court. He is obviously Arthur’s most trusted knight as well as the king’s advisor in military pursuits. Indeed, when Galiot first declares war, “the King he gan inquire/

¹³⁶ As previously noted, this is a marked change from the French source where Gawain battles Riche Soudoier, a knight who cannot accept defeat in front of his lady.

At Gawan and at other knyghtis sere/ If that thei knew or ever hard recorde/ Of Galiot, and wharof he wes lorde” [the king began to inquire of Gawain and various other knights, if they knew or heard any account of Galiot, or where he was lord] (593-596). Arthur first approaches Gawain, his chief counsellor, for information on a foreign adversary. During the battle, the author details Gawain’s great exploits, emphasizing his skills as a knight and a leader of men. Gawain is very much situated at the front of Arthur’s small army. He organizes the troops, strategically plans for battle, and delivers a morale-boosting speech, similar to his role in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The fight is difficult, and many men die, but Gawain’s bravery and strength are unwavering, leaving him the last of Arthur’s men on the field:

And Gawan yit apone his horss abidith
 With suerd in hond when thei away uar gon;
 And so forwrocht hys lymmys uer ilkon
 And wondit ek his body up an doune,
 Upone his horss right thore he fel in swoune.
 And thei hyme tuk and to his luyne bare.
 Boith King and Qwen of hyme uare in dispare;
 For their supposit, throw marvellis that he urought,
 He had hymeself to his confusioune broght” (886-894)

[And Gawain remains upon his horse with sword in hand when [Arthur’s men] are gone; And so exhausted with toil and wounded up and down his body, upon his horse he therefore fell in a swoon. And they took him and carried him to his lodgings. Both the King and Queen despaired of him; for they supposed, through the marvels he wrought, that he had brought death to himself]

The image of Gawain remaining on his horse, sword in hand, is powerful here, as it affirms to both the poem’s audience, and Arthur’s men, that Gawain is “the flour of chevelry.” His reputation is widespread, so that word of his fight and his wounds reaches Lady Malehault, who has imprisoned Lancelot in her castle. News of Gawain’s injuries is the impetus behind Lancelot’s arrival on the field of battle and while much of Lancelot’s time is spent agonizing over his love for Guinevere,

Gawain's greatness inspires him temporarily to put aside his longing and join the fight to protect Arthur's kingdom.

Gawain is wounded a second time in the narrative, once Galiot's army returns after their one-year truce with Arthur. Once again, Gawain's injuries are potentially fatal. The people cry sorrowfully for their wounded knight and the king laments his wounded nephew, "Far well...my gladnes and my delyt,/ Apone knyghted far well myne appetite,/ Fare well of manhed al the gret curage,/ Yow flour of armys and of vassalage,/ Gif yow be lost" [Farewell my gladness and my delight, for upon your knighthood farewell my inclination, farewell manliness and great courage, you flower of prowess and vassalage, if you are lost] (2721-2725).¹³⁷ Upon hearing news of Gawain's seemingly impending death, Lancelot also laments his potential loss:

And of Sir Gawan, wich that shuld be lost?
 If that be swth, adew the flour of armys!
 Now nevermore recoveryt be the harmys.
 In hyme was manhed, curtesy, and trouth,
 Besy travel in knichthed, ay but sleith,
 Humilyte, gentrice, and cwrag.
 In hyme thar was no maner of outrage.
 Allace, knyght, allace! What shal you say?
 Yow may complen, yow may bewail the day
 As of his deith, and gladschip aucht to ses,
 Baith menstrasy and festing at the des;
 For of this lond he was the holl comfort
 In tyme of ned al knyghted to support. (2752-2764)

[And of Sir Gawain, who might be lost? If that be so, adieu to the flower of chivalry! Now nevermore harm will be rectified. In him was manhood, courtesy and faithfulness, [he made] diligent effort in knightly deeds, always without sloth, [but with] humility, gentility and courage. In him there was no manner of offence. Alas, knight, alas! What shall you say? You may complain, you may bewail the day as [the day of] his death - joy, both minstrelsy and feasting at the dais ought to cease; For in this land he was the entire comfort [and] support to all knights in need].

¹³⁷ This speech closely echoes Arthur's eulogy over Gawain's body in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

The space given here to lamentations for Gawain is extremely telling in a text mainly focused on kingship and, to a lesser extent, on Lancelot's forbidden love.¹³⁸ In addition, these effusive eulogies seem somewhat out of place in light of the fact that Gawain survives his injuries from both battles. Unlike the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, where Gawain's death marks the loss of Arthur's hope and the acknowledgment of Mordred's regret, *Lancelot of the Laik* is not a text centered on the final ruin of Arthur's kingdom. Rather, the focus given to Gawain is a sign of his popularity as a literary figure – for surely an audience predisposed toward this knight would feel sorrow and anticipation at the possibility of his death. The lamentations also mark Gawain's importance within the narrative frame, as news of his potential demise spreads quickly through Arthur's court and beyond. The people mourn for him. Both the King and the Queen mourn for him. And, most importantly for this text, Lancelot mourns signalling the widespread affection for Gawain.

Additionally, the potential loss of Gawain speaks to his larger role in these distinctly Scottish romances. In both texts, and indeed in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Gawain is a figure always potentially at risk of dying in battle. In *Lancelot of the Laik*, he is grievously wounded twice and in *Golagros*, Spynagros laments the likelihood of his death. These moments inspire great mourning and melancholy from Arthur and the court. As I have discussed previously, Gawain provides for his audience a symbol of potential ideal knighthood and, in the Scottish texts, a symbol of ideal kingship. As the man who *could* be king, who is both worthy and honourable

¹³⁸Lancelot also eulogizes Gawain in the Prose *Lancelot*, but because the tone of *Lancelot of the Laik* is vastly different from its source, his mourning must be considered in an alternative context. The focus on courtly love in the French text makes Lancelot's sorrow less about Gawain's potential death, although he is saddened by this, and more about his frustration over his imprisonment. While he also notes his frustration in *Lancelot of the Laik*, the eulogy has been slightly expanded and is more focused on Gawain's greatness.

enough to be king, the subsequent potential for his loss is devastating. Gawain represents a new hope, a possibility of a different future than the terrible fate prefigured in Arthur's prophetic dreams. Gawain's death – or close brushes with death – would mark an end to that hope and a loss of an imagined golden age. Both Lancelot and Arthur in *Lancelot of the Laik*, upon hearing of Gawain's grave condition, announce that his death would mark an ending. Gawain, that example of good counsel and chivalry, holds the key to victory for Arthur and salvation for the kingdom. Despite similar content in the French sources, *Lancelot of the Laik* must be read as a text written for a Scottish audience. For late medieval Scottish readers, who likely recalled the sudden death of James II and the more recent controversial death of James III, this sense of melancholy and loss at the potential death of a chivalrous leader would be keenly felt.

Gawain's injuries also serve a larger narrative purpose. By removing him from the battlefield, the poet is able to shift Gawain's role from military strategist to political counsellor. Additionally, and more revealing of the author and audience's favourability towards Gawain, removing Gawain from battle allows him to maintain his knightly prowess once Lancelot arrives to aid Arthur and his men. As Shichtman notes, "Since Gawain and Lancelot rarely share the same scene – one is generally indisposed while the other is fighting – the issue of comparison never develops. In fact, because they are both such fine knights, Gawain and Lancelot complement one another" ("Sir Gawain" 243). Furthermore,

In the Prose *Lancelot*, Gawain is denigrated because his recklessness in these battles results in personal injuries. In the Scots romance, however, the knight is admired for his rashness, both by Arthur, who refers to him as the flower of arms and vassalage, and by Lancelot, who laments not being with his friend at the time of his injuries. ("Sir Gawain" 243)

The friendship between Lancelot and Gawain is a marked shift from the French source, where Lancelot constantly outshines Gawain. There, Arthur's obsession with the Red Knight highlights the king's overwhelming favourability towards Lancelot. He outwardly states that the Red Knight is the best knight in all the land, thus tarnishing Gawain's reputation. In the French narrative, following the wise man's visit with Arthur, Gawain recovers from his wounds and goes to speak with the king. Arthur's reaction to his nephew is telling. He says,

Gawain, Gawain, you've disturbed me from the most courtly thoughts I ever had, and I shouldn't be blamed, for I was thinking of the best of all knights, the one who carried the day in the battle between Galehaut and me, of whom Galehaut has boasted that he will have him in his household. There was a time when, if the knights of my household and my companions knew of something I desired, they sought it for me, no matter in what strange land. And it used to be said that all earthy prowess was at my court, but I say that now it's not, since the world's best knight is absent from it. (242)¹³⁹

When Lancelot is present in the Prose *Lancelot*, Gawain cannot achieve equal status as a knight. Here in the Scottish romance, both knights are given the opportunity to exhibit their great skill. Their achievements are never compared, rather they celebrate each other's victories and show each other courteous respect and fellowship.¹⁴⁰ This also speaks to national associations with specific knights and how romance negotiates these potential issues. As a French knight, Lancelot is shown respect in the Scots romance, but he is not the central figure. Gawain, an English knight with familial ties to Scotland, is acknowledged and appreciated for his chivalric deeds, even as the poet rarely strays from his French source.

¹³⁹All translations are by Samuel N. Rosenberg from *Lancelot-Grail: Part I*. Ed. Norris J. Lacy.

¹⁴⁰ Later in the Prose *Lancelot*, Lancelot decides to side with Galehaut, which causes Gawain to faint and Arthur to weep. Gawain reproaches Arthur, blaming him for Lancelot's decision, and furiously arguing that the wise man had been correct in his counsel. This episode does not survive in *Lancelot of the Laik*, but it highlights the French Arthur's lack of redemption and inability to gain the loyalty of his men. Even Gawain finds the king troublesome.

Gawain's injuries force a reinterpretation of his role as Arthur's counsellor. Before the battle, he served as a military strategist, but after his wounds force him to abandon the fight, he switches his attention from warfare to courtly politics, adopting the role so commonly attributed to him in the northern romances and exemplifying his ease with this transition. Gawain spends much of the second battle watching the impending fight and it is through his gaze that the poem's audience follows the action. Gawain becomes the interpreter, not only for Arthur, but also for the reader. Indeed, "...his couche and gart be had/ Before o wyndew thore, as he mycht se/ The knycht, the ost, and al the assemble" [he caused his bed to be placed before a window so that he might see the knight, the host and all the assembly] (2834-2836).

In order to defeat Galiot, Arthur and his men need Lancelot's aid. It is Gawain who first recognizes the Red Knight on the battlefield as the same man from the earlier exchange with Galiot. Lancelot appears here in red armour, gazing wistfully at the queen's pavilion. Gawain alone organizes a meeting between the disguised Lancelot and Arthur's representatives. He sends his own squire with a host of ladies to greet the Red Knight. Lancelot's response to their request for aid is hesitant, as he mourns the fact that the queen has not come in person to speak with him, "Bot of Sir Gawan, glaid in his entente,/ He askit quhar he was and of his fair" [But of Sir Gawain, [he was] glad in his spirit [to] ask about his [Gawain's] whereabouts and condition] (2946-2947). Lancelot's only concern beyond his all-consuming love for Guinevere is Gawain's health. Out of respect for the king's nephew, Lancelot accepts a spear from the squire and goes to fight, all under the watchful eye of Gawain. Once the mêlée is complete, Lancelot returns to his post, watching the queen's pavilion and Gawain steps in to speak with Guinevere. He tells

the queen that she has slighted Lancelot because of her absence and instructs her to speak with him. He says,

Tharfor my consell is, yhow to devyss
 And ek yhowreself in yhowr trespass accus
 And ask hyme mercy and yhour gilt excuss.
 For well it oucht o prince or o king
 Til honore and til cheriss in al thing
 O worthi man that is in knyghted previt. (2992-2997)

[Therefore my counsel is [that] you should declare and tell of your fault and ask him mercy and to excuse your guilt. For it well befits a prince or a king to honour and to cherish in all this a worthy man that is proven in knighthood].

Gawain's words echo Amytans' earlier advice to Arthur, but also show that Gawain has replaced Amytans as counsellor to the king and queen. Gawain explains,

If that yhone knyght this day will persyvere
 With his manhed for helping of the King,
 We sal have causs to dred into no thing.
 Our folk of hyme that sal sich comfort tak
 And so adred thar ennemys sal mak
 That sur I am, onys or the nyght,
 Of forss yhone folk sal tak one them the flycht. (3008-3014)

[If that knight will persevere this day, with his courage to help the king, we shall have no cause to dread anything. Our people will take much comfort from him and our enemies will be so afraid that I am sure that before the night, those folk will flee].

Gawain's sole focus is the protection of Arthur's kingdom. His loyalty and his wisdom are on full display here as he openly chastises the queen for her behaviour¹⁴¹ and carefully explains why she should follow his advice. Of course, the great irony of Gawain's efforts here is that by bringing the queen to Lancelot, he accelerates the eventual destruction of Arthur's kingdom.¹⁴² Yet, this inevitable downfall fails to overshadow the remarkable importance of Gawain in this Scottish romance. While

¹⁴¹ In the French source, Galehaut plays this role, arranging a meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere. Because *Lancelot of the Laik* is incomplete, it is impossible to state whether the Scottish poet intended to include this in the narrative.

¹⁴² Much like he chastises Arthur in the French source for losing the Red Knight to Galehaut.

Arthur must reform his ways and learn the ideals of good kingship, Gawain seemingly embodies all of Amytans' earlier advice. He alone arranges the negotiation between the ladies and Lancelot, ensuring success for Arthur against the superior Galiot.

The poem is, of course, incomplete and it is impossible to say with certainty where the poet would have chosen to conclude his romance. The poem ends on a note of foreboding with Gawain warning Arthur that despite their temporary victory, Galiot will likely strike again. This is not to say that Gawain's behaviour throughout the narrative is completely unproblematic. Despite his immense loyalty to Arthur and his tireless efforts to defend king and kingdom, Gawain's decision in Book Two to seek the mysterious Red Knight leaves Arthur vexed. After the long advice section, Gawain decides to gather Arthur's knights and leave on a quest to find the Red Knight, to which Arthur responds, "Sair Gawan, nece, why dois yow so?/ Knowis yow ocht I myne household suld encess/ In knyghted and in honore and largess?/ And now youw thinkith mak me dissolat" [Sir Gawain, nephew, why do you do this? Do you know of anything that could increase the chivalry, honour and generosity of my household? And now you intend to deprive me [of my knights]] (2200-2203). Later, Arthur reiterates his argument against Gawain's quest: "Nece, yow haith al foly urought/ And willfulness that haith noch in this thought/ The day of batell of Galot and me" [Nephew, you have brought folly and wilfulness that you have not thought of the battle between me and Galiot] (2245-2247). Arthur's repeated use of the term "nece" emphasizes the kinship bond and his grave concern over Gawain's departure highlights the importance of Gawain to the politics of the court. Yet Gawain's rashness, or his seeming thoughtlessness, only reveal the extent of his

wisdom. He knows that in order to defeat Galiot, Arthur *needs* the Red Knight, which leads to Gawain's ill-timed quest. All that he does, he does for the good of Arthur and the kingdom.¹⁴³

The Gawain of *Lancelot of the Laik* and *Golagros* is overwhelmingly loyal, courageous, and wise. He provides important counsel to the king, represents Arthur in battle valiantly, and shows patience, mercy, and the political shrewdness so commonly associated with Gawain in the northern romances. His role as an English knight of Arthur's court and the son of a Scottish lord allows the Scottish romance writers literary freedom to explore the Arthurian mythos in a positive and productive light. Indeed, his literary popularity in the north and in Scotland may reveal the answer to why the chroniclers left Gawain out of their narratives.

Ultimately, the study of Arthur and Gawain in both the Scottish chronicle tradition and the Scottish romances is a question of genre. The chronicles present history, a teleological account, however fanciful, of how a nation has grown and developed. Romances, however, allow writers the opportunity to explore both an idealized past and a potentially glorious future. The landscape of romance is filled with idyllic portraits of kingship and knighthood, and it is here, as a symbol of Arthur's greatest knight and a promise of future glory, that Gawain firmly belongs. The chronicles choose Mordred as their crucial figure, as his dynastic claim to the throne is stronger, but in the literary context, Mordred is too closely associated with incest and evil to be a central figure of the narrative. The chronicles are concerned with dynasties, succession, and the realm. Tracing Mordred and his deeds does not

¹⁴³ Arthur's reaction to Gawain's quest is similar to his behaviour in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* during the grail quest episode. Gawain's decision to seek the Grail is met with mourning from Arthur, who knows that this quest will end the fellowship of the Round Table. Gawain's rashness (his habit of leaving on quests) is, at times, a negative aspect of his character.

matter for chroniclers, despite minor efforts to re-write Mordred's incestuous beginnings. Gawain's literary popularity and prominence in the region, however, make him the more suitable heir apparent for the Arthurian legend in Scotland. Gawain represents a new age. He is a man who inherently understands the importance of counsel and justice. He is a man who could usher in a golden age, a figure of hope, but also, paradoxically, of despair, for the potential for his loss permeates both texts.

As both romances were produced in the late reign of James III or early in the reign of James IV, these ideas of good kingship and governance reflect issues of particular concern to that moment. Arthur seems a figure of the past, prone to error and sin. While he is given moments of redemption, it is Gawain who ultimately represents all the potential of a good king. Gawain thus symbolizes a figure of change, reflective, perhaps, of the young James IV or the idea of such a king, a man inspired by chivalric tales and romance literature, who in the years following the death of his unpopular father, became a figure of hope and possibility for the future of the Scottish nation.¹⁴⁴ In a Scottish political culture inherently coloured by the

¹⁴⁴ Gawain's connection to James IV is made even more compelling by Katie Stevenson's recent article concerning James IV and chivalric language. After the death of Arthur Tudor in 1502 and the marriage of James to Margaret Tudor in 1503, the king became increasingly forward in his displays of appropriation of English symbols of chivalry (Stevenson "British" 6). This is clearly seen in the birth of his son, Arthur Stewart (b. 1509), whose name has often been linked to the deceased Arthur Tudor. Yet, as Stevenson argues, "Arthur was not a name used by the Scottish royal family, nor was it common among the children of the Scottish nobility. [...] the Stewarts can hardly have been ignorant of the cultural and political significance attached to this act of naming. In Scotland King Arthur was understood in direct relation to issues of kingship and British sovereignty. To the Scots Arthur was both the great king of a glistening chivalric court and the heroic conqueror who had dominion over both England and Scotland. Arthur was thus a British name that was chosen deliberately by the Stewarts to invoke the image of Arthur as the historical king of a unified Britain, and to remind Henry VIII that a Stewart was next in line to the English throne" ("British" 6-7). The poet of *Golagros* negotiated this potentially difficult aspect of Tudor/Stewart relations by making Gawain, himself a symbol of potential British unity, the central figure of his poem. The threat of British unity under an English king is neutralized by Gawain, whose Scottish parentage and English loyalties make him an irresistible figure of acceptable political unity. And, as both Henry VIII and the "historical" King

recent death of kings, however, the sense of Gawain as a potential leader is always, strikingly, tempered by the possibility of his early death. The hope he seems to offer to Arthur's regime is always already nostalgic. For Scottish readers of the romances, the potential loss of Gawain is firmly situated in the historical loss of Scotland's kings. Indeed, the threat of Gawain's death that permeates Scottish Arthurian romance was to be made manifest in James IV, who died heroically, but disastrously on 9 September 1513 in the Battle of Flodden. The anxiety surrounding Gawain's possible death heavily influences his symbolic resonance. He is used as a tool to depict good kingship and chivalric ideals, yet these ideals are overshadowed by the nostalgia surrounding his deeds and the eventual collapse of Arthur's kingdom. While Arthur dreams of destruction and decay, Gawain stands as the embodiment of hope and the opportunity to change the apocalyptic Arthurian future, a hope faded by the nostalgic awareness of his fragile existence and the inevitable cost of his potential loss.

Throughout this chapter, I have suggested various ways that romance supports and evolves Gawain's characterization and symbolism in the Scottish material. To return to Frye's definitions of "the mythical" and "the fabulous," Gawain can occupy both of these spaces, but it is only within the ever-changing structure of romance that he truly excels. As we have seen previously, the northern romances establish a specific set of characterizations in an attempt to reclaim Gawain from less complimentary French sources. The legacy of Gawain in the French romance tradition, however, is ever present: even when English and Scottish writers attempt to adapt their sources, the influence of the French texts often serves as a

Arthur had no heir at the time of the poem's composition, Gawain also steps into James IV's enviable position as heir apparent to two great and warring kingdoms.

reminder of how and why these changes have been made. In the next chapter, I will continue to examine how romance influences Gawain and how the dialogue between the French characterization of Gawain and the Middle English/Scots variation converge in what is arguably the most famous of the Gawain-related romances in Middle English, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Chapter IV
“I am þe wakkest, I wot”:
Reputation and Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

As I have discussed in chapters two and three, the Gawain of the northern and Scottish romances is portrayed in a very specific manner, unique to the geographical setting of the poems' composition. Repeatedly, Gawain is seen as Arthur's greatest knight, his most skilled warrior, a shrewd politician, and a wise counsellor. These texts often borrow significantly from their French sources, in which *fin amour* features heavily, yet there is a distinct lack of attention to Gawain as a courtly lover.¹⁴⁵ While the French depictions of Gawain characterize him as an exemplar of chivalry, he is also known for his inappropriate and sometimes problematic relationships with women. In comparison to Lancelot, who for the French poets is Arthur's greatest knight, Gawain is seen as a less successful figure, prone to sin and discourtesy, especially in the Prose *Lancelot*. These aspects of his characterization are removed by northern and Scottish writers in order to focus on his more positive attributes and to celebrate him as a chivalric ideal.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, written in the west-midlands by an anonymous author¹⁴⁶ provides another variation of Gawain's characterization, one that combines elements of the French, English, and Scottish versions, but with distinctive features of its own. At its core, it is a poem about reputation and, more specifically, identity. Throughout the text, the reputation of characters, places, even inanimate objects are questioned, studied, and tested. As the central figure of the piece, it is Gawain whose reputation is most frequently and searchingly analyzed and

¹⁴⁵ As we have seen in chapter three, the French romances showed a greater interest in matters of courtly love than their English and Scottish counterparts. Additionally, Gawain does not feature very positively in the French romances in terms of *fin amour*. Cf. chapter one, page four.

¹⁴⁶ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* survives in a single manuscript, BL Cotton Nero A.x.

discussed, both by figures within the narrative frame and by the *Gawain*-poet himself. This chapter will examine the poet's portrayal of Gawain as it relates to his varied reputations: the reputable Gawain of the north and the slightly tarnished paramour found in the French sources. In focusing on Gawain and his deeds, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ultimately challenges the perception of Gawain created by the northern romances. Here, Gawain becomes an amalgamation of his various literary appearances, making the poem an important element in any understanding of Gawain's varied characterizations in Middle English literature. Unlike the northern romances where Gawain is represented as a master of diplomacy, martial skill, and courtesy, the *Gawain*-poet examines each of these aspects of his character and expands on them, incorporating and interrogating the typical romance aspects of the knight alongside new features adapted and reinterpreted from French Arthurian texts. *Sir Gawain* thus offers a detailed vision of Gawain as more than a chivalric archetype and it is this version of the knight that would eventually inform the work of later Arthurian poets, especially Sir Thomas Malory.

Christmas Games

In the final Fitt of the poem, the transformed Bertilak de Hautdesert tells Gawain that one of the reasons for the Green Knight's visit to Camelot was, "For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were/þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table"¹⁴⁷ [To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth of the great reputation attached to the Round Table] (2456-2457).¹⁴⁸ The question of the Round Table's

¹⁴⁷ All quotations are from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron.

¹⁴⁸ All translations by James Winny. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2006).

“surquidré,” defined by the Middle English Dictionary as “Arrogance, presumption, [or] pride” provides an integral theme for the narrative, permeating every aspect of the plot from the poem’s opening lines concerning the fall of Troy, to Gawain’s hasty return to Camelot in Fitt IV. The *Gawain*-poet fills his text with references to Camelot’s pride or, more accurately, Camelot’s proud reputation. As the definition of ‘surquidré’ suggests, there is a delicate line between positive and negative expressions of proud behaviour. In a courtly setting, arrogance is a hugely problematic trait and such behaviour could possibly lead to sin and a loss of courtesy. The Green Knight’s testing of Camelot’s reputation, first by confronting Arthur and the court collectively, and then by testing Gawain alone, exposes the Arthurian world within *Sir Gawain* as an environment fraught with danger and the potential for self-destruction. For, despite the wondrous trappings of Arthur’s court and the bravery of Gawain on his quest, the threat of failure haunts much of the narrative.

The poem begins with a reference to “þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt” [The man who had plotted the treacherous scheme there] (3), which serves as a reminder of the fall of a once great civilization. And this greatness is juxtaposed with Arthur’s glittering court at Christmas in a way that suggests a thematic link between the two. The poet is very specific in his description of Arthur and the celebration at court. The king surrounds himself with “þe most kyd knyȝtez vnder Krystes Seluen/ And þe louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden” [The most famous warriors in Christendom, and the loveliest ladies who ever drew breath] (51-52). Arthur is upheld as the “comlokest kyng,” and the people of his court are celebrated as, “fayre folk in her first age” (54). James Winny defines “first age” as “the flower

of youth,” which implies that “first age” refers directly to the people populating Camelot. While this is likely true, “first age” seems also to connote that the court itself, and Arthur’s reign, is in its first age, its earliest beginnings. While Arthur has already gained a reputation for greatness, the poet repeatedly emphasizes that the setting for this tale is in the early days of his rule, a kingdom free from the sinful tragedy that would later cause its downfall. Arthur is an untested king, for, although he may have been tried in battle (as the poet suggests in his overview of Arthur’s historical claim to the throne), it is unclear whether he has yet learned diplomacy or the kinds of statesmanship that come with maturity. Here, in his “first age,” he is very young and may lack the necessary skills of a great king.

H. Bergner notes that Arthur’s Christmas celebration is not a solemn religious service, but rather, “its feeling of eternal well-being derives from its joy, youth and beauty, its opulent, extravagant splendor, its extrovert activism and its customary festivity” (407). Indeed, the *Gawain*-poet’s description of Arthur reveals an interesting portrait of a very different king to the experienced, but temperamental, ruler found in the northern *Gawain* romances. Arthur’s exuberance at the feast is carefully detailed:

Bot Arthure wolde not ete till al were serued;
 He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered.
 His lif liked him lyzt; he louied þe lasse
 Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte,
 So bisied him his 3onge blod and his brayn wylde. (85-89)

[But Arthur would not eat until everyone was served, he was so lively in his youth, and a little boyish. He hankered after an active life, and cared very little to spend time either lying or sitting, his young blood and restless mind stirred him so much.]

Initially, Arthur’s youthful demeanour seems a positive quality for a king. He is energetic and joyful, delighting in his court and the potential for entertainment before

the feast. Yet this description also reveals some worrying attributes, as a “childgered” king may not behave in the manner most suitable to a monarch. This youthful king’s ability to defend his court is quickly tested by the arrival of the Green Knight. As the narrative continues, it quickly becomes evident that Arthur’s youth may work against him. He is also revealed to be rash and ill tempered, despite his reputation for greatness.

The arrival of the Green Knight marks the first opportunity to test Arthur’s kingship. Despite the Knight’s alarming appearance, Arthur initially behaves courteously towards him. While the court openly stares at the viridian stranger, Arthur politely invites him to stay for the feast:

Wyȝe, welcum iwys to þis place.
 Þe hede of þis ostel, Arthour I hat.
 Liȝt luflych adoun the lenge, I þe praye,
 And quatso þy wylle is we schal wyt after. (252-255)

[Sir, welcome indeed to this place; I am master of this house, my name is Arthur. Be pleased to dismount and spend some time here, I beg, and what you have come for we shall learn later.]

This first exchange is a study in careful courtesy and polite words, behaviour more commonly associated with Gawain than with Arthur, as I have discussed in previous chapters. But Arthur acts admirably in these scenes, meeting an unknown and potentially dangerous guest with patience and caution. Jonathan Nicholls writes that, “courtesy is due to and from a knight, and although the Green Knight’s appearance is shocking, and subsequent events prove that he is supernatural, much of the dramatic tension in this scene is generated by expectations of courteous behaviour being disregarded...” (Nicholls 117-118). The Green Knight turns down Arthur’s request, immediately turning to his purpose at court. His “refusal to dismount is another indication of this disruptive force” (Nicholls 119) and he proves to be a formidable

figure, described as “On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe” [In his stature the very tallest on earth] (137) and “Half-etayn” [half a giant]. On horseback, the Green Knight would loom over Arthur and his court and his discourteous answer to Arthur’s invitation could be interpreted as a sign of hostility, despite his assurances “Þat I passe as in pes and no plyzt seche” [That I approach you in peace, seeking no battle] (266).

When the Green Knight explains that he wishes to partake in a game with Arthur, the king continues his reserved politeness and assures the visitor that “Here faylez þou not to fyzt” [You will not lack a fight] (278). What proceeds is a calculated verbal attack by the Green Knight aimed at the very heart of Arthur’s kingdom. He claims that his lack of interest in battle is due to the immaturity of Arthur’s knights, whom he calls “berdlez chylder” [beardless children].¹⁴⁹ This dismissive attitude only heightens the tension in Arthur’s hall, as the Knight presents the rules for his beheading game. His offer is met with fearful silence: “If he hem stowned vpon first, stiller were þanne/ Alle þe heredmen in halle, þe hyz and þe loze” [If he petrified them at first, even stiller were they then, all the courtiers in that place, the great and the small] (301-302). The Knight provocatively interprets this hesitancy as cowardice, which leads to more disrespectful words and a marked change in Arthur’s behaviour.

The Knight turns to mocking the court when they fail to bring forward a worthy opponent to take up the beheading offer. He bellows,

‘What, is þis Arþures hous ...
 Þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?
 Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
 Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes?’

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Galiot’s decision to retreat based on Arthur’s poor military capabilities in *Lancelot of the Laik*.

Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
 Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyzes speche,
 For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!' (309-315)

[What, is this Arthur's house...that everyone talks of in so many kingdoms? Where are now your arrogance and your victories, your fierceness and wrath and your great speeches? Now the revelry and repute of the Round Table are overthrown with a word from one man's mouth, for you all cower in fear before a blow has been struck!]

This speech provides a detailed account of the Round Table's international reputation; it is known for its pride and its victories, implying that Arthur has previously been successful in his conquests. Additionally, Arthur and his knights are famous for their "grete wordes," indicating a specific talent for courteous speech and diplomacy. The Knight's first question, "is þis Arþures hous[?]" is integral to the remainder of the poem, as it marks the first time the identity of Arthur and his knights is directly challenged. Later, Gawain will face a similar inquiry at Hautdesert, but these pointed questions serve as a reminder of the intertextual manipulation occurring in the narrative. The poet recalls previous incarnations of Arthur and his deeds, thereby toying with audience expectation. By questioning whether he is, indeed, facing Arthur's court, the Green Knight reiterates the fame of Arthur *and* forces the question: which literary version of Arthur is present in this particular text - the heroic, noble king or the rash, imperialistic leader found in many of the northern romances? The Knight reads the court's silence as cowardice and, in doing so, attacks Arthur's most important asset: the reputation of the Round Table. The mocking laughter that follows enrages Arthur and leads to a potentially disastrous confrontation.

The offence that Arthur takes at this behaviour is made clear as, "þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face/And lere" [The blood rushed into his fair face

and cheek for shame] (318) and he “wex as wroth as wynde” [grew angry as the wind] (319). It may be true that Arthur’s reaction is not entirely without merit, as the Knight’s task, a game of exchange resulting in two decapitations, does not seem plausible and heightens the sense that something about the green guest is not quite right.¹⁵⁰ As Arthur argues, “þyn asking is nys,/And as þou foly hatz fayst, fynde þe behoues” [What you demand is absurd. And, since you have asked for folly, that [is what] you deserve] (322-323). Not only is the Knight’s request inappropriate, he has also insulted the king and his court. Arthur’s decision to pick up the axe, however, is reckless. His death would leave the kingdom in chaos, but he reacts purely on emotion, lifting the axe he “sturnely sturez hit aboute, þat stryke wyth his þoʒt” [grimly swings it about, as preparing to strike] (331). As Arthur holds the axe, the poet masterfully takes the opportunity to remind his audience again of the Knight’s physical size and strength:

Þe stif mon hym bifore stod vpon hyʒt,
 Herre þen ani in þe hous by þe hede and more,
 Wyth sturne schere þer he stod he stroked his berde
 And wyth a countenanunce dryʒe he droʒ down his cote,
 No more mate ne dismayd for hys mayn dintez
 Þen any burne vpon bench hade broʒt hym to drynk
 Of wyne. (332-337)

[Towering before him stood the bold man, taller than anyone in the court by more than a head. Standing there grim-faced he stroked his beard, and with an unmoved expression then pulled down his coat, no more daunted or dismayed by those powerful strokes than if any knight in the hall had brought him a measure of wine]

Additionally he is impressively calm in the face of Arthur’s strong axe swings, showing little reaction to the king’s strength. This is in stark contrast to Arthur who stands red-faced and agitated. He is outmatched, his practice swings only emphasizing the error of his decision to lift the axe. His actions are revealing of

¹⁵⁰ The court has yet to discover his supernatural abilities.

which Arthur is present in the text. He shares much in common with the northern depictions, calling to mind the impetuous, ambitious imperialist of *Golagros* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. This revelation would be in keeping with the *Gawain*-poet's depiction of Gawain at court. Both the king and his nephew are, at this early point, characterized in a similar manner to the northern poetry that I have previously discussed. By accepting the Knight's challenge, the king risks his own death, and it is precisely at this moment, when the realm is on the precipice of potential collapse, that Gawain steps into the narrative and prevents Arthur from accepting the challenge.

The Knight's Speech

Gawain's speech is integral to the understanding of his character for the remainder of the poem. Here, in front of his king and a dangerous enemy, Gawain masterfully takes charge of the potentially disastrous situation, proving himself to be Arthur's most valuable knight in the process. Greg Walker writes,

as many critics have pointed out, what Gawain says proves him to be the consummate courtier and diplomat. What has perhaps not been so fully appreciated, however, is just how skillful is Gawain's response, and how well designed it is to counter the specific challenge to Arthur and his knights which the Green Knight has posed. It is important to note how the text forces us to appreciate both the full decorousness of his performance and the deliberate political strategy it enacts. For the manner in which Gawain employs his renowned courtesy here demonstrates how accurately he reads the threat posed to the Court by the intruder and his challenge. (Walker 116-117)

This "skillful response" should come as no surprise after examining Gawain in the context of the northern romances. Yet his speech in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is particularly impressive. A close reading of it will further emphasize Gawain's aptitude for courtesy, humility, and courtliness. He has an uncanny ability

to read the situation before him: from Arthur's rashness to the Knight's threat.¹⁵¹

This particular talent will be tested again at Hautdesert, but within the walls of Camelot, Gawain's diplomacy is unrivalled:

Wolde 3e, worpilych lorde...
 Bid me bo3e fro þis benche and stoned by yow þere,
 Pat I wythoute vylanye my3t voyde þis table,
 And þat my legge lady liked not ille,
 I wolde come to your counseyl bifore your cort ryche.
 For me þink hit not semly – as hit is soþ knawen –
 Per such an asking is heuened so hy3e in your sale,
 Þa3 3e 3ourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen,
 Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten
 Pat vnder heuen I hope non hazerer of wylle
 Ne better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered.
 I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of syt feeblest,
 And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe.
 Bot for as much as 3e ar myn em I am only to prayse;
 No bounté but your blod I in my bodé knowe.
 And syþen þis note is so nys þat no3t hit yow falls,
 And I hauve frayned hit at yow first, foldez hit to me.
 And if I carp not comlyly let alle þis cort rych
 Bout blame. (342-360)

[If you would, noble lord, bid me rise from my seat and stand at your side, if without discourtesy I might leave the table, and that my liege lady were not displeased, I would offer you counsel before your royal court. For it seems to me unfitting, if the truth be admitted, when so arrogant a request is put forward in hall, even if you are desirous, to undertake it yourself while so many brave men sit about you in their places who, I think, are unrivalled in temper of mind, and without equal as warriors on field of battle. I am the weakest of them, I know, and the dullest-minded, so my death would be least loss, if truth should be told. Only because you are my uncle am I to be praised, no virtue I know in myself but your blood. And since this affair is so foolish and unfitting for you, and I have asked you for it first, it should fall to me. And if my request is improper, let not this royal court bear the blame.]

The speech exhibits all the traits commonly associated with Gawain in the northern English and Scottish romances. He speaks carefully, choosing fair speech over reckless violence. His motives are clear and direct: he aims to preserve Arthur's reputation by any means necessary, even at the risk of personal harm. From the very

¹⁵¹ Interestingly, Arthur, by contrast, is often depicted as a man who cannot read or understand that which lies before him. Malory especially seems to delight in showing Arthur tricked by Merlin's disguises.

first line, Gawain is working to repair the damage caused by Arthur's temper. Lest his king embarrass himself, or worse, die at the hands of the Green Knight, Gawain's words re-focus the narrative and return power to the king. By saying "Bid me boȝe fro þis benche," Gawain is tacitly forcing Arthur to turn his attention from the axe in his hand to the request from his knight. As Walker explains,

This particular form of interjection has the effect of both refocusing the attention of the gathering – and the reader – upon Arthur, and of reminding everyone that this is indeed his court, his feast, his domestic space. Thus Gawain implicitly re-invests the king with a presence in the text, a presence that has hitherto been all but effaced by the studied indifference shown him by the Green Knight. He also seeks to restore the king's capacity to command rather than simply respond to events, offering him, without seeming to presume, the opportunity to exercise authority once more [...]. (117)

As we have seen, Gawain's gift with words is also the feature of numerous Gawain romances. His actions here not only return martial power to Arthur, but serve to redefine the court's reputation. The Knight's earlier question, "is þis Arþures hous [?]," is unequivocally answered by Gawain. It *is* Arthur's house, as long as Gawain is present to defend and represent it. A second question for the court is also answered in this speech, a question that will later be challenged at Hautdesert, pertaining to which version of Gawain is in play. The Gawain present in this moment is the popular figure of the northern romances. At least in this early scene at court, the poet clearly chooses the identity of his version of Gawain – an identity that he purposefully transforms over the course of the narrative.

The similarities between the northern depiction of Gawain and the *Gawain*-poet's Gawain continue throughout the speech. After asking Arthur's permission to rise, Gawain also includes the Queen in his request, exhibiting both courtesy to Guinevere, and also recalling their personal connection. This is reminiscent of

Gawain and Guinevere's experiences in *The Awntyrs*, where Gawain, not Lancelot, is very much the Queen's knight. In addition, Gawain is seated with her on the high dais,¹⁵² indicating both his high standing in Arthur's court and his close relationship to Guinevere. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Gawain is known to offer Arthur crucial counsel and he does so once again in this narrative, saying, "I wolde come to your counseyl bifore your cort ryche" (347). This particular counsel serves to highlight the Green Knight's discourtesy and Gawain's impeccable understanding of political exchange. According to Gawain, the Knight's request is "not semly." He also notes that "mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten" (351) whom "vnder heuen I hope non hazerer of wyll/Ne better bodyes on bent per baret is rered" (352), essentially telling the Knight that the men he deemed cowardly are actually the bravest knights in the world.

The first part of Gawain's speech serves to shift control of the situation back to Arthur and protect the reputation of the Round Table. The second part, however, is a fascinating insight into both Gawain's diplomacy and his understanding of his place in Arthur's court. It is a uniquely personal confession by Gawain, despite the likelihood that he is highly aware of *how* to sway Arthur and the court away from the Green Knight's axe through careful speech and personal pleas. Two events are occurring simultaneously: Gawain is putting on a very self-aware performance. But he is also exposing something potentially private: he feels that his reputation rests on his kinship with Arthur and nothing more. While these may seem like contradictory statements, the *Gawain*-poet is especially conscious of Gawain's multiple literary personas, which we will see later in the chapter. The self-aware, confident knight

¹⁵² I will discuss the seating arrangements in more detail shortly.

may exist alongside the youthful, inexperienced, nephew, as the presence of both “Gawain-types” are instrumental in swaying the king’s hand and allowing him to take on the Green Knight’s challenge.

While Gawain may be an especially talented wordsmith, he also believes that he has much to prove because, like his young king, he is untested and, therefore, unworthy of his reputation. There is both performance and truth here, which makes his subsequent quest just as much about proving Gawain’s reputation as defending the Round Table’s renown. His assertion that he is “þe wakkest” and the “feeblest,” “is wholly unconvincing [...] But, as with all courtly display, it is nonetheless impressive in its obvious artifice – indeed impressive because of its manifest untruth. His modest disclaimer serves to illustrate his worthiness...” (Walker 122-123). The notion that Gawain is “þe wakkest” also plays with the idea of Arthur’s court in its earliest period. If Gawain is young, perhaps he has yet to prove his full potential. While this idea is quickly proven false, it does highlight the text’s obsessive focus on reputation and identity, a focus that becomes especially apparent once Gawain leaves the court. While his claim is untrue, Gawain’s depicts himself as an unproven member of Arthur’s court, or a “green” knight, to excuse the pun.

As if to support these humble words, Gawain adds that he “lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe,” arguing that his death would have the least impact on the Round Table. In chapter three, I discussed the anxiety and melancholy surrounding Gawain’s potential for death in the Scottish romances, and the idea that his loss would be of little consequence here in the poem is surely absurd. The fact that he mentions this, however, provides yet another example of the Gawain romance

tradition worrying about the knight's mortality.¹⁵³ While the Green Knight's challenge is, at this moment, still a point of confusion and distrust for the court, Gawain states without reservation that he will certainly die if he engages with the axe-wielding stranger. For the first time in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the sense of melancholy and fear surrounding Gawain's loss is made apparent, a point I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Finally, Gawain finishes with what is perhaps the most impressive moment of his speech, as he appeals directly to Arthur as a nephew speaking to his uncle. He says, "Bot for as much as 3e ar myn em I am only to prayse;/No bounté but your blod I in my bodé knowe," indicating that he is only deemed worthy because of his bloodline. In her discussion of virtue in the poem, Alice F. Blackwell argues that "If kinship to Arthur is his only virtue, that virtue derives from some heritable quality. Further, in locating his own nobility in the blood he shares with Arthur and portraying both his excellence and his blood as contained in his body, Gawain somatizes his virtue" (83). While it is possible that Gawain is again using an exaggeration or even a falsehood to sway Arthur's opinion, the importance of kinship and bloodlines to both the poem as a whole and Gawain's characterization in particular cannot be ignored.

Gawain's kinship relations play an increasingly important role in Arthurian narratives of the late medieval period. He is often directly referred to as Arthur's nephew, and this bond eventually becomes an integral aspect of his character. In the Scottish romances, as we have seen, Gawain's connection to Scotland through his father Lot makes him a compelling figure of dual Scottish and English identities.

¹⁵³ This is, of course, different than the Scottish depiction, where the loss of Scotland's kings influences the reading of Gawain, but the threat of his death is always a cause for concern in the romances.

Later, in Malory, Arthur's reliance on Gawain for counsel, and Gawain's subsequent allegiance to his kinsmen, divides the court to devastating effect. Here in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet consciously infuses his text with references to Gawain's family. In his description of the high dais, the poet writes that Gawain sits beside the queen,

And Agrauayn a la Dure Mayn¹⁵⁴ on þat oþer syde sites –
 Boþe þe kynges sister-sunes and ful siker kniȝes;
 Bischoþ Bawdewyn¹⁵⁵ abof biginez þe table,
 And Ywan, Vryn son, ette with hymselfen” (110-113)

[And Agravaïn à la Dure Main¹⁵⁶ on the other side; both the king's nephews and outstanding knights. Bishop Baldwin heads the table in the highest seat, and Ywain, son of Uriens, dined as his partner].

This configuration confirms the importance of Arthur's family in his court structure. Aggravain is Gawain's brother, making them both Arthur's sister's sons – an important distinction.¹⁵⁷ Ywain is also an interesting inclusion, as his father Uriens is often listed as the husband of Morgan le Fay, making Ywain Arthur's nephew.¹⁵⁸ Morgan le Fay will play a crucial role later in the narrative and this early reference to her family further enforces the importance of Arthur's kinsmen in Camelot (and perhaps an early clue to her involvement). While Malory depicts these relationships as tumultuous and, at times, destructive, the *Gawain*-poet's use of familial ties creates a stronger connection between the two courts depicted in his text. Camelot is Arthur's house and Hautdesert is ambiguously Morgan le Fay's domain. Gawain, the nephew of both Arthur and Morgan, is tasked with negotiating two very different

¹⁵⁴ Aggravain, Gawain's brother, traditionally discovers the affair between Guinevere and Lancelot.

¹⁵⁵ Bishop Baldwin is a popular figure in northern Gawain romances. Cf. *The Avowing of Arthure* and *The Carle of Carlisle*.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew and Waldon define 'à la Dure Main' as 'of the hard hand' (211).

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Sister's Son in Early Irish Literature" for a detailed discussion of the significance on the sister's son as a medieval literary trope.

¹⁵⁸ Ywain is also the protagonist of the popular Middle English poem *Ywain and Gawain*, a translation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*.

courts and two very different members of his family. His success at Camelot, affirmed by his impressive speech, seems to indicate that Gawain is more than capable of protecting his uncle's reputation. His aunt, however, will prove a more challenging adversary.

The First Cut (Is the Deepest)

Following Gawain's speech, the courtiers gather and agree that Gawain should be allowed to take the Green Knight's challenge. Arthur abides by this counsel and tells Gawain to rise and "on kyrf sette" [strike one blow] (372). The Green Knight seems delighted with Gawain's offer to participate in the beheading game, saying, "Sir Gawan, so mot I þryue/ As I am ferly fayn/ Þis dint þat þou schal dryue" [Sir Gawain, as I live, I am extremely glad this blow is yours to give] (386-389). He is pleased because he has a worthy opponent, but also because Gawain's reputation precedes him. Despite Gawain's earlier speech, the Knight obviously recognizes that the man before him is an esteemed knight and a noble member of Arthur's family. What follows is the extraordinary beheading of the Green Knight, whose rolling head causes both horror and wonder for the witnesses at court.

The tone of the narrative shifts upon the Knight's departure, as, despite the potentially disturbing scene, the poet writes, "Þe kyng and Gawen þere/ At þat grene þay laze and grenne/ 3et breued watz hit ful bare/ A meruayl among þo menne" [Seeing that green man go, the king and Gawain grin; yet they both agreed they had a wonder seen] (461-466). It is a curious reaction because although the Knight certainly fulfilled Arthur's requirement for a Christmas wonder, his survival implies Gawain's imminent death. Indeed, Arthur's behaviour following the Knight's departure is a return to a more controlled, joyful monarch. The *Gawain*-poet writes

that “Þa 3 Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder,/ He let no semblaunt be sene...” [Although inwardly Arthur was deeply astonished, he let no sign of this appear] (467-468). If Arthur feels fear or distress, he keeps it to himself, although the text seems to indicate that all the king experiences is wonder and astonishment. He then turns to Guinevere, urging, “today demay yow neuer” [let nothing distress you today] (470) because “Wel bycommes such craft vpon Christmasse” [Such strange goings-on are fitting at Christmas] (471). The court returns to laughing, singing, and dancing. Arthur even tells Gawain to “heng vp þyn ax, þat hatz innogh hewen” [hang your axe up, for it has severed enough] (477). In an act reminiscent of *Beowulf*, where Grendel’s severed arm is hung in Heorot as a remembrance of Beowulf’s victory over his monstrous foe, Gawain hangs the Green Knight’s axe in the hall, “þer alle men for meruayl myzt on hit loke/ And bi trwe tytel þerof to telle þe wonder” [Where everyone might gaze on it as a wonder, and the living proof of this marvellous tale] (479-480). The king ignores the fact that Gawain is still sworn to fulfill his part of the bargain, making Arthur’s celebration “not semly.” He must leave Camelot and face the Knight, who has shown himself to be supernaturally capable of surviving a beheading. Gawain is unlikely to be so lucky. Yet Arthur treats the axe as a reminder of something marvellous, rather than an omen of Gawain’s deadly mission. The appropriation of a potentially negative object as something to celebrate will be seen again at the end of the poem when Gawain returns to court bearing the green girdle.

While Arthur and the court may be happy to continue their Christmas festival, the *Gawain*-poet is not so dismissive of the approaching threat to Gawain’s life. The final wheel of Fitt I ends on an ominous note, reminding the audience, and

Gawain, that this “wonder” is far from over. He writes, “Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan,/ For woþe þat þou ne wonde,/ Þis auenture for to frayn/ Þat þou hatz tan on honde” [Now take good care, Gawain, lest fear hold you back from leaving on the quest you have sworn to undertake] (487-490). This final statement echoes the Green Knight’s initial accusation of cowardice in Arthur’s hall. Gawain is told to be careful because he must not let the Christmas festivities or Arthur’s dismissal distract him from his final goal. Arthur has, once again, misinterpreted what he has seen with his own eyes. What he views as a Christmas wonder is really a yearlong quest that may end in Gawain’s death. The king’s inability to recognize or acknowledge this is an indication that the Green Knight’s test of the Round Table’s reputation is not without merit. It is no oversight that the *Gawain*-poet specifically warns Gawain to be cautious, rather than call for Arthur, the court, or even the poem’s audience to take heed. For Arthur, the marvel has ended and merry-making may continue. For Gawain, on the other hand, as the poet notes, the danger has just begun.

Simply the Best

Despite the poet’s warnings, Gawain avoids thinking about his task for nearly an entire year: “Til Mezelmas mone/ Watz cumen wyth wynter wage./ Þen þenkkez Gawan ful sone/ Of his anious uyage” [Until the Michaelmas moon brought hint of winter’s frost; and into Gawain’s mind come thoughts of his grim quest] (512-515). On All Saints’ Day, Arthur throws Gawain a large farewell feast, placing his departure on the first of November.¹⁵⁹ The mood of the court is particularly

¹⁵⁹ Michaelmas, 29 September and All Saints’ Day, 1 November, give the impression that Gawain is slowly working himself towards leaving for the Green Chapel. While the Green Knight granted him a full year to find the Chapel, it is unclear why Gawain did not depart earlier (Gawain does not know the location of this chapel, as made evident by his subsequent wanderings). By stretching Gawain’s time at Camelot to November, the *Gawain*-poet emphasizes Gawain’s hesitancy. His quest is

interesting as despite the “reuel and ryche” Round Table, “Knyȝtez ful cortays and comlych ladies/Al for luf of þat lede in longynge þay were” [The most courteous of knights and beautiful ladies grieved out of love for that noble man] (538-539).

“Longynge” can refer to “a yearning desire, wish” or “a sensual desire,” but it may also connote “sorrow, sadness, distress, anxiety.”¹⁶⁰ The knights and their ladies are grieving for Gawain because they know this quest will likely be his last.

As I discussed in chapter three, grieving and mourning for Gawain before a departure or leave-taking is a common feature of many Gawain romances. The Scottish romances are especially infused with melancholy for a potentially lost Gawain, perhaps, as we have seen, a feature that is born of the particularly Scottish experience of the frequent, premature death of kings and leaders. In *Sir Gawain*, the feast is haunted by melancholy because the courtiers try to hide their sorrow over Gawain’s imminent departure. They grieve, “But neuer þe lece ne þe later þay neurned bot merþe./ Mony joylez for þat jentyle japez þer maden” [But no less readily for that spoke as if unconcerned. Many troubled for that nobleman made joking remarks] (541-542). Once again, Arthur’s feast in the face of such a terrifying quest seems improper. When Gawain requests permission to leave the next day, the Round Table knights gather,¹⁶¹ offering Gawain advice and “þere watz much derue doel driuen in þe sale/ Þat so worthé as Wawan schulde wende on þat ernde/ To dryȝe a delful dynt and dele no more/Wyth bronde” [Much deep sorrowing was

dangerous and Gawain’s behavior indicates that he is concerned or reluctant to leave the safety of Arthur’s court.

¹⁶⁰ Definitions from the Middle English Dictionary, s.v. ‘longing’.

¹⁶¹ Lancelot is included in this list, which marks the small role he plays in this narrative. He is one of Arthur’s counsellors and offers advice to Gawain, but we are not privy to his words or his thoughts. While the *Gawain*-poet later mentions Guinevere as one of Morgan le Fay’s targets, Lancelot is never mentioned again. Guinevere has no dialogue in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the *Gawain*-poet includes hints that allude to her eventual affair and potentially dangerous presence in Arthur’s court.

heard in the hall that one as noble as Gawain should go on that quest, to stand a terrible blow, and never more brandish his sword] (558-561).

The gathering of Arthur and his knights provides insight into a very intimate group of courtiers lending the king counsel. The knights are Arthur's inner circle and his most trusted advisors, yet their loyalty and the exclusivity of the Round Table knights prove to be problematic.¹⁶² As Gawain leaves Camelot on his quest, the poet gives a detailed description of the court's reaction:

Al þat seþ þat semly syked in hert
 And sayde soþly al same segges til oþer,
 Carande for þat comly, 'Bi Kryst, hit is scape
 Þat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
 To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe.
 Warloker to haf wrozt had more wyt bene
 And haf dyzt zonder dere a duk to haue worþed.
 A lowlande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez,
 And so had better haf ben þen britned to nozt,
 Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.
 Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
 As knyzttez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez?'
 Wel much watz þe warme water þat waltered of yzen
 When þat semly syre sozt fro þo wonez
 Þat daye. (672-687)

[All who watched that fair knight leave sighed from the heart, and together whispered one to another, distressed for the handsome one, 'What a pity indeed that your life must be squandered, noble as you are! To find his equal on earth is not easy, in faith. To have acted more cautiously would have been much wiser, and have appointed that dear man to become a duke: to be a brilliant leader of men, as he is well suited, and would better have been so than battered to nothing, beheaded by an ogrish man out of excessive pride. Whoever knew a king to take such foolish advice as knights offer in arguments about Christmas games?' A great deal of warm water trickled from eyes when that elegant lord set out from the city that day].

¹⁶² In her book *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur*, Dorsey Armstrong recalls that in a marked change from his French source, Malory moves the establishment of Arthur's "Round Table *community*" (35, my emphasis) earlier in the narrative, making it one of the central concerns of Arthur's early reign. The Round Table is a chivalric order; an elite group that does not include all the knights present at Camelot. This division is accentuated by the *Gawain*-poet as the counsel provided by this chivalric order is unpopular amongst Arthur's courtiers and implies possible factions at court.

This secretive moment between Arthur's courtiers is revealing of both the court's view of Gawain and the inner machinations of Arthur's Camelot. What becomes quickly apparent is that Arthur's decision to let Gawain accept the Green Knight's challenge is viewed as foolish. Not only do the courtiers take issue with their king's choice, they also frown upon his counsellors, the Knights of the Round Table. The Green Knight's desire to test the pride of the Round Table no longer seems like a curious venture, but rather, a much-needed exercise for a court riddled with disapproval and distrust.

While the Round Table knights are closer to Arthur and act as his primary counsellors, their advice to let Gawain take leave is deemed unacceptable. Furthermore, Arthur is made to look like a rash, inexperienced leader, as he has let his greatest knight go to his death as part of a Christmas game. Their opinion of Gawain reveals that, despite his earlier assertion that he was the weakest and least noble of Arthur's knights, the court sees him as quite the opposite. The idea that Gawain should "haf dyzt zonder dere a duk to haue worped./A lowlande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez" speaks to his widespread reputation for fair speech and diplomacy. In *Sir Gawain*, Gawain is most famous for his counsel rather than his skill on the battlefield. The courtiers believe that he should have been made a duke and given a more substantial role in ruling the realm, and sending him off to die is viewed as a tragic end for such a talented politician. They weep as he departs, but their concerns are kept secret, suggesting that even in its 'first age,' Camelot was susceptible to faction and hidden dissention: a further indication of potential disaster for Arthur's court. With his king's reputation in danger and the court displeased with their monarch, Gawain rides away from Camelot in order to defend the renown of

the Round Table, a task that seems more and more necessary as the wondrous spectacle of Arthur's court quickly begins to fade alongside the shining reputation of the young king.

Into the Woods

Gawain's departure from Camelot offers the first glimpse of the knight on his own. At court, he defines himself by the relationships he shares with Arthur, the queen, and the Round Table knights. Before leaving court, the poet describes Gawain's shield in great detail, noting the pentangle design on the front and the image of Mary inside.¹⁶³ In addition to the shield, we are told that Gawain's horse, Gringolet is made ready for departure. While the shield is an important object infused with meaning and symbolism, the fact that the poet makes so much effort to describe it implies Gawain's importance and prestige. By also including the name of Gawain's horse, the poet confirms Gawain's stature as both a figure of import within the narrative *and* a popular character of Arthurian romance. Despite Gawain's popularity in the romance tradition, objects associated with him are rarely given names.¹⁶⁴ Here both his shield and his horse, two chivalric identifiers, are named or described in great detail. As he leaves the safety of Camelot, Gawain rides to almost certain death, armed with his pentangle shield and, more effectively, his great reputation. His identity is still closely tied to Camelot and the objects he carries with

¹⁶³ For a discussion of the pentangle shield's significance, Cf. Gerald Morgan, "The Significance of the Pentangle Symbolism in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'," John F. Kiteley, "'The Endless Knot': Magical Aspects of the Pentangle in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Eugenie R. Freed, "'Quy the pentangel apendes...': The Pentangle in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Catherine Batt, "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space."

¹⁶⁴ His sword is named in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, but not here in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Cf. chapter two. His horse is also named in the works of Chrétien de Troyes. According to Ackerman the horse is named "Gringalet" in *Merlin, A Prose Romance* and "Greselle" in the three manuscripts of "Awntyrs off Arthure" (MS Ireland, MS Lincoln Cathedral Library 91 [Thornton], MS Douce 324) (Ackerman 111).

him. He brings all the associations of the court into the forest, from his renowned reputation to his heraldic symbols. The woods are a place of transition, however, and it is here in the forest that the poet's study of Gawain and his personal reputation become the central concern of the narrative

We must also consider the forest setting within the context of romance and its common motifs. Corinne J. Saunders calls the forest "an archetypal romance landscape" where "the focus is not upon sodality but upon the knight's achievement of honour in isolation" ("The Forest" iv). By entering the forest, Gawain enters a motif of romance, a trope common to the genre and familiar to its audience. Yet this forest is also a creation of the *Gawain*-poet and, therefore, its symbolism is ambiguous, as are its potentially Otherworldly inhabitants.

Saunders explains that,

While the forest functions as a recurring literary topos with great symbolic power, it is also a 'real' landscape, linked to the geographic, economic and legal concepts of the forest in the Middle Ages. As a motif, then, the forest must be considered not only in terms of its literary history and symbolic function, but also in terms of its cultural development and the interplay of the real and the symbolic. ("The Forest" xi)

The "interplay of the real and the symbolic" becomes a point of confusion for Gawain and the poem's readers, as it seems that Arthur's knight has wandered into a layered landscape, where the 'real' forest is overwritten with preconceived perceptions of a 'Faery' forest. The ordered world of Camelot is quickly replaced by natural disorder. Increasingly, the memory of Arthur's court diminishes and is replaced by an unfamiliar landscape. Gawain is displaced here, an English outsider trying to navigate a treacherous country without any guide or knowledge of the region. But while he may be lost in these northern climes, the *Gawain*-poet ensures

his readers are familiar with Gawain's surroundings as he wanders north through Wales and into the Wilderness of Wirral.

The Wirral is the setting for Gawain's meeting with the court of Hautdesert and the Green Knight:

Geographically the Wirral is a relatively small area, a comparatively flat peninsula, twelve miles by seven miles, between the estuaries of the Mersey and the Dee. Up until the last part of the fourteenth century, it was one of three forests in Cheshire under forest law, i.e., not necessarily tree covered but an area reserved for the chase, with both animals and trees under the protection of the king. (Hill 67)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the only work of Arthurian literature to mention the Wirral as an important setting for adventure (Hill 67), unlike the northern romances set in Inglewood Forest or the French works that see knights on their quests in the forest of Brocéliande.¹⁶⁵ The decision to set the poem in the Wirral is, therefore, significant for our understanding of Gawain's experiences in the woods, at Hautdesert, and finally, the Green Chapel.

For the poet, Gawain wanders into a region filled with “bot lyte/ þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied” [There few people lived whom either God of good-hearted men could love] (702). Gillian Rudd explains,

By adding the detail that there are few to be found there who love either God or men with a good heart, the poet is merely confirming what we all know about wildernesses: they are inhabited by wild and lawless men with no respect for either God or good people. At the

¹⁶⁵ Morgan le Fay's involvement at Hautdesert creates a compelling question regarding the castle's true location. Although we are told that the castle appears while Gawain wanders in the Wirral, the description of a knight entering Morgan le Fay's territory has more in common with the French romances where the enchantress Morgan dwells in her *Val sans Retour* (also known as *Val des Faux Amants*). As Carolyne Larrington explains, “Morgan's most spectacular and provocative feat of magic is the *Val sans Retour* or *Val des Faux Amants* (the Valley of No Return or Valley of False Lovers), an enchanted valley from which no knight who has ever been unfaithful to his lady in any way, ‘even in desire alone’, can escape, a paradise that rapidly palls on its inhabitants. Here knights are punished for their infidelity; forced to remain in the company of their ladies, they are deprived of the opportunity of performing knightly deeds in an enchantment that lasts seventeen years” (“Enchantresses” 51-52).

same time, by implication in this line, the wilderness-dwellers are not loved by God or good men either. (Rudd 56)

Here we see the convergence of what Saunders calls the ‘real and the symbolic.’ The Wirral is a known geographical region inhabited by real people and affected by real societal and political concerns. According to Andrew and Waldron, the Wirral “was a notorious refuge for outlaws in the fourteenth century” (234) while Hill argues that, despite the presence of outlaws and marauders, the real issue in the Wirral was between local government and the monarchy. Accordingly, “...there is considerable evidence to show that the Wirral in particular and Chester in general, a county as civilized as most of the rest of England, was a setting for a power struggle between the local administrators and the royal family, particularly the Black Prince who used his power to milk the region for money under the guise of administrative justice” (Hill 68). The Wirral is a place where royal power is in conflict with local government, which echoes in Gawain’s difficulties while travelling. As a representative of the royal court, he is not necessarily a welcome presence in this space. Indeed, the poet tells us that the people Gawain meets in the Wirral are godless and he also encounters non-human creatures and some that are more, or less, than entirely human. Along the way, “mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndeþ” [so many wonders befell him in the hills] (718). He fights “wormez” [dragons], “wolues” [wolves], “wodwos” [wild men], “bullez” [bulls], “berez” [bears], “borez” [boars], and “etayneþ” [giants¹⁶⁶]. This is an understandably confusing space. While it is tempting to label the forest as an Otherworld setting, it would be an

¹⁶⁶ Winny defines “etayneþ” as ogres, despite earlier defining “etayn” as “giant,” in reference to the Green Knight’s stature. In the interest of continuity, I have chosen to define the term as “giants,” which provides further evidence for the Wirral’s Otherworldly inhabitants and implies that the Green Knight belongs in this space.

oversimplification of the landscape presented by the *Gawain*-poet. There are too many variables to consider when deciphering *where* or *what* Gawain must face.

The multiplicity of forest landscapes is summed up by Saunders as follows,

The historical forest, then, has several nuances. Most obviously, the term suggests the wild and wooded landscape of medieval Europe. While this landscape was clearly an unknown and threatening quantity, it also served an important economic and agrarian function and for this reason included clearings and habitations. Legally, the medieval forest came to represent the lands on which the king enjoyed the right of hunting. Such land might be scrub or wasteland, rather than densely tree-covered, and was governed by its own complex set of laws. These laws radiated outwards into other functions of the forest, as the forest became an important source of revenue for the king. Populated, valuable, regulated, the forest yet retained an idyllic quality as the king's hunting preserve. ("The Forest" 9)

These varied aspects are all present in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The forest is, indeed, 'wild and wooded,' filled with supernatural creatures and unknown dangers. Yet it is also an inhabited space, as despite the godless nature of the men Gawain meets, their presence proves that the forest is not empty or devoid of civilization. While these people may be a reference to the Wirral's reputation as a sanctuary for outlaws, they provide a link to the world outside the forest, regardless of their criminal history. Finally, the connection between medieval forest landscapes and hunting is obvious in the poem, as the majority of the narrative is occupied with Bertilak's hunt. The appearance of Hautdesert and the surrounding land are evocative of the king's hunting grounds, as Bertilak is free to hunt on the property. It would seem, then, that the forest of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* encapsulates all the features of a typical medieval forest: wilderness, inhabited space, and royal property.

The forests of Middle English romance, however, are a place where the border between 'this' world and the Otherworld are at their most delicate. It is, at times, impossible to tell where one land ends and the other begins. Gawain's journey

certainly leads him through familiar territory, but once he enters the Wirral, this familiarity is brought into question. Is he in the historical Wirral, a royal hunting forest and sanctuary for outlaws? Or is the Wirral now Faery?

There are numerous instances of knights wandering into forests throughout the long history of romance writing. The Middle English writers also employ this popular motif in their tales, relying on audience familiarity with the trope, but also using the forest as a place where anything can and will happen. The rigidity of the court and its customs falls away in romance forests. Saunders notes that, “Several themes recur with some frequency and emphasis in association with the forest, playing a central role in the thematic construction of these texts: rape, idyll, hunt, otherworld, quest, madness” (“The Forest” 132). These themes are included in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as the Wirral and Hautdesert provide space to explore the motif and play with its conventions. In two of the most well known Middle English romances, *Sir Orfeo* (early fourteenth century) and *Ywain and Gawain* (late fourteenth century), the forest becomes a crucial place of transition, and this transition is brought about by madness.

Orfeo’s journey into the forest is a result of the Faery King kidnapping his beloved wife. In his grief, Orfeo abandons his kingdom and lives in the woods. The poet provides an interesting comparison between Orfeo’s previous life of civilized comfort and his new sylvan dwelling:

Into the wilderness he geth.
 Nothing he fint that him is ays,
 Bot ever he liveth in gret malais.
 He that hadde y-werd the fowe and griis,
 And on bed the purper biis –
 Now on hard hethe he lith,
 With leves and gresse he him writh.
 He that hadde had castels and tours,

River, forest, frith and flours,
 Now, thei it comenci to snewe and frese,
 This king mot make his bed in mese.
 He that y-had knightes of priis
 Bifor him kneland, and levedis,
 Now seth he nothing that him liketh;
 Bot wilde wormes bi him striketh. (238-252)¹⁶⁷

[Into the wilderness he goes. He finds nothing to ease him, but lives ever in discomfort. He that had worn the white and grey fur, and [had on his] bed the purple linen – now he lies on hard earth, and covers himself with leaves and grass. He that had castles and towers, rivers, forests, parks and flowers, now it begins to snow and freeze, this king must make his bed in moss. He that had knights of esteem who kneeled before him, and ladies, now sees nothing that pleases him; only wild snakes slide by him.¹⁶⁸]

Orfeo abandons his worldly possessions and replaces them with accoutrements more suitable for the forest. He sleeps on the hard earth, covers himself with moss and grass, and battles wicked weather and wildlife. Although he eventually crosses into Faeryland, he spends ten years wandering the wilderness before he sees the Faery King. While the Otherworld is an important aspect of this narrative, Orfeo's self-exile takes place in a recognizable forest landscape. It is not until he follows the Faery King's retinue that he leaves the forest and crosses into Faery. The repeated refrain of "he that hadde" highlights Orfeo's displacement, a displacement shared by Gawain who must also navigate the discomforts of nature and a loss of courtly luxury.

Ywain, like Orfeo, is drawn to the forest by his grief, although his own actions have brought about his despair. He wanders, mad and naked, a wild thing in a wild place. Ywain is only saved from his madness by an ointment provided by Morgan "the wise."¹⁶⁹ In both cases, grief is the catalyst for these sylvan departures.

¹⁶⁷ All quotations are from *Middle English Romances*, edited by Stephen H.A. Shepherd.

¹⁶⁸ Translations are my own, with additional translations by Stephen H.A. Shepherd.

¹⁶⁹ Morgan is referred to as 'he' in the text, which seems to be an anomaly as she is "traditionally a woman" (Shepherd 118). The use of "the wise" is adopted from the French source, as Chrétien's

Orfeo and Ywain abandon their courtly lives, ignore societal rules, and give in to their anguish. The madness that follows is shown outwardly on their bodies (Orfeo's long beard, for example) or in their actions, as Ywain is described as drinking the warm blood from one of the animals he kills. For both Orfeo and Ywain, as well, an encounter with the Otherworld ends their mad wanderings and eventually leads to reunion with the court and a return to proper society.

In these two examples, encounters with the Otherworld bring clarity. For Orfeo, there is no doubt that he is *in* Faery once he wanders into the Faery King's domain. He departs with his lost wife and her survival marks an end to Orfeo's isolated suffering. The use of a magical ointment in *Ywain* does not necessarily mean Ywain is *in* Faery, but the forest and her denizens provide that connection – as does the evocation of Morgan le Fay, a notorious presence in Otherworldly realms and forests. And, as Richard Kieckhefer notes, “The purveyors of magical objects are often fairies, immortal beings who live in the “Land of Fairy” but occasionally enter the world of mortals and favor certain individuals with magical gifts” (107). The healing ointment was given to a lady whose handmaiden uses it to heal Ywain. The gift and its giver connect Ywain to the Otherworld, offering a glimpse at the subtle supernatural presence in the text. For Gawain, there is no clear distinction between the forest and the Otherworld and his inability to recognize where he is plays a major role in his time at Hautdesert. As Saunders continues, “The marginality of the forest world is employed by the poet to call into question the conventional structures and ideals of Arthurian romance” (“The Forest” 155). Gawain is simultaneously negotiating a convention of the genre *and* a place set in reality. As a hero of

Morgan, in both *Yvain* and *Erec and Enide* is a healer and not yet the dangerous sorceress of later works (Kibler 506).

romance, Gawain's confusion is the first sign that he may be unsuccessful in his quest.

Gawain's time in the forest serves to emphasize the distance he has traveled from Camelot and the changes he experiences while on this journey. His transition from courtly hero of romance to a flawed, occasional sinner begins in the Wirral. There is an overwhelming sense in these stanzas that Gawain does not belong here, that he is out of place and unwelcome. Ironically, "Regarded in this light, Gawain becomes the ambassador from the mythical Other world of Arthur. In that case Gawain is rendered mystery as well as mystified; as the representative of the land of Romance, he becomes the marvel, and indeed this is suggested by his reception at Haut Desert" (Rudd 60). Once again, the *Gawain*-poet plays with the conventions of the genre, leaving his protagonist, and perhaps his audience, in a state of confusion and anticipation. Gawain's displacement in the Wirral will, after all, continue at Hautdesert, which like the Wirral itself is a place shrouded in mystery and confusion.

Like A Prayer

Throughout his literary career, Gawain is tasked with the unique obligation of visiting foreign courts and navigating their customs and laws. I have previously discussed his role in *The Carle of Carlisle* and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*, both narratives that feature him in negotiation with a non-Arthurian court. Each time he must interpret the court through his own understanding of chivalric identifiers and political meaning. As we have seen in *Golagros*, Gawain quickly understands that Golagros and his court are noble people, worthy of their freedom from Arthur's ambitious desires. His encounter with the Carle in Inglewood Forest is similar to his arrival at Hautdesert in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While the

court of Bertilak is certainly more prestigious than the Carle's humble abode, both courts require Gawain to undergo a test by a figure of baronial and/or domestic authority. Unlike *Golagros*, where the risk of Gawain's failure has wider ramifications for Arthur's realm, in the *Carle of Carlisle* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the risk to the Arthurian realm seems less dire. In *Sir Gawain*, Gawain's test also has larger ramifications, as his failure would symbolize a failure of the Round Table. Yet, his time at Hautdesert is intimately enclosed: there is no risk of war or imperial expansion overshadowing events. Nor is Gawain's opponent a foreign army. As with his experience in *The Carle*, Gawain comes face to face with a figure of mischief and, in order to survive and succeed, must negotiate the tests laid out by his host.

Hautdesert is itself a place of mystery and confusion. As Gawain wanders through the wilderness, he grows increasingly distressed, as there is no place for him to hear mass. He does not pray for shelter *per se*, but rather "Of sum herber þer heȝly I myȝt here masse/ Ande þy maytnez tomorne" [For some lodging where I might devoutly hear mass and your matins tomorrow] (755-756). Suddenly, at the precise moment he offers his prayer, he sees a castle through the trees:

A castel þe comlokest þat euer knyȝt aȝte,
 Pyched on a prayere, a park al aboute,
 With a pyked palays pyned ful þik,
 Þat vmbeteȝe mony tre mo þen two myle.
 Þat holde on þat syde þe habel auysed,
 As hit schemered and schon þurȝ þe schyre okez. (767-772)

[The most splendid castle ever owned by a knight, set on a meadow, a park all around, closely guarded by a spiked palisade that encircled many trees for more than two miles. That side of the castle Sir Gawain surveyed as it shimmered and shone through the fine oak].

Gawain immediately attributes the miraculous appearance of the castle to his prayer, and “heȝly he þonkez/ Jesus and Sayn Gilyan, þat gentyle ar boþe/ Þat cortaysly hade hym kydde and his cry herkened” [devoutly thanks Jesus and St Julian, who kindly are both, who treated him courteously, and listened to his prayer] (773-775). The idea that he was treated “cortaysly” is a notable insight into Gawain’s personal philosophy. According to him, saints and even God himself can behave like knights, acting courteously to those who request aid. With this in mind, the fact that he views Hautdesert as an act of God is not surprising, nor is the fact that he expects those within the castle to behave in a courtly manner. Despite his displacement in the Wirral, and the Otherworldly undertones of the setting, Gawain still understands the world according to the rules of Arthur’s court: saints listen to prayers and castles may be entered by courteous knights should their equally courteous hosts allow it.

Yet, the castle raises numerous questions given Gawain’s previous struggles along his journey. As I have discussed above, the Wirral and even North Wales are places of political, historical, and literary significance. It is difficult to properly define the *Gawain*-poet’s Wirral, as it seems a place based in both fact and Faerie.

Rudd writes,

The poem uses the association of land designated forest (and so refuge for outlaws) alongside the more magical forests of romance tradition to create a contrast between a landscape we are happy to project onto and populate with wild animals, wild men, and semi-mythical beasts – one that is both more thoroughly real and more utterly strange. (Rudd 62)

The *Gawain*-poet’s description of Hautdesert, however, is far removed from the “utterly strange” and “semi-mythical beasts.” If anything, Hautdesert seems to be a castle set amongst well-manicured parkland with an impressive fortress defended by a substantial palisade. This is not the Elf King’s domain in *Sir Orfeo* or the

enchanted Faerie forests of Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," where "The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,/ Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede" (860-861). Hautdesert is for Gawain, and the poem's audience, a recognizable dwelling set in a tangible location.

By setting Hautdesert in Cheshire, the *Gawain*-poet places Camelot in direct contrast to the physical realities of Bertilak's castle. As H. Bergner explains,

the physical actuality of the castle into which Gawain is invited is in contradistinction to Arthur's court, described in rich detail both with regard to its external appearance and to the itemization of what is found therein, even going so far as to mention by name household articles in daily use. The mention of such trivial objects and the amount of specific detail supplied for them seems intentionally to have been omitted in the description of Arthur's court. [...] What [the detailed descriptions] show is this: while, on the one hand, the hyperbole associated with the Arthurian court serves to reveal what that court *is* and what it *has*, that is, gaiety, youth, beauty and wealth, the superlative, excessively-great qualities of the provincial court disclose what it is capable of in terms of *performance* and *action*.
(411)

Compared to Hautdesert's detailed descriptions of daily tasks, hunting, and the mundane presence of servants and porters among the aristocrats, Camelot seems to be the fantasy-scape of feasts and wonders. Gawain's time at Hautdesert shows him trying, sometimes with success and sometimes not, to navigate a world infused with both the trappings of romance and the realities of political allegiances and private desires. Perhaps the poet is playing with the idea of the 'real' and the fictional within his narrative construct. The Wirral is a 'real' place and Camelot is technically a fictional location, but readers of romance recognize Camelot and understand its symbolic resonance better than that of Hautdesert, a fictional castle that the poet locates in Cheshire. Hautdesert, then, seems to be the fantasy-scape, despite its location and functionality. It may have the trappings of a 'real' castle, but the

Gawain-poet plays with expectation and genre, juxtaposing Camelot with his creation and asking his audience, and Gawain himself, to identify the meaning behind both castles in the text.

Castle Hautdesert is a conundrum from the very start. As Gawain stares at it in wonder, he thinks “*Pat pared out of papure purely hit semed*” [That, truly, [the building] seemed cut out of paper] (802). While the castle seems to be a real structure, it also feels like a dreamscape, appearing suddenly out of the wilderness. For Gawain, the Castle represents sanctuary and an opportunity to discover if he has found the way to the Green Chapel. Yet the castle itself proves to be the site of his most dangerous trial. Gawain believes that he is entering a recognizable setting – a castle whose beauty and wealth rivals Camelot. But it quickly becomes apparent that Hautdesert is not what it seems. Gawain’s fame for negotiating foreign courts and foreign rulers is put to the test here, but, unlike his successful forays into diplomacy so common in the northern romances, Castle Hautdesert offers an insidiously persistent test for Arthur’s greatest knight.

Gawain is greeted with great cheer and exuberance even before the courtiers at Hautdesert learn his name. They quickly invite him in, taking Gringolet to the stables, and removing the knight’s armour and clothing. Gawain is “*dispoyled, wyth spechez of myerþe*” [stripped, with merry remarks] (860) and given the choice of many fine robes. Once dressed, he is deemed the most handsome knight ever known and the court delights in his presence. This act of disrobing is not in and of itself uncommon. Nicholls writes that “the details of greeting, asking permission, alighting and being helped from a horse, the taking by the hand, dressing in a robe, and the stabling of the horse, establish a strong pattern of courtesy” (126), a pattern found in

both romances and courtesy books (126). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, is a text where objects are of symbolic importance. The poet has previously explained in detail the significance of Gawain's attire. His famous pentangle shield is a symbol connected to him personally, as this particular shield is not associated with Gawain in any other romance. By removing these items, first his famous horse and then his armour, the sense of displacement that began during Gawain's trek north is heightened at Hautdesert. Suddenly, the objects that so closely associated Gawain with Camelot and Arthur have been replaced by clothing that belongs to Bertilak's court. While his physical beauty is recognized, the items that mark Gawain as *the* Gawain we have seen at Camelot, are removed. His immersion into the culture of Hautdesert and his transition into a "different" Gawain begins with this courteous act of disrobing.

Gawain's arrival at Hautdesert also marks the return of the poem's obsessive focus on reputation and identity. In the earlier scenes at Camelot, Arthur and his court's renown are questioned, but here at Hautdesert, Gawain alone is at the center of this narrative test. The focus remains heavily on Gawain during his time at Hautdesert and even in these early scenes, the knight behaves uncharacteristically in comparison to his usual demeanour in the northern romances, implying that his characterization is in transition. Bertilak and the court serve Gawain a great feast and, "Ɔat mon much merþe con make,/ For wyn in his hed þat wende" [that man grew full of mirth as wine went to his head] (899-900). Because of his intoxication, Gawain is eventually compelled to reveal his true identity, something he had until this point concealed. While it is perhaps an overstatement to argue that Gawain's intoxication has led him into a dangerous situation, by revealing his identity earlier

than intended, it becomes clear that Gawain is not acting prudently. His identity, who he is and where he is from, proves to be an integral plot point, and by revealing his name and his association with the Round Table, Gawain opens himself to the questioning eyes of Hautdesert's court. Furthermore, Bertilak obviously already knows the identity of his guest and his ability to make Gawain reveal this by simply serving him copious amounts of wine, once again gives Bertilak the upper hand.

Gawain's intoxication is also surprising in light of his usual behaviour in the romances that I have discussed in previous chapters, where he is well known for his diplomacy, especially in unknown or foreign situations. The Gawain that walks into the court of Golagros is a very different man than the Gawain who sits drunkenly at Bertilak's table.¹⁷⁰ This discrepancy in characterization is further confused once Gawain's identity is revealed to the court:

And alle þe men in þat mote maden much joye
 To apere in his presense prestly þat tyme
 Þat alle prys and prowes and pured þewes
 Apendes to hys person and prayed in euer,
 Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk in þe most.
 Vch segge ful softly sayde to his fere,
 'Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þewez
 And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble.
 Wich spede is in speche vnspurd may we lerne,
 Syn we haf fonged þat fine fader of nurture.
 God hatz geuen vus His grace godly forsoþe,
 Þat such a gest as Gawan grauntez vus to haue
 When burnez blyþe of His burþe schal sitte
 And synge.
 In Menyng of manerez mere
 Þis burne now schal vus bring.
 I hope þat may hym here
 Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.' (910-927)

[And all the men in the castle were overjoyed to make the acquaintance quickly then of the man to whom all excellence and valour belongs, whose refined manners are

¹⁷⁰*Golagros* is, of course, a later romance than *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but it derives from the same northern romance tradition as *The Carle of Carlisle* and *The Avowyng of Arthur*, both contemporaries of *SGGK*.

everywhere praised, and whose fame exceeds any other person's on earth. Each knight whispered to his companion, 'Now we shall enjoy seeing displays of good manners, and the irreproachable terms of noble speech; the art of conversation we can learn unasked, since we have taken in the source of good breeding. Truly, God has been gracious to us indeed, in allowing us to receive such a guest as Gawain, whose birth men will happily sit down and celebrate in song. In knowledge of fine manners this man has expertise; I think that those who hear him will learn what love-talk is.]

Despite his earlier assurance to Arthur that he is untested and unproven, the courtiers at Hautdesert know Gawain well. His reputation, just like the reputation of the Round Table, precedes him. And, just like the Round Table, Gawain's personal reputation will be put to the test. While the courtiers note his "prys and prowes," their true cause for jubilation is the opportunity to witness Gawain's claim to fame: his "sle3tez of þewez" and "talkyng noble." Despite his prowess in combat, Gawain is even more famous for his good manners and his noble speech. He is also celebrated for his fine breeding, a pertinent trait given the involvement of his aunt Morgan le Fay in the Green Knight's presence at Camelot. Finally, the courtiers make mention of Gawain's knowledge of "luf-talkyng," a curious addition that is more in line with the French characterization of Gawain than the northern English and Scottish representation of his character.

This list of Gawain's famous traits is a window into his reputation in the world outside of Camelot. The *Gawain*-poet knowingly combines the traits commonly found in northern representations of Gawain (his courtesy and diplomacy) with the often negative attributes of the French and southern English representations of Gawain (his weakness for women). This awareness on the part of the poet is present in all of Gawain's actions at Hautdesert and does much to inform his decisions throughout his stay at Bertilak's castle. Here, in the earliest moments of his time at Hautdesert, the poet playfully invests Gawain with attributes that will either

permit him success on his quest or cause disastrous failure at the hands of the Green Knight and Morgan le Fay. He alters his audience's expectations by reminding them that the northern Gawain is not the only version of the knight in existence. Who Gawain is and which variant will appear become the central concern of his time at Morgan's court.

The reaction from Bertilak's court also provides an early opportunity to once more compare Hautdesert with Camelot. As H. Bergner writes, "Bertilak's court is a place of open horizons, of hidden danger and aggression [...]. The essential identity of the provincial court lies as much on the surface as in its concealed sub-structures" (412). This is nowhere better demonstrated than in the seating arrangement of Hautdesert's dais during their Christmas celebrations. At Camelot, the high table consists of members of Arthur's family, Bishop Baldwin, and the queen. The *Gawain*-poet describes Bertilak's dais as follows: "Þe olde auncian wyf heȝest ho syttez;/ Þe lorde lufly her by lent as I trowe./ Gawan and þe gay burde togeder þay seten/ Euen inmyddez [...]" [The ancient lady sits in the place of honour, the lorde politely taking his place by her, I believe. Gawain and the lovely lady were seated together, right in the middle of the table] (1001-1004). The "sub-structure" of Hautdesert is overtly revealed in this seating arrangement, as the "olde auncian wyf," who is later revealed as Morgan le Fay, is given the seat of honour. Bertilak, the lord of Hautdesert, is seated next to her, leaving Gawain with the lady of the castle. Gawain does not question the old hag's identity nor does he ponder why she is given such a high honour. He is far too distracted by the lady's beauty, and like Arthur, who so often fails to see the truth before his eyes, he misses an opportunity to understand the internal affairs of Hautdesert. While he is entranced by the lady's

beauty, the power structure of Hautdesert is plainly laid out before him. The old woman, whom he treats with courteous kindness, is far more than she seems and, indeed, represents “the hidden danger” lurking behind Hautdesert’s festive atmosphere.

The contrast between Camelot and Hautdesert is revealing of the *Gawain*-poet’s attitude towards his romance setting. The poet grounds his description of Hautdesert in his previous representation of Camelot. The lady’s beauty is compared to Guinevere and the opulence of Bertilak’s court rivals Arthur’s extravagance. Gawain finds himself in the midst of these two settings and his behaviour changes based on where he is. At Camelot, Gawain is the recognizable chivalric ideal, courteous and humble. At Hautdesert he seems to stumble, indulging in the wine and women (or, more accurately *a* woman) presented to honour him. The attitudes of the courts are also heavily contrasted and do much to uncover the potentially dangerous darker side of Hautdesert. Despite the festive atmosphere, it must be remembered that the courtiers at Camelot complained specifically about decisions made by their king and his council during Christmas festivities. In their opinion, Arthur’s error lies in listening to his knights during Christmas games – a frivolous activity when Gawain’s life is at risk. Hautdesert, by contrast, is also depicted at Christmas, but the courtiers are full of mirth and solemnity, as Gawain joins them for evensong. There is no hint of dissension or displeasure, as quite the contrary, there is an undercurrent of mischief and chaos here, made all the more apparent by the knowledge that both Bertilak and the old hag are figures of trickery. The *Gawain*-poet ensures that both Gawain and the poem’s audience do not recognize this. Instead, Gawain is seduced and, more alarmingly, distracted, by Bertilak’s Christmas festivities.

Private Spheres, Public Fears

Gawain's distraction continues once he agrees to the terms of Bertilak's game of exchange: he will remain in the castle while Bertilak hunts and at the end of each day, they will exchange their winnings. By staying at the castle, Gawain places himself outside the traditional male-dominated sphere of the hunt,¹⁷¹ heightening the sense of displacement that first begins when Gawain leaves Camelot. There is an analogous scene in *The Weddyng* that sees Gawain choose to remain in his bedchamber with his new wife Ragnell, rather than join Arthur in a joust. His unwillingness to join the king marks the first time in the text where Gawain does not blindly follow Arthur's orders.¹⁷² In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, Gawain's apparent lack of interest in Bertilak's hunt further distances him from the more traditional Middle English Gawain found in the northern romances. He does not attend it, nor is he involved with Bertilak and the noblemen who attend the hunt. Rather, he finds himself in the domain of Bertilak's lady, the bedchamber, and must face her temptations alone, far from the more familiar landscape of a hunting expedition.

The question of *where* Gawain is during the hunting scenes and why this matters is pertinent to the sense of displacement and transitioning characterization at

¹⁷¹ Gawain participates in hunting scenes in *The Weddyng*, *The Awntyrs of Arthure*, and *The Avowying of Arthure*. The hunt is a common aspect of the northern Gawain romances, which makes Gawain's decision to miss the hunt an uncharacteristic aspect of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

¹⁷² As I discussed in chapter one, Gawain spends much of the poem stoically helping Arthur, ultimately agreeing to marry a hideous hag in order to save his king from certain death. Gawain's loyalty to Arthur is unwavering, despite his king's cowardly behavior. It is not until Ragnell's transformation that Gawain's loyalty shifts to his wife, but the poem does not depict this as a negative trait. Instead, it celebrates Gawain's happiness and love for Ragnell. Ironically, this behavior is exactly what Gawain counsels against in *Ywain and Gawain*. There he believes that the bonds of chivalric fellowship must supercede the bonds of matrimony.

this stage of the narrative.¹⁷³ In her study of gender and archaeology, Roberta Gilchrist notes that medieval castles were, “an institution most often characterized as a bastion of male warrior ethos” (109). While she cautions that castles “were not exclusive male and female domains, or simple binary oppositions,” (145), the fact remains that castles and spaces within these castles had significance according to gender because “[...] noble women were concentrated spatially in a separate female household” (120). According to the archaeological and architectural record, male and female spaces within the castle were segregated in order “to convey a sense of social order” (Gilchrist 113). These feminine spaces were

Positioned in the upper ends of the halls or the upper reaches of castles, the female household may have been characterized by a greater degree of luxury, embellished by warmth, rich colours and soft textures. It would have been provided with better facilities, such as fireplaces and private garderobes, and made more hospitable by furnishings such as tapestries, room hangings and cushions. (Gilchrist 125)

The female household was a separate space designed to offer its inhabitant, either the queen or a lady, privacy (Gilchrist 137). Although the *Gawain*-poet does not state that Gawain is sleeping in the lady’s chamber, the juxtaposition of hunting imagery with the bedroom scenes stresses the separation of Gawain from the rest of the castle. While Bertilak hunts, “...Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed lygez” [the good man Gawain lies in his fine bed] (1179), “Vnder couertour ful clere, coryned aboute” [Under a splendid coverlet, shut in by curtains] (1181). This image of Gawain

¹⁷³ This is not to say that hunting was a singularly masculine activity. Amandra Richardson notes that women were known to hunt in parks because like their household, these parks afforded them privacy (260). In addition, falconry was associated with women and they would have been familiar with hunting lore (Richardson 258). The poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, is very specific in his description of Bertilak’s hunting party. He departs with “renkkez ful mony” [many knights] (1134) and no women are mentioned in the hunting scenes. While women may have owned hunting dogs or even participated in certain types of hunts, there are no women present in Bertilak’s party, which further emphasizes the gendered spaces in the text.

sleeping in luxurious surrounding is evocative of a medieval lady's bedchamber. The lady's easy access to his bedchamber further enhances his displacement. He is not with the other lords on the hunt and despite the poet's ambiguity surrounding whose bedchamber he occupies, the lady and the trappings of traditionally feminine spaces surround him.¹⁷⁴ The privacy, a marked feature of these spaces, makes the bedchamber a dangerous environment for Gawain. He is at his most vulnerable here because he does not recognize that the lady's temptation attempts are designed to test him and the privacy afforded by the bedchamber cuts him off from possible aid. Their three meetings prove an arguably bigger challenge than the Green Knight's threat, and Gawain is ill prepared to face Bertilak's lady who, like the Green Knight at Camelot, focuses her attention on testing his reputation.

Each of the three meetings between Gawain and the lady provide an opportunity to test not only Gawain's reputation, but his identity. Gawain's "identity" may be defined as his reputation within the narrative frame *and* his reputation in various works of Arthurian literature. The *Gawain*-poet is aware of these works and these differing characterizations of Gawain. He uses the lady to playfully examine Gawain as he *is* in *Sir Gawain* in contrast to the multiple variations of Gawain that exist in both the French and English literary traditions. During their first meeting, while Gawain lies "imprisoned" and naked in his bed, the lady assures him that she knows exactly who he is – alluding to her awareness of how a knight of such widespread fame *should* and *would* act in this type of situation. She comments,

I shcal happe yow here þat oþer half als

¹⁷⁴ We have seen examples of dangerous bedchambers in both *The Weddyng* and *The Carle*. Gawain's bedchamber is the setting of Ragnell's transformation in *The Weddyng* (cf chapter one), and the Carle of Carlisle tests Gawain's resolve when he offers his own wife as part of a courtesy test.

And syþen karp wyth my knyȝt þat I kaȝt haue.
 For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ȝe are,
 Þat alle þe worlde worchipeȝ; quereso ȝe ride,
 Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed
 With lordez, wyth ladyes, with alle þat lyf bere. (1224-1229)

[I shall tuck you in here on both sides of the bed, and then chat with my knight whom I have caught. For I know well, in truth, that you are Sir Gawain, whom everyone reveres wherever you go; Your good name and courtesy are honourably praised by lords and by ladies and all folk alive].

On the surface, this claim that she knows Gawain's identity seems out of place, given the amount of time they have previously spent together.¹⁷⁵ Her knowledge of his reputation also seems to allude only to his well-known womanizing.¹⁷⁶ The lady repeatedly notes her husband's absence, obviously baiting Gawain with this knowledge that while Bertilak is away, they are very alone in the privacy of the bedchamber. Despite her best efforts, however, he remains impervious to her seductions: "Þe freke freed with defence and feted ful fayre/ Þaȝ ho were burde bryȝtest þe burne in mynde hade,/ Þe lasse luf in his lode for lur þat he soȝt/ Boute hone" [The knight reacted cautiously, in the most courteous of ways, though she was the loveliest woman he could remember: he felt small interest in love because of the ordeal he must face very soon] (1282-1285). During this first meeting, Gawain's attention is still where it must be. Although he seemed distracted during his arrival and Bertilak's morning feast, in the first bedroom encounter, Gawain is able to ignore the temptation of the lady, as his thoughts betray his worry over his imminent death at the hands of the Green Knight.

Before she leaves this first encounter, however, the lady once more playfully questions Gawain's identity. She remarks "Bot þat ȝe be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!"

¹⁷⁵ To clarify, there is no need for her to affirm that she knows who he is. The fact should be quite obvious given the time they have spent in each other's company at Bertilak's Christmas festivities.

¹⁷⁶ This is not common in the northern romances, but seen in the French sources and later in Malory. cf. chapter three for a discussion of the sixteenth-century Gawain ballad "The Jeaste of Gawain."

[But that you should be Gawain I very much doubt] (1293). His refusal to kiss her is her reasoning behind this statement, but it also alludes to the poet's subtle exploration of Gawain's literary reputation. It is as if the lady is telling Gawain that the Gawain she has heard of, the Gawain from other tales and stories, *would* behave differently, which is why she jokingly remarks that he cannot possibly be *the* Gawain. Jonathan Nicholls notes that "the kiss as a gesture of greeting or parting is well-documented in the Middle Ages," (132) and Gawain readily accepts the lady's request of a farewell kiss, arguing "I schal kysse at your comaundement, *as a knyzt fallez*" [I will kiss at your bidding, *as befits a knight*] (1303, my emphasis). Gawain willingly kisses¹⁷⁷ the lady because it is the courteous thing to do, not because he succumbs to her feminine charm.¹⁷⁸

The lady's focus on Gawain's identity, and her attempt to seduce him bleed into the second meeting, which takes place during Bertilak's boar hunt. Her dual purpose – both highlighting Gawain's well-known reputation and, in the process, trying to tarnish this reputation, becomes even more apparent during their second discussion in the bedchamber. Nicholls writes, "it is the lady's purpose to shift the meaning of courtesy from its purely social and virtuous associations so that it becomes a quality dependent on adulterous and dishonorable action. At the same time, she tries to insinuate that Gawain's reputation is founded upon expectations of

¹⁷⁷ *The Carle of Carlisle* offers an interesting alternative example of Gawain facing a seduction challenge. The Carle tells Gawain to kiss his own wife in their bedchamber, but by kissing her and stopping when he is told, he passes the Carle's test and is rewarded that night with a visit from the Carle's daughter. In *The Carle*, the poet playfully acknowledges Gawain's reputation as a womanizer. His actions make him courteous rather than lecherous and he is eventually rewarded for his deeds. While the Carle's own behavior is bawdy, it is quickly obvious that such displays are acceptable in the Carle's dwelling. Any potential issues surrounding Gawain's bedding of the Carle's daughter, an act that is arguably discourteous for a knight and more in line with French depictions of Gawain, is resolved in the end of the text where he marries her and is given a horse. In *The Carle*, Gawain's behavior is seen as yet another example of his courtesy.

¹⁷⁸ This is not to say that Gawain is not tempted, however, the inclusion of his reference to knightly behavior indicates that during this first meeting, he is still overly focused on courtesy and manners.

a similar kind of behavior” (135). By using the kiss as a way to mock Gawain’s lack of courtesy, the lady is able to bring into question his true identity. The Gawain she knows is courteous and would, therefore, know that a kiss in greeting or farewell is a sign of good manners. Upon entering his bedchamber on the second day, she once more questions him: “Sir, 3if 3e be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez,/ Wy3e þat is so wel wrast always to god/ And connez not of companye þe costez vndertake” [Sir, if you are Gawain, it astonishes me that a man always so strongly inclined to good, cannot grasp the rules of polite behaviour] (1481-1483). Her gentle chiding is, on the surface, a means to tell Gawain that a kiss in greeting is the proper custom. Yet, these supposedly casual kisses are also the lady’s way of testing his resolve. She uses courtesy as a path to temptation, trying to force his failure by testing his most famous attribute. These questions regarding Gawain’s identity mirror the Green Knight’s entrance into Arthur’s hall and his mocking challenge “is this Arthur’s court?” This emphasis on identity serves to bring attention to the fact that both the court and Gawain have much to prove, despite their widespread reputations for courtesy.

The second meeting takes a darker turn than the first when Gawain remarks that he would rather not kiss her due to fear of rejection and she replies, “Ma fay, [...] 3e may not be werned;/ 3e are stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkþe, 3if yow lykez/ 3if any were so vilanous þat yow devaye wolde” [Ma foi...you could not be refused; You are strong enough to force your will if you wish, if any woman were so ill-mannered to reject you] (1495-1497). The lady’s implication that Gawain could forcibly take any lady he chooses is a sinister moment in their otherwise playful banter. Gawain immediately responds to her statement, “3e, be God...good is your speche; Bot þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende,/ And vche gift þat is geuen not

with goud wylle” [Yes, by God...what you say is true; but in my country force is considered ignoble, and so is each gift that is not freely given] (1498-1500). Both the lady’s statement and Gawain’s response imply an undercurrent of the potential for sexual violence.

Many critics have remarked on the juxtaposition between these bedroom meetings and the violence of Bertilak’s hunt, and, just as Bertilak chases his prey through the forest, Gawain and the lady take part in a similar power struggle.¹⁷⁹ During their first meeting, she literally looms over him, finally taking him in her arms for their farewell kiss, a reversal of the traditional role of a knight and his paramour. Once more in the second meeting, when they finally kiss in greeting, she is said to “loutez adoun” [[bend] down over him] (1504). The specter of rape and Gawain’s acknowledgment that such a thing *could* be possible changes the power dynamic between them. While it previously seemed that she had the upper hand, especially because she is knowingly taking part in Morgan le Fay’s scheme, their conversation suggests that Gawain could easily overpower her, both physically and perhaps mentally should he ever discover the truth behind her advances. Initially, it seemed that Gawain was the one in danger, but now, the poet implies that the lady has placed herself in a precarious position.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, Gawain’s response

¹⁷⁹ For a detailed examination of the juxtaposition of the hunting and bedroom scenes, Cf. Gerald Morgan “The Action of the Hunting and Bedroom Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” and H.L. Savage “The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.”

¹⁸⁰ Traditionally, despite his occasional mistreatment of maidens, Gawain is not depicted as a rapist. The exception may be found in Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale” where an unnamed knight rapes a lady and must face the queen’s justice. While both the knight and the queen are unnamed, it is clear that Chaucer means for the queen to represent Guinevere, Arthur’s wife. It could be argued that the knight, clearly one of Arthur’s men, could be Gawain. “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is a Loathly Lady tale similar to *The Weddyng*. In my unpublished MA dissertation, I argued that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an inverted loathly lady story with the beautiful woman, rather than the old hag, performing the seduction/temptation scenes. Gawain’s presence in these two romances (both *SGGK* and *The Weddyng*) give further credence to the idea that Chaucer’s raping knight is perhaps meant to be Sir Gawain. While this does not establish Gawain as a character known to commit acts of sexual

further the sense of his displacement that I have noted earlier in the chapter. His assurance that “þrete is vnþpnyuande in þede þer I lende” seems to imply that Gawain follows the customs of his country and will not, therefore, behave ignobly. Yet the lady’s habit of questioning his identity also implies that the Gawain that exists in his country may not be the same Gawain at Hautdesert.¹⁸¹ He is not in his country and his adherence to the customs he usually follows may fail.

The sense of multiple versions of Gawain existing in the bedchamber space is once again the emphasis throughout the remainder of the second meeting. The lady remarks that she has yet to hear a word of love from Gawain, despite his reputation for “luf-talkyng”: “Your worde and your worchip walkez ayquere,/ And I haf seten by yourself here sere twyes,/ 3et herde I neuer of your hed helde no wordez/ Þat euer longed to luf, lasse ne more” [Your fame and your honour are known everywhere, and I have sat by you here on two separate occasions yet never heard from your mouth a solitary word referring to love, of any kind at all] (1521-1524). The lady wishes for Gawain to teach her about love and it is obvious that she wants more than simple words from the knight, as her suggestive reminders that they are alone enhances the implications of her request. Gawain’s response is purposely naïve, as he ignores the unsubtle meaning of her words and replies instead,

violence, it would at the very least imply that Gawain is capable of such behavior. Given Gawain’s later misogynistic outburst in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, his history as a knight capable of rape must be considered. Cf. chapter three for a brief discussion of Gawain’s confession to rape in the First Continuation of Chrétien’s *Perceval*.

¹⁸¹ Monica Brzezinski Potkay notes that the definition of ‘rape’ or *raptus* in the medieval period was “sexual violence or the forced abduction of a woman” (97). As Corinne Saunders argues, “actual rape is found only on the margins of romance [...] While the absence of rape becomes a statement of order within a kingdom and rape is consistently threatened, it is rarely instanced, and never within the narrative ‘here and now’.” (“Rape” 187). Furthermore, “...only when the threat of rape stems from the supernatural is it carried out, and thus the romances whose subject is the otherworld...offer the most developed and sustained treatments of actual rape” (188). Despite the lady’s allusion to these instances of rape or abduction, Gawain’s response falls in line with the typical romance depiction of a courteous knight.

Gret is þe gode gle, and gome to me huge,
 Þat so worþy as 3e wolde wynne hidere
 And pyne yow with no pouer a mon, as play wyth your knyzt
 With anys kynnez countenaunce; hit keuzez me ese.
 Bot to take þe toruayle to myself to trwluf expoun
 And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of armez
 To yow, þat (I wot wel) weldez more slyzt
 Of þat art, bi þe half, or a hundredth of seche
 As I am, oþer euer schal in erde þer I leue,
 Hit were a folé felefolde, my fre, by my trawþe. (1536-1545)

[It gives me great gladness and pleases me hugely that one as noble as yourself should make your way here, and trouble yourself with a nobody, trifling with your knight with any kind of favour: it gives me delight. But to take the task on myself of explaining true love, and treat the matter of romance and chivalric tales to you whom – I know well – have more expertise in that subject by half than a hundred such men as myself ever can, however long I may live, would be absolute folly, noble lady, on my word.]

The first part of this speech is a return to form for Gawain, as it mirrors his speech to Arthur. He responds to the lady with a great show of humility, going so far as to call himself a “pouer” man. It is her willingness to spend time with him that should be celebrated, rather than his great reputation. Her desire for lessons in love is also dismissed as he claims that surely she knows more about love than him. Gawain may be implying that the lady’s obvious desire for him and her bold displays of affection are evidence that it is she who is the expert in “trwluf.” Alternatively, Gawain’s reference to romances and chivalric tales serves as a further example of the *Gawain*-poet relying on his audience’s intertextual familiarity. Romances and chivalric tales are, according to Gawain here, favoured by women. As he sits in his bedchamber, traditionally understood to be a female space, faced with a woman “fondet hym ofte,/ For to haf wonnen hym to woze” [tempting him many times to have led him into mischief] (1549-1550) it becomes all too clear that the knight is in the wrong space for both his social standing and his gender. Gawain, the chivalric hero of romance, finds himself struggling to resist the temptations of a lady because he is not where

such heroes *should* be. While we have seen numerous examples of Gawain taking part in the hunt, battling enemies for Arthur, and rescuing maidens, it is here in the own bedchamber that his grasp on courtesy and chivalric ideals begin to falter.

Despite his literary fame, within the confines of this particular narrative, Gawain is no match for a figure of female trickery, whose knowledge of romance and chivalric tales – including tales that may feature Gawain himself - would give her the information she needs to eventually seduce Gawain and shame him.

Of Gawain and Girdles

The third meeting between Gawain and the lady is the most notable for it marks Gawain's final transition from the knight who left Arthur's court to the more flawed figure who will face the Green Knight. As the scantily clad lady approaches his bed for the final time, however, the slumbering Gawain's thoughts are far from Hautdesert:

In dreȝ droupyng of dreme draueled þat noble,
 As mon þat watz in mony þro þoȝtes,
 How þat Destiné schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde
 At þe Grene Chapel when he þe gome metes
 And bihoues his buffet abide withoute debate more. (1750-1754)

[In the stupor of a dream that nobleman muttered, like a man overburdened with troublesome thoughts; how destiny would deal his fate on the day when he meets the man at the Green Chapel, and must stand the return blow without any more talk].

Despite the constant feasting and clandestine meetings with Bertilak's wife, Gawain's mind is still wholly focused on his impending challenge. In their third meeting, the lady tries desperately to woo Gawain, declaring her love and great sorrow over his lack of mutual affection. The *Gawain*-poet includes much insight into Gawain's thought process during this meeting, and warns "Gret perile bitwene hem stod,/ Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne" [Great peril threatened, should Mary not

mind her knight] (1768-1769). This warning suggests that despite Gawain's focus on his upcoming challenge, the true danger lies right before him.

His primary focus in dealing with the lady is how to maintain his virtue without causing offence. Indeed, "he cared for his cortaysye, lest crapayn he were,/ And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne/ And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t" [He felt concerned for his good manners, lest he behaved like a boor, and still more lest he shame himself by an act of sin, and treacherously betray the lord of the castle] (1773-1775). At this point, it would seem that the Gawain in the bedchamber is certainly the same Gawain who stood in Arthur's court and humbly accepted the Green Knight's challenge on behalf of his king and the Round Table. It is for this reason that Gawain's subsequent acceptance of the lady's girdle requires careful examination.

While I have noted Gawain's drinking and his inability to recognize the danger of Bertilak and the lady, he has mostly defended his famed reputation as a courteous exemplar of chivalric ideals. The lady's attempts to seduce Gawain have failed, but it is not until she offers him a safeguard against the Green Knight that she exposes his true weakness: fear. Upon the revelation that the girdle is a magical object, capable of protecting him from the Green Knight's axe, "þen kest þe kny3t, and hit come to his hert/ Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym jugged were:/ When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,/ My3t he haf slypped to be vnslayn þe sle3t were noble" [Then the knight reflected, and it flashed into his mind this would be a godsend for the hazard he must face when he reached the chapel to receive his deserts; could he escape being killed, the trick would be splendid] (1855-1858).

Albert B. Friedman and Richard H. Osberg argue that

...Gawain's overriding reason for keeping the girdle was his desire to save his life, to even the odds in his ordeal with a fairy monster; that being so, the connotations of the girdle strengthen his realizations. By devious but understandable processes the girdle has come to be exclusively associated in Gawain's mind with the adventure of the Green Chapel not as a relevant item in the exchange agreement, which is after all merely a parlor game to while away the time before his moment of deadly earnest truth. (311-312)

While I agree with the assertion that Gawain's sole reason for accepting the girdle was an overpowering desire to save his own life, the notion that he could not understand that by claiming the girdle and keeping it a secret he would be breaking the rules of Bertilak's game is not plausible. In the moments before the lady offers her girdle, Gawain specifically worries about betraying Bertilak's trust.¹⁸² In addition, he is described as constantly wearing the girdle, first under his surcoat and then over it on his way to the green chapel. He could not have forgotten its presence, especially in light of Bertilak's offering that same day. Unlike the previous hunts for venison and boar, Bertilak offers Gawain a fox pelt on the third day.¹⁸³

Until this point, the exchange of kisses between Bertilak and his guest have been used for comedic effect. This exchange, however, serves as a glaring reminder of Gawain's omission. He has been handed two material objects, a green girdle and a fox pelt. The exchange seems obvious, yet he does not surrender the girdle. While it may be easy to dismiss Bertilak's arrangement as a "parlour game," it must be remembered that the contest between Gawain and the Green Knight was considered a "parlour game" by Arthur's court, arranged at Christmas for the entertainment of the king. Gawain's fear of his own death overrides his courteous manners and by

¹⁸² "And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne/ And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt" [He felt concerned for good manners, lest he behaved like a boor, and still more lest he shame himself by an act of sin] (1773-1774).

¹⁸³ Foxes were commonly associated with trickery and cunning. Gerald Morgan makes note of the obvious connection between the fox's symbolic resonance and the lady's cunning (Morgan "Hunting" 213).

accepting the girdle and concealing it from Bertilak, he demonstrates an uncharacteristic level of fear. His confidence is shaken and he appears to have a very different attitude from the man who, facing imminent death, told a grieving Camelot, “Quat schuld I wonde?/ Of Destinés derf and dere/ What may mon do bot fonde?” [What should I fear? For whether kind or harsh a man’s fate must be tried] (563-565). Arguably, Gawain still believes this, as despite his fear he is ready to face the Green Knight. Yet by taking the girdle, he subconsciously implies that his own courage and strength may not be enough in the face of such a frightening adversary. This is not to say that the acceptance of magical protection is a sign of cowardice in the romances. There are numerous examples of knights taking magical objects into battle in order to succeed. The difference in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, is that the object in question was part of a game of exchange and by failing to give Bertilak the girdle, Gawain has broken his oath.

This is not to say that Gawain’s fears are unwarranted. There is, after all, a fine line between cowardice and fear and a man facing certain death can be forgiven for experiencing anxiety. After all, he gives no indication that without the girdle, his fear would have kept him from leaving Hautdesert. While some of Gawain’s behaviours may be interpreted as cowardice, it must also be remembered that he is now involved in a morally ambiguous game of magical trickery. The rules of this game are unknown and certainly different to the strict moral codes in existence at Camelot. As John Kiteley argues, “...Gawain, ironically, fails when he tried to combat what to him is a malignant magic with magic; when he places reliance on the magical qualities of the girdle rather than on the integration of moral virtue signified by the Pentangle” (48). By taking the girdle, Gawain enters into this game without

fully understanding its rules, not unlike his acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge at Arthur's court. Unlike his previous adventures in the northern romances, he is not able to use his diplomatic cunning or marshal skills to navigate the situation. His natural fear of death, coupled with the magical trickery of his hosts, makes him unprepared to face the supernatural foe ahead.

Despite his earlier assertions that there is no reason for fear, Gawain is riddled with anxiety throughout his stay at Hautdesert. On the morning of his departure, “Þe leude listened ful we, þat leȝ in his bedde -/ Ðaȝ he lowkez his liddez ful lyttel he slepes; Bi vch kok þat crue he knew wel þe steuen” [The knight lay in his bed listening intently, although his eyelids are shut very little he sleeps; each cock-crow reminded him of his undertaking] (2006-2008). As he dresses, “ȝet laft he not þe lace, þe ladies gifte/...*for gode of hymseleuen*” [he did not leave out the belt, the lady's gift...*for his own good*] (2031-2032, my emphasis). This moment of reclaiming his possessions is important, as it indicates that Gawain is taking his leave of Hautdesert and perhaps transitioning once more into the knight that left Camelot. We have noted the sense of displacement created by the *Gawain*-poet as Gawain tries to negotiate Bertilak's court with varying degrees of success. Towards the end of his stay, his grasp on diplomacy slips, and he finds himself increasingly tempted by the lady. This moment of donning his armour, the armour that specifically belongs to him as opposed to garments offered by Bertilak, should initiate a change in Gawain's uncharacteristic behaviour. Yet, by taking the girdle and garishly tying it around his torso, it is clear that Gawain is still under the castle's spell. At Camelot, Gawain showed himself to be exceptionally aware of how to counter the Green Knight's challenge without bringing shame to Arthur. At Hautdesert, however,

Gawain seems less in tune with his surroundings and the concern for the girdle indicates that despite his approaching departure, he has yet to revert back to the version of Gawain that left Camelot months before.

Gawain's decision to hide the girdle from Bertilak and his failure to mention it during confession are equally troubling and yet another sign that he is out of place in a magical setting. While he believes himself to be a courteous knight, indeed a knight who has successfully navigated Bertilak's court and managed to withstand the lady's seduction attempt, in reality he has proven himself to be less than his great reputation would seem to indicate. Just as the poet juxtaposes the hunting and bedchamber scenes, the symbol of Gawain's pentangle shield and the lady's girdle can also be seen as two interconnected symbols.¹⁸⁴ As Geraldine Heng writes,

With the substitution of an imperfect knot, the Lady's lace, for the pentangle, a signifier is produced that situates identity as more tenuous and incomplete – a fragile, uncertain prospect that is always on the verge of unraveling and reconstitution in infinitely varied sequences of possibility. (“Feminine” 504)

The girdle itself is a transitional object whose meaning changes as it moves from the lady's possession into Gawain's hands. What he views as a love token and what she presents as a protective amulet is really a symbol of cowardice and shame. What is meant to represent protection from danger is actually a physical reminder of Gawain's broken oath.

¹⁸⁴ For more on the symbolism of the Pentangle and the girdle, cf. Geraldine Heng “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” John F. Kiteley “‘The Endless Knot’: Magical Aspects of the Pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Larissa Tracy “A Knight of God or the Goddess?: Rethinking Religious Syncretism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Stoddard Malarkey and J. Barre Toelken “Gawain and the Green Girdle.”

Just a Flesh Wound

The climactic meeting between Gawain and the Green Knight serves as the final moment of Morgan le Fay's test for Arthur's Round Table. Gawain, whose fear and trepidation have been duly noted, initially seems to shed his previous anxieties and presents himself as the brave knight he is reputed to be. He willingly bends forward in front of the Green Knight's axe, "And lette as he noȝt dutte;/ For drede he wolde not dare" [And seeming unafraid; he would not shrink in fear] (2257-2258). As the Green Knight swings his axe, however, Gawain "schranke a lytel with þe schulderes for þe scharp yrne" [hunched his shoulders a little to resist the sharp blade] (2267). In this moment, the Knight playfully chides Gawain and boisterously claims that Gawain's wincing is a sign of cowardice, all the while knowing that such a statement will infuriate the already frazzled man. The Knight's claim, "Pou art not Gawayn," recalls the *Gawain*-poet's interest in revealing different aspect of Gawain's literary persona, and mirrors the loving tones of the lady who called into question his identity based on his courteous (or discourteous) behaviour. The Gawain that the Knight has heard of would never behave in such a cowardly manner. He continues, "Þat neuer arȝed for no here by hylle ne be vale,/And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!/ Such cowardise of þat knyȝt cowþe I neuer here" [[The knight] never quailed from an army, on valley or on hill, and now flinches for fear before he feels any hurt! I never heard of such cowardice shown by that knight] (2271-2273). The Knight's assertion that he has never heard of such behaviour from "þat knyȝt" further differentiates the famed Gawain of great renown and Gawain, the man, who stands before him at the Green Chapel. While Gawain defends his minor flinch, comically noting, "Bot þaȝ my hede falle on þe stonez/ I con not hit restore"

[Though if my head should fall I cannot put it back] (2282-2283), the damage to his reputation has already been done. He is not yet aware of the girdle's significance, but by flinching, he has shown himself to be afraid, something the Gawain of world renown would, according to the Knight, never do.

Gawain's demeanour in this second meeting with the Knight is also markedly different from their first encounter at Camelot. While it can be argued that Gawain stayed calm at Camelot because he was not in any immediate danger, his growing anger at the Green Chapel seems out of place in contrast to the prudence he shows at Camelot, which is also a marked trait of the northern Gawain. The Knight and Gawain bicker throughout this scene, as Gawain grows increasingly impatient. He taunts the Knight, who is setting up his second swing, saying and the green man responds by agreeing to carry on with his swing: "so felly þou spekez,/ I wyl no lenger on lyte lette þin ernde/ Riȝt nowe" [you [Gawain] speak so aggressively that I will no longer delay or hinder your business at all] (2302-2304). After the third and final blow, however, the Knight's attitude towards Gawain completely changes. Gone is the proud, accusatory adversary, to be replaced with a man who speaks with the jovial nature of Bertilak de Hautdesert. He admires Gawain, who has leapt from his vulnerable position and stands at the ready, sword in hand. But before he has the chance to strike, the Knight gently, but respectfully, chides him, "Bolde burne, on þis bent be not so gryndel,/ No mon here vnmanerly þe mysboden habbez,/ Ne kyd bot as couenaunde at kyngez kort schaped" [Brave sir, don't act so wrathfully in this place. No one has discourteously mistreated you here, or acted contrary to the covenant sworn at the king's court] (2338-2340). The revelation of the Knight's true identity, followed by the acknowledgment of the girdle on Gawain's chest, does

nothing to calm Gawain's temper. Instead, his reaction is emotionally overwrought. While the Knight becomes once more the courteous Bertilak,¹⁸⁵ Gawain is now unrecognizable as the man who left Arthur's court and the stoic hero so often depicted in the northern romances.

According to the Knight, Gawain's sin is relatively minor. He explains, "Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir and lewté yow wonted;/ Bot þat watz for no wylde werke, ne wowing nauþer,/ Bot for 3e lufed your lyf – þe lasse I yow blame" [Only here you fell short a little, sir, and lacked fidelity, but that was not for fine craftsmanship, nor wooing either, but because you wanted to live: so I blame you the less] (2366-2368). Here it would seem that Gawain's only mistake was breaking his oath to Bertilak. By keeping the green girdle a secret, he has slightly erred, but, as the Knight says, he only does so because he wishes to live (he cannot fault him for being human, after all). Gawain, however, does not agree with this analysis. He is blinded by his fury and self-loathing and ignores the Knight's kind explanation. He is at first rendered speechless by the Green Knight's words and then "all þe blode of his brest blende in his face,/ Þat al he schrank for schome þat þe schalk talked" [All the blood in his body burned in his face, so that he winced with shame at what the man said] (2371-2372). Gawain's anger, which has steadily increased since his arrival at the Green Chapel, boils over as he furiously curses himself. When the Knight sees a man who has committed a minor discretion, Gawain views himself as beyond redemption. He woefully cries, "Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetsye boþe!/ In yow is vylany and vyse, þat virtue disstreyz" [A curse upon cowardice and covetousness! You breed boorishness and vice that ruin virtue] (2374-2375). Despite

¹⁸⁵ The Green Knight retains his green exterior and does not physically transform into Bertilak's more human form.

the Knight's claim that Gawain has only lacked fidelity, Gawain sees himself as a cowardly and covetous man. After tossing the green girdle towards the Knight he continues his rant, "Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer/ Of trecherye and vntrawþe – boþe bityde sorþe/ And care!" [Now I am false and unworthy, and have always dreaded treachery and deceit: may misfortune and grief befall both!] (2382-2384). Gawain believes he has become that which he fears the most and begs the Knight for the opportunity to confess his sins once more. But the Knight maintains his casual indifference to Gawain's claims of sinfulness. As Andrew and Waldon note, the Knight's gift of the green girdle is meant to be a celebratory action (294). He says, "For hit is grene as my goune, Sir Gawayn, 3e maye/ Þenk vpon þis ilke þrepe þer þou forth þryngez/ Among prynces of prys, and þis a pure token/ Of þe chaunce of þe Grene Chapel at cheualrous kny3tez" [Since it is green like my gown, Sir Gawain, you may remember this meeting in the world where you mingle with princes of rank: it will be a true token of the exploit of the Green Chapel among chivalrous knights] (2396-2399), obviously viewing "þe chaunce of þe Grene Chapel" as a knightly adventure, free from the serious symbolism Gawain has attached to his gift. For Gawain, the adventure to the Green Chapel has proven his unworthiness, which is why the Knight's offer to return to Hautdesert in order to reconcile with the lady is met with such a hateful speech.

Gawain's tirade against women is a surprising inclusion in the text. Despite his obvious frustration with the Green Knight and his nearly inconsolable anger once the game has been revealed, Gawain's sudden focus on treacherous women is uncharacteristic and unbecoming a knight of his position. As Gerald Morgan notes, "[The outburst] is entirely at odds with the argument of the poem as a whole and our

sense of Gawain's humanity" ("Medieval" 275). Once again, the poet presents a depiction of Gawain that does not seem to fit the literary tradition associated with the heroic version. Had Malory composed this piece, Gawain's misogyny would seem in keeping with the character, but this is not *Le Morte D'Arthur*.¹⁸⁶ A.C. Spearing attempts to explain some of Gawain's anger in relation to his perspective on the green girdle:

...for him the girdle is not a kind of campaign medal but a humbling reminder of the weakness of the flesh. He refers to it as a *luf-lace* (2438), a love-token: he did not literally succumb to the lady's sexual advances, yet it has been shown convincingly that women's girdles in folklore and in medieval narratives have 'clear sexual connotations'. Thus in a sense 'the girdle represents an event which never occurred' but the impression given is that Gawain feels as if it did occur. (*Readings* 197)

In addition, Morgan explains that, "It falls to the Green Knight to disclose to Gawain the nature of his sin, and, in so doing, the part the lady has played in his moral downfall. Gawain is not only humiliated by this realization of his sinfulness but also frustrated and embittered by the thought that his own virtues have made their contribution to that downfall" ("Medieval" 275). Because "it was the young lady who was the immediate agent of his deception and the ready instrument of his downfall," (Morgan "Medieval" 277), Gawain shifts his focus from the personal shame he feels in his actions to outright anger at the woman he feels led him astray. In the act he makes himself a victim, a move that further enforces the sin he so desperately wishes to avoid: cowardice. By blaming the lady, he can continue to avoid the true cause of his downfall, his own warranted fear. It was not the lady's seduction, but his sense of self-preservation that led him to the Green Chapel and his misogynistic outburst reveals that Gawain is still unable to understand the lessons of

¹⁸⁶ cf. chapter five for a discussion of Gawain's characteristic rashness and anger in Malory.

Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight. He must take responsibility for his own failings and, in doing so, will re-establish himself as a man worthy of accolades and celebration. It is only once he accepts the girdle that he can begin to repent for his actions. In embracing his shame, he slowly reverts back to the version of Gawain seen in Arthur's hall at the very beginning of the narrative.

While the Green Knight repeatedly offers Gawain a chance to return to Hautdesert and an opportunity to visit his aunt, Morgan le Fay,¹⁸⁷ Gawain leaves abruptly. As I discussed earlier, knights in romances often find themselves in forest landscapes and this setting brings with it certain connotations. While there are various reasons for entering a forest, and by extension, Faery, the lessons learned in this setting and the objects removed from the landscape are also noteworthy. Orfeo departs the Fairy King's realm with his wife and he leaves the forest able to reclaim his throne and his kingdom. In *Ywain and Gawain*, Ywain spends much of the tale in the forest, both on quests and due to madness. Yet his time in the woods, where he meets the lion who will become his companion, makes him a better knight and a more worthy husband. These departures enable reconciliation between the knight

¹⁸⁷ The *Gawain*-poet's depiction of Morgan le Fay, is, like his depiction of Gawain, an amalgamation of Morgan's numerous literary roles. The Green Knight describes her as "the goddess," which is likely a reference to her place in the early Irish and Welsh literature (and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*) where she is a healer. The French romances depict her as a sorceress who loathes Arthur and works tirelessly to destroy her brother's court. In *Sir Gawain*, she shows aspects of both of these literary interpretations. She is obviously a magical figure, able to change Bertilak into a large green man. She is also highly aware of the problems in Arthur's court, sending her messenger to test the Round Table *and* kill Guinevere – a woman who will eventually be partially responsible for the fall of the Round Table. By placing Morgan as the most powerful figure in Hautdesert, the poet is also able to compare Camelot and Hautdesert once again. Arthur, the youthful and rash king is unaware that his sister plots to test his court. Morgan, who appears aged (but may, in fact, be younger, as we have seen her ability to transform others), is a figure associated with the supernatural and trickery, yet her actions may also signify concern for her brother. After all, her fixation on the Round Table and Guinevere imply that Morgan knows *how* Camelot will eventually collapse. By sending Gawain back to court as her messenger, Morgan is able to communicate her warnings to Arthur through the symbol of the green girdle.

who must learn a lesson and his courtly society.¹⁸⁸ For Gawain, however, the object he brings with him is, in his opinion, emblematic of a lesson Camelot must learn in order to survive.

His journey back to Camelot is infused with a sense of urgency and “Abelef, as a baudreyk, bounden bi his syde,/ Loken vnder his lyfte arme, þe lace, with a knot,/ In tokening he watz tane in tech of a faute” [Across his body like a baldric, fastened at his side, and this girdle tied under his left arm with a knot, to signify he had been dishonoured by a slip] (2485-2487). He desperately wishes to return to Camelot in order to share his story, or more specifically, to share his guilt. Gawain’s intentions here are not to glorify his place in this tale. He wants the court to hear of his sin and he wants them to see the symbol of this sin in the form of the girdle. As he explains to Arthur and the court:

Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek.
 Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue
 Of couardise and couetyse, þat I haf caȝt þare;
 Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne.
 And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may last;
 For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit,
 For þer hit oneȝ is tachched twynne wil hit neuer. (2506-2512)

[This is the injury and damage that I have suffered for the cowardice and covetousness that seized me there; this is the token of the dishonesty I was caught committing, and now I must wear it as long as I live. For a man may hide his misdeed, but never erase it, for where once it takes root the stain can never be lifted].

Here Gawain is given the opportunity to confess, something he so desperately wished to do at the Green Chapel. He boldly explains his misdeeds, but unlike the Green Knight, who listened to his words and forgave him, Arthur and the court respond with boisterous laughter. This is a troubling moment for Gawain, and indeed

¹⁸⁸ We have seen other examples in *The Weddyng*, *The Awntyrs*, and *The Carle of Carlisle*.

a troubling moment for the future of the court. A.C. Spearing addresses the court's laughter:

They [laugh], apparently, without fully understanding what they are doing. They laugh loudly at Gawain's story, and their laughter suggests both resilience and a kind of foolishness. They have not undergone the chastening experiences that Gawain has suffered on their behalf, and they cannot fully understand them: but they can see that, as the Green Knight has pointed out [...], Gawain is still the best of earthly knights. (*Readings* 204)

Their inability to understand Gawain is a problematic reminder of the Green Knight's initial challenge to the Round Table's reputation. The fact that they still see Gawain as the greatest of all knights is also worth noting because Gawain now views himself as permanently tainted. While he is also known for his great humility, his personal feelings about his journey have left him convinced that, despite the Green Knight's assertions that he is human and, therefore, allowed to err, his sin should be remembered with solemnity and introspection. After numerous questions regarding Gawain's identity at Hautdesert, the Arthurian court's inability, or more correctly, disinterest in recognizing him as a different person to the brave knight who departed is a reminder of their immaturity seen in the first Fitt. Their adoption of the girdle emphasizes their lack of understanding, empathy, and awareness of the fragility of their own existence. It becomes a symbol of the renown of the Round Table, and all who wear it are greatly honoured. They appropriate the symbol to suit their needs and it becomes an object to reinforce the greatness of Arthur's court. Yet, Gawain's journey to prove this greatness shows that even the greatest knight, representing the greatest court, may fail. Gawain's symbol of shame becomes part of the very fabric of the Round Table. And, as Gawain notes, "For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit, / For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer." Gawain,

through trial and failure, is no longer one of Arthur's "beardless" men of the Round Table. His experience has changed him and the *Gawain*-poet's subtle references to Gawain's literary tradition implies that Arthur's court may also be on the precipice of change. The multiple versions of Gawain present in the text (both the archetype of chivalric values and the temperamental misogynist) imply a prophetic vision of Camelot's future and a reminder to the poet's audience that the story of Arthur ends in tragedy. Gawain's return to Camelot marks the end of Arthur's "first age," while the adoption of the girdle indicates the first blemish on Camelot's reputation and the first tentative step towards the collapse of Arthur's golden reign.

Conclusion

What makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* particularly remarkable in the field of Gawain-related poetry, is the poet's familiarity with the various incarnations of his hero, and his creative use of this familiarity to make Gawain's identity the central theme of the poem. As a summarizer and reviser of the Gawain tradition, the *Gawain*-poet is arguably the first to examine Gawain's characterization and psychological motivations by incorporating numerous Arthurian sources into his construction of his character. Rather than see Gawain's varied characterization as problematic, the poet instead makes his diversity the thematic heart of the text. While it is difficult to judge the poem's influence on later medieval writers,¹⁸⁹ the existence of *The Greene Knight* (c. 1500) would indicate that at the very least, the narrative and its motifs found some popularity for writers of later Gawain ballads. The ballad, however, ignores much of the *Gawain*-poet's character building and disregards the

¹⁸⁹ The survival of the poem in a single manuscript and the likelihood that the manuscript was housed in private libraries makes it difficult to comment on readership before it was first edited in the nineteenth century.

intertextuality that makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* such a rich entry into Gawain's literary history.

We cannot say, then, that *Sir Gawain* marks a watershed in the production of Gawain-romances. Many of the romances I have previously discussed were written after the poem and they do not delve deeply into Gawain's identity. Yet, the work of the *Gawain*-poet opens the romances to further interpretation. Gawain is no longer just one aspect of his character – the chivalrous knight or the lecherous lover, for example – but he is an amalgamation of numerous literary works and this more layered, complicated portrait is also present in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Malory's depiction of Gawain borrows heavily from multiple sources, and it is this reliance on intertextuality to build and negotiate character that becomes the legacy of the *Gawain*-poet.

As I discussed in earlier chapters, Gawain is always depicted as an ideal knight in the northern and Scottish romances. His diplomacy, courtesy, and martial skills are renowned. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, these skills are tested and found wanting. Gawain finds himself in a place where the rules of the court, the chivalric oaths that he lives by, do not apply, or at least not in the same way or to the same degree. The introduction of magic places him at a disadvantage. He is a displaced figure at Hautdesert and despite surviving the Green Knight's axe, his return to Camelot is a moment of humility and confession rather than a triumphant celebration and affirmation of the Round Table's reputation. Gawain has certainly met with supernatural figures before, yet this is the first time that magic has been used to trick the knight rather than aid him in his journey. Unlike the ghost of Guinevere's mother who passes on crucial warnings in *The Awntyrs*, or the loathly

hag of *The Weddyng* whose cunning ultimately saves Arthur, Morgan le Fay and her minions use magic to confuse, seduce, and trick the Round Table's greatest knight. The tarnished Gawain who returns to Camelot is a different man from the Gawain of these other romances, yet he is still *the* Gawain – as his final act upon seeing Arthur again is to confess, repent, and try to pass on all that he is learned to the court. He is still courteous, perhaps the more so because he believes himself to be lacking and vows to better himself.

In my next chapter, I will examine Sir Thomas Malory's portrayal of Gawain, a portrayal that sees his chivalric greatness fade in favour of a more negative depiction of a failed knight. Here in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, Gawain still reflects many of the accolades found in the works of the northern poets. Yet, the hint of his potential weaknesses proves to be an early example of Gawain's downfall in later Middle English romance. He is a character in transition, changing from the popular knight of the northern romances into something more Continental, as the French sources begin to influence his depiction in England. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he proves that despite his great renown, he is also human, and therefore, prone to err. It is this characterization that Malory adopts, expands, and immortalizes in his *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

Chapter V
“the moste untrewyst lyff that ever I herd knyght lyve”:
Contextualizing Sir Thomas Malory’s Gawain in *Le Morte Darthur*

Sir Gawain is a troubling presence in Malory’s great Arthurian work.

According to other critical studies,¹⁹⁰ he is both the Gawain found in Malory’s French sources and a unique creation, as Malory often chooses to change the French depiction of Arthur’s nephew to suit his own narrative agenda. In this chapter, I will show that the author meticulously establishes Gawain’s personality in his earliest adventures, using his parentage and actions to lay the foundations of the character. I will then examine *The Tale of Gareth*, a romance that shares much in common with the northern Gawain romances and certain Middle English loathly lady tales.

Malory’s characterization of Gareth is, I shall argue, an appropriation of the northern representation of Gawain. By examining Gawain’s earliest adventure in contrast with *The Tale of Gareth*’s use of northern characterizations and narratives, I will argue that the author created his own version of, not only an ideal English knight, but also an alternative representation of a “northern Gawain type,” a role that cannot, for reasons I shall explore, be fulfilled by Gawain himself. Malory is drawn to the English virtues and narrative possibility of the ‘northern Gawain’ – yet wary of the tainted Gawain of his French sources. Ultimately, Malory’s Gawain is a character incapable of redemption, but the legacy of his northern romances is strongly felt in *Le Morte DArthur* through the author’s representation of Gareth and Gawain’s reaction to Gareth’s death.

¹⁹⁰ For more on Gawain’s varied characterization, cf: D.J. Barnett, “Whatever Happened to Gawain?”; Beverly Kennedy, “Gawain and Heroic Knighthood in Malory.”; Margaret Robson, “Local Hero: Gawain and the Politics of Arthurianism.”; Martin B. Shichtman, “Malory’s Gawain Reconsidered.”; Bonnie Wheeler, “Romance and Parataxis and Malory: The Case of Sir Gawain’s Reputation.”; B.J. Whiting, “Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*.”

Malory's English Sources

The question of where Malory gained access to his sources has long been a topic of academic debate.¹⁹¹ Because this chapter will focus on the connection between *The Tale of Gareth* and the northern Gawain romances, I am particularly concerned with Malory's personal knowledge of texts that would depict Gawain in the typical northern characterization. Beverly Kennedy argues, "Malory seems to have concluded that this native English romance tradition erred by making Gawain much too good to be true [...] and that the Vulgate romances erred by making him over too much in the courtly French image. Thus he resolved the contradictions of his sources by preferring English chronicles to the English romances and the post-Vulgate French prose romances (the *Suite du Merlin* and the *Tristan*) to the Vulgate romances (The *Merlin* and the *Lancelot*)" (Kennedy 289). I would argue with the notion that the "native English romance tradition" makes Gawain "to[o] good to be true" for Malory's characterization process. While it is correct that his sources include the post-Vulgate romances, the evidence of Malory's adaptation of English romances exists in the figure of Gareth, who I will argue fulfills the role typically filled by the northern Gawain. In order to create this 'northern type,' however, Malory would need specific texts featuring Gawain in a prominent role, especially the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and any number of Gawain romances.

In Carole Meale's study of manuscripts and readership in the fifteenth-century, she questions whether Malory had access to a library containing his sources or whether he owned some of the French romances that would eventually form the

¹⁹¹ For more on Malory's sources, cf: P.J.C. Field, "The Source of Malory's *Tale of Gareth*."; Edward D. Kennedy, "Malory and His English Sources."; Terence McCarthy, "Malory and his Sources."; Carol Meale, "Manuscripts, Readers and Patrons in Fifteenth-Century England: Sir Thomas Malory and Arthurian Romance."; Ralph C. Norris, *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur*.

basis of *Le Morte D'Arthur* (105). In terms of access to English texts, however, she writes:

...access to most of [the English sources] would have been straightforward. The English translation of the Vulgate *Merlin*, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, and the treatise on hunting ascribed to Sir Trestrem...were all available in relatively inexpensive booklets, and all were in circulation in London, as well as farther north. Furthermore, the text on hunting and the *Awntyrs* were combined by two stationers or purchasers within the same volume. Amongst the romances, only the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the *Avowing of Arthur*, to judge from the evidence of extant MSS seem to have had more restricted geographical distribution. (Meale 106-107)

Malory's known English sources include the stanzaic and alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

His access to northern romances is, however, less clear-cut. As Meale suggests, access to *The Awntyrs off Arthure* may have been possible. The poem survives in four manuscripts and one of these, MS. Douce 324, was originally part of a compendium of popular literature in the fifteenth century (Smith 234). Malory's connection to *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain* is also a point of contention amongst critics, as both Ralph Norris and P.J.C. Field have argued that Malory may indeed have been the poem's author.¹⁹² The inclusion of this poem as a source for Malory would be especially interesting to my later discussion of *The Tale of Gareth; The Weddyng*, a loathly lady tale, may have provided Malory's inspiration for the sisters Lyonet and Lyonesse.¹⁹³ Alternatively, Malory would have had access to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* as a second possible source for the loathly lady type.

¹⁹² Field's argument relies heavily on the poem's inclusion of Sir Gromer Somer Joure, a name that also exists in Malory's *Morte* and nowhere else (Norris 82). Norris expands on this argument, citing the fact that both *Le Morte* and *The Weddyng* were written by imprisoned knights. Additionally, Norris notes the use of similar sources (including *Awntyrs*) for both poems (Norris 96). Ultimately, the evidence is inconclusive and the characterization of Gawain in *The Weddyng* does not reflect the characterization used by Malory in *Le Morte Darthur*.

¹⁹³ In addition, Malory may have also used Chrétien's *Yvain* or its Middle English translation *Yvain and Gawain* as his source for these two names. I will discuss this later in the chapter.

It should also be noted that three of the poems I have previously discussed appear as ballads in the Percy Folio, a manuscript dated to 1650.¹⁹⁴ Malory's knowledge of these particular poems is unknown, but their survival in ballad form indicates distribution beyond the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In order to create his Gawain and his Gareth, Malory would have needed access to the post-Vulgate romances and certain English sources – particularly the alliterative *Morte Arthur* and one (or more) of the northern romances. We know for certain that Malory used the post-vulgate French romances and the alliterative *Morte* as his sources for numerous tales. In addition, as Meale notes, access to, at the very least, *The Awntyrs off Arthure* would have been possible. Therefore, Malory would have had enough source material to familiarize himself with the traditional characterization of Gawain in the northern romances and this knowledge was used, I will suggest, both to establish his character in the early tales and, later on, to create a unique Orkney knight to take Gawain's traditional place as the greatest of Arthur's nephews.

Enter: Gawain

Malory's changes to Gawain's character are evident from his earliest introduction in the text. Arguably, he is doomed from the very start, as his arrival at Camelot is overshadowed by the actions of his parents. Both Lot and Morgause heavily influence the first tale, whose primary source is the French Post-Vulgate Cycle (or the *Suite du Merlin*). In Malory's source, King Lot, Gawain's father, is

¹⁹⁴ The ballads include *The Greene Knight*, an adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, an adaptation of *The Weddyng*, and the *Carle of Carlisle*, an adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. In addition, the Percy Folio also contains *The Turke and Sir Gawain* and *King Arthur and King Cornwall*. Furthermore, *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, a ballad that survives in one incomplete manuscript dated 1564, may have also been a source, as Terrence McCarthy notes similarities between one particular phrase (“begotyn upon a mountayne”) and *The Jeaste*'s multiple use of the phrase “upon a mountayne” (McCarthy 81).

angry with the newly crowned Arthur because he believes that the king is responsible for the death of his son, Mordred.¹⁹⁵ He tells Merlin,

if I hate [Arthur], it's not surprising. For he has recently committed the greatest treachery a king ever committed and has hurt by it all the noble men of this kingdom. He had deprived me myself of a child whom God had sent me; he never considered that the child was my son – and I the highest ranking man in his kingdom and so much his friend that I married his sister, so that my child was his nephew. Speaking of treachery, see what his crime was! (63)¹⁹⁶

Malory changes Lot's motivations, so that, while he is still one of the first knights to protest Arthur's claim to the throne, he wages war because, "...of late tyme before he had bene a knyght of Kynge Arthurs, and wedded the syster of hym. And for because that Kynge Arthure lay by hys wyff and gate on her Sir Mordred, therefore Kynge Lott helde ever agaynste Arthure" (51).¹⁹⁷ Both Malory's text and his source exhibit great respect for Lot, yet his differing motivations in the two narratives heavily color his actions. In the French source, Lot is acting as a bereaved father, who believes his former friend has killed his son. In Malory, Lot's fury stems from Arthur's incestuous union with his wife, and this adultery cannot be forgiven. Lot's justified anger is twofold as he is angry over the adulterous act, but his anger also calls attention to Arthur's worst sin. For Malory, Lot serves as a reminder that Arthur is deeply flawed, even in these early days of his reign. It is under this dark cloud that Gawain enters the text, in another marked change from Malory's French source.

In the *Merlin*, once the Orkney horde has been conquered by Arthur's knights, Lot's body is entombed in the Church of St. Stephen at Camelot, where

¹⁹⁵ While Mordred is secretly Arthur's son, Lot is unaware of his wife's incestuous union with her brother and believes the child is his.

¹⁹⁶ All translations from the Post-Vulgate are by Martha Asher in *The Post-Vulgate Cycle: The Merlin Continuation*.

¹⁹⁷ All quotations are from *Le Morte D'Arthur* are from Eugene Vinaver's *Malory: Complete Works*, unless otherwise noted.

Arthur honours the slain king. Upon Lot's death, his family (the queen, Arthur's sister, and her four sons, along with King Urien and Morgan le Fay) arrive at court. This marks Gawain's first appearance in the text and his actions provide crucial clues into how the French author characterized him:

When the king was buried, his oldest son Gawain, a very handsome child and yet only eleven years old, grieved so marvellously that all who saw him felt great pity for him.

When he uttered the lament for his father, the most beautiful any man of his age could have delivered, he said something that was heard and not forgotten, and it was this: "oh, my lord, King Pellinor, who killed you has injured me grievously and has diminished and impoverished our kindred by your death! The kingdom of Logres itself will certainly be impoverished by it more than it would have been by the loss of the seven best kings here. Please God, my lord, may I never earn praise for knightly deeds until I have taken appropriate vengeance and killed a king for a king." Gawain had already learned that King Pellinor had killed his father.

Those who heard these words wondered greatly at them, for they were noble, especially for such a child as Gawain was at this time. Everyone who heard him said, "This child has spoken nobly. He will yet avenge his father." And he did just as he had said, for later he killed King Pellinor and two of his children. (67-68)

There are numerous aspects of this fragment that help create a lasting impression of Gawain for the Arthurian court. His age is of particular importance, as the French poet reminds his readers that Gawain is very young when his father is killed. Furthermore, he exhibits exceptional nobility for a child and his words are greeted with respect and wonder. Here in the Post-Vulgate, the child Gawain is associated with nobility and fair speech. Like his northern British counterpart, this French Gawain is a figure worthy of respect and admiration. Malory, however, removes both the reference to Gawain's age and his speech in its entirety. Instead, his arrival at court is quickly summarized alongside his vow of vengeance against Pellinor: "But Kynge Pellynore bare the wyte of the dethe of Kynge Lott, wherefore Sir Gawayne revenged the deth of hys faidr the ten yere aftir he was made knyght, and slew Kynge

Pellynor hys owne hondis” (48). Gawain is not celebrated for his fair speech or his surprising maturity, rather he enters court with his mother, a woman notorious for her dalliance with her own brother, and his brothers, men who will later be responsible for the downfall of Arthur’s kingdom.

Gawain’s desire for revenge permeates his earliest adventures and is arguably his most distinct characteristic in Malory’s first book.¹⁹⁸ D.J. Barnett writes that “hardly has Gawain been knighted than we find him treacherously plotting with Gaheris his brother to waylay and slay King Pellinor, who had, it is true, killed their father, King Lot, but fairly in battle. The immediate cause of the plot is not, however, King Pellinor’s slaying of Lot, but the fact that he has a more honourable place at the Round Table” (1). While it is true that Pellinor killed Lot fairly, Gawain’s anger is not unwarranted. By allowing Pellinor a seat at the Round Table, Arthur is choosing a political alliance over a familial bond. Arthur’s decision, however, has been heavily influenced by Merlin, who personally takes Pellinor by the hand and seats him at the Round Table. Upon seeing Pellinor given such an honour, “thereat had Sir Gawayne grete envy, and tolde Gaherys hys brothir, ‘Yondir knyght ys putte to grete worship, which grevith me sore, for he slewe oure fadir Kynge Lott. Therefore I woll sle hym...with a swerde that was sette me that ys passynge trencheaunte” (Malory 63). Gaheris responds, “Ye shall not so...at thys tyme, for as now I am but youre squyre, and whan I am made knyght I woll be avenged of hym. And therefore, brothir, hit ys beste to suffir tyll another tyme, that we may have hym oute of courte, for and we dud so we shall trouble thys hyghe feste” (63). Gawain’s rashness is on

¹⁹⁸ Martin B. Shichtman argues that Malory’s Gawain has “three broad roles”, that of the “avenger, quester, and counselor” (“Malory’s” 159). Gawain’s thirst for vengeance is very much a prominent trait throughout the earliest tales.

full display here. It is also notable that he has just been made a knight, although only after Sir Torre.¹⁹⁹

In the *Merlin*, Merlin also allows Pellinor to sit at the Siege Perilous, an action that angers Gawain, as it does in Malory. But Malory has reversed the reactions of Gawain and Gaheris, as in the French source, Gaheris is the aggressor. After discussing Pellinor's great honour, Gaheris says,

Dear brother...what do you want me to do about it? I'm still your squire, and I ought not lay hands on a knight, whatever happens. Nevertheless, if you tell me to, I'm ready to go kill him at once with everyone there watching. I am prepared for it, for I have a sword which was brought me from our country the day before yesterday, the sharpest and best I have seen in a long time. Certainly, I will kill him quickly with it, if you agree, for there is nothing in the world I hate so mortally as I do his person. (122)

Gawain responds immediately, telling his brother, "Don't do it, dear brother...Don't do it like that, for if you lay hand on him while you are a squire, you won't have deserved the honour of knighthood. Leave it to me, who am a knight, to take vengeance, and I tell you that I'll take it as nobly as a king's son should on one who killed his father" (122). The French characterization of Gawain sees him act with prudence. He is still obsessed with vengeance, but he is also very aware that there is a proper way to obtain his vengeance. He is angry, but still calm, unwilling to risk

¹⁹⁹ Torre arrives at court with his father, Aryes, a cowherd. Aryes explains that he has thirteen sons who all wish to be labourers, except for Torre, who wants to be a knight. Upon seeing the young man, whose physical beauty is "much more" than any of his brothers, Merlin steps in and reveals that Aryes is not his father. According to Merlin, King Pellinor, who raped his mother before she was married, is his true father. Torre asks Merlin "Dishonoure nat my modir," but Merlin explains that because his mother was unwed and because King Pellinor "ys a good knyght and a kyng," Torre should be pleased with his noble pedigree. Both his mother and Aryes agree, and Torre is made a knight before Gawain. The revelation that King Pellinor is a rapist does nothing to tarnish his reputation. Merlin invites him to sit at the Round Table very shortly after this discovery and Torre is shown more respect than Gawain, whose own knighthood is overshadowed by Torre's arrival at court, his physical beauty, and the strangely happy news of his parentage. Instead, the negativity falls on Gawain, whose focus on vengeance seemingly blinds him to Pellinor's nobility, despite the king's obvious moral ambiguity. In the French source, Tor's parentage is revealed after Gawain's knighting and the text does not explicitly say that Pellinor raped his mother.

his or his brother's reputation. Gaheris is presented as the rash Orkney knight here, his sword – from their country – is a symbolic reminder that both Gawain and Gaheris come from elsewhere and follow different customs. Yet Gawain is willing to adhere to the customs of Arthur's court and plans to challenge Pellinor fairly once he has left Arthur's feast.

Malory's changes are subtle but hugely effective in altering Gawain's behaviour and motivations. He is prepared to kill Pellinor in Arthur's hall and he is not only offended by Pellinor's inclusion in the Round Table, he is also envious. It is Gaheris who has to remind him to be patient. While Gaheris would also like revenge, he is hesitant to disrupt Arthur's feast or bring shame onto his family. Gawain shows no sign of adhering to any chivalric code, despite being made a knight that very evening. His famed nobility and diplomacy are not present in Malory's version of events. Instead, we are shown a vengeful, rash young knight, ignorant of courteous behaviour and eclipsed by Sir Torre, a foreshadowing of Gawain's treatment once Lancelot arrives at court. These behaviours stay with Gawain throughout his disastrous first adventure and lead to a damaging series of events that will further tarnish his reputation. As Martin B. Shichtman argues, "[Gawain] is a man whose best intentions are undermined by a host of human frailties. In the context of Malory's work, Gawain's family loyalties seem understandable, though at times, plainly excessive and misguided" (160). In other words, Gawain is often distracted by his desire for vengeance. These distractions, and his deep family loyalties, are a combination that leads to disaster for Arthur and his kin.

Accidental Beheadings

Gawain's earliest quests as a knight prove to be both disastrous and damaging to his reputation. His accidental beheading of a maiden and his betrayal of Pelleas are both present in the French source, but once again, Malory has made changes to further emphasize Gawain's indecent behaviour. The first task, to return to Camelot with a white stag, sees Gawain accidentally behead an innocent maiden, the direct result of his refusal to show mercy to the maiden's knight. His actions are made all the worse by his seeming motivation for this act. The stag he seeks runs into a castle and is slain by his hounds. Upon seeing the dead stag, Sir Blamour appears and furiously kills two of Gawain's dogs because the stag had been a gift from his lady and its death has angered him greatly. Gawain reacts to the deaths, and swears, "Thou shalt dey...for sleyng of my howndis!" (66). When the knight asks for mercy, Gawain refuses, but, as he is about to strike the killing blow, Blamour's lady falls over his body and is accidentally decapitated by Gawain's sword instead. This is obviously a horrifying end to Gawain's first quest as a knight. Gaheris chastises his brother, reminding him that, "Alas...that ys fowle and shamefully done! For that shame shall never frome you: Also ye sholde gyff mercy unto them that aske mercy, for a knyght withoute mercy ys withoute worship" (66).

Not only is Gawain a knight un-worthy of worship, but he has also permanently tarnished his reputation. For a newly made knight, this is especially concerning. Once Blamour departs for Camelot on Gawain's orders, the two Orkney knights are attacked and Gawain is severely wounded. He is only spared when four ladies allow him to return to Camelot. There Gawain is chastised by Arthur and Guinevere and judged by the queen's ladies, who command that "for ever whyle he

lyved to be with all ladyes and to fight for hir quarrels, and ever that he sholde be curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy” (67). Gawain “sworne upon the foure Evaungelystis that he sholde never be ayenste lady ne jantillwoman, but if he fight for a lady and hys adversary fyghtith for another” (67). Malory makes no further comment on Gawain’s first adventure and instead turns to a tale of Sir Torre.

According to Bonnie Wheeler, “Gawain sometimes seems to be held to a higher standard of behaviour than other characters” (121). And indeed, Gawain is not the only knight to behead a lady;²⁰⁰ yet “somehow only Sir Gawain’s decapitative act merits such serious sanction that it blackens all later perceptions of him” (121). Undoubtedly, Gawain has behaved poorly for a knight, although his greatest crime is his lack of mercy, as the slaying of the maiden is a direct result of his temper. What is especially interesting about Malory’s rendition of events, however, is Gawain’s treatment after Blamour has left for Camelot. First he and Gaheris are set upon by knights and his injury seems a fair penance for killing the maiden. But once Gawain and Gaheris are imprisoned, the ladies of the castle show mercy only because he is Arthur’s nephew. Malory heavily emphasizes Gawain’s relationship with Arthur in this scene. When Gawain introduces himself to the first lady, he says “Fayre lady, my name ys Sir Gawayne, the Kynges son Lotte of Orkeney, and my modir ys Kyng Arthurs sister” (67). The lady tells him, “Than are ye nevew unto the Kyng,” (67), and immediately leaves to tell the knights of the castle “the presonere was Kyng Arthurs nevew.” Here, early in the narrative, Malory begins creating his

²⁰⁰ Wheeler notes that in the course of *Le Morte Darthur*, Sir Tristram, Arthur, and Gaheris all decapitate ladies, Gaheris notably his own mother (Wheeler 121).

faction of Orkney knights and their important kinship to Arthur.²⁰¹ For Malory, Gawain's first quest reveals a discourteous knight who must return to Camelot in shame.²⁰² He is freed from prison because he is Arthur's nephew, not because he has earned this forgiveness.²⁰³ And so, as Gaheris predicted, the shame of the act is not absolved or transcended.

The *Suite Merlin* presents a similar story, but Malory has removed much of the nuance from the tale. Here, both Gaheris and Blamour chastise Gawain's actions, and the mourning knight tells Gawain,

Evil, cowardly knight, now you have demonstrated your stupidity, having killed this young lady for no reason. Certainly, now I do not care if I am killed, except for the fact that I'll die at the hands of the worst and most cowardly and treacherous knight I ever saw. (130)

This is much harsher than Malory's version, where Blamour tells Gawain that he no longer has the will to live, but agrees to go to Camelot, carrying Gawain's slain greyhounds. The French source is obviously more detrimental to Gawain's reputation, but it also more carefully describes Gawain's deeds and the reaction to them. It allows Gawain to reflect upon his actions and, more importantly, to make amends. Upon returning to court, a scene Malory greatly minimizes, Merlin uses Gawain's actions as a lesson in knightly behaviour and an opportunity to let the young knight identify his faults and try to better himself. Even once the queen and her ladies have delivered their judgment,

[Gawain] swore at once, and he kept it well all his life, for never after did he fail to help a young lady who asked him, however strange she was or from however distant land. And because he later always helped maidens so willingly and with such a good heart, he was called

²⁰¹ Cf. *The Book of Sir Tristram* where Gawain is forgiven for killing Sir Lamorack because he is Arthur's nephew, an act frowned upon by Lancelot.

²⁰² Gawain rides back to Camelot with the slain maiden's head around his neck and her body set before him on a horse.

²⁰³ Cf. chapter four for an analysis of Gawain's speech in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

everywhere, in the court and elsewhere, the Knight of Maidens, and he never lost this name as long as he could bear arms. (135)

Merlin then asks him to be merciful towards his fellow knights, and Gawain “knelt at once and swore to observe this all his life” (135). These sections are missing or only minimally mentioned by Malory, so, although Gawain swears to uphold the court’s judgment, the subtle difference in the French source tells us that he becomes the Knight of Maidens, a far cry from the man who accidentally killed a woman on his first quest and is never allowed to atone for it. Malory does not grant Gawain this gift and instead subtly closes the scene with Gawain’s assurance that he will protect maidens. Unlike the Post-Vulgate, Malory does not provide any evidence that Gawain keeps his oath, and his next adventure proves that he still has much to learn when it comes to proper courteous behaviour towards ladies and their knights. This is in keeping with Malory’s characterization and remains an integral aspect of his character. Gawain’s inability to repent will haunt him for the rest of his days.

Rude Awakening

Gawain’s second adventure is, arguably, just as disastrous as his first. As B.J. Whiting argues, “No single act of Gawain’s disgusts modern readers as much as his betrayal of Pelleas” (Whiting 57). Malory’s editorial decisions once again change the original narrative of the French source by reinforcing Gawain’s failures as a young knight. The first part of his adventure concerns his treatment of women and his inability to show mercy to his fellow knights. As I have noted above, Gawain is heavily chastised for his actions, but this second adventure shows that, for Malory’s Gawain, the lessons of his first erroneous quest have quickly been forgotten. If the

inaugural outing depicted Gawain as an unmerciful knight, this second adventure shows him to be discourteous, lecherous, and cowardly.²⁰⁴

In the second quest, Gawain is faced with a superior knight who proves his higher moral standing and worthiness.²⁰⁵ Gawain's initial agreement with Sir Pelleas - that he will convince the lady Ettarde to fall in love with him - is admittedly a somewhat bizarre plan. In both the *Suit Merlin* and *Le Morte*, Pelleas is overjoyed by Gawain's offer to help because he is Arthur's nephew and the son of a king. These two kinship identifiers are crucial to Pelleas' ability to identify Gawain, more so than his shield or armour (which only become important when the two later switch armour). For Pelleas, Gawain's credentials as a knight lie solely with his familial connections. In the French source, Gawain initially describes himself as "a knight errant from a foreign country" (229), but for Malory, his connection to Arthur and Lot is more important. Pelleas, whose unrequited love for the lady Ettarde has caused him endless woe, is pleased that such a pedigreed knight would help him. But he warns, "sir knyght, syn ye ar so nye cosyn unto Kyng Arthure and ar a kynges son, therefore betray me nat, but help me, for I may nevir com by hir but by som good knyght" (101). Gawain's "goodness" has nothing to do with his prowess in arms or his reputation (which even at this early point would be poor), but because he is the nephew of the king and a son of a king, he must, presumably, behave nobly.

The anonymous French writer heavily emphasizes Gawain and Ettarde's (or 'Arcade' in the French) feelings about their love affair. In Malory, Gawain tells Ettarde that he has killed Pelleas and very quickly the two fall into bed. In the French

²⁰⁴ I will not discuss Gawain's cowardice at length here. He is accused of cowardice by his lady companion, who leaves him for another knight when he fails to help Sir Pelleas upon their first meeting. In the French source, Gawain is deeply shamed by her departure, "...for he truly thought the maiden had left him because of some fault she had seen in him" (226).

²⁰⁵ Just as Sir Torre outshone him in the first tale.

text, however, the love affair is more nuanced and Gawain is given yet another opportunity to reflect on his sin and make amends. As the French poet writes,

If at the beginning he had wooed her, hating her inwardly, now there was no longer any deception or pretence in it, for he loved her as much as she loved him and had set his heart on her so completely that he would rather have killed Pellias than given him the maiden. He remembered neither his promise nor the friendship he had pledged nor anything else except the woman he held in his arms and with whom he hoped soon to have his will. (233)

Furthermore, once they spend the night together, the poet writes, “Thus Sir Gawain fell in love with the young lady he had meant to trick, and she with him. They had so far consigned Pellias to oblivion that neither one remembered him” (233). While the French author does not exonerate Gawain of his actions, he does provide detailed evidence for his motivation. Gawain had certainly planned to help Pellias, but his love for the lady kept him from his task. The detailed erotic description of their growing passion, coupled with Gawain’s innermost feelings help explain why he chooses the lady over his fellow knight. Malory, however, ignores these exclamations of love and instead shows his Gawain to be a lustful, deceitful knight. He sleeps with Ettarde and, upon realizing that Pelleas has discovered their tryst, departs for the forest, leaving the lady to deal with the ramifications of their actions. Gawain does not speak following his initial declaration of love for the lady,²⁰⁶ so that the remaining action is centered on Pelleas’ discovery of the two lovers and his despair.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Gawain had previously agreed to go to Ettarde and claim to have killed Pelleas. He does this and Ettarde decides to be his lady because although Pelleas is a good knight, she despises him. Instead of trying to move Ettarde towards loving Pelleas, Gawain inexplicably tells her that he loves her and the two go to bed. Gawain’s declaration of love comes without motivation and seems to be part of his attempt to woo the lady (though she seemingly does not require much wooing).

²⁰⁷ Upon discovering the naked Gawain and Ettarde asleep in bed, Pelleas leaves his unsheathed sword between them as a sign that he was present. This is interpreted as a sign of his great courtesy, as rather than seek revenge on the sleeping Gawain, Pelleas decides against violent action (a far cry from

Pelleas' reaction to Gawain's betrayal is also heavily edited by Malory. In the French text, Pelleas expresses his deep sorrow, dramatically exclaiming, "Oh, God! Who would have thought that there would be such treachery in a king's son as this traitor has committed against me. Oh, Gawain! Although you have been false, I won't be; although I am the son of a poor vavasor, yet will I be true. God willing, my loyalty will serve me yet, while your treachery will make you die shamefully and ignobly" (234-235). Once Gawain realizes that Pelleas had discovered him *and* spared his life, he immediately repents for his actions: "Then he repented deeply what he had done, for he saw clearly that he had acted ignobly and falsely. The misdeed was so great that he did not see how he could ever amend it" (236). The French Gawain quickly vows to right his great wrong and does so by convincing Ettarde to marry Pelleas. The tale ends with the wedding of Pelleas and Ettarde and, despite Gawain's initial error, the narrative concludes on a relatively happy note. Pelleas' sorrow has ended and Gawain has made amends.

Malory's conclusion is very different. The involvement of the Lady of the Lake in this section is not found in the French source, but in Malory she steps in once Gawain departs for the forest.²⁰⁸ While Gawain leaves before Ninive's love spells are put to work, his actions inadvertently lead to Ettarde's death.²⁰⁹ Malory's deliberate decision to change the ending is curious, as by involving the Lady of the Lake he

the vengeful Gawain who arrived at Arthur's court). Instead, Pelleas rides away and decides to die, ordering that once he has died, his heart should be taken to Ettarde.

²⁰⁸ The union of Pelleas and Ninive is problematic because she uses spells to sway both Pelleas and Ettarde to her will. She uses a sleeping spell on Pelleas so that he will not follow her when she rides to speak to Ettarde. Then, she uses a love spell on Ettarde, which makes her fall in love with Pelleas. The Lady of the Lake blames Ettarde for this predicament, because Pelleas is such a valiant knight and she showed him such scorn. Pelleas falls in love with the Lady of the Lake and Ettarde dies from sorrow.

²⁰⁹ This may be a harsh assertion, but in a mythos where a love affair leads to the downfall of Arthur's kingdom, individual choices and actions can greatly impact the future. Ettarde's heartbreak is caused by magical intervention, but her predicament begins with Gawain's scheme and his casual dalliance in her tent.

removes the happy ending of the French source. There, Gawain sins, but also recognizes his grave error and feels genuine remorse over his actions. His attempt to make amends also includes his promise to stay away from Ettarde, a woman whom he deeply loves. His courtesy and nobility, however, must come before his own personal desires and for Gawain, Pelleas' happiness is more important than his own feelings. In Malory, Gawain's silence makes him seem unfeeling. Upon discovering the sword in her bed, Ettarde says, "Sir Gawayne, ye have betrayed Sir Pelleas and me! But had he bene so uncurteyse unto you as ye have bene to hym, ye had bene a dede knught. But ye have dissayved me, that all ladyes and damesels may beware be you and me" (103). Once again, Gawain is accused of acting poorly towards ladies despite his oath to do the contrary. He does not respond to the lady's words but simply "wente into the foreste" leaving Pelleas on his deathbed and Ettarde in a state of anger. At the end of Gawain's second adventure, he is still a knight who lacks mercy towards his fellow knights, mistreats women, and behaves ignobly. This is the reputation that follows him throughout Malory's text and Malory's deliberate exclusion of Gawain's thoughts and motives create the image of a man who does not learn from his mistakes.

These early adventures inform Gawain's character for the remainder of the text and ultimately prevent him from gaining honour and worship. He is permanently tarnished, so much so that his reputation as a vengeful knight haunts his every action. Barnett argues that Malory's purposely negative portrayal of Gawain is a result of his knowledge of the Prose *Tristan*, where Gawain is likewise seen negatively (6). Gawain's later adventures in Book V, Arthur's Roman campaign, and Books VI and VIII, only further emphasize Malory's dedication to depicting a sinful Gawain. I

suggest, however, that these authorial decisions have been carefully and deliberately constructed by Malory so that he may maintain his characterization throughout the text. In order firmly to establish the Orkney faction and the early signs of trouble in Arthur's kingdom, Malory uses Gawain's first quest to situate his geographical and ideological distance from Arthur's more celebrated knights: Lancelot, Tristan, and, eventually, Galahad. In order to depict an ideal example of English chivalry, Malory turns to Gareth because Gawain is already too tarnished at this point in the narrative. At this early juncture, Gawain has proven himself a most unworthy knight, an aspect of his character purposely drawn from the French sources by Malory, which eventually enables Gareth to appropriate the characteristics of his more famous elder brother. I will now discuss *The Tale of Gareth* as it relates to the northern Gawain romances and Malory's characterization of Gareth in comparison to his eldest brother.

Bad "Bromance"

The *Tale of Sir Gareth* provides an interesting opportunity to discuss Gawain and his many literary iterations present in Malory's text. Arnold Sanders' argues that in *Gareth*,

Malory ceases to follow a single source and, instead, artfully and with comic effect recombines well-known Middle English romance types, most obviously the 'Fair Unknown' romances. Malory mixes and disrupts narrative conventions common in 'Fair Unknown'²¹⁰ tales by blending them with conventions common to poems of the 'Gawain'-romances [...] Unlike the 'Fair Unknown' tales, however, 'Gawain'-romance plots often involve beheading games with grotesque male opponents from the Welsh border, and bed tests with willing but forbidden ladies. Most importantly, perhaps, the 'Gawain' romances' emphasis on testing knightly courtesy

²¹⁰ P.J.C. Field and Ralph Norris also see similarities between Malory's *Gareth* and the Fair Unknown romances, which include the French *Le Bel Inconnu* and the very popular Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus*, a tale of Gawain's son (Norris 81).

results in the challengers' peaceful reintegration within Arthur's court..."
(34)

There are many intriguing similarities between *Gareth* and certain Gawain-romances, but I believe Sanders' argument can be taken a step further.²¹¹ Not only does Gareth's tale have many commonalities with narratives often attributed to Gawain romances, but Gareth himself shares many of the characteristics unique to the northern and Scottish literary renditions of Gawain. I believe that Malory's Gareth is his own version of a 'northern Gawain type', free from the literary baggage of his Gawain. As Sanders concludes, "[Gareth], who becomes a central figure in Malory's tragic catastrophe, helps define values that might have prevented that gloomy event, such as gentil speech and deeds, respect for knightly prowess, and reverence for marriage" (41). These attributes perfectly describe the Gawain of the northern and Scottish romances, providing further evidence that Malory's Gareth is a stand-in for the common depiction of his eldest brother.

The question of Malory's source for *The Tale of Gareth* has long troubled scholars. Roger Loomis (Field 65), and, more recently, Faith Lyons believe Malory used a now lost French source as inspiration for his work. Alternatively, R. W. Ackerman (Field 65) and, as I have noted, Arnold Sanders argue that Malory was inspired by an English source for the tale. P.J.C. Field, alternatively, suggests that Malory's source was likely an English translation of a French narrative (70). Conversely, Wilfred L. Guerin thought that *The Tale of Gareth* has no source and was original to Malory. These options are by no means the end of the debate, but for

²¹¹ Sanders does remark that "Malory's association of Gareth with fairness of deeds, more than appearances, aligns the protagonist with 'Gawain'-romance heroes who behave respectfully to uncouth challengers, and with the challengers themselves, because their 'courtesy' so often is mistaken because of their exterior appearance" (37), but this argument can be made more specific by considering Gawain as the quintessential, and obvious, hero of his own romances.

my own work, I am more interested in the English aspects of Malory's text, especially his characterization of Gareth in contrast to Gawain. Or, as D. Thomas Hanks Jr. notes in his essay on the folk fairy tale aspects of *Gareth*, "As the longest chiefly-original part of the *Morte*, it naturally appeals to the Malorian who wishes to see Malory's writing at its least French..." (55). Whether *The Tale of Gareth* originates from a French or an English source, or whether it has no source and is original to Malory, the narrative feels like the most English section of the *Morte*, mainly because it shares so many commonalities with popular Gawain-romances and the motifs and themes found there. Additionally, because Gareth takes the place of the 'northern Gawain type,' *The Tale of Gareth* features a uniquely English example of the chivalric ideal usually represented by Gawain.

Even the name 'Gareth' is a complicated linguistic puzzle, as 'Gareth' is Welsh in origin and Malory's use of the name is its first appearance in an English text (P. Taylor 506).²¹² Furthermore, Gaheris, who Malory lists as one of Gareth's brothers, "is not found in French romance, but comparable O.F. forms of his name – *Guerret* and *Guerrehet* – are phonologically representative of usual French pronunciations of *Gareth*" (P. Taylor 507). And "there are no episodes in French romance involving Gaharet which could serve as sources for the tale of Gareth" (P. Taylor 507). Malory's Gareth, then, is arguably an original creation. While his name may be an adaptation of a French name or borrowed from a Welsh source, the character 'Gareth of Orkney' appears for the first time in the English, *Le Morte D'Arthur*. This allows Malory the opportunity and freedom to adopt characteristics

²¹² The Post Vulgate lists the name of the fourth son of Lot as 'Guerrehet.'

typical of the northern Gawain and use them in his creation of the youngest Orkney brother.

As we have seen, the northern/Scottish Gawain-romances all imbue their hero with similar features. Gawain is particularly known for his diplomacy, especially his fair speech and prudence. He is a skilled warrior when called upon to fight for Arthur. He is also familiar with facing supernatural foes and his courtesy and chastity are often tested in these romances by damsels, or the queen herself. This later aspect is usually an attempt to reconcile the more courteous version of Gawain found in the English tradition with his infamous philandering made popular in the French romances. These four aspects of Gawain's character are all found in *The Tale of Gareth*, as Malory's Gareth must navigate a forest filled with knights, foreign lords, a sorceress, and her fair sister. His ability to successfully take on these tasks in his first adventure is reflective of Malory's appropriation of character traits more commonly associated with the northern version of Gawain.

A Pre-Feast Marvel

Malory's begins his *Tale of Gareth* in a place named Kynke Kenadonne,²¹³ "uppon the sondys that marched nyghe Walys" (177). Arthur wishes to see a "grete mervayle," and it is at this moment that Gareth enters on the shoulders of two men. Gareth's entrance serves as Arthur's pre-feast wonder, as his strange entrance and his extraordinary appearance please the king. His beauty and his size make him remarkable: "he was large and longe and brode in the shuldyrs, well-vysaged – and the largyste and the fayreste handis that ever man sye" (177). Gareth's hands and his

²¹³ According to R.W. Ackerman, "Kynke Kenadonne" is a city or castle located "on the Welsh border" (138).

refusal to share his identity inspire Sir Kay to call him ‘Bewmaynes’, a name he carries for much of the narrative.

The opening of the tale is reminiscent of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Gareth’s entrance shares many similarities with the antagonists of Gawain-romances. Here in Malory’s tale he seems to echo the Green Knight, Golagros, and the Carle of Carlisle – all remarkable for their size and startling appearance (Sanders 37). But Gareth quickly proves that he is not an antagonistic figure and Kay’s cruel taunts provide another similarity to the Gawain-romances, as Kay’s inability to recognize Gareth’s nobility make him appear characteristically foolish. This early section also sets up what will be the two factions of knights responsible for the eventual destruction of Arthur’s kingdom. Lancelot and Gawain both display kindness towards the mysterious young stranger, “but as towchyng Sir Gawayne, he had reson to proffer hym lodgyng, mete, and drynke, for that proffer come of his bloode, for he was nere kyn to hym than he wyste off; but that Sir Launcelot ded was of his grete jantlynesse and curtesy” (179). Gawain and Lancelot do not figure greatly in *The Tale of Gareth*, but their presence looms in the background of Gareth’s adventures, as the young knight favours Lancelot over his brother time and again.

Diplomacy on Display

Despite his youth, Gareth quickly proves himself to be an exceptional knight. His first foray into the forest with Lyonett is fraught with jousts and his lady’s endless taunting. Lyonett’s displeasure over Gareth’s reputation – he had spent the previous year as a kitchen servant – makes for a comical interlude in Gareth’s adventures, but her harsh words serve to highlight his usurpation of both Gawain’s

typical role in northern romance and Gawain's previous failures in Malory's text.

With the exception of the Black Knight, whom Gareth kills, his meetings with the Green Knight and the Red Knight end with both knights yielding. When the knights ask for mercy, Gareth responds similarly each time, saying "all this avaylyth the nought but yf my damesell speke to me for thy lyff" (186). The importance of these dual scenes of mercy are twofold: Gareth is given the opportunity to exhibit his talent for dealing with foreign knights, but also, he maintains the chivalric oath Gawain accepted at the end of his first adventure more ably than his eldest brother. Gawain's promise "to be with all ladyes and to fyght for hir quarels" and "never to refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy" (67) is quickly broken during his interactions with Pelleas and Ettarde. Gareth, however, is granted the opportunity to fulfill his brother's broken oath and he does so remarkably well for such a young knight. He upholds the vow to protect women above his vow to show mercy, exhibiting the hierarchy of his chivalric oaths. As the narrative progresses and Lyonett comes to respect Gareth, however, the young knight begins to make his own decisions regarding mercy in battle. His maturation reveals a burgeoning skill for diplomacy, a skill reminiscent of Gawain's numerous exchanges with foreign lords in the northern romances.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ During Gareth's first adventure, his mother Morgause arrives at court and is shocked that her brother did not recognize his young nephew. Once she tells Arthur that the mysterious kitchen boy is in fact Gareth, son of Lot and brother of Gawain, the king marvels at his nephew's greatness. She explains, "...ever sytthen [Gareth] was growyn he was [merveillously wytted, and ever he was] feythfull and trew of his promyse" (210). Gareth's intelligence, wit, and courtesy firmly establish his reputation before he even returns to court from his first quest. Arthur tells his sister, "Fayre sister...ye shall right well wete that I knew hym nat, nother no more dud Sir Gawayne nothir his bretherne" (209). Gawain's ignorance is used to clear Arthur of his wrongdoing. If even his own brother could not recognize him, the king should be exempt from Morgause's anger. It is also notable that at the moment Morgause reveals the young knight's true identity, Gawain asks the king, "...ye woll gyff us leve, we woll go seke oure brother" (210). Before Arthur can answer, Lancelot steps in and prevents Gawain from leaving. In these court scenes, Gawain always fails in his attempts to gain favour from Arthur. Unlike the Gawain of the northern romances, whose speech and fair words are uncannily

By the end of his tale, Gareth has slain the Black Knight in fair combat, charmed his brothers into subservience, and convinced the fearsome Red Knight of the Red Lands,²¹⁵ a knight who nearly killed Gawain,²¹⁶ to turn away from his murderous siege and pledge allegiance to Arthur. The final scenes of *The Tale of Gareth* feature not only numerous weddings, but also, a parade of knights paying “omage and feauté” directly to Gareth. He is a newly made knight and now a lord in his own right, with vassals and lands to oversee. His careful adherence to his chivalric oaths have led him to success on his first adventure, appropriating his brother’s usual talent for diplomacy against difficult adversaries. For Malory, Gareth is the Orkney brother gifted with martial skill, fair speech, and courteous acquiescence to his chivalric oaths. Despite Gawain’s obvious love for his brother and his lack of any major wrongdoings in this tale, he remains an outsider. Lancelot is the better knight at court, and Gareth proves the most worshipful of the Orkney brothers. The connections between Gareth and the northern Gawain do not end with his diplomatic skills, however, as Malory skilfully investigates Gawain’s reputation as a womanizer through Gareth’s dealings with the two powerful damsels in the text.

perfect in every situation, Malory’s Gawain is constantly chided for his failures. His inability to recognize his own brother is used by Arthur when Morgause accuses Arthur of acting shamefully when he allowed Gareth to stay in the kitchen. His rash desire to find Gareth is also embarrassing in light of Lancelot and Baldwin’s plan to summon Dame Lyonesse and ask her about Gareth’s whereabouts (as I discussed in chapter one, Baldwin is a popular figure in the Gawain-romances).

²¹⁵ Gareth spares the Red Knight of the Red Lands, despite the numerous Arthurian knights killed on his command. The Red Knight begs mercy of Gareth, explaining that his actions were motivated by the love of a lady whose brother had been murdered by Lancelot or Gawain. For Gareth, this is a suitable reason to show mercy, as “all that he dud was at a ladyes requeste, I blame hym the lesse” (200). Once again, Gareth’s dedication to protecting ladies supersedes his own moral compass. First and foremost, he shows courtesy to women, followed closely by his own chivalric fellowship with Round Table knights.

²¹⁶ The Red Knight of the Red Lands eventually becomes Sir Ironside, a knight who also features in *The Carle of Carlisle*.

The Loathly Lady Motif in *The Tale of Gareth*

Another unnoticed aspect of *Gareth*, and further evidence that its hero is the heir to the ‘northern Gawain’ tradition, is Malory’s use of the loathly lady motif in his depiction of the two sisters, Lyonett and Lyonesse.²¹⁷ Gawain’s interactions with women are, as I have noted previously, complicated and troubled. While the French tradition and Malory favour a flawed, lusty Gawain, the northern English and Scottish tradition sees him as a respectful champion and defender of women. At times, the English authors play with his characterization, referencing his reputation as a womanizer, but over all, the English tradition²¹⁸ shies away from Gawain’s unchaste behaviour, perhaps his most famous foible.²¹⁹ In *The Tale of Gareth*, women play an integral role in the narrative and, arguably, hold the most power within the textual universe. Gareth’s interactions with these women often mirror Gawain’s interactions with the women featured in many of the Gawain romances I have discussed previously. Once again, Malory’s Gareth is given the opportunity to face Gawain’s greatest challenges and succeed where his brother so often fails.

Just as Gareth must face his fellow knights in combat, he finds himself navigating what Sanders refers to as “bed-tests” throughout the narrative. These

²¹⁷ The name ‘Lyonett’ may be derived from Chrétien’s *Yvain* or its Middle English translation *Ywain and Gawain*, where ‘Lunete,’ a handmaiden, aids Ywain in his adventures and unites him with his estranged wife. Lunete and her lady Laudine (or Alundyne in *Ywain*) are not sisters and both texts are deeply concerned with female inheritance rights. Ywain, however, shares much in common with the young Gareth, as both knights venture on a quest, aided by a woman, and mature throughout their journey, which prepares them for marriage (or for Ywain, to be a better husband).

²¹⁸ Of course, there are exceptions to this statement including the sixteenth century ballad, *The Jeaste of Gawain*. Cf. chapter three.

²¹⁹ Cf. chapter four for my discussion of Gawain’s relationship with women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

chastity tests echo many similar narrative moments in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Carle of Carlisle* (Sanders 39).²²⁰ Sanders writes,

These physical tests of chastity offer access to forbidden women who are controlled, secretly or openly, by the women's male relatives. In 'Wedding' romances, like 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,' 'The Marriage of Sir Gawain,' and the 'Wife of Bath's Tale,' the women themselves control access to their bodies, and the knights must be taught 'what women want most' before they can satisfy their own desire. Bertilak's wife and Chaucer's 'loathly lady' are the most fully developed of these female challengers. They represent opposing images of female desire: on the one hand, a suggestively lustful invitation to extramarital sex, and on the other hand, a chaste channelling of desire by marriage. (Sanders 39-40)

Both types of women – one controlled by a male relative and the other politically and physically independent of male dominance - are represented in *The Tale of Gareth*. I believe that Sanders' reference to loathly lady narratives can successfully be applied to Malory's representation of women in his text,²²¹ as the motif enables an informative reading of *Gareth* and offers further evidence for Malory's use of Gawain in his characterization of Gareth.

Gareth's first 'bed-test' is an example of the first type of chastity test Sanders mentions – with a woman controlled by a male relative.²²² The second has more in common with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as it involves a particularly

²²⁰ Sanders also includes the later ballad version of these poems, *The Green Knight* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. Due to their late composition date, I have not included them in my own discussion.

²²¹ Ragnell can, of course, be added to this list.

²²² Sir Persaunte, the Blue Knight, sends his daughter to Gareth's bed and orders her to "...make hym no strange chere but good chere, and take hym in your armys and kysse hym; and loke that this be done, I charge you, as ye woll have my love and my good wylle" (192). Once the lady arrives in Gareth's chamber, however, he immediately turns down her offer: "God deffende me...than that ever I sholde defoyle you to do Sir Persaunte suche a shame. Therefore I pray you, fayre damesell, aryse oute of this bedde, other ellys I woll" (192). The damsel's response to this is telling, as she assures Gareth that, "I com nat hydir by myne owne wyll, but as I was commaunded" (192). Sir Persaunte interprets Gareth's response as a sure sign that he is of noble blood. Gareth's reply to the maiden's offer is once again revealing of his successful adherence to the chivalric oaths. He has no desire to jeopardize the maiden's reputation, as by doing so, her father would be shamed. Gareth understands that his actions would have consequences for both father and daughter, exhibiting once again his great respect for women and his fellow knights. This scene, when considered in comparison to Gawain's experience during the Ettard/Pelleas episode, once again shows Gareth as superior to his brother.

seductive lady and magical interference. As I suggested above, the role of women in this tale is of particular note as Dame Lyonett and her sister, Dame Lyonesse, are responsible for much of the narrative action. Gareth's interactions with these two sisters are the early catalysts for events that will extend far beyond his own tale.

Carolyn Larrington believes that Lyonett, Lyonesse and their brother Gryngamoure "are essentially denizens of the Otherworld" ("Sibling" 66), as "Lyonesse holds the Castle Perilous 'besyde the Ile of Avylon' [...], while Gryngamoure's dwelling is said to be in 'the Isle of Avylon' [...]. Gryngamoure's name aligns him with the heroes of French fairy-mistress *lais*, and he is indeed named as the lover of Morgan le Fay in Chrétien's *Erec*" ("Sibling" 66). I agree with Larrington's reading and suggest that Lyonett and Lyonesse share many aspects in common with the loathly lady figure, which explains their symbolic purpose in the text. Like Morgan le Fay and Bertilak's lady in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Lyonett and Lyonesse represent the dual aspects of the loathly lady. The loathly lady's traditionally ugly outward appearance allows her freedom to test knights without the societal boundaries faced by other female figures in the romances. Mary Leech writes, "The Loathly Lady is not just ugly; she is deformed. Since she cannot be a viable commodity for marriage, she is not marketable. Because she is disgusting, she is not subject to the same regulatory standards as beautiful women. The Loathly Lady is therefore accorded a certain amount of freedom not otherwise permitted to women" (215). As the hag, the loathly lady is not the object of desire nor is she considered a suitable spouse, although many loathly lady stories end in a wedding. Her purpose, to teach men what women most desire, is often revealed in bedroom scenes where her ability to transform – often due to a magical curse – allows the knights in her charge

to learn valuable lessons about the proper treatment of women. Despite her eventual transformation into a beautiful and, therefore, desirable woman, loathly ladies often maintain their independence.²²³ They are not demure distressed damsels, but capable, powerful figures in their own right. Lyonett represents the loathly lady in her hag form: a woman who is not looked at as a possible wife, but rather, a powerful, independent, female figure who tests Gareth's patience and chivalric oaths. Lyonesse becomes the loathly lady post-transformation: she is a figure of political power, seduction, and ultimately, marital happiness. These two sisters form the symbolic whole of a loathly lady, which makes Gareth the loathly lady knight: a man in need of maturation, but capable of great improvement.

Traditional loathly lady stories feature not only an enchanted female figure, but also, a sinful knight. As we have seen, Gawain often features in the Middle English loathly lady stories.²²⁴ Mary Leech argues, "The circumstances that permit the Loathly Lady to gain her authority originate from a masculine breach of boundaries rather than a feminine intrusion into the ordered society" (217-218). Gareth's behaviour early in the tale causes unrest for the court, not because he is purposely sinful like Chaucer's raping knight, but because he inadvertently upsets the natural social hierarchy. Gareth's entrance at court is surprising, but by concealing his identity and asking to be placed in the kitchens, he "breach[es] the boundaries" of Arthur's court. This disruption is later noted by his mother, who

²²³ I am specifically referencing Chaucer's loathly lady in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" and Dame Ragnell. Ragnell in particular is an important example for my comparison between Malory's Lyonett and Lyonesse and loathly ladies in the Gawain romances. After Ragnell's transformation, she sways Gawain away from Arthur and asks Arthur to pardon her troublesome brother, Sir Gromer Somer Jour. Ragnell is represented as a strong female figure who, despite the curse that turned her into a hag, maintains the sovereignty all women, according the motif, most desire.

²²⁴ I am referring specifically to Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and *The Weddyng*. John Gower's "Tale of Florent" is a well-known loathly lady story in Middle English, but it is not an Arthurian tale.

arrives at court expecting to see her youngest son – the child of a king – treated with the respect his lineage demands. His acceptance of Lyonett’s quest further disrupts this hierarchy and inspires her taunting because his identity and social standing have been kept a secret. Lyonett’s arrival signifies that it is time for Gareth to leave the kitchens and for the court to return to its natural hierarchal structure. Gareth’s sins may not be equal to the example found in Chaucer’s loathly lady example, but his disruptive entrance symbolically connects him to the ‘sinful knight’ of the motif.

Lyonett, whom Miriam Rheingold Fuller calls Gareth’s “most loyal ally” (264) appears at Arthur’s court in Carlyon on Whitsunday (Pentecost) the year after Gareth’s arrival. Arthur once again refuses to eat “untyll he harde of som adventures” (179) and Lyonett provides the required entertainment. Malory does not offer any details about her appearance, a strange omission considering that a woman’s physical appearance is often an important factor in the loathly lady motif and the romance genre.²²⁵ This is not to say that Lyonett is ugly, but her purpose at court is not to attract Gareth’s affection. She is not an object of romantic love, but rather, an authoritative figure following her own rules and free from the gendered boundaries of courtly society. Lyonett’s abusive taunting throughout the tale is controversial, but as Fuller argues, “Lynet’s [sic] mistreatment of Gareth constitutes a test of his courtesy” (257).

Lyonesse, alternatively, is immediately the object of Gareth’s desire. Upon seeing her for the first time, he tells Lyonett, “[Lyonesse] besemyth afarre the fayryst lady that ever I lokyd uppon; and truly, . . . I aske no better quarrel than now for to do batayle, for truly she shall be my lady and for hir woll I fyght” (197). Despite

²²⁵ Arthur refers to her as “Fayre damesell,” but this is a sign of his courtesy rather than a comment on her physical appearance.

spending the majority of the narrative travelling together, Lyonett and Gareth never show any romantic interest in each other. Lyonett is not jealous of Gareth's sudden love for her sister, nor does she pine for him. Her focus remains on rescuing her sister and motivating Gareth on their way to the Castle Perilous. Lyonett's comical dislike of Gareth and her constant insults drive Gareth to be a better knight:

“Although Malory does not give much evidence for motivation, the fact that Lynet's treatment of Gareth, whether positive or negative, helps him to become a better knight, strongly suggests that she means to help Gareth all along” (Fuller 253). When she apologizes for her behaviour, she says, “what maner a man ye be, for hit may never be other but that ye be com of jantyll bloode; for so fowle and shamfully dud never woman revile a knyght as I have done you, and ever curteysly ye have suffyrde me – and that com never but of jantyll bloode” (191). Gareth responds,

Damesell [...] a knyght may lytyll do that may nat suffir a jantyllwoman, for whatsomever ye seyde unto me, I toke none hede to your wordys – for the more ye seyde the more ye angred me, and my wrette I wrekid upon them that I had ado withal. [And therefor alle] the mysseyng that ye mysseyde me in my batayle furthered me much and caused me to thynke to shew and preve myselffe at the ende what I was. (191)

Just as the loathly hags teach their knights important lessons, Lyonett has prepared Gareth for his fight against the Red Knight of the Red Lands *and* marriage. When he left Arthur's court he was a lowly kitchen boy, but each of Lyonett's cruel taunts has led to him learning patience, courtesy, and prowess in battle. He has proven his nobility through his actions, which is ultimately the symbolic purpose of the loathly lady motif. Through Lyonett's constant testing of his resolve, Gareth transforms from Sir Beaumanys into Sir Gareth, worthy knight of Arthur's court and capable opponent of the dastardly Red Knight of the Red Lands.

Her role in the narrative does not end here, however, as Lyonett's magic and constant vigilance enable Gareth success in his first quest, which makes him, arguably, the most worthy knight of the Orkney contingent. To allude once more to the loathly lady motif, Leech writes of Dame Ragnell, "After her change, her power, her forceful nature, her ability to exert influence has not gone away, despite the fact that she now has the physical appearance of a lady and claims that she wants to behave like a good wife" (227). Although Lyonett does not physically transform, Gareth's success against the Red Knight of the Red Lands marks the completion of her initial story arc. Following the shift in focus from Lyonett to Lyonesse, however, Lyonett – much like the transformed Dame Ragnell – maintains her power: both magical and political. Her presence ensures a continuation of Gareth's self-improvement and chivalric education. Despite Gareth's newfound focus on Lyonesse and the Castle Perilous, Lyonett still exhibits behaviours typical of the pre-transformation loathly lady because Gareth's own transformation is not quite complete.

Lyonesse provides the second aspect of the loathly lady, the seductress and eventual wife. After his successful battle against the Red Knight of the Red Lands,²²⁶ Gareth grants his adversary mercy noting, "[...] I woll relece hym, that he shall have his lyff uppon this covaunte: that he go into this castell and yelde hym to the lady, and yf she woll forgyff and quyte hym, I woll well" (200). While the typical question

²²⁶ The Red Knight of the Red Lands is an interesting figure when juxtaposed with Gawain's representation in the text. The Red Knight, later called Sir Ironside, is infamous for killing a large number of Arthur's knights. Upon killing them, the Red Knight hangs them from trees, a "shamefull deith withoute mercy and pyté" (196). Additionally, he seems to share Gawain's solar strength, gaining great power before noon. While Gawain is certainly not depicted quite so villainously, he is known for his shameful inability to show mercy and his solar strength. This strength is viewed negatively by Lancelot who sees it as an unfair advantage. The similarities between the Red Knight and Sir Gawain imply that while Gareth's brother is not yet considered an antagonist, he shares characteristics with a man viewed as a shameful villain.

of the loathly lady motif is “what do women most desire,” by granting Lyonesse sovereignty (she is given the final say on the Red Knight’s fate) – the answer to the loathly lady’s question – Gareth technically successfully completes the loathly lady test. He is now matured, reformed, and prepared to be a suitable husband. In *The Tale of Gareth*, however, Lyonesse is a powerful figure in her own right, who holds a certain amount of political sway. The seductive aspects of her character appear after Gareth defeats the Red Knight, but her political independence and appeal for Gareth maintain the loathly lady motif even after he has granted her sovereignty.

Gareth’s second ‘bed-test’ is not quite as successful as his first. Once again, he experiences a scenario similar to one faced by Gawain in Malory’s fourth book. Unlike Gawain, however, who is held solely responsible for the disastrous liaison with Ettarde, Gareth is shown the forgiveness his brother never achieves. Once the Red Knight of the Red Lands departs, Gareth and Lyonesse find themselves in the Castle Perilous. Their lust for each other is nearly overwhelming, “and so they brente *bothe* in hote love that they were acorded to abate their lustys secretly” (205, my emphasis). They secretly plan to meet at night and give in to their mutual desire, but “this counceyle was nat so prevyly kepte but hit was undirstonde, for they were but yonge *bothe* and tendir of ayge, and had nat used suche craufftis toforne” (205). Before they can consummate their relationship, however, Lyonett sends an enchanted knight who battles Gareth and stops his youthful tryst.²²⁷ Malory is kind to both Gareth and Lyonesse. He excuses their behaviour because they are so young and inexperienced. This statement is especially notable in light of his treatment of Gawain. As we have seen, the French source forgives Gawain during the

²²⁷ This magical interference is similar to the Green Knight and Bertilak’s lady actions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Pelleas/Ettarde episode because he too is so young and inexperienced. Malory eliminates this excuse and places the blame entirely on Gawain, despite Ettarde's willing participation. While it is entirely possible that Malory's missing source excused Gareth's behaviour, Malory has shown himself to be especially apt at removing similar statements in reference to Gawain's actions.

The second 'bed-test' shares more in common with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as despite Gareth's temptation, he walks away mostly unscathed and is forgiven for any perceived wrongdoing. As the symbolic loathly lady knight, Gareth has successfully navigated both 'bed-tests' and, in the process, found the maturity and wisdom required to be a knight and a husband. Additionally, both Lyonett and Lyonesse maintain their dual loathly lady personas throughout this test: Lyonesse as the seductive figure of temptation and Lyonett as the magical being testing and teaching the knight. Lyonett's ability to send an enchanted knight not only reveals that she is a powerful sorceress, but also continues her primary role in the narrative as Gareth's guide and protector. She also heals Gareth after his encounter with her conjured knight and after his brutal joust against Gawain. By stopping Gareth and Lyonesse, she is able to preserve their reputations. Lyonesse is also given the opportunity to exhibit magical prowess later in the tale and her gift of a magic ring further solidifies her connection to the loathly lady figure.²²⁸ She tells Gareth, "...tthat ryng encresyth my beawté muche more than hit is of myself" (213). As we have seen, the loathly lady motif is deeply concerned with the physical appearance of its enchanted ladies. Although Lyonesse is seen as the object of sexual

²²⁸ Ywain is also given a magical ring in *Yvain/Ywain*, which protects him from any harm as long as he wears it and thinks of his lady. When he abandons his wife, the ring is taken by a maiden, who shames him in front of Arthur's court.

desire and, therefore, great beauty, her magical ring connotes the ability to change and transform physically, which is the most distinct feature of the loathly lady.

The Tale of Gareth culminates in the marriage of Gareth and Lyonesse. In addition, Lyonett (now called the Damsel Savage²²⁹) marries Sir Gaheris, Gareth's brother, and Sir Aggravain weds Lyonesse's niece. As Carolyne Larrington notes, "Gareth is both more and less fortunate than many of the knights chosen by fairy-women or entrapped by enchantment; he is able to maintain and increase his honour through both the tournament and his subsequent adventures, and his marriage to the Otherworldly lady does not entirely take him out of the courtly world" ("Sibling" 67). Through the guidance of Lyonett and Lyonesse, Gareth becomes a reputable knight, worthy of honour and worship. The marriage between the Orkney brothers and the "Otherworldly" females creates a strong political alliance and establishes Gareth as the most successful of his brothers. *The Tale of Gareth* thus ends in a similar fashion to many Gawain-romances and loathly lady tales: weddings take place, land is exchanged, and order is established through the integration of problematic knights into the Round Table fellowship. Leech writes, "as a symbol, the Loathly Lady would seem to represent a needed change within the societal structure" (222) and Gareth's return to court establishes where this change is necessary. His favouritism towards Lancelot and his rejection of Gawain pinpoint the problematic conflict at the centre of Arthur's court. Gareth's ability to identify this early fracture further highlights his maturation throughout his tale. Through the symbolic connotations of the loathly lady motif, Gareth has appropriated Gawain's

²²⁹ The inclusion of the 'Damsel Savage' may be yet another reference to *Yvain/Ywain*. Lunete reminds her lady that the mysterious Damsel Savage has written them a letter warning that King Arthur is on his way and will conquer her lands. Stephen H.A. Shepherd argues that the reference to the Damsel Savage "is a sense of the strange and exotic" (99) and Malory may be evoking her presence to emphasize the Otherworldly quality of Lyonett and her family.

usual role in these romances. For Malory then, Gareth is his “Gawain type,” a knight of exemplary skill in battle, diplomacy, and courteous behaviour.

Yet, in what Bonnie Wheeler calls “the final degradation of Sir Gawain” (130), it must be noted that Gawain is left out of Gareth’s marital alliance.²³⁰ Despite his kindness towards Gareth, Malory writes, “For evir aftir Sir Gareth had aspyed Sir Gawaynes conducons, he wythdrewe himself fro his brother Sir Gawaynes felyshyp; for he was evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther – and that hated Sir Gareth” (224). Or, as Wheeler writes, “In a gesture of decorative congruity, King Arthur marries all of Sir Gareth’s brothers to female relatives of Lyones’s – all of Sir Gareth’s brothers, that is, except Sir Gawain, who in this tale is vilified and scorned, and whose reputation has been tainted seemingly beyond recovery. Most powerfully, in the end of this story, he is subjected to that worst of humiliations – he is in the end, as in the beginning, ignored” (130). Gawain is not given the opportunity to join with his brothers, enter a marriage, or take part in Gareth’s triumphant arrival at court. The temporary peace brought by Gareth’s return is tarnished by the marginalization of his eldest brother.

Fractured Fellowship

The question becomes, then, why does Malory champion Gareth over Gawain? If Gareth’s characterization borrows heavily from the Gawain-romances, why did Malory not simply take the opportunity to tell a story about Gawain’s redemption? As I have suggested, Gawain’s first quest in Malory’s narrative ends disastrously. Malory works hard to establish Gawain’s failures, repeatedly referencing his connection to his difficult parents, his mistreatment of women, and his lack of mercy

²³⁰ Cf. Maureen Fries, “The Unmarried Knight” for a discussion of marriage in Malory.

for fellow knights. Even in the *Tale of Gareth*, Gawain is depicted poorly, despite his obvious love for his brother. He is ignored in favour of Lancelot, nearly defeated by the Red Knight of the Red Lands, and incapable of recognizing his own brother during their final joust. Despite Gawain's popular literary reputation in Middle English romance, Malory shows no interest in depicting him as anything other than a troublesome, vengeful figure, partially responsible for the downfall of the Round Table fellowship. As I have discussed, Malory splits the figure of the Loathly Lady between Lyonett and Lyonesse, but it seems that he has also created a dual representation of Gawain by creating a composite of the northern Gawain through Gareth. Both versions of Gawain exist in his text: the negative portrayal *and* the more positive northern portrayal, embodied by Gareth. By allowing both versions of Gawain to exist side by side in the narrative, Malory is able to explore themes unique to the northern Gawain in the remainder of the tale.

In her chapter titled "Blood Ties in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*," Kate McClune argues that,

Repeatedly, blood relationships jeopardize the stability potentially offered by Arthur's alternative chivalric brotherhood of the Round Table. An assertion of loyalty to Arthur and his fellowship necessarily implies a voluntary subjugation of prior loyalties, including to the family, but the value system represented by the Round Table fellowship repeatedly comes under severe pressure from the alternative, and often contradictory, values represented by kinship bonds. [...] the group which exemplifies most profoundly the destabilizing potential of fraternal brotherhood is the Orkney brothers, Gawayne, Aggravayne, Gaherys, Gareth, and their half-brother Mordred. With the notable exception of Gareth, this family is a microcosm of the conflicts and tragedies that often, for Malory, result from the prioritization of familial bonds, rather than chivalric loyalties. ("Blood" 91-92)

I believe this "blood-chivalry conflict" (McClune "Blood" 90) is at the heart of Malory's characterization of Gawain and Gareth. For Malory's Gawain, kinship bonds supersede any oaths of chivalric fellowship. He arrives at court seeking

revenge for his murdered father and he loses his life seeking revenge for his murdered brother.²³¹ Arguably, his actions are completely driven by his need to protect and support his kin (including Arthur). Gareth, alternatively, understands that knightly bonds are integral to the survival of Arthur's Round Table ideal. He allies himself with Lancelot, the exemplar of chivalric fellowship, and in *The Tale of Sir Gareth*, distances himself from the most dangerous of his brothers, Gawain.²³² This is yet another example of Gareth borrowing a trait common to Gawain: his exceptional ability to navigate difficult political situations. Gareth's loyalty to Lancelot is, arguably, politically motivated. The stability of Arthur's court relies on this fraternity, as represented by the Round Table, and in order to preserve the kingdom, Gareth rejects the dangerous kinship bonds that could potentially lead to disaster.

Just as Gawain chooses to help Golagros, a foreign lord, in *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*, Gareth's decision to ally himself with Lancelot is a sign of his political wisdom and his dedication to Arthur's kingdom. While Gareth is certainly loyal to Arthur himself, his alliance with Lancelot seems to signify his allegiance to the Arthurian ideal made manifest in the Round Table. The Orkney knights tend to pledge their loyalty to Arthur, *their Uncle*, rather than to the realm

²³¹ Sally Mapstone argues that the concept of 'the blood-feud,' "a fundamental feature of late medieval and early modern Scottish society" (109) would have been familiar to Malory and likely employed in his representation of Gawain and his kin. Mapstone specifically cites the long-lasting blood feud between James, 9th earl of Douglas and the Stewart monarchs. While she does not believe that Malory is using Gawain as a representative of James Douglas, she does note the widespread fame of this blood-feud, especially because James Douglas spent thirty years exiled in England – something Malory would likely know (Mapstone 112-113). Whether or not Malory intended his Orkney knights to be seen as specifically Scottish or specifically northern English, the stereotypes of both of these identities are present throughout *Le Morte Darthur*.

²³² At this point in *Le Morte Darthur*, Gawain is the most volatile of the Orkney knights. This changes, however, as the narrative continues. Gaheris kills their mother and Aggravain is responsible for the discovery of Lancelot's affair with the queen (an action that begins the war between Lancelot and Arthur). Mordred is, well, Mordred.

itself. Gareth works for the good of the kingdom, where his brothers place their kinship bond with Arthur ahead of the Round Table fellowship and the kingdom. When Gareth finally switches his loyalties and sides with his brothers, he is killed for his actions. In other words, “[...] Launcelot’s accidental killing of the innocent Gareth, the sole Orkney knight to reject the ethos of vengeance and feud, inadvertently causes the destructive and all-encompassing conflict between Launcelot and Gawayne” (McClune “Blood” 92). Gareth’s death, representative of the death of ‘northern’ idealism, has echoes in the numerous references to Gawain’s potential death in the Scottish/northern tales. Malory’s knowledge of these stories is evident in the symbolic importance and magnitude that he affords Gareth’s death. Like the anxiety surrounding Gawain’s potential loss, the aftermath of Gareth’s murder confirms the truth that the northern romances feared so greatly regarding Gawain’s death: that the loss of such a figure would surely lead to calamity for Arthur and the kingdom.

The Round Table Falls

The final act of Malory’s narrative offers a glimpse of Gawain as a wise counsellor. His rash brothers, Aggravain and Mordred, wish to expose Lancelot, but Gawain understands that revealing the affair will destroy the kingdom – a temporary departure from his usual focus on familial loyalties. For a moment, it seems as if Malory has allowed Gawain the maturity and wisdom he lacked in the earlier tales. When Aggravain decides to tell Arthur about the affair, Gawain responds, “Nat be my counceyle...for, and there aryse warre and wrake betwyxte Sir Launcelot and us, wyte you well, brother, there woll many kynges and grete lordis holde with Sir Launcelot” (673). Gawain’s emphasis on “Sir Lancelot” versus “us” - the Orkney

brotherhood - is telling, as he recognizes the two factions threatening Arthur's kingdom. Lancelot has many allies, a result of his dedication to the chivalric fellowship.²³³ The Orkney knights, however, are firmly separated from this courtly group. Gawain maintains his role as counsellor for a short time, so that when Arthur calls for Lancelot's death by reminding Gawain that he has killed Sir Aggravain, Sir Florens, and Sir Lovell,²³⁴ he responds,

But insomuch as I gaff hem warnynge and tolde my brother and my sonnes aforehonde what wolde falle on the ende, and insomuche as they wolde nat do be my counceyle, I woll nat meddyll me thereof, nor revenge me nothyng of their dethys; for I tolde them there was no boote to stryve with Sir Launcelot. Howbehit, I am sory of the deth of my brother and of my two sunnes; but they ar the causars of their owne dethe, for oftyntymes I warned my brothis Sir Aggravayne, and I tolde hym of the perellis. (683)

This rational, patient Gawain is a far cry from the man Malory typically depicts elsewhere in his text. He shows diplomacy, guiding Arthur, even if his counsel is not what the king wishes to hear. He also shows a level of calm never seen before in *Le Morte*. But this moment is short lived. The rational, forgiving Gawain disappears and Malory reminds his readers that the "real" Gawain is very much present in these final scenes.

When Lancelot accidentally kills Gareth, Arthur tells his court, "Now, fayre felowis...I charge you that no man telle Sir Gawayne of the deth of hys two brethirne, for I am sure...whan he hyryth telle that Sir Gareth ys dede, he wyll go nygh oute of hys mynde" (685). He continues, "the deth of them woll cause the grettist mortall warre that ever was, for I am sure that whan Sir Gawayne knowyth

²³³ Some of Lancelot's loyal men are his relatives, but they do not share the near obsessive adherence to kinship bonds as the Orkney knights. While he at times refers to Sir Bors as "fayre newew," he is inclusive of all loyal to him. When he asks them if they will follow him in his attempt to rescue Guinevere, he addresses the gathered crowd as, "my fayre lordys, my kyn and my fryndis" (680).

²³⁴ Gawain's sons.

hereof that Sir Gareth ys slayne, I shall never have reste of hym tyll I have destroyed Sir Launcelottys kynne and hymselff bothe – other ellis he to destroy me” (685). Gawain’s reputation is so well known that the king is certain of his reaction to Gareth’s death. Despite his quiet acceptance of Aggravain’s death, Arthur knows that Gawain will not behave so calmly when faced with Lancelot’s betrayal. Indeed, Gawain vows, “My kynge, my lorde, and myne uncle... wyte you well, now I shall make you a promise which I shall holde be my knyghthode, that frome thys day forewarde I shall never fayle Sir Launcelot untyll that one of us have slayne that othir” (686-687).²³⁵ Gawain’s promise marks the beginning of the end, as he gathers Arthur’s men and lays siege to Lancelot’s stronghold. Lancelot’s refusal to fight Arthur and Gawain is met with Gawain’s inability to forgive him for killing Gareth. Malory writes, “But the Freynsh booke seyth Kynge Arthur wolde have takyn hys queen agayne and to have bene accorded with Sir Launcelot, but Sir Gawayne wolde nat suffir hym by no maner of meane” (689-690). Even when the Pope commands that Arthur forgive the queen and end the war, “Sir Gawayn wolde nat suffir [it]” (692). Gawain’s desire for vengeance overrides all reason and diplomacy. He speaks on behalf of his uncle, continuing a war that few desire. For six months Gawain continues his siege, a selfish event that allows Mordred the opportunity to usurp Arthur’s throne in England.

Gawain is grievously injured in the very first battle against Mordred and seems to acknowledge his wrongdoings on his deathbed. He writes Lancelot a letter, making amends for his behaviour and tells Arthur, “and all I may wyte myne owne

²³⁵ Lancelot later makes a similar claim when he expresses his great sadness over Gareth’s death. He tells Gawain “I wyste well, anone as I harde that Sir Gareth was dede, I knew well that I shulde never aftir have youre love, my lorde Sir Gawayne, but everlasting warre betwixt us – and also I wyste well, that you wolde cause my noble lorde Kynge Arthur for ever to be my mortall foo” (696).

hastynes and my wyfulnesse, for thorow my wyfulnes I was causer of myne owne dethe. [...] And thorow me and my pryde ye have all thys shame and disease...”

(709). After he dies, Gawain appears to Arthur in a dream, telling the king not to fight Mordred the next day, but otherwise, Gawain disappears from the narrative. It is a rather inglorious ending for one of Arthur’s greatest knights. He is not given a moment of military triumph or peaceful reunion with Lancelot. Rather he dies quietly and is quickly forgotten.

The question remains, then, why did Gawain, who seemed to have finally obtained wisdom and prudence, revert back to his old ways upon hearing of Gareth’s death? As Felicity Riddy explains while discussing the final book of *Le Morte D’Arthur*, “Gawain is particularly fragmented in this book: the multiple Gawains – wise counsellor, prosecutor of the blood feud, Christian penitent and protector of ladies – supersede one another in the course of the tale, each cancelling the Gawain that has gone before. The touchstones of one identity become the touchstones of quite a different one” (Riddy 153-154). Bonnie Wheeler argues,

Malory chooses from among his sources to tell us who acted, what happened, how it happened, often where it happened, sometimes when it happened – but almost never why it happened. Readers who assume this seemingly neglected authorial function may choose to deduce a ‘right reading’ or Arthurian history. Malory’s text is suggestive, but not definitive, about matters of character, culpability and causality. (Wheeler 112)

While it is true that Gawain’s behaviour in this final tale is contrary to Malory’s typical depiction, I disagree with Wheeler’s assessment, specifically in regards to the depiction of Gawain. His temporary display of wisdom, when viewed in light of his experiences during the Grail Quest, can be seen as a maturation of the character. During the search for the Sangreal, Gawain is forced to face his failures as a knight.

He is repeatedly reminded that he has been sinful and his unworthiness prevents him from seeing, let alone obtaining, the grail. As B.J. Whiting notes, “The magnitude of Gawain’s failure lies not in the fact that he did less well than an overwhelming majority of the questing knights, but in that he did not excel them. His eminence makes him [...] the typical example of the worldly knights who cannot throw off their old ways even under the inspiration of the Grail” (67). When he is given the opportunity to repent, Gawain declines, but the lessons of the grail quest linger. He is no longer the young, foolish knight of his first quest, and the search for the Sangreal forces introspection and, perhaps, acceptance of the fact that he has led a sinful life. The wise Gawain who acts as a counsellor for his brothers may be the natural evolution of his character development. He has gone from a young, rash knight, to a man forced to examine his own failings.

As to why Gawain loses his newfound wisdom once Gareth is killed, the answer is twofold. Malory may simply be reverting to his earlier interpretation of Gawain’s character. I suggest, however, that an alternative answer may be found in my earlier argument suggesting Gareth’s role as both a “Gawain type” and the loathly lady knight. For Gawain, Gareth represents an ideal because he is both a noble knight *and* his own brother. Gareth is all that Gawain cannot be because Malory continuously reminds his readers that Gawain is sinful and incapable of repentance. Gareth, conversely, becomes the representative of youthful hope and accomplishment for Arthur’s Round Table. Just as Galahad becomes an even more glorious version of his already celebrated father Lancelot, Gareth is for Gawain and the Orkney knights, a shining exemplar of the type of chivalry they can never hope to attain themselves. This suggests that Malory not only knew the northern Romances,

but knew them well and valued the depiction of Gawain they favoured: the chivalrous, diplomatic, English warrior and skilled counsellor to King Arthur.

Malory's use of the Gawain romances and the characterization of Gawain from these romances enable him to represent Gareth as an ideal English knight, fierce in battle, fair of speech, and courteous in behaviour. His death, therefore, is the death of this ideal. Just as the Gawain romances examine the anxiety surrounding Gawain's potential death, Malory takes this a step further and Gawain's reaction to Gareth's murder is a manifestation of the sorrow surrounding the death of such an ideal. For Gawain, the loss of Gareth is too much, and the vengeful knight Malory worked so hard to establish throughout the narrative is consumed by his grief. His "hastynes", wylfulnes" and "pryde" may have ultimately caused his death, but the loss of Gareth, whose courtesy, loyalty, and nobility Gawain could never achieve, are the catalyst for Gawain's actions. The death of Gareth also represents the death of the "northern Gawain type" in Malory's work. Gawain, who recognizes the goodness in Gareth, is symbolically reacting to his own death. For a knight who has experienced nothing but sin and failure, and has recently been forced to face these disappointments during the Grail quest, the death of Gareth is the death of hope.

These character traits, adapted from the Gawain-romances and expanded in *The Tale of Gareth* reveal Malory's use of the northern Gawain as an integral figure to his narrative. The appropriation of Gawain's character traits from the northern romances allows Malory to use Gareth as a representation of the ideal English knight, rather than his elder brother who is so often burdened with the literary baggage of the French sources and Malory's constant reminder that he is "wicked and synfull" (515). For Malory, Gawain is a doomed figure from the very start,

haunted by the actions of his parents and his early failures as a young knight. Malory works hard to establish these character traits, which enables him to make Gareth a clear adaptation of the northern Gawain. Gareth becomes a symbol of hope for Gawain, just as the Gawain of the northern romances becomes a symbol of hope for the often-sinful King Arthur. The threat of Gawain's death, which we have seen in the northern romances, is made manifest in Gareth's slaughter. The loss of this ideal causes the cataclysmic end of Arthur's Round Table in both the Gawain romances and Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. For Gawain, however, Gareth's death is a moment of personal anguish as he bears witness to not only the loss of his brother, but also the loss of self. Gawain's potential for improvement and success exists solely in Malory's characterization of Gareth. Once Gareth dies, Gawain, and by extension, Camelot meet a calamitous end.

Malory's deliberate use of the northern Gawain type in his depiction of Gareth reveals that not only was he aware of this tradition, but he understood its thematic and national importance. Despite scholarship suggesting otherwise, Malory intentionally molded his source material to fit his vision for Gawain. Although he relies heavily on the French tradition, his inclusion of the northern English sources speaks to his confident narrative abilities. Gawain maintains his characterization throughout, so that even his shift from prudent counselor to rash avenger, becomes evidence of Malory's ability to negotiate between his sources, rather than authorial error. His use of Gareth, juxtaposed with Gawain's struggle throughout the text, highlights Malory's skillful use of multiple traditions related to Arthur's nephews in order to firmly guide the narrative to its inevitable conclusion. His ability to reconcile the French sources with the northern English poems shows Malory as not

simply an editor of these texts, but a capable storyteller with a clear vision for his Arthurian epic.

Le Morte DArthur offers a final glimpse of Gawain in the moments following his death. Arthur inters his nephew's body in Dover castle, "and there yet all men may se the skulle of hym, and the same wounde is sene that Sir Launcelot gaff in batayle" (710). In the 1485 prologue to the printed edition of *Le Morte DArthur*, William Caxton confirms this, writing, "Item in the Castel of Dover ye may see Gauwayns skull" (816), which he lists among a small cluster of "remembraunces" of the Arthurian past found throughout England. Despite Gawain's complicated literary depiction in *Le Morte*, Malory offers him this one final moment of immortality. He is made a relic, an everlasting reminder of the greatness of Arthur's reign. While listing Gawain's burial site is certainly not unique to Malory, the choice to include the location of his fractured skull speaks again to his deliberate construction of Gawain's narrative. Gareth carried the tradition of the northern Gawain, but in this concluding moment, Malory allows Gawain himself to become part of the memory and legacy of Camelot. As Robert Rouse and Cory Rushton note, Dover is "a site traditionally associated...with the defense of the British coast" (69). In death, Malory grants Gawain the honour he lacked in life. He once more becomes the defender of the realm, a worthy knight of Arthur's Round Table, and an enduring symbol of a lost golden age. Yet, the nature of Gawain's mortal injury is emblematic of the Arthurian collapse. His fractured skull, the killing blow delivered by his friend Sir Lancelot, is visible forevermore, which serves as a reminder of the fractured Round Table and the destructive factions therein. Despite the promise of Arthur's return, Gawain's broken

skull, resting near the site of his inglorious demise, signifies the fall of a once great kingdom.

Conclusion

I began this project with the general question of Gawain's characterization in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. While I knew of the existence of a group of Middle English Gawain romances and had done previous work on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I was unsure how these texts informed Malory's work, or whether they revealed anything unique about Gawain in the Middle English Arthurian tradition. Initially, I simply wanted to understand why Malory's Gawain seemed a completely different character in comparison to his earlier appearances in Geoffrey of Monmouth's work and later in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. My confusion over Gawain's character – who he is, how he behaves, why he behaves the way he does – should come as no surprise to scholars of Arthurian literature. As we have seen, the variations in Gawain's characterization create complications for both medieval and modern writers and audiences. He was and can be many things to many people: a philandering womanizer, a chivalric ideal, a talented diplomat and counsellor, a symbol of a lost golden age, a regional hero, a solar deity, a loyal vassal, a fierce warrior, and much more. He evolves from the Galfridian tradition, becoming more than an archetype of chivalric knighthood, changes under the influence of French writers, and it is only later in the period that Middle English writers attempt to re-establish Gawain as a hero of local and national importance. What results in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is a collection of Gawain-centric tales that must negotiate his literary history, alongside their own often-specific political or historical agendas.

The fact that these Middle English works were romances, as opposed to chronicles, is also of note. Northrop Frye explains the general form of romance:

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. (*Anatomy* 187)

More recently, James Simpson clarifies the structure of romance, saying, “That structure is tripartite: a state of *integration*, or implied integration, gives way to a state of *disintegration*, successfully undergoing the trials of which is the premise of *reintegration*” (168). As a genre, romance is adaptable and transformative. Many romance tropes exist, and yet not all must be present for a work to be considered a romance. But the repetitive nature of the hero’s quest, as both Frye and Simpson (and many others) have noted, allows a familiarity and recognition on the part of romance readers and audiences. With the growing popularity of the genre in France, Gawain emerges as a quintessential hero of romance, popular across the Continent and, late in the period, in his literary place of birth, Britain. Gawain becomes as familiar to his audience as the basic structure of romance. He perfectly performs the duties of a romance hero, while enabling romance writers to express contemporary late medieval political and societal concerns.

When I began writing chapter one, I was faced with a collection of Gawain-romances and a large body of critical work that wondered whether the Gawain found in these northern works was only an archetype or a cipher, used by Middle English writers with little interest in psychological motivation. The distinction between the numerous variations of the Gawain figure required a brief examination of his literary history, followed by a close study of the Middle English romances. The aim of the first chapter was to examine how the Gawain of these northern romances came to be, and whether or not the Middle English narratives differ from the earlier French

works. Finally, the chapter needed to look at the question of Gawain's character by reviewing his actions in these texts and discerning why and what these actions said about his role in specifically English and Scottish texts.

The four poems I examined in chapter one were *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*, *The Avowyng of Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawain*.

What I found was that the Middle English – or in the case of *Golagros* – Scots writers had adopted and developed the French version of Gawain to suit specific symbolic requirements for their particular audiences. While at times Gawain seems to be only present to represent idealized knighthood, his actions, deeds, and words (or lack of words), ultimately create the portrait of a distinctly British hero. The Gawain of the Middle English tradition is a skilled warrior, a talented diplomat, and a trustworthy counsellor. While the combination of these traits does often make him a chivalric ideal, they also become the central identifiers of the “English Gawain type.”

In addition to Gawain's characterization, patterns emerge concerning the poem's intended symbolism, setting, and socio-political concerns. The poems were composed outside London, and, therefore, set far from England's southern base of political power. Their narratives often begin in Carlisle or Inglewood Forest and usually involve the king on a hunt. The forest setting introduces a variety of marginalized figures haunting these wilderness spaces surrounding the king's northern stronghold: ghosts, hags, and problematic knights appear to challenge Arthur and the reputation of his knights. The poems are also deeply concerned with land ownership and exchange. In *The Weddyng*, the troublesome Sir Gromer Somer

Jour accuses Arthur of stealing his lands and it is left to Gawain, and later Gawain's wife, to rescue his king from embarrassment by taking on a loathly lady challenge and, eventually, welcoming Sir Gromer into the king's good graces. *Golagros* is arguably the least subtle of the northern Gawain works, as it presents a foreign lord who wishes to maintain his independence against an imperialist Arthur who cares little for diplomacy. In each of the narratives discussed in chapter one, Gawain must negotiate potentially precarious political situations and he very rarely resorts to violence to do so. What emerges is a figure of absolute loyalty to his king, but also, a man who understands the importance of courteous words over rash action.

The most important discovery of the first chapter, and indeed the impetus for chapter two, is the heavy emphasis on Gawain's loyalty to Arthur and northern attitudes towards the king in these texts. Kingship becomes an increasingly important theme, as each poem examines Arthur's actions, often in relation to Gawain's own deeds. This strong link between Arthur and his nephew forces questions about how Arthur is perceived in these poems and what his presence reveals about contemporary fourteenth and fifteenth century ideas of kingship. Margaret Robson has argued that "the regional poems of the north-west midlands are deeply politicized in that they do offer an alternative to the narratives of cohesion. Everything about them from the form [...], through the locus of an England that is a benighted forest, to the alternative hero who still belongs to the regions suggests dissatisfaction with central government" ("Local" 93). Despite Arthur's widespread literary popularity, the Middle English romances often present a flawed portrait of a proud king, a portrait contrasted with the ever-chivalrous Gawain.

Ultimately, I found that Gawain was not simply an archetype, but was used purposely by Middle English writers to explore chivalry and kingship, often on the peripheries of royal authority. Where Arthur is commonly seen as a unifying figure representative of Britain, from the vantage of the midland and northern poets, the king appears more threatening. Gawain becomes a useful figure of negotiation who enables an examination of centralized Arthurian kingship through the perspective of those on the borders of his empire. While the four poems discussed in the chapter provided suitable evidence for Gawain's specific character traits and common themes found therein, these issues merited further inquiry. Once I established that the Gawain of the north was known specifically for his diplomacy, martial skill, courtesy, and loyalty, I wanted to examine these traits in the context of a single romance in order to trace this distinctly English variant of Gawain. I also wanted to explore the themes of kingship and nationalism further, which is why chapter two focuses on *The Awntyrs off Arthur*.

The Awntyrs is, arguably, one of the more popular Gawain-centric romances. Its survival in four manuscripts suggests that it was one of the most widely read works and its alliterative poetry speaks to the quality and talent of its writer. Most of the critical study of *The Awntyrs* has been about its structure and I considered how to answer my specific questions about the poem without completely ignoring its structural problems. While issues regarding the poem's structure – whether it is indeed a single work or two separate poems combined awkwardly – are integral to my analysis, my interests lay in its content. A.C. Spearing has argued that Arthur is the unifying factor of the poem and, while I believe this is an interesting use of the lens of character to solve the poem's structural issues, I questioned Spearing's choice

of character. Instead, I argue that Gawain is the unifying factor and once he is placed in this position, the poem reveals itself to be not only a key example of traditional Middle English depictions of Gawain, but also, a work that questions kingship, the appeal of nationalism versus regionalism, and Gawain's place in the Arthurian universe.

The Awntyrs uses familiar romance tropes to construct a poem deeply concerned, once again, with kingship and regional interests. The use of the 'Three Living and Three Dead' motif enhances the symbolic resonance of Guinevere's mother's message and the later land dispute between Arthur and the Scottish knight Galeron once more brings into question the king's imperialistic ambition and its cost. What makes this poem different to those previously discussed, however, is that it also relies heavily on intertextuality – both the knowledge of romance tropes and the romances themselves - to convey meaning. Gawain once more shows himself to be a skilled warrior and an important member of Arthur's Round Table, but the poet is also interested in Arthur's role in the governance of his kingdom and the cost of the king's imperial ambitions. The first half of the poem sees the ghost of Guinevere's mother provide warnings of future doom for the kingdom. The reliance on the 'Three Living and Three Dead' motif serves to remind the poem's audience of the ghost's symbolic resonance. She is there to warn her daughter, but she is also present to warn Arthur through his representative, Gawain. The ghost directly references events in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, indicating both authorial and audience familiarity with this text.

The second half of *The Awntyrs*, which sees Gawain tourney with a Scottish knight, Sir Galeron, is, I have argued, a direct response to the first. With Gawain as

unifier, his presence in both halves of the narrative makes him the thematic center of the text. First, he bears witness to the ghost's prophecy, a prophecy that foretells the fall of Arthur's kingdom due to the king's ambition and greed. Then, he fights on Arthur's behalf, defending his king against a knight who claims that his lands have been illegally procured. Brett Roscoe has recently argued that "The *Awntyrs* is a tale of forgetfulness interwoven with memory, a story of a ghost who moves to the margins, never to return, but never to leave until her prophecies come to pass" (61). In addition, Roscoe accuses Gawain of having "a poor memory" (58) in the narrative, as he does not mention the ghost's prophecy in the second half. I have argued, however, that despite Gawain's silence, his actions mirror the first half of poem, bringing attention to the ghost's prophecy by finding himself involved in a land dispute. It is not *his* memory that is being tested, but rather, that of the poem's audience. The fierce fighting between a Scottish nobleman and the English king's favoured knight reflects the text's deep concern with imperialism and the ultimate cost of Arthur's ambition. In addition, by referencing the alliterative *Morte*, the poet provides numerous examples of Arthur's greed in action, greed that, in the *Morte*, leads directly to the fall of his kingdom.

Finally, chapter two provided two important topics to consider in the remainder of my study of Gawain and the romances. In *The Awntyrs*, Gawain acts as Arthur's and, by extension, the Round Table's, representative. The survival of the kingdom rests solely on his shoulders. Should he fall against Galaron, his defeat would indicate that Arthur was wrong to take the Scottish lands and that the ghost's prophecies will most certainly come to fruition. His victory would indicate the opposite. Gawain plays this role many times in the Middle English texts and he is

uniquely suited for it. As we have seen, his courtesy, strength, and wisdom are distinct characteristics in the northern poems, but his role as sole representative of Arthur and the kingdom is repeatedly used as a motif in these texts. In *The Awntyrs*, the ghost's message and Galaron's challenge allow Gawain to represent the Round Table twice: symbolically, as witness to the Round Table's possible end, and physically in his meeting with a Scottish knight. Gawain is, then, the kingdom embodied, which is, arguably, his most important and defining role in the English and Scottish Arthurian works.

The second important development revealed by *The Awntyrs*, is the focus on Arthur's imperial ambition and how this plays into ideas of nationalism and regionalism within these texts. The ghost's words are not subtle: Arthur's pride will lead to ruin. The poet uses the events of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* as evidence that her prophecy is correct. This negative portrayal of Arthur is important, as we have seen the king appear cowardly or overly ambitious elsewhere (specifically in *The Weddyng* and *Golagros*). Galaron is a sympathetic figure, a Scottish nobleman accompanied by a lady of esteemed beauty. They are not savage barbarians from the north, but rather the equals of Arthur's courtiers; Galaron is worthy of facing Gawain in a challenge and his lady is compared most favourably to Guinevere. Despite the national themes present in many Arthurian works - the king is, after all, often portrayed as the king of a unified Britain - the Gawain poems do not always see him favourably.

The romances, then, are a product of regional interests. The use of Anglo-Scots relations in an Arthurian work not only brings realism to the text, but also speaks to the contemporary concerns of the poem's writer and readers. Galaron, the

Scot, claims that the English Arthur has unjustly taken his lands. The poem ends with a second land exchange, as Arthur grants Gawain Welsh lands, once again implying that Arthur's imperialistic tendencies will be disastrous, both on an international stage, and closer to home.

The purpose of the first two chapters was to establish the traditional Gawain characterization in the northern romances and to uncover any thematic patterns found within the poems discussed. Having briefly examined *The Knightly Tale of Golagros* in chapter one and considered the political connotations of Sir Galaron in *The Awntyrs*, I decided to explore Gawain's role in Scottish literature in order to put my initial findings about the northern Gawain to the test. This was inspired by Rhiannon Purdie and Nicola Royan's volume *The Scots and Medieval Arthurian Legend*. Using two Scots Arthurian romances, I wanted to know whether Scottish writers also saw Gawain as a heroic figure and how themes of nationality played out in works produced outside of England. I specifically chose to look at *Lancelot of the Laik* and *The Knightly Tale of Golagros*, as they both attempt to reconcile the English (or potentially British) Arthur and an English Gawain for a Scottish audience. Additionally, I believed that Gawain would likely feature heavily in Scottish chronicles of the period, so I began the chapter with the supposition that both the chronicles and romances of Scotland would provide further evidence in my construction of the Middle English, and specifically, northern Gawain type.

While the three chronicles I examined included mentions of Gawain, he is not a particularly notable figure in these texts. Despite his Scottish origins – his father is King Lot of Lothian and Orkney – Gawain is depicted as Mordred's brother and one of Scotland's rightful heirs. But he is overshadowed in the chronicles by Mordred,

whose rebellion is justified based on Arthur's illegitimate birth. What I found was that Gawain's minimal presence in the chronicles was a matter of genre. As we have seen, the adaptable nature of romance enables certain creative freedoms. For Scottish writers of romance, these works allowed them to express their attitudes towards kingship, English expansion, and the anxiety surrounding Scotland's recent loss of kings. Gawain fits into this milieu with great success because, unlike the chronicles, where the focus of the Arthurian materials lies with matters of succession, the romances need a figure like Gawain to bring legitimacy to their symbolic intentions. Arguably, the Scottish romances show Gawain at his most heroic and, as both Martin B. Shichtman and Margaret Robson have noted, his popularity is likely due to the regional interests of the poem (or, from the Scottish perspective, national interests). As an English knight with distinctly Scottish origins, Gawain becomes a figure through which Scottish writers could explore the Arthurian narratives, while maintaining their sense of separateness and national independence.

The Gawain present in both *Lancelot of the Laik* and *Golagros* exhibits all the behaviours of the Middle English Gawain type. He is a skilled soldier, fighting honourably in both texts and, once injured in *Lancelot*, a skilled military strategist. He also has a flare for diplomacy, which is crucial to the plot of *Golagros* where Gawain negotiates a peaceful solution to the potentially disastrous siege between Arthur and a foreign lord. Arthurian kingship is the central theme of these romances, as the king comes under the microscope of Scottish writers and is found to be wanting. In *Lancelot*, his failings first appear in a dream vision and then in the words of his counsellor, Amytans, who warns of destruction unless Arthur changes his ways and repents. The writer of *Golagros* is even more forward in his negative

portrayal of the king, as Arthur's imperialist ambitions threaten the independent Golagros and force Gawain to rescue his king from his own ignoble behaviour. That Arthur is portrayed poorly in these Scottish texts is no surprise, but the use of Gawain as an idealized figure of *kingship* is notable, as, despite the fact that he is still considered an English knight, his ties to Scotland make him a suitable replacement for the problematically *British* Arthur.

The poor portrayal of Arthur, combined with the always-heroic Gawain, make the Scottish poems an especially useful example of the functionality of romance. Both Arthur and Gawain reflect contemporary Scottish political figures, especially the unpopular King James III and his celebrated, but ultimately doomed son, James IV. The parallels between Scotland's historical concerns and the two Scottish romances do not end there. Gawain is upheld as a tantalizing glimpse of a possible new golden age, yet his near death experiences betray the anxiety and nostalgia surrounding his presence. For fifteenth-century Scottish audiences, this anxiety around Gawain's loss would be familiar, as the sudden death of Scotland's kings weighs heavily on the symbolic resonance of Gawain's actions and deeds. Gawain is only lauded as the knight who could be king when it seems already too late; in *Lancelot* he is critically wounded twice and expected to die, while in *Golagros*, Arthur's counsellor, Sir Spynagros, expects his exchange with Golagros to go poorly and his likely death would be the result of Arthur's greed. Gawain's death would signal the loss of the hope he represents as an idealized figure of good kingship. The nostalgia that haunts these two romances is evocative of the loss of Scotland's kings and the fear that a destabilized monarchy could lead to potential English invasion and a loss of independence. For Scottish writers, then, Gawain is

more than a stock literary figure. Within the narrative, he represents the renown of the Round Table, but more importantly, he becomes a symbol for peaceful Anglo-Scots relations and an example of *how* a good king should behave. In *Golagros*, the poet uses numerous examples of problematic English involvement in Scottish matters of governance, including a reference to purveyance and later, unjustifiable land claims. Gawain is used here to negotiate Scottish hostility towards a threatening English monarch. His Englishness, when combined with his Scottish origins, make him a unique figure of diplomacy and a representative for possible peaceful relations in the future. The Scottish romances not only mark the pinnacle of Gawain's role as a hero of romance, but also successfully exhibit how the genre can be used, adapted, and appropriated to suit the political and, in this case, national needs of its writer and readers.

Any study of Sir Gawain would be incomplete without including some discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Its literary fame precedes it, not unlike that of its titular character. At the time of writing chapter four, I had not yet read Kate McClune's chapter on Malory's Gawain. Both McClune and I reach similar conclusions about Gawain's unique status in the Middle English tradition. McClune notes that "Reputation is, for Gawain, crucial" ("Gawain" 118) and argues that this reputation covers both his "extra-textual reputation that means his presence inspires certain expectations on the part of an audience that is presumed to recognize him" ("Gawain" 118) and, "secondly, Gawain's fame and reputation are features that loom large *within* many of the texts in which he appears" ("Gawain" 118). She refers to this as "the 'Gawain-effect'" (128), or the "audience assumptions when his name is invoked" ("Gawain" 128). I have also argued that in *Sir Gawain and the Green*

Knight, Gawain's reputation, and indeed the reputation of the Round Table are constantly brought into question in order to call attention to potential factions within the king's court.

Gawain assumes responsibility for the Round Table's reputation in the poem and, in doing so, puts his own reputation to the test. This is not rare in Gawain related romances, as he often faces courtesy tests on behalf of King Arthur or other Knights of the Round Table fellowship. In *Sir Gawain*, however the *Gawain*-poet knowingly plays with the problematic reputation of Arthur's kingdom by framing his text with references to the fallen Troy and repeatedly questioning the identity of Arthur, his knights, and Gawain himself. The "Gawain-effect," is exploited in the poem in order to cause confusion, humour, and familiarity within the Arthurian frame of the text. It can be argued, then, that the *Gawain*-poet has moved beyond just questioning Gawain, and instead the "Arthurian-effect" is used to question the very foundations of the Round Table. This is clearly seen in the juxtaposition between divisions within the court and Gawain's mission. As he is about to depart, the court is seen whispering their disapproval of Arthur and the Round Table and, upon his return, the same courtiers laugh upon hearing the tale of his adventure. While the Round Table's reputation is brought into question, what ultimately unsettles the king's court is not Gawain's interaction with the Green Knight, but the factions forming between Arthur, his knights, and his courtiers. Gawain's actions expose these problems, and by relying on his audience's familiarity with the Arthurian story, the *Gawain*-poet reveals that, regardless of Morgan le Fay's meddling or the Green Knight's test, the events leading to Camelot's collapse are *already* in motion. Gawain provides the catalyst for these revelations.

We have seen intertextuality used before to similar effect in *The Awntyrs*. Its reliance on the audience's familiarity with the alliterative *Morte Arthure* enables the poet to lend the ghost's warnings gravitas; her words are true because the audience has seen the events she speaks of before. Likewise, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet infuses his text with references to previous literary iterations of Gawain, specifically the French variation, who is famous for both his chivalry and his womanizing.

Identity and reputation are the central themes of the poem. The poet's conscious choice to recall numerous versions of Gawain's character provides the impetus for the poem's intense focus on who Gawain is and why his identity matters, both in and outside of the narrative frame. The reliance on intertextual knowledge, the so-called "Gawain-effect," is not a hindrance for the poet, but rather an opportunity to explore the expectations that come with romance. After all, we have seen Gawain succeed in courtesy tests and martial tasks, yet in *Sir Gawain*, Arthur's knight fails. While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not as blatantly politicized as the Scottish works, it does question themes of chivalry, knighthood, and kingship. Once more, Arthur's pride is brought into question, as both the Green Knight and Morgan Le Fay call attention to the potential problem at the heart of the fabled Round Table.

McClune argues that Gawain is particularly concerned with his own reputation ("Gawain" 121), but we cannot forget that Gawain is used in the romances to represent Arthur and the Round Table. His reputation is not his alone and while it is true that he, at times, is worried about how *he* will be perceived, the true source of his (and perhaps the audience's) anxiety comes from how his actions will reflect

upon Arthur and the realm. As the kingdom embodied, Gawain is responsible for the future survival of the Round Table and when his most famous attribute, his courtesy, is tested he is found somewhat wanting. His courtesy masks his deception, and this misuse of such a knightly trait is ultimately Gawain's minor failing at Castle Hautdesert. Despite the Green Knight's assurance that he has done quite well, Gawain reacts with horror. His small failure, then, is emblematic of the minor, but growing, problem at court, where Arthur's courtiers quietly express their concerns with the king's behaviour while outwardly celebrating his exuberant merrymaking. Gawain's hurried flight back to Camelot and his subsequent confession to the court represent a marked change from the youthful, confident Gawain who left Camelot one year before. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* boldly questions Gawain's identity, his literary reputation, the stability of the Round Table, and ultimately, finds the Arthurian universe a flawed landscape.

By the end of chapter four, I had established the characteristics of both the Middle English "Gawain-type" and the Middle English Gawain romance. Despite repetitive patterns found within these poems, too heavy an emphasis on characterization would prove to be limiting, especially because my next step was to look at Malory's depiction of Arthur's nephew. The framework of this project, indeed the first question I asked when beginning the work, concerned Malory's decision to portray Gawain in such a negative light. As we have seen, other Middle English writers have chosen to make Gawain a national – or in some cases – regional hero. His diplomacy, courtesy, wisdom, and strength are renowned and he fits especially well into romances that examine themes of kingship, chivalry, and nation. Yet Malory's characterization borrows more heavily from his French sources,

making Gawain a vengeful, rash and sometimes murderous, sinner. He is constantly overshadowed by Lancelot and is largely responsible for the Arthurian collapse. After chapter four, however, I had also established that there was in the Middle English tradition and the later ballad tradition, a willingness to expose some of Gawain's more human failings. He may be the heroic central figure of a text like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the later ballad *The Jeaste of Gawain*, but he is flawed and prone to err in these texts.

I was able to reconcile the presence of Malory's failed portrait of knighthood after considering *The Tale of Gareth* in relation to the Middle English tradition related to Gawain's characterization and thematic continuity. Arnold Sanders has argued that Gareth's tale borrows heavily from the Gawain-romances and the *Bel Inconnu* (or Fair Unknown) tradition. I argued that not only has Malory created a romance similar to the northern works, but more importantly, he has made his Gareth a "Gawain-type," a figure appropriated from the Gawain-romances who brings many of the same characterizations and thematic patterns to the text.

Malory's Gareth shares many characteristics with the northern Gawain. Throughout his tale he learns courtesy and chivalry, eventually becoming the most courteous of his troublesome brothers. This maturation process is aided by Lyonett, and Gareth's patience and humility in the face of her barbs help prepare him to be a better knight and, eventually, a better husband to her sister, Lyonesse. He proves himself to be a skilled warrior, but shows mercy when mercy is due, unlike Gawain, whose earliest quests see him behead a woman and betray a fellow knight. Gareth is also faced with courtesy challenges and, although he requires magical intervention for help, Malory kindly excuses his behaviour as a result of his youthful

inexperience. Gareth leaves the court a kitchen boy, but returns a knight and lord in his own right, with vassals under his command. He also marries Lyonesse and arranges marriages for his brothers (except Gawain) ensuring that his union will be politically beneficial for the Orkney knights and Arthur's kingdom. Ultimately, Gareth does all that Gawain cannot do in Malory's text: he is merciful, respectful of women, diplomatic, and patient. His reward for this is a profitable marriage and the respect of the court, an echo of Gawain's narrative function in both *The Weddyng* and *The Carle of Carlisle*.

Thematically, *The Tale of Gareth* also shares much in common with the northern Gawain romances, as Arnold Sanders has noted.²³⁶ It follows the expected structure of romance: Gareth departs a boy, matures through trials, and returns to the exaltation of his court, now a full member of Arthurian society. The tale even uses certain motifs that are most commonly associated with Gawain, especially the loathly lady motif, which is featured in *The Weddyng* and Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale." The duality of Lyonett and Lyonesse mirrors the duality of Gawain and Gareth in the text. The two women serve dual purposes, each working towards making Gareth a better knight and a better husband. Like the traditional loathly lady knight, Gareth must learn important lessons from the loathly lady (or *ladies* in *Gareth*) before he can accept his place in Arthur's hall. The loathly lady knight is rewarded for his newfound maturity with a beautiful wife and re-admittance into society. At the end of Gareth's tale, he is granted both of these honours, but Gawain is marginalized in the process. In Malory's text, Gareth represents what Gawain *could* have been and was in other texts. Gareth's alignment with Lancelot and his dismissal of Gawain at

²³⁶ In Arnold Sanders, "Sir Gareth and the 'Fair Unknown': Malory's Use of the Gawain Romances."

the end of the tale reinforce Malory's interest in kinship bonds versus chivalric fellowship. Gawain, whose loyalty to his kinsmen is nearly obsessive and very destructive, pales in comparison to Gareth, who chooses Arthur's greatest knight, Lancelot, as his closest ally. At the close of *The Tale of Gareth*, Malory has set into motion all the factors that will eventually destroy the Round Table: Gawain's love for Gareth and Gareth's love for Lancelot will both lead to ruin for Arthur.

Malory's appropriation of the English "Gawain-type" for his Gareth also speaks to the national importance of such a figure. In Malory's text, much of Gawain's characterization is based on the French sources. Malory sometimes removes passages from these sources that explain Gawain's behaviour and the emotional impetus behind some of his most dastardly actions. As we have seen, Gawain is a character associated with both nationalism and regionalism. He is an English knight with Scottish origins who finds great popularity in romances written outside of London. These romances often convey regional concerns and, with the exception of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is rarely treated like an outsider. It is Arthur, rather, who is scrutinized and often found to be lacking morality and wisdom.

The lack of the English Gawain in Malory's text is, initially concerning, as why would Malory purposely choose to exorcise England's most popular literary knight in his great work about England's legendary king? What I have found is that he did not completely disregard the English Gawain, but rather made his Gareth the representative of 'English' knighthood in *Morte*. Malory understands the contradictions involved in writing Gawain. His heavy reliance on French sources means that Arthur's nephew retains much of his questionable behaviour from the

Post Vulgate Cycle. The earliest tale sees a young knight who is prone to error and philandering, and these character traits are adopted by Malory and expanded, rather than adapted to fit more closely with traditional northern characterizations. Malory does this consciously, so Gawain's extreme loyalty to his father Lot and thirst for vengeance, which propel much of his early actions, grow throughout the narrative until, in the end, his rashness, when combined with strict clan loyalties and unyielding honour lead to disaster. Yet, Malory does not completely disregard the northern Gawain, despite the fact that 'his' Gawain is markedly different from the northern figure of courtesy and diplomacy. He knowingly negotiates the French and English depictions of Gawain by including both in his text through his creation of Gareth. The national and regional symbolism often associated with Gawain is made manifest in Gareth. While Lancelot and later Galahad are Malory's example of perfect chivalry personified, Gareth embodies all the celebrated aspects of *English* knighthood. He is from Orkney, but unlike his brothers, adheres to the fellowship of the Round Table, forgoing kinship bonds in favour of a more chivalric fraternity. The dichotomy between Gawain and his brother ultimately becomes a question of loyalty. Gareth is the knight who transcends kinship bonds for chivalry and Gawain is the knight who does not, a choice Malory repeatedly views negatively. When Gareth abandons these bonds and sides with his brothers, he is accidentally killed by Lancelot, the man he loved more than his own kin.

In the northern romances, Gawain is often seen as the herald of a golden age, sometimes paradoxically a past golden age and, at times, a hopeful glimpse at a better future (particularly in the Scottish texts). His loss, then, is always a cause for mourning because without Gawain, Arthur's kingdom is unsustainable. For Malory,

the loss of Gareth is these anxieties surrounding Gawain made manifest. Gareth's death marks the loss of hope for Gawain, the loss of the possibility of redemption. Malory's final image of Gawain, a shattered skull sitting at Dover, serves as a reminder that despite Arthur's possible return, all that remains of the Arthurian age are relics; a skull, a sword, a memory. The loss of Gareth, which drives Gawain to certain death, is Malory's final nod to the northern romances. The northern Gawain is often depicted as the kingdom embodied and his Malorian heir, Sir Gareth, proves with finality that with his death, Camelot will fall.

I began this project thinking about why Malory's Gawain is so different from his northern depictions and here, at the end, I feel that I have found some answers to this initial line of inquiry. Gawain is, as I have suggested, many things to many people; he can be a figure of ideal chivalric values or a more recognizable example of the cost of human error. Ultimately, I believe this study has clarified how his literary presence informed Malory's work and ultimately led to the establishment of the "Gawain-type" of hero, a chivalrous figure of national importance. His characterization is predicated on the nationality of the poem's author, the setting of the poem, and the intended audience/reader of the text. Gawain is, therefore, as much a product of the romance genre as the motifs commonly found in works concerning his great deeds. The adaptability of romance is the perfect fit for Gawain, who at times needs to be a northern hero or, in the French texts, a flawed exemplar of chivalry with philandering tendencies. Yet, while it is tempting to rely on Gawain's characterization as evidence for his literary evolution (or devolution), the poems discussed in this project do not follow a linear path of character growth. There does not seem to be a 'before and after' point in the creation of Gawain-centric romances

in England and Scotland. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, is one of the earliest works I discuss and the *Gawain*-poet depicts a far more flawed and varied Gawain than some of the later poems. We cannot say, then, that the English “Gawain-type” was invented in the fourteenth century, adopted by later writers, and then used with any regularity. Instead, it seems that Gawain’s popularity in the French works was reclaimed by English writers, who often re-characterized the French Gawain to suit their nationalistic needs. At times, however, especially in the ballad tradition, the poets return to the French sources to present a more flawed, bawdy version of Arthur’s nephew.

Even Gawain’s penchant for womanizing is negotiated by Middle English authors through his common association with the loathly lady motif. I have argued that there are elements of the motif in Malory’s *Tale of Gareth* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but Gawain himself appears in *The Weddyng* and it is also arguable that he is Chaucer’s unnamed raping knight in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” The loathly lady knight is usually guilty of some sin, immaturity, or for Chaucer, rape, and requires the aid of a lady to better his ways. Gawain’s association with this motif is of note, because by reading him through the trope of the loathly lady knight, writers are able to acknowledge his faults and allow him to grow. Unlike the French sources where Gawain’s behaviour bears little on the symbolic or national importance of the text, English authors rehabilitate this difficult character flaw and instead allow Gawain to learn from his mistakes, especially mistakes concerning women.

Corrie Rushton has argued that “Gawain’s love life, at least for most Middle English authors, was [a] matter of state policy and not erotic nor domestic love”

(“Lady’s” 35). In regards to his marriage to Dame Ragnell, for example, Rushton states that “love was not Gawain’s primary motivation here [...] his willingness to marry a foul hag like Ragnelle is based on his loyalty to Arthur” (“Lady’s” 35). And, while it is true that Gawain’s marriages are not long lasting, I disagree that his love for Ragnell is only important because it reveals his loyalty to Arthur. Instead, I see this as yet another example of the northern romances questioning Arthur’s kingship. In *The Weddyng*, it is Arthur who *should* play the role of the loathly lady knight. Ragnell and her brother challenge him, implying that it is he, not Gawain, who has something to learn, yet the king does not take the loathly lady challenge himself, which means Gawain is given the opportunity to, once again, pass a courtesy test and prove himself an exemplar of chivalry, more so than his sovereign. Gawain’s loyalty may lead to his marriage, but the love between Ragnell and Arthur’s nephew enables Ragnell’s return to society, the defeat of a magical charm, and the negotiation of peace between her brother, Sir Gromer, and the king who could not face his challenge without the aid of Gawain. In *The Weddyng*, Gawain’s notoriety for philandering is re-written for English audiences and it is Arthur whose reputation is bruised by the events of the narrative.

On a national level, however, the presence of Gawain in numerous romances does speak to his popularity late in the period, regardless of the order in which these poems were produced. Ultimately, I believe what this project has uncovered is that when the target audience for the poems is more northern, removed from the power base of London, the narratives focus especially on kingship and knighthood. The patriotism in the works is not necessarily positive and regional concerns often supersede the expected support for Arthur and his reign. This is especially obvious in

the Scottish works, but the existence of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Weddyng*, speaks to growing interest in what it means to be a good king. Gawain's presence enables a comparison between Arthur and his greatest knight and when Arthur is found wanting, his nephew steps in to do his job for him: through combat, diplomatic relations, and wise counsel. Many of the poems seem to be in dialogue with each other, reinforcing the idea that, outside of London, regional concerns were preoccupied with the place of the monarch within their society. Arthur's ambition, greed, and imperialism are met with Gawain's courtesy, humility, and prudence.

There is more work to be done regarding nationalism and kingship in relation to Gawain. While I have firmly established the Middle English "Gawain-type," Gawain's popularity as a literary figure extends well beyond England, Scotland, and France. The existence of Gawain-romances in languages ranging from German and Flemish to Dutch and beyond speaks to widespread interest in Gawain. My findings regarding Malory's appropriation of the "Gawain-type" offer a new method to explore romance heroes and their symbolism and it would be beneficial to uncover whether other authors use the "Gawain-type" to convey similar societal and political concerns. Can the "Gawain-type" be considered a propaganda figure, used as a national hero for the specific purpose of representing idealized knighthood and kingship? How Gawain is characterized in these works and *why* Gawain is so popular away from his literary birthplace may reveal more about emerging late medieval literary trends and the growing popularity of romance.

I have also hinted at the presence of intertextuality in many of the sources considered. This too requires more work, as the manuscript history of many of these

poems is lacking. More information on the readership and distribution of Gawain-romances in England and Scotland would reveal how and why these particular romances seem to be in dialogue with each other. The existence of the ballads suggests that, at the very least, the narratives were well enough known to be adapted. Furthermore, the depiction of Arthur as a problematic king in the north would benefit from a study of significant cultural or political events at the end of the fourteenth and into the fifteenth centuries. While I am hesitant to say with any certainty that these romances coincide with specific historical moments – the dating of the manuscripts makes that impossible – the obvious concern with kingship and governance makes the Gawain-romances an important tool in understanding regional concerns, especially in the context of the War of the Roses and ongoing Anglo-Scots relations.

By focusing on Arthur's flaws, the romances produced outside of London reveal specific regional concerns and perceptions about governance and central authority. The king's faults are many and for northern and Scottish audiences, these stories warn of the consequences of insular imperialism. Gawain is repeatedly used in these narratives not only as a means to draw attention to problematic kingship in action, but also as a regional ambassador. Through Gawain, these northern poets are able to examine centralized authority from the peripheries of the kingdom. While this viewpoint often presents Arthur poorly, Gawain is the embodiment of what these regions value in their political leaders: courtesy and honour. As a figure with connections to Scotland, whose romances are mostly set in the north or midlands, Gawain is the intermediary between the king and his subjects on the borders. He is beneficial, therefore, to both sides represented in the text. For Arthur, Gawain provides an example of proper chivalry and, at times, kingship. And for the

audiences of the poems, he stands as a hopeful example of regional representation and mutual respect between the center and periphery. His presence draws attention to these sometimes-neglected regions of the realm and enables a mutually beneficial dialogue about kingship and governance.

The northern romances thus unveil a problematic attitude towards Arthur, which signifies societal divisions between the north and south of England. That Gawain is embraced specifically in the midlands and the north speaks to the cultural need for a hero who was not the king, a figure more at home in the forests near Carlisle or on the marches. Gawain is not a folk hero, however, as unlike England's most famous forest outlaw Robin Hood who becomes a figure of popular literature, the Arthurian romances were originally written for an aristocratic audience. After *Le Morte Darthur*, the myth and national significance of King Arthur grows, while Gawain is relegated to the background, an interesting figure associated with the *Rex quondam, Rexque futurus*, but a figure of very little national importance. Unlike Lancelot, whose love for Guinevere forever cements his popularity in literature and, later, cinema, Gawain, perhaps, lacks the same romantic appeal for modern audiences. Yet the wealth of work devoted specifically to him should be reconsidered, as should his place in the pantheon of British heroes. His reputation was likely forever tarnished by the widespread availability of Caxton's *Morte*, but in re-evaluating the work of Middle English and Scots writers, it is clear that he was a beloved figure throughout the late Middle Ages, a figure writers returned to again and again with purpose and affection.

The lasting influence of Malory, however, has greatly influenced modern interpretations of the character. In an 1897 ballad, the American poet, Richard Hovey,

describes Gawain as, “sleek, lying, golden-tongued [...]” (Hovey 220). In Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, when Gawain’s amorous advances on the Maid of Astolot make him forget the purpose of his quest, she angrily asks, “Why slight your King/And lose the quest he sent you on” (Tennyson 650-651). His courtesy, which Tennyson describes as having “a touch of traitor in it,” is later questioned when he leaves diamonds with the Maid and upon explaining his actions to Arthur, Tennyson writes: “The seldom-frowning King frowned, and replied, ‘Too courteous truly! Ye shall go no more/ On quest of mine, seeing that ye forget/ Obedience is the courtesy due to kings” (Tennyson 710-713).

Tennyson’s depiction of the philandering Gawain, abandoning his duty to the king and failing his quest, falls in line with Malory’s vision, but is a far cry from the celebrated peacemaker of *The Knightly Tale of Golagros* or the comical, loyal knight of *The Weddyng* and *The Carle of Carlisle*. While the importance of Gawain as a national and regional hero may have been forgotten outside of academic circles, for a time he was, arguably, the most popular of Arthur’s knights for writers of medieval romance. Like his broken skull at Dover, Gawain is, in many ways, a relic of a lost tradition. This tradition, however, speaks to the lasting influence of romance on the political and social landscape of late medieval England and Scotland. The appeal of Arthur, the enduring notion that Britain’s greatest king shall return at the hour of her greatest need, has made the Matter of Britain a lasting legend of national significance. And while Arthur’s nephew may no longer be seen as a glittering exemplar of chivalric idealism, perhaps he too deserves a chance to return, a hero of the north, and the celebrated embodiment of a lost Golden Age.

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