



‘Muse on my mirrour’: Gawain’s function in relation to the supernatural of Arthurian literature

Rory Byrne

Despite the prominent connection with the supernatural held by both the characters of Arthur and Merlin, it is clear that the character of Sir Gawain also holds a functional role in relation to the supernatural – albeit a complex one. On the one hand, Gawain’s importance in this role is underlined by the ubiquity of his supernatural dealings: from his long-standing connection with the sun to his encounters with unworldly beings, Gawain’s ‘associations with magic and the supernatural were perpetuated throughout English literary tradition.’¹ On the other hand, the presentations of these dealings – like those of Gawain’s character in general – are inconsistent. For example, in texts such as the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Thomas Malory’s ‘Deth of Arthur’ Gawain maintains evidence of his Celtic literary origins through his evident understanding and manipulation of his paranormal abilities associated with the sun; in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, his encounters with the supernatural are characterised by deception and misunderstanding.² Similar variations and ambiguities occur in Malory’s ‘Noble Tale of the Sankgreal’ and the anonymous *Awntyrs off Arthur*, both of which will be further examined herein with a view to exploring whether Gawain’s understanding – or otherwise – of the supernatural encourages the reader to focus on their own cognition of stimuli. The aim of the discussion is to prove that these variations in Gawain’s understanding allow him to act in a very specific role on a metatextual level – as a ‘mirrour’ himself. Through the uncertainty of his relationship with the supernatural *in* the text, he reflects back at the reader the inherent uncertainty of their own relationship *with* the text; with Gawain acting as a touchstone, the supernatural in the texts becomes what the text is to the real world. Paradoxically, nowhere is Gawain’s role as a ‘mirrour’ more clear in the texts than in an area which is presented with a great deal of consistency: that of the interplay between the physical and metaphysical aspects of the supernatural.

Two narrative elements of the first episode of the *Awntyrs* are relevant in this respect – the ghost and the hunt. The ghost of Guinevere’s mother which Gawain and Guinevere encounter is both spiritual and corporeal; the horror it evokes in the characters of the text comes from not only its physical pain and grotesque appearance but also its supernatural qualities. Firstly, the ghost exhibits physical and natural properties: it is ‘al biclagged in clay’ (l.106) as an organic body might be, and it is ‘serkeled with serpentis’ and has ‘todes theron’ (ll.120-1). These attributes not only place the ghost as a tangible being within the world of the text, but also connect it to the animals that were previously driven away by King Arthur’s hunt. The hunt itself – which C. G. Martin suggests is the epitome of ‘the aristocrat’s perch at the top of the literal and symbolic food chain’ – causes the deer of the wood to ‘durken and dare’ for ‘drede of deth’.³ The fact that the hunters subsequently ‘fleen fro the forest’ (l.80) at

¹ Roger Dalrymple, ‘Sir Gawain in Middle English Romance’, in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by H. Fulton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009) pp.265-277 (p.275).

² *Ibid.*, p.266; p.275.

³ C.G. Martin, ‘The Awntyrs off Arthure, an economy of Pain’, *Modern Philology*, 108.2 (2010), pp.177-198 (p.182); Thomas Hahn (ed.), ‘The Awntyrs off Arthur’, in *Sir Gawain, Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) pp.178-226 (p.179). Subsequent references to this text will be abbreviated to *Awntyrs*, and line numbers will be noted in brackets in the essay’s body.

the sight of the ghost's extraordinary manipulation of the weather (ll.81-2) means that the previous display of the hunters' power over nature is subverted by the ghost. If the hunt is taken to be emblematic of the avarice of which the ghost accuses the court, the supernatural occurrence represents a successful challenge to the court's conduct. As Ralph Hanna suggests, 'the natural order asserts its primacy in the violence with which it drives the hunters to seek shelter'; in doing so, the ghost communicates its message that the court's excessive habits will ultimately result in them, like the deer in the woods, being hounded in Hell.⁴ The ghost's place in the world of the text, therefore, is defined by both its physical and magical abilities; as Corinne Saunders observes, such ambiguities are typical of revenants and they therefore 'provoke questions of interpretation', to which Gawain's analysis is crucial.⁵

Like the rest of his cohort, Gawain recognises the physical aspect of the ghost, as is evident when he 'braides oute the bronde' (l.122) when initially confronting the ghost. Guinevere, similarly, remarks upon the ghost's deformation in a purely physical sense, noting that its 'burly body is brought to be so bare' (l.203) and 'the baleful bestes that on thi body bites / Al blendis my ble - thi bones arn so blake!' (ll.211-12). This second quote reasserts the symbolism – a point raised by Thomas Hahn – relating to the ghost and its actions being described as black (ll.76, 105 & 212), whereas Guinevere is repeatedly described in terms of her whiteness (ll.13n.,25 & 212).⁶ In this respect, Guinevere could not be more starkly contrasted with the ghost. This adds to the ghost's assertion that Guinevere should 'muse on my mirroure' (l.167) – thereby seeing the reflection of herself in the ghost – and thus affirms the connection between the two. This apparent reflection seems to be Guinevere's only incentive for her offer of spiritual redemption in the form of masses to the ghost; her primary concern is for herself, as is evident by her question 'what bedis might me best to the blisse bringe?' (l.249). In this text, therefore, Guinevere functions as a contrastive figure to Gawain: her incomplete reading of the supernatural stands as an imperfect model, which is to be avoided by the reader because it provides an incomplete understanding of the ghost (which in the context of the fictional world is a text in itself).

Gawain, conversely, is set apart from the other characters: he is not only the 'gayest' (ll.12 & 68) and the 'boldest' (l.297), but also has the insight to see past the ghost's physical attributes. Firstly, he says that he will enquire about the ghost's pains (l.102) and his primary concern is to find 'what the bales bete' (l.103); unlike Guinevere, he remarks upon the ghost's internal suffering rather than its outward appearance, and seeks to help it for its own good not because it will bring forgiveness to himself. Secondly, by asking 'How shal we fare [...] that fonden to fight' (l.261) he communicates that he has understood the ghost's intention of encouraging introspective scrutiny within the court; as Hahn states he 'demonstrate[s] a remarkable degree of self-consciousness and self criticism.'⁷ His question asks for a prediction of the future, not guidance, and so also implies that Gawain acknowledges not only the ghost's prophetic abilities, but also the significant role of the supernatural 'wheele' (l.266), 'chance' (l.269) and 'Fortune' (l.270). His judgement that the ghost will provide reliable information is vindicated by the ghost's accurate rendering of the Arthurian narrative arc, which R.J. Moll asserts 'a fifteenth century audience would have recognised [...] as authentic.'⁸ Gawain then, in this instance, understands the supernatural more comprehensively than his companions: his interpretation of the ghost goes beyond its surface-

⁴ Ralph Hanna III, 'The Awntyrs off Arthure: An Interpretation', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 31 (1970), pp.275-97 (p.284); Martin, p.185.

⁵ Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp.222-3.

⁶ Hahn, p.203.

⁷ Hahn, p.210.

⁸ R.J. Moll, *Before Malory: reading Arthur in later medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.134.

level meaning and as a result he can learn more from its message – an ability which Malory's representation of the knight lacks. Although Martin asserts that the *Awntyrs* is as flattering towards the aristocracy as it is didactic, Gawain's analysis serves as a model of interpretation which the reader is encouraged to adopt, and so aids the text's ability to promote understanding at a more than superficial level.⁹

Although Hanna's opinion that the poem contains 'two works: *Awntyrs A* and *Awntyrs B*' is supported by various incongruities between the two episodes, A. C. Spearing argues that these discrepancies do not mean that the two halves are entirely disparate – he argues that the second episode 'at once parallels and contrasts with the first.'¹⁰ There are accretive justifications to support this connection between Gawain and Galeron's battle and the first episode's ghost. Firstly, as Martin points out, during the fight Gawain, like the ghost, suffers both physical pain and mental anguish: he is wounded by Galeron, apparently his equal, who 'swapped him [Gawain] yn at the swyre with a swerde kene; / That greved Sir Gawayn to his dethday' (ll.514-5), and he 'wepus for wo' (l.560) at the death of Grissell.¹¹ Of the combatants, we are told that 'her blees wex blak' as the fight wears on, which relates them to the poet's aforementioned use of 'blackness' to characterise the supernatural, and so draws further parallels between the ghost and the fight. Secondly, the fight may be qualified as supernatural in itself because of its marvellous qualities. The physical violence involved is communicated by relating it to material objects: 'Fifté mayles and mo' (l.517), 'Shildes on shilders' (l.588) and 'stapeles of stele' (l.591) are all destroyed in the fight, which underpin the fight as a quantifiable and therefore tangible occurrence. After suffering an impossible succession of blows the knights are described as 'doughti with dyntes so delfully were dight. / The dyntis of tho doghty were doutous bydene' (ll.593-4), and yet they display superhuman ability in that they persevere with the fight.¹² Like the ghost, the battle is both tangible, in terms of the physical nature of the description, and supernatural, in terms of the violence the knights endure. If we grant Spearing's assertion, that the text is to be read as if it were a diptych, then it is evident that the poet places the responsibility to elucidate meaning from the text upon the reader, just as Gawain must derive meaning from the supernatural.¹³ In the first episode of the *Awntyrs*, Gawain is set up as an example because he reads the supernatural correctly and is therefore able to derive the desired meaning from the ghost's words. The battle, as the second occurrence of the supernatural within the text, provides an opportunity for the reader to apply the interpretive ability previously demonstrated by Gawain, in order to derive an implicit meaning from the text; Gawain's role as a facilitator of extra-textual examination is clear.

In the *Awntyrs* Gawain's virtue is linked with his ability to construe meaning from the supernatural – the same is true of Malory's rendering of Gawain in 'The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal'.¹⁴ However, in the context of the Grail Quest he is portrayed as the worst knight, and his failure to understand anything more than the literal meaning of the supernatural ultimately leads to his downfall. From the outset of the 'Sankgreal', Gawain is established as the earthly, secular knight who is only able to produce superficial readings: upon first encountering the Holy Grail, he states he will not rest until he has 'sene hit more opynly' because 'hit was so preciously coverde' (p.503). Like the ghost found in the *Awntyrs*, the

⁹ Martin, p.181.

¹⁰ Hanna, p.277; A.C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.137.

¹¹ Martin, p.191.

¹² Line 565 also augments the supernatural allusions in the fight – it recalls other Arthurian texts such as the stanzaic in which Gawain's strength is linked with the sun.

¹³ Spearing, p.129.

¹⁴ Sir Thomas Malory, S. Shepherd (ed), *Le Morte Darthur: Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), pp.496-585. Subsequent references to this text will be abbreviated to the 'Sankgreal', and page numbers will be noted in brackets in the body of the essay.

Grail inhabits a liminal position between the real and spiritual world: its supernatural qualities are both physical, in its ability to make 'metis and drynkes' appear, yet elusive, in that its appearance is both transient and indefinite (p.503). By interpreting the Grail as nothing more than a physical entity which must be sought and admired for its own sake Gawain has read it literally with no thought given to its spiritual qualities. This, therefore, established a precedent which displays his inability to deduce metaphorical readings. At this point in the narrative, the reader is in the same position as Gawain, in that the semiotic systems are not yet established to such a degree that they can provide clear meaning. As Martin Shichtman states, the characters' need to find interpretations of signs within the 'Sankgreal' is reflected by the reader's, in that 'Malory's reader, like his knights, is forced into the role of chasing after signification, trying to grasp that which is always slipping away', and Gawain's position in this relationship increases in its importance through the text.¹⁵

As Kenneth Tiller argues, Malory assigns various ways of 'seeing and interpreting' to the main Grail-Knights, each of whom 'function simultaneously as different modes of interpretation and as generically diverse texts to be interpreted.'¹⁶ Gawain's shortcomings as a virtuous knight are inextricably linked with his lack of ability to interpret signals beyond a literal level, and as such his progress through the quest is punctuated by misunderstandings of the supernatural which result in his ultimate failure. His shortcomings are shown poignantly in two episodes of the tale which seem to repeat the same structure: a misunderstanding of the supernatural, a killing and a chastisement followed by a refusal of repentance. In the first instance of this cycle, he fails to see the symbolism of the Castle of Maiden's seven knights and 'slew one of the bretheren' (p.515). He then meets a hermit, who reprimands his lack of understanding of the previous metaphor and explains that Galahad rescued all the maidens without killing any of the brothers (p.516), thereby establishing the contrastive relationship between the two knights (discussed below). Gawain's subsequent refusal to confess his sins, on the basis that 'knyghtes adventures many tymes suffir grete woo and payne' (p.516), affirms the idea that Gawain's fundamental misunderstanding of the supernatural includes aspects of religion – as Tiller suggests '[he] mistakes the signifier for the signified and so remains stalled at the literal level.'¹⁷ This cycle is then repeated when Uwayne is killed, but with one significant difference: when encountering the supernatural prophetic dream, he seeks advice before acting on his literal interpretation of it (p.540). Like the Grail, Gawain is unable to 'see' the meaning of the dream, but after receiving guidance on its interpretation from Nacien he understands it completely – he eventually acknowledges that 'for oure synnes hit woll nat avayle us to travayle in thys Queste' (p.543). He has, therefore, successfully overcome his stifling inability to read the supernatural by seeking help, which in itself draws attention to the ambiguities that were previously misunderstood by Gawain.¹⁸

There is a fundamental contrast established between Galahad and Gawain in the 'Sankgreal': just as Guinevere's character in the *Awntyrs* served as a contrastive figure to the more perceptive Gawain, Malory's flawed Gawain now serves as the inverse reflection of the perfect Galahad. This distinction is highlighted by their respective ability to decode texts: whereas Gawain, as discussed above, can only deduce literal meanings from his interactions with the supernatural, Galahad's readings of them are more discerning. For example, when

¹⁵Martin B. Shichtman, 'Politicizing the Ineffable', in *Culture and the king: the social implications of the Arthurian legend: essays in honor of Valerie M. Lagorio*, ed. by Martin B. Shichtman, et al. (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), p.174.

¹⁶ Kenneth J. Tiller, "'So precyously coverde": Malory's Hermeneutic Quest of the Sankgreal', *Arthuriana*, 13.3 (2003) pp.83-94 (Accessed online, <<http://www.arthuriana.com/access/ISubscribe/13-3/tiller.pdf>>, 10/5/11).

¹⁷ Tiller, p.88.

¹⁸ Tiller argues that although Lancelot also requires help interpreting his dream, he differs from Gawain's surface-level reading and Galahad's allegorical perception in that he operates between the two in 'a realm of dual interpretations.' Tiller, p.89.

confronted by the White Knight who presents him with Joseph of Arimathea's shield, Shichtman argues that Galahad's utterance of 'by thys shyld bene many mervayles' is not a question, as implied by Stephen Shepherd's addition of a question-mark (p.507).¹⁹ Instead, he suggests that Galahad already fully understands the shield's heritage and that the explanation is meant for Malory's audience, who when compared to Galahad are 'somehow inadequate to the monumental task of interpretation.'²⁰ The knights, then, represent two opposing ends of the interpretive spectrum: 'the relentless literalness of Gawain and the inscrutable abstractness of Galahad.'²¹ However, even though Galahad is established as a paragon of interpretive ability in the 'Sankgreal', he cannot replicate the exemplary model depicted by Gawain in the *Awntyrs*, precisely because he is 'the best Knyght of the worlde' (p.498). His perfection is so total that he is almost part of the other-worldly supernatural, and as such is someone to whom one cannot relate – as Tiller puts it 'like the Grail, Galahad is, in effect, unsignifiable, unknowable, concealed, and finally, undefinable.'²² Gawain, conversely, is fallible and therefore human and infinitely more relatable – as such, in the 'Sankgreal' he still serves as a model of interpretation, albeit one which is mainly discouraged. By linking success with understanding, and failure with misinterpretation, Malory asserts the importance of the reader's reception to any text. Within this relationship stand the various knights who, as argued herein, represent different modes of reading. Gawain's role as an accentuator and demonstrator of interpretive faculty in the 'Sankgreal', therefore, is the inverse of his role in the *Awntyrs*: it is not his lack of virtue as a knight, but his lack of understanding which ultimately leads him to failure.

This analysis has sought to support the ambitious notion that Gawain's primary role in relation to the supernatural in Arthurian literature is to act as an intensifier of reader attention on their own relationship with the text itself. Four reservations should be made at this point. Firstly, as an original proposition, it is inherently susceptible to the potentially erroneous amplification of some themes at the expense of others – suggesting metatextual qualities of Middle English works demands such compromises. The analysis is, secondly, incomprehensive because its scope is limited to only two of the many significant texts within the literary tradition in question, and as such any hypotheses that have been suggested require more investigation in order to hold any demonstrable validity. Thirdly, although Gawain is undoubtedly highly relevant to the tradition's renditions of the supernatural, other characters such as Arthur and Merlin arguably hold similarly significant roles. Lastly, by focusing on the division of the physical and metaphysical within the supernatural sphere, the analysis has diverted attention from their often-symbiotic presentation.

Reservations aside, what is clear is that the function of Gawain's involvement with the supernatural, whether material or spiritual, depends upon his own understanding of it: his analyses of his 'texts' within the texts are used as models of understanding – both positive and negative – which means he serves as a 'mirroure' in which the reader is to reflect upon their own ability to understand the text. Literal understandings of the supernatural are established as incomplete in both texts: in the *Awntyrs* Gawain's ability to interpret the ghost means he learns more than those who cannot do so, and similarly in the 'Sankgreal' his own lack of understanding ultimately leads to failure. The importance of the individual's understanding – both inside and outside the texts – is highlighted by this key paradigm established by the texts; it is, therefore, arguable that Gawain's function pervades the confines of the text-worlds by attempting to influence the audience's response to the works in question.

¹⁹ Shichtman, p.175.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tiller, p.88.

²² Ibid., p.91.

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