

Is there a Ritual Plot in the text of the *Awntyrs off Arthure*?

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Studies of the *Awntyrs off Arthure*¹ have all had to take up a position on whether the text represents a single narrative or two unconnected ones, 'Awntyrs A' and 'B',² placed one after the other. There are interesting arguments for both positions, but my own argument has to be conducted independently of them, because I suspect the reason for our problem may be the presence of an unconscious, ritual plot in the text. If this is the case, the ritual plot would be *the* plot of the text, the ruling narrative force throughout, while the author's treatment of it would be a dependent overlay, using the plot for concerns of its own, while showing no awareness of the plot's alien, dominant concerns. This textual situation would be a problem only for critics, casual audiences being able to enjoy the conscious and unconscious levels of the text simultaneously.

The presence of a ritual plot could certainly be responsible for the unexplained addition of a second tale in the *Awntyrs*. On the face of it, we are presented with two complete narratives loosely joined, of unrelated provenance and on apparently unrelated topics. A ritual plot is designed to secure remedies for inner desires and fears and it uses narrative as its medium; there would be nothing to prevent it from adding a version of the tale of the challenger and the king's nephew to the stirring adventure at Tarn Wadling. A ritual plot has no concern with narrative as art, no concern with characterisation or moral themes: instead, it makes use of narrative for the creation of its remedies. A type of narrative frequently used is one where a particular crime or vice, which can represent the anxiety seeking relief, is either present or can be introduced. In such cases, the 'crime' is announced in some way, usually in the form of an accusation, and the remedy is applied. This remedy is one or more narrative manoeuvres invested with the power to expunge the stated crime. In my analysis of the *Awntyrs*, I find links between 'Awntyrs A' and 'B' in the accusation of covetousness made by the ghost of Guenevere's mother in 'A' and the accusation of theft made by Sir Galeron in 'B'. Can these more obvious accusations be connected with the ghost's earlier confessions and warnings?

Criticism has tended to confine its approach to the level of high, moral themes and has not been able to find wholly convincing reasons for the presence of the Sir Galeron material in the text. Recent criticism has approached the romance as a diptych study of the dangers of power, presenting 'A' and 'B' as paired exemplars. Two acts of self-abasement are found in the text, the ghost's confession to abuse of her 'wealth and privilege', and Sir Galeron's admission to defeat in battle and his renunciation of his hereditary lands. The link between the two is the ghost's prophecy of the downfall of the Round Table. She warns Guenevere to be charitable and chaste, and then warns Gawain

that Arthur is too covetous and Fortune will bring him low.³ I find this an interesting approach. The Sir Galeron material is clearly connected with the ghost's warning about the covetousness of Arthur, and Arthur's atonement might be seen in the return of the lands he stole from Sir Galeron and gave to Gawain. The king's atonement is then followed by his queen's, when, in the last stanza, she honours her vow to arrange a million requiem masses for the ghost. This might well have been the author's vision of the material, but I have two immediate questions. One is that there appears to be a moral problem relating to the return of Sir Galeron's lands, the kind of problem which can be an indication of the presence of a ritual plot. The narrative loses an opportunity at its climax to display the goodness and generosity of 'Gawain the good' (ll. 539), in a text much concerned with covetousness and injustice. The moment when the defeated Sir Galeron yields up his lands to Gawain is the moment to be seized by 'Gawain the good' for the return of those stolen lands to their rightful owner, but the immediate response comes from the king, who offers Gawain other rich lands if he restores the stolen lands to Sir Galeron. Only then does Gawain do so. As Maldwyn Mills comments, Gawain only restores Sir Galeron's lands to him after receiving 'handsome advance compensation from Arthur'.⁴ In a diptych study of the dangers of power, where 'A' and 'B' are paired exemplars, we would expect the atonement to be equal, the queen's action to be matched by the king's: Sir Galeron's lands would be returned to their rightful owner without the somewhat disreputable prior inducement of compensation for Sir Gawain.

My other question concerns the view that in 'A' we have the ghost's confession to abuse of her 'wealth and privilege'. What she actually confesses to in 'A' is breaking a solemn vow ("I brak a solempne avowe", l. 205) and indulgence in illicit love, improper desires and delights ("luf paramour, listes, and delites"⁵). Later in the text, she addresses Guenevere's question "What wrathed God most?" (ll. 238-42) with the answer, "Pride," and counsels her daughter that meekness and mercy, pity on the poor, charity and chastity, and almsgiving please God, almsgiving and charity above all (ll. 250-53). I think the confessions and the counsel have quite different status in the text, the confessions belonging to the ritual plot I propose, and the counsel belonging to the overlay. Meanwhile, both the immediate and larger contexts of the confession to illicit love suggest its importance. It comes a few lines after the confession to breaking the solemn vow and appears in the same stanza as the appeal for the remedy of thirty trentals. Just before it, Guenevere comments on the "baleful bestes" biting her mother's body, and on the blackness of her face. The ghost replies that illicit love has brought about her downfall and punishment:

"That is luf paramour, listes, and delites,
That has me light and laft logh in a lake;
Al the welth of the world [thus] away
witis
With the wilde wormes that worche me wrake—
Wrake thei me worchen, Waynour, iwys.
Were thritty trentales don

Bytwene under and non,
My soule [were] socoured [full] son
And brought to the blys.” Shepherd, 211-221

Illicit love, improper desires and delights are the sins desperately in need of remedy, requiring the thirty trentals. Perhaps the breaking of the vow also requires them? The text does not tell us what vow this was, but in the analogous *Trental of St Gregory*, the mother has broken a marriage vow of chastity.⁶ Considering these details in relation to their larger context, it might seem that the ghost’s sudden interruption of Gawain’s time alone with the queen in the opening lines is directly connected with them. The briefly described, equivocal idyll opens dreamily in the midst of Arthur’s hunt, given emphasis, however, by the structure of the stanzas, the first ending with: ‘Sir Gawayn, gayest on grene, / Dame Gaynour he ledes’, and the second beginning with the repetition, ‘Thus Sir Gawayn the gay Gaynour he ledes’ (ll. 12-13; 14). Sir Gawain alone does not follow the hunt, staying behind with the queen, who lies in the shelter of the surrounding trees:

Al but Sir Gawayn, gayest of all,
Beleves with Dame Gaynour in greves so grene;
[By a lauryel ho lay, undur a lefesale]
Of box and of berber bigged
ful bene. Shepherd, 68-71

Immediately after these lines, the idyll is suddenly plunged into midnight darkness and a snowstorm, and a flame appears out of the lake in the likeness of Lucifer, lowest in Hell. The flame glides towards Gawain, yelling and lamenting. In a ritual plot, there are no characters, only figures in the rituals. So if this text contains a ritual plot, it would not matter which characters made the accusations or which were accused. The concern of the plot would be the anxieties and their removal.

While the themes of ‘A’ and ‘B’ both appear in the prophecy, the accusation of covetousness does so almost as an afterthought, introduced by Gawain’s question just before the ghost leaves. The romance could well end before the topic of covetousness is raised, simply with the final stanza honouring the queen’s vow. Instead, the author would seem to have joined the accusation of covetousness and Sir Galeron’s challenge onto the adventure at Tarn Wadling. The join would be neatly done and the Sir Galeron material is given equal, expert treatment, but the question still is why? Good answers would have to address the fact that a great text has an unnecessarily unsatisfactory plot. But I think this difficult text can be shown to be of one piece throughout at the level of a ritual plot and the author would have seen no problem. Whatever ambitions he had for the text, he would be under the influence of the plot and not alter it.

A ritual plot would be directly accessible to audiences identified with it, as there would be no distance between audience and plot, and it would only be visible to critics if they took up this same single point of view essential to the unconscious narrative structure.

The single point of view would be creating the plot for solipsistic purposes. In the case of the *Awntyrs*, there are some particular difficulties: how could we see its plot work as a ritual plot, where we have to address its material precisely in the order in which it appears? There does not seem to be a move structure, and the only possible structure I can see begins with the briefly described idyll with the queen during the hunt, which is then followed by two longer passages of narrative, the first featuring the ghost and the second Sir Galeron, and both concerned with wrong-doing. These are followed by a final stanza, completing the text with the queen's action in carrying out her vow to arrange a million masses. The plot does have the appearance of the type I find defending an adventure – the 'defended narrative' – which does not have a move structure. But if it is a defended narrative, it would be an unusual one in not having defences at the beginning, before the adventure. The idyll with the queen would be the adventure, presented simply as Gawain and the queen spending time alone together in the country, then to be followed abruptly with the first of a sequence of devices for dealing with anxiety relating to the adventure. The addition of the Sir Galeron narrative would be quite typical of a defended narrative, for there tends to be a piling on of safeguards where a ritual plot is defending an adventure. Then the single stanza placed at the very end, where the queen honours her vow, seals the sequence of remedies.

If there is a ritual plot in this text, there must also be an overlay, and one which pays more attention to the material in 'Awntyrs A' than to the material in 'B'. A rich overlay, carrying the text's moral themes and characterisation, and much other material, can conflict with the plot and illuminate the problems, but, in the 'Awntyrs', it is 'B', with lighter treatment, which shows more problems. I have found no conflict between the two levels in the first part of the text for the particular reason that the ghost's prophecy, with its themes of punishment and redemption, is the kind of material which might not show conflict in such a situation: punishment and redemption are themes common to both levels and their different treatments would blend easily. The plot's remedy would be prayer, as it would be in the overlay. Such a powerful amalgam, in fact, might be a factor in the high quality of this earlier part of the text; it would attract the author's best writing and dramatic treatment. By contrast, the treatment of the return of Sir Galeron's lands in the second part of the text does show the kind of moral problem which can arise. The concern in the text with covetousness and injustice appears to have fallen victim to the greater power of the ritual plot, which could not be concerned with presenting true rightness of behaviour: the plot prevails with its intent on making a ritual proclamation that there has been no theft. The remedy for anxiety employed here would be the narrative manoeuvre of reversal, expunging the theft: the challenge and battle would, in fact, have been set up by the narrative for this purpose. The outcome of winning the battle is that Gawain has become the true owner of the stolen land, so they are his to return when he gives them back to Galeron. He is not a thief. The steps forward in a ritual plot are quite different from those in any other kind of narrative, because the plot would be making use of irrational stratagems designed to remove unwanted ideas.

In my own analysis, I find that the ghost's accusation of covetousness and Sir Galeron's challenge of theft are essentially connected as ritual strategies of accusation. These accusations are removed by ritual reversal in the narrative to follow. Are they also linked with a strategic accusation of illicit love in the ghost's prophecy? I think they are: I find an underlying accusation in the ghost's words, "Fonde to mende thi mys—/ Thou art warned, ywys—/ be war be my wo" (ll. 193-5), an accusation removed by a vow to pray. I also find a link in the threat of punishment accompanying all the accusations, the threat of hell in the ghost's account of her fate – "With Lucyfer in a lake logh am I light" (l. 164) – and a threat of downfall in her echoing prophecy of Arthur's fate – "He shal light ful lowe on the se-sondes" (l. 268).

My own view of the plot is below:

The Defended Narrative in the *Awntyrs off Arthure*

The Author's Narrative

The Plot

<p>1.</p> <p>While Arthur's court is at Carlisle, the king goes out hunting does at Tarn Wadling. During the hunt, Guinevere rides off with Gawain, and they rest together under the shelter of small trees.</p> <p>ll. 1-72</p>	<p><i>The Adventure</i></p> <p><i>Adventure with the queen, while the court hunts deer in the woods.</i></p> <p><i>'Al but Sir Gawain, gayest of all, Beleves with Dame Gaynour in greves so grene; [By a lauryel ho lay, undur a lefesale] Of box and of berber bigged ful bene'. Shepherd, ll. 68-71</i></p> <p><i>The adventure is accompanied by a fear which the rest of the plot is designed to dispel.</i></p>
<p>2.</p> <p>The day becomes as dark as midnight, and a horrifying spectre rises out of the lake, telling Gawain she has come to speak to the queen. A blackened corpse, hung with snakes and toads, she is the ghost of Guinevere's mother and she has come to warn her daughter to take heed of the sad fate of her mother. Guinevere must have pity on the poor while she has power – the prayers of the poor can purchase her peace – and she must cast off her sin. The ghost's dwelling in hell is a dungeon, where she is tormented by fiends. Guinevere wishes to know how she can help her, and is told that her mother's plight is due to illicit love: 'luf paramour' has drawn her down and abandoned her low in a lake. She asks that thirty 'trentals' (nine hundred requiem masses) be said for the salvation of her</p>	<p><i>Ritual punishment and first accusation of wickedness. Arrangement made for purification through prayer. Finally, the vow.</i></p> <p><i>The ghost performs the punishment for the adventure: her blackened body, abandoned in a lake and bitten by malicious beasts, is the result of illicit love (ll.209-17). She also speaks the words of accusation: "Fonde to mende thi mys--/ Thou art warned, ywys --/ Be war be my wo!" (ll. 193-95).</i></p> <p><i>A remedy for the illicit love is expounded: "Were thritty trentaies don / Bytwene under and non, / Mi soule [were] socoured [full] son / And brought to the blys" (ll.218-21).</i></p> <p><i>A vow is made that the remedies will be carried out:</i></p>

<p>soul. (These ‘trentals’ recall the ‘Trental of St Gregory’, where Pope Gregory has a vision of his mother in a similar plight.) Guinevere vows to honour her mother’s request with a million masses. She asks what prayers would be best for her own salvation, and she is answered in terms of virtues, those of meekness and mercy, pity for the poor, charity and chastity.</p> <p>1. 73-337</p>	<p>“‘Here, hertly my honde, thes hestes to holde, / With a myllion of masses to make [thy] mynnyng!’”(ll. 235-36). <i>The thirty trentals become a million masses in the vow.</i></p>
<p>3.</p> <p>Gawain asks the ghost how those who invade other kingdoms will fare, and she replies that Arthur and his knights are too covetous, unjustly seizing the kingdoms of others: she prophesies the downfall of Arthur and the end in anguish of the knights of the Round Table. The ghost then departs and the storm dies down; after the hunt, the whole party goes to supper.</p> <p>When Arthur and his court are at supper, a lady enters the hall leading Sir Galeron of Galloway, who challenges one of Arthur’s knights to a duel in order to right an injustice. He says Arthur has deceitfully taken his lands and given them to Gawain. Gawain takes up the challenge and he is winning when the lady appeals to the queen to get Arthur to intervene. Galeron cedes his territorial rights and Arthur gives Gawain new lands on condition that he comes to an agreement with Galeron. Gawain then gives back the lands taken from Galeron. Galeron is made a knight of the Round Table.</p> <p>ll. 338-701</p>	<p><i>Accusations of covetousness and theft, followed by reversal of these accusations, eliminating the ideas of invasion and theft in the adventure with the queen.</i></p> <p><i>The ghost speaks the accusation of covetousness: “‘Your King is to covetous, I warne the, sir knight’”(l.265). Gawain has questioned her about the fate of the knights of the Round Table, who “‘defoulen the folke on fele kinges londes, / And riches over reymes withouten eny right’”, and her prophecy for the invasion of kingdoms is downfall and death (ll. 262-3; 293-99).</i></p> <p><i>Accusation of theft, spoken by Galeron: “‘Thou has wonen hem [his lands] in werre with a wrange wile / And geven hem to Sir Gawayn; that my hert grylles’”(ll. 421-22).</i></p> <p><i>Reversal of the accusations of covetousness and theft. The accuser and the hero fight until the fight is stopped, and the accuser then resigns his rightful claim (“‘Here I make the releyse, renke, by the Rode, / [And, byfore thiese ryalle, resyng] the my right.’” ll.640-41). The king announces that he will give the hero new lands, provided that the hero gives the accuser back the lands taken from him (“‘With-thi thou saghtil with the knight / That is so hardi and wight, / And relese him his right / And graunte him his londe.’” ll. 664-676). The hero does so and the king honours the accuser.</i></p> <p><i>The stolen lands are thus returned to their owner voluntarily by the hero who has just won them. As he has just won them, they are his to return; he is not a thief. The king, meanwhile, is the giver to the hero; he is the king. This ritual restores the status quo after the adventure with the queen.</i></p>
<p>4.</p> <p>The Queen writes letters arranging for the million masses she vowed to arrange for her mother.</p> <p>We are not told what effect they had on her mother,</p>	<p><i>The vow to arrange a million masses is honoured and the punishments will be lifted by prayer</i></p> <p><i>In the first four lines of this verse, the vow to arrange the masses which will lift the punishment is</i></p>

probably because this would not be a concern of the ritual plot, where the masses are intended for those of the audience identifying with the plot rather than for Guinevere's mother.

ll.702-714

put into effect. The inflated number of masses is strategic, not scribal emphasis: ritual plots need to pile on the magic. The punishments are to be lifted by a million masses.

As the ritual plot I find in the *Awntyrs* is a 'defended narrative', constructed to remove fear and guilt from an adventure, it has no move structure and therefore no helpful step-by-step formation to guide the critic. It also does not have the helpful surrounding safeguards I find in other defended narratives, which tend to be piled on top of each other at the beginning and end of the text and provide some discernible structure to the irrational narrative. The opening safeguards tend to use narrative to give some kind of permission for the adventure, and, in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I find very highly structured safeguards at the beginning and end of the narrative, and also within the adventure itself.⁷ By contrast, the *Awntyrs* appears to have no safeguards preceding the adventure with the queen, but it has powerful means to deal with fear and guilt following it. The first narrative it uses is the tale of a mother's visit from hell to her son,⁸ adding to it strategies of accusation. The tale does not have a ritual plot, but it readily serves the plot's purpose of ritual punishment and purification through prayer. The ghost performs the punishment and asks for the prayer; she also makes two accusations, the first being where she tells Guenevere to seek a remedy for her wickedness ("Fonde to mende thi mys", l. 193). Her request for prayer is for thirty trentals (nine hundred requiem masses), and Guenevere vows to arrange a million masses, an enormously inflated figure typical of ritual narrative. The vow is honoured after the Sir Galeron sequence, as the final ritual.

The ghost's second accusation addresses covetousness and the punishment for the invasion of kingdoms. This is another aspect of the fear attached to the adventure with the queen, and the plot deals with it by using the king and his knights, moving on from its use of the queen and the ghost. The link is smoothly made, the narrative bringing Gawain into the discussion between the ghost and the queen about the remedy for wickedness, and Gawain asking how the king and his knights will fare in view of their invasion of kingdoms. To deal with the accusation, the plot employs a fresh narrative suitable for the creation of the device of reversal, where the sense of wrong-doing is cancelled out by a ritual manoeuvre reversing the accusation. The narrative chosen is the tale of a battle between a challenger and the king's nephew, a tale which also appears in the Charlemagne romance *Otuel and Roland*.⁹ The details of the challenge and battle in each text are close, but *Otuel* does not have a ritual plot and the challenger makes no accusation of theft; the hostilities are neatly resolved when Otuel is 'converted' to a new loyalty, Christianity. Sir Galeron's accusation of theft lies in his statement that Arthur had used deception when taking his lands in war (l. 421), and the remedy of the new loyalty reappears as a small detail – not as the remedy – in the overlay of the *Awntyrs*, when Sir Galeron is made a knight of the Round Table. The material providing the ritual remedy in the *Awntyrs* is the reversal of the challenger's accusation of theft, making the ritual statement that there has been no theft. Ritual processes are not inherent in narrative

material: when material is adopted for ritual purposes, there will be changes made to it, and when it is then used for other purposes, the ritual strategies will disappear.

The addition of the device of denial (there has been no theft) to that of prayer might not appear a convincing reason why the ghost and Sir Galeron should be seen as part of a single narrative. The employment of a million masses followed by a removal of the idea that there is an urgent need for the masses puzzles the rational mind, but it is a good example of how these plots work. The defended narrative, particularly, uses the accumulative method, piling on devices to make them more powerful. After the reversal of the accusations, there is a return to the device of prayer in the final stanza.

While the ritual plot is concerned with the private inner life of desire and fear, the author's overlay is responsible for the social and moral concerns in the *Awntyrs*. The ritual plot uses amoral ritual manoeuvres (magic) to banish a sense of wrong-doing, while only the overlay is concerned with the teachings of the Church and our moral decisions in relation to the vices and virtues. But ritual plots can make use of the power of the Church ritually, for example, using the power of prayer or penance. Concern with public virtues such as meekness and mercy and taking pity on the poor (ll. 250-51) can also be used ritually.

Is this a purification plot rather than a defended narrative? The entire purpose of a purification plot is to remove irrational guilt or fear. It has a move structure and the steps of the narrative are set up to accomplish this. By contrast, 'The Awntyrs' does not *set out* to remove irrational guilt: it sets out to enjoy an adventure, and then works to remove the guilt. I find it a defended narrative, concerned with an adventure made possible by the rituals to follow.

¹ I have used and quoted from Stephen H.A. Shepherd's edition in *Middle English Romances*, New York and London, 1995, pp. 219-243.

² See Ralph Hanna III's edition in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terme Wathelyn*, Manchester, 1974.

³ See Rosamund Allen, 'The Awntyrs off Arthure: jests and jousts', in *Romance Reading on the Book: essays on medieval narrative*, Cardiff, 1996, pp. 129-30; and A.C. Spearing, in 'Central and displaced sovereignty in three medieval poems', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 33 (1982), pp. 247-61.

⁴ Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Ywain and Gawain, Sir Percyvell of Gales, The Anturs of Arther*, London, 1992, p. xxx.

⁵ See Stephen H.A. Shepherd, *Ibid*, p. 226, note 8.

⁶ See Stephen H.A. Shepherd's edition in *Middle English Romances*, 1995, pp. 369-70, ll. 3-20.

⁷ See Anne Wilson, *The Magical Quest: the use of magic in Arthurian romance*, Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 189-212.

⁸ The tale also appears in two *exempla* from the *Gesta Romanorum*. For the texts, see Stephen H.A. Shepherd, *Ibid*, pp. 375-77, 'A Mother Eternally Damned Appears to Her Son' and 'A Son Releases His Mother from Purgatory'.

⁹ Mary Isabelle O'Sullivan, ed. The Fillingham MS. of *Firumbras and Otuel and Roland*, EETS o.s. 198, 1935, pp. 29-146, ll. 24-613. Stephen H.A. Shepherd drew attention to the similarities between 'Awntyrs B' and *Otuel/Otinel* in his paper '“Heathenic” Catechesis and the (Non-Arthurian) Source of Awntyrs B' at the Romance in Medieval Britain 11th Biennial Conference, University of St Andrews, March 29-31, 2008.

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