

Not Only Ladies Belong in Lakes: An Ecofeminist Examination of Arthurian Legends

By

Ashley Wood

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Ashley Wood

Author's Name

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Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

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By

Rebecca Quoss-Moore Digitally signed by Rebecca Quoss-Moore
Date: 2020.07.22 15:33:48 -05'00'

Committee Chairperson

David Macey Digitally signed by David Macey
Date: 2020.07.22 15:45:41 -05'00'

Committee Member

Laura Bolf-Beliveau Digitally signed by Laura Bolf-Beliveau
Date: 2020.07.22 16:29:27 -05'00'

Committee Member

Committee Member

Abstract:

In Arthurian legends, knights are renowned for their chivalry and honor. The stories center around their exploits, focusing on how the men overcome great adversity in their quests. Within their tales, however, a vast silence engulfs other groups, such as women, animals, and supernatural beings. In determining how to explore this silence, I examined ecofeminist works by Greta Gaard, Stacy Alaimo, Carol J. Adams, and Nancy Howell. Feminist theorists such as Laura Piersol, Nora Timmerman, and Judith Butler informed my definitions of femininity and gender performativity, as well as my framework for examining how these constructs influence the connections people share with nature. Ecocritical work by Iris Ralph shapes the critical work on medieval animal studies. Critics such as Cynthia Jeney and Jean Birrell contribute to my understanding of the animal and the natural in the medieval world.

Looking specifically at the stifled and often unheard stories within these legends, I argue that women and animals in these texts are systematically silenced in an attempt to glorify King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. In my thesis, I examine three tales from Arthurian legend—*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*, and *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*—through an ecofeminist lens and interrogate the nature/culture binary that they set up. In each tale, I focus on minor characters, women, and animals, exploring gaps in the narration and moments of resistance. This reexamination of these three poems confirms the underlying tension between natural and order—especially masculine or military order—in the Arthurian tales.

Specifically, this analysis shows that in the war between nature and culture, Camelot's patriarchal society subjugates the natural world and those aligned with it. Expanding on recent work in feminist textual recovery, this research highlights the work Arthurian tales do both to preserve and to resist women's voices and the power of nature. My work suggests, then, the fruitful possibilities for further work examining what is overwritten or resistant in medieval texts, particularly those ways in which textual transmission or reception have overwritten more central roles for women—such as Lady Bertilak being received as a passive temptress rather than a willing participant of the trials—and different understandings of the ways in which an established literary tradition has distorted our understanding of the sociocultural past.

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Introduction

In Arthurian legends, knights are renowned for their chivalry and honor. In pop culture, they are considered the stuff of legends, beings whom mortal men can only dream of emulating. They are considered the embodiment of strength and righteousness. Arthurian legends center around the knights' exploits, and they focus on how the men overcome great adversity in their quests. A vast silence engulfs the other groups within their tales. In this thesis, I examine *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*, and *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure* through an ecofeminist lens and interrogate the nature/culture binary that they set. Looking specifically at the stifled and often unheard stories within the legends, I argue that women and animals in these poems are systematically silenced in an attempt to glorify King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. In each tale, I focus on minor characters, women, and animals, exploring gaps in narration or moments of resistance. The reexamination of these three poems confirms the underlying tension between the domains of nature and human order—especially masculine or military order—in the Arthurian tales. Specifically, in the war between nature and culture, Camelot's patriarchal society subjugates the natural world and those aligned with it.

Despite having no alternative living spaces or backup planets, our society continues to subjugate the world, depleting its natural resources and slaughtering its citizens. Humans are effectively creating the largest tomb this galaxy has seen. As Gretta Gaard notes, "first world citizen-consumers have been slow to listen, and slow to demand institutional changes, lulled into complacency, in part, by propoganda from the

mainstream media, and the half-truths of climate change science fiction ('cli-fi')" (ch. 7). Logic fails to make an impact, and the reason may be because something stands in its way, something that separates humans from the experiences of our fellow earthly animals and gives us the unwarranted confidence that human beings will survive, even when the rest of the planet is naught but cinders.

Camelot—though in ruins—heavily influences modern-day America. Arthurian legends, though incredibly old, have endured and thrive in current popular culture. Ferszt and Bump observe “[t]hat Arthur and the chivalric culture he invokes remain relevant to our cultural lexicon is evidenced by his continued re-imagining in popular media” (5). The traditional story and characters can be found in songs, books, and even major fandoms, though they are often reimagined. Video games and visual novels are also popular media that carry notes of Arthurian legend, letting them bleed through into a romanticized ideal of the time period. What is surprising, however, is not that the stories are popular, but that they continue to remain relevant to the societal struggles of the modern world. Lisa Krakowka believes that, “Arthur’s longevity is directly related to [his] unique ability to span the ages and suit the societal needs of the times. He’s a chameleon of sorts...They and he appeal to the common human psyche above and beyond cultural/societal differences related to the time of publication” (qtd. in Lupack 294). The legends reflect and heavily influence our own society. The patriarchal structures of Camelot echo across time, helping to justify many of the inequalities and injustices prevalent in the modern era.

With a societal structure heavily influenced by the patriarchal precedent found in Arthurian legends, studies that break down binaries are imperative—particularly ones

that look at the nature-culture binary and aim to tear down the wall separating them. At the heart of ecofeminism—also known as ecological feminism—lies the belief that both the natural world and the marginalized groups who dwell within it have been subjugated by patriarchal society. A relatively new theoretical field, ecofeminism was first conceptualized in the 1970s and has continued to develop, challenging old ideals and creating new ways of looking both at modern society and the way it treats those whom the patriarchy deems as “lesser.” The goal of ecofeminism is to “assure global ecological survival” (Howell 231). Since its creation, ecofeminists have had to maintain a delicate balance between environmental and feminist studies. For many years, feminists have fought against the identification of disenfranchised groups with nature because that association has been used as an excuse to characterize other groups as available for exploitation or erasure. The socially constructed nature-culture binary has created the misconception that nature is below man and is thus ruled by him. Those aligned with nature, then, are also seen as unworthy and are considered inferior to the dominant social group. Alaimo examines the circular argument behind this line of thinking, arguing:

A multitude of feminist demands have been met with the cocksure contention that woman’s inferior role is—of course—‘natural.’ The dual meanings of nature converge at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular arguments: woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is inferior because nature made her so. Perhaps it is the misogynist logic of this formulation that obscures the contradictory meanings of the term ‘nature,’ which is subordinate to Man, and yet contains Man’s Truths. (2-3)

Because of the circular arguments, the tendency in the past, when the claims of nature and culture are in contention, has been for scholars to choose the side of culture (Alaimo 11-12).

The argument that those who are close to nature are weak is still prevalent within our society, and the prescribed gender norms put into place by our culture add fuel to the convictions surrounding these claims. Although there is a connection between women and nature, it is not one of weakness, nor is it innate. As Gaard articulates, “women are indeed the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters, but their vulnerability is not innate; rather it is a result of inequalities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty” (ch. 6). Because power structures grant men, as a group, greater income and a higher social standing, they are less affected by the natural disasters brought about by climate change. Further, men who are affected—particularly if they are affected because of some other identity marker like race or sexual orientation--can often be silenced by the social constructs that are currently in place, placed within the “feminized” categories regardless of gender identity. The rigid structure of gender performativity¹ taboos makes the conversations about conserving nature a largely feminized discourse, and many people do not wish to be seen as weak due to association with [women? the natural world (animals, plants,

¹ Gender performativity is the idea set forth by Judith Butler that gender is not an innate, biological trait, but is instead a social construct formed by the society’s utilization of “social sanction and taboos” (Butler 520). In her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Butler likens gender performativity to acting in a play and putting on a mask (521). She states that the reason for a socially constructed identity is the continuance of the species. She believes that “as a strategy for survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (522). The ridged structure of binaries described in her article can be found within the interaction of men and women with nature, as well as their association with natural forces and how they are viewed.

atmospheric and environmental phenomena, etc.]. This inclination is slowly changing, however, as theorists concentrate on breaking down barriers that people have erected between humanity and the natural world (Piersol and Timmerman 12). Instead of focusing on nature as a weaker, separate entity, ecofeminists are changing the way that nature is regarded by humans, advocating for a view of the world that declares other animals to be entitled to just as much agency as human beings.

While ecofeminism originally concentrated on how women and nature are subjugated by patriarchal society, intersectionality has influenced the field greatly. A.E. Kings makes the argument that it is only through intersectionality that scholars can “explore the effects of sexism, class, homophobia, caste systems, and racism on women and their relationship with the environment” (66). Focusing exclusively on biological sex severely limits female existence and assumes a singular type of femininity (Piersol and Timmerman 11). Because these categories influence a person’s psyche far more than their biological gender does, they are subject to interrogation [?] in literary study. This is the reason that new types of ecofeminism do not focus merely on a broad definition of women but instead take into consideration disenfranchised groups of all kinds, including those that are not human.

I aim to apply this new definition of ecofeminism to three medieval works of literature. Aguirre states that “there is throughout the Middle Ages a clear trend towards reducing a woman’s direct participation in the making of society. She is at the same time exalted and degraded, both protected and subjected” (281). As I argue in the second chapter, animals and women are routinely denied their own voices and serve instead as stand-ins for a knight’s chivalric reputation. They are very rarely valued

outside of the servile roles given to them and are strongly discouraged from helping to reconstruct society. Listening to their voices creates a contrasting view of Camelot and its legends, and it begins to articulate a solution to the current ecological crisis.

In the first chapter, I examine *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from the standpoint that the current ecological crisis has already begun. The Pearl Poet begins and ends the poem with the fall of Troy, situating the events of the story between the two depictions of destruction. The annihilation of Troy is linked to the fall of Camelot, and the poem holds one of the ultimate reasons why Camelot is doomed to fail. I argue that the Green Knight may be interpreted as a physical manifestation of the earth—one that Morgan le Fey has created in her attempt to save the city of Camelot. Morgan le Fey, Lady Bertilak, and Lord Bertilak act as a triumvirate of power in a plan to stop the ecological crisis that medieval society has set in motion, as their own court opposes the nature/culture binary embraced in Camelot. By aligning themselves with nature, the three aim to inspire change in the next king—Gawain—in hopes of preventing the fall of Camelot.

The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne features a blurring of the life and death binary as a specter leaves hell to speak to Guinevere and Gawain. Revealed to be Guinevere's mother, the ghost foretells of the destruction of Camelot and Arthur's fall from Fortune's wheel. In the second half of the poem, however, she disappears. In my second chapter, I analyze the voices—or silence—of the animals and ghost in the tale and the reason for their suppression. I argue that by silencing characters throughout the tale to reassert a masculine narrative, Arthur and his knights doom themselves and their

kingdom. By ignoring the very real prophecies that the ghost proclaims—as well as the issues they bring to light—Arthur brings ruin and chaos to Camelot.

In the final chapter of my thesis, I examine *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure* and argue that the poem addresses the problems of sovereignty for women and nature within Arthurian legends, as well as the toxic relationship that characters have with nature and the animals that reside within the natural world. Throughout the poem, Dame Ragnell constantly breaks down the binaries between the culture of the court of Camelot and the natural world. Her association with nature forces the nobility to examine their biases, but it also reveals that natural beings are not allowed to possess sovereignty by humans unless they subject themselves to human order.

Throughout my thesis, my definitions are necessarily flexible and shifting because of the content examined, as well as the timeline in which it occurs. I am communicating in the current cultural moment, yet I write about a much earlier one; the works that I examine were written in the Middle Ages and set even earlier, in a fantasized version of the fifth or sixth century. As such, the meaning of these concepts changes depending on the historical and cultural contexts of the text under examination and of the moment in which it is being interpreted. Sovereignty” has multiple meanings within *Weddyng*, including Arthur being “sovereign” over a kingdom as its ruler—which would have been the commonly accepted concept of sovereignty at the time the poems were written. According to Latham, in late medieval society, kingdoms had the most secure connection with sovereignty and were more likely to be seen as sovereign by other powers. Smaller types of state were seen as having sovereignty as well, but much

less so than kingdoms; smaller polities “had more difficulty securing the recognition of their claims to sovereignty and as a result were constantly exposed to the threat of absorption or subordination by top-layer authorities” (Latham par. 14). The breach in this type of sovereignty can be seen in both *Weddyng* and *Awntyrs* as Arthur absorbs other areas and gives them to Gawain. The term also has the meaning of individual sovereignty, which consists being the ruler of one’s own mind and body. This type of sovereignty—though one addressed more readily in modern texts—can be seen throughout all three poems.

“Natural” is another term in my work that has multiple meanings within the texts. In *Weddyng*, it is used in two ways. The first meaning has to do with the world of nature outside of human beings. The second relates to a person’s “natural” status, such as nobility, which was thought to be intrinsic and inherited through bloodline.² The way culture interacts with nature also changes the meaning of both terms, depending on the work analyzed, as well as the group examined. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the people of Camelot and Bertilak castle interact differently with nature, with the people of Camelot being cut off from it and those in Bertilak castle working closely with their animal neighbors to coexist. *Weddyng* and *Sir Gawain* also feature characters with “natural” characteristics, such as Lord Bertilak turning into a physical manifestation of the earth and Dame Ragnell having the likeness of a boar.

While I have tried, in this thesis, to represent separately some of the ways medieval people thought about their culture, about what was natural, and about nature, these intersecting ideas are very complex and require further research. How the

² For more on this definition of natural, see chapter three.

common people viewed changes in the way in which humans treated the natural world and the effect human activity had on the ecosystems within England are two broader questions I aim to examine in the future. I hope to develop my understanding of the many medieval worldviews and their connections with nature—as well as their connections to the current ecological crisis—as I continue to work in this field.

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Going Green: An Ecofeminist Examination of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

A creature that has claws capable of reducing flesh to ribbons, a jaw strong enough to make bones crumble into bite-sized pieces, or a human-sized battle axe that can cleave a head from its perch with one swing is likely to inspire terror in anyone who behold it, regardless of the intent of the act. This fear is compounded when the being is eight feet tall, has red eyes, and is completely green. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the seemingly malevolent appearance of the Green Knight—as well as the moral ambiguity of his actions—has long been a source of interpretive contention. He has been read in many ways, including as a mythical green man, a type of evil spirit, and a nature deity. The interpretations of the Green Knight are many, and an ecofeminist reading of the tale complements these varied and nuanced readings of the knight and his role within the poem. An ecofeminist reading allows us to see the Green Knight as more than merely a malevolent spirit determined to sever a knight's head from his body or to scare a damsel to death. Through an ecofeminist lens, the Green Knight may be interpreted as a physical manifestation of the earth—one that Morgan le Fay has created in her attempt to save the city of Camelot. Morgan le Fay, Lady Bertilak, and Lord Bertilak act as a triumvirate of power in a plan to stop the ecological crisis that medieval society has set in motion.

In “Medieval Ecocriticism,” Vin Nardizzi argues that “the Middle Ages is the era where our ongoing ecological crisis first began” (113). He explains that Chaucer is considered to be “the figurehead” of the ecological movement during the Middle Ages (113). He is not the only author who depicts the shift in how people relate to and treat nature, however. The Gawain Poet subtly portrays the change in medieval England by

looking at one of its more famous mythical fortresses: Camelot. Its downfall is shown through the ages in multiple stories, and there is an overarching knowledge that the kingdom will end bloodily, cast into ruin by the chivalry and honor that once made it a formidable adversary. One of the contributing factors to that ruin is the relationship the court has to nature and its denizens.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight draws strong parallels between Camelot and Troy, and the knowledge of the inevitable fall of each encourages readers to consider the collapse of their own civilization. The poem starts and ends with the same image: the great city of Troy burns as its citizens are slaughtered in the streets. The image shows “how a remnant from one city founds a new city, which is in turn destroyed, and since the entire poem is presented in the past tense, the reader is never allowed to forget that Camelot is likewise a doomed society” (Clark and Wasserman 8). Because the two cities are connected within the text, the fall of Troy can be read as an indication that the ideologies within the poem are instrumental in the fall of Camelot.³ The fall of Arthur and his Round Table are not the only casualties in this collapse of civilization.

The Gawain Poet:

...not only knows that Camelot has fallen but also fears that his own society is likewise unraveling, and in his poem of Arthurian society’s failure—a failure in a line of failures stretching from Troy—he attempts to warn of impending doom facing New Troy, that is, London. (Clark and Wasserman 8)

³ In her article “Structures of Time in Medieval Historiography,” Gabrielle Spiegel explains that there are three main concepts of temporality in medieval texts: a series of events in which one event in no way causes the others, a cyclical temporality, and typological events (26). Typological events are those “in which antecedent events become prophecies of later ones, which represent their fulfilment but which are not connected to the earlier events in any direct, causal manner” (26). Although the fall of Troy does not cause the destruction of Camelot, it is a prophecy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

In the poem, Morgan le Fay, Lord Bertilak, and Lady Bertilak attempt to avert this travesty by stopping the ecological crisis. They plan on inspiring a change in King Arthur, one that will eventually change the way his empire interacts with the world. Their plan fails, however, due to an unlikely hero. The failure to avert the ecological crisis ultimately signals the beginning of the end for Camelot and allows the systemic cycle of collapse to continue, reducing another great civilization to ruin and myth.

In modern-day society, Camelot represents a shining beacon of hope, one that fills grade-school heads with dreams of adventure and codes of honor. The renowned morality of the mythical fortress has not always been viewed in this way, however. Camelot is a city riven by contradictions. Although its foundations were built on high ideals, implicit within these ideals are the potential for human error and corruption. In most stories, the knights of the Round Table value the laws of Camelot more than their own lives. Although courtly love and chivalry have long been part of literary tradition, in each iteration of the Arthurian legends, they are presented anew and in different ways. In each tale, they become susceptible to corruption and human fallibility in new ways that indicate that, although these ideals may be honorable in theory, in practice they are easily manipulatable. In Arthurian tales, that manipulation is typically begun by those in power or by knights who seek to usurp sovereignty and claim the power of the realm for themselves. Two of the most notorious examples of the misuse of ideology are found in the legends of Guinevere and Mordred, though their stories differ greatly from version to version.

In modern media, most stories that focus on Guinevere fixate on her connection with Lancelot. The entertainment industry has glorified the legends in which the two

have a sexual relationship while deliberately ignoring the myths that emphasize that the queen and her knight instead engage in courtly love, consistent with Camelot's ideals. The idea of courtly love permeates the court in Arthurian tales and is present to a lesser extent in many other medieval texts. The type of devotion a knight shows to his lady is typically not a sexual one. The two share a bond that is somewhere between sensual love and devotion to a deity, though it normally involves flowery language and minor flirtation. It is easy to skew the image of courtly love into a sexual relationship, however, due to this unwavering devotion, as can be seen in the various depictions of Guinevere and Lancelot. While in some versions of the Arthurian legends, the lady and her knight are mutually invested in their relationship, many feature a struggle between the two as they engage in courtly love while striving to sustain their investments in chivalry and their reputations. The delicate balance between courtly love and sexual intimacy allows Mordred to take advantage of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship and to portray them as traitors in some of his attempts to usurp Arthur. It is important to note, however, that Mordred is only able to take advantage of Lancelot and Guinevere in later renditions of Arthurian legends. The evolution of the lady and her knight's relationship from an act of courtly love into an amorous affair happened in the twelfth century in Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot; Ou, le Chevalier de la Charrette* ("Lancelot," par. 2). Before the addition of Lancelot to Camelot's mythology, the death of Arthur and the downfall of his Round Table were generally attributed to the king's arrogance and his thirst for conquest. Arthurian mythology has been rewritten throughout history to

empower the men within its stories and privilege Arthur, while effectively overwriting the women and blaming Guinevere for the fall of Camelot.⁴

Chivalry is the second tenet in the knight's code, and it likewise is susceptible to human error. Knights are described as being willing fight to the death for the sake of honor or to gain glory for their king. In theory, chivalry is a valuable practice for a monarch. It promotes loyalty to Christianity as well as fealty to the leader of the land one inhabits. From a practical perspective, it would be an ideal code for rulers to implement among their nobility. Chivalry also holds monarchs accountable. Although a knight will swear fealty to the king, the monarch must also abide by the rules that the king sets forth himself. If he fails to do so, he is no longer deemed worthy of his position. In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, this is the ultimate cause of the fall of Camelot. Mordred and his chosen knights bring "proof" to Arthur of Guinevere and Lancelot's affair. Although in this particular case Lancelot and Guinevere happen to be only chatting with one another, Arthur is forced to confront the truth in this rendition of the tale: Guinevere has committed adultery with her knight and has thus committed treason. Arthur has two choices once the accusation has been brought before the court. He can pardon Guinevere and lose his honor and potentially his throne, or he can burn her at the stake. Unfortunately, he decides to burn her alive, choosing the path of chivalry while hoping

⁴ The cycle of suppressing the stories of women and privileging the men in charge of doomed cities is also present in the story of Troy. Instead of being victim to the will of the gods, Helen is often read as the instigator of a war, one who eventually knocks the great city of Troy to its knees. The overarching theme of capricious gods intervening and toying with mortal lives has largely been written out of current day renditions of the story, much like the wheel of Fortune has been written out of Arthurian legends. The blame falls instead upon the women within these tales, as writers steal their voices away in an attempt to glorify old rulers and their heroic battles. In both cases, the queens have been reduced to love-sick ladies in search of romance, even when their original characters were nothing of the sort.

that Lancelot will fulfill his duties and save the queen. Arthur is trapped in a prison of his own making, constrained by the code of honor to which he so desperately clings.

Camelot may have been built on luminous ideals, but those ideals were misused by the court. The corruption found among the nobility is why change must come from outside the city, from a being who is not bound by the codes that Arthur has implemented within his realm. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan le Fay sends her champion to Camelot to challenge the king and, hopefully, to inspire a change in the way the kingdom is run.

The tests take place in Wirral, where the inhabitants have been given up by both other humans and God (Gawain Poet 701-2). In “‘The Wilderness of Wirral’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Gillian Rudd examines the landscape within the poem through an ecocritical lens. She states that the Green Knight “is a creature who *embodies* nature, and so can be regarded as the representation of how humans think about and react to the non-human world. As such, this Green Knight acts as a representation of the human concept of Nature” (52). In a medieval Europe, nature would not only be viewed with awe but would also be abhorred because of the vicious beasts that dwell within its domain. This is part of the reason that the court reacts in the way it does to the Green Knight. Rudd details Gawain’s arduous journey across England and decides that while some of the journey may take place in the realm of reality, the majority of it occurs in the Otherworld (62). One indication of this is the hawthorn bush entwined with hazel. Rudd explains that hawthorn “foliage is one of the models for the foliate Green Man faces” and that it “marked the place where one might cross over into the Celtic otherworld” (61). The Otherworld is a place of change—a

place where one might encounter the impossible and conquer it. Rudd details Gawain's journey across the English countryside and believes that he probably crosses a river to get to Wirral, symbolizing an actual crossing into another world (59). In the real world, Gawain would also have to cross the Dee Estuary to get to Wirral from northern Wales.

The river is more than simply a landmark or dangerous obstacle. Water can indicate "that important changes are about to occur, such as transformations, a paradigm shift, an epiphany, a rite of passage, etc." (Classen 35). Bodies of water have long been associated with the supernatural.⁵ Jean-Claude Schmitt describes why rivers are so revered within Arthurian legend and why they have many associations with the supernatural:

The Welsh claimed to have seen [King Herla] plunge into the Wye, the river that marks the boarder of England. The bodies of suicides were also thrown into a river, thereby depriving them of a Christian burial, and it was a river that marked, for a ghost of Yorkshire, an uncrossable boundary. Sometimes a river was the border between the land of the living and the land of the dead. (Schmitt qtd. in Roscoe 54)

The river is not the only watery obstacle on the route to Bertilak Castle. The castle is also surrounded by a moat and, if the location is around present-day Wirral, is situated near the sea. While water can be associated with death, the trials are not meant to slay Gawain, but rather to inspire within him a change that will one day lead to a brighter

⁵ In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, one version of King Arthur's ascension to the throne relates that he gains Caliburn from the Lady of the Lake. He gives it back to her at the end of his life, trusting the power of the legendary sword to her waters rather than to his knights. Avalon—the mythical place where Arthur is supposed to be healed or buried depending on the story—is also surrounded by water and can be reached only by boat.

version of Camelot.⁶ By passing into what Rudd calls a Celtic Otherworld, Gawain is able to break from the toxic kingdom and encounter a geological and psychological place full of potential change.

Although Bertilak castle is a place of potential growth and rebirth, it is not always perceived in that way. The most common reading of the poem holds that Lord Bertilak's castle is more bloodthirsty than the court of Camelot. This is due to not only the head-slicing game but also the graphic hunting scenes that take place and the exchange of winnings. In "An Animal Studies and Ecocritical Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Iris Ralph explains how medieval people viewed hunting for sport. She states that "in medieval Europe animals were not separated from humans on the kinds of inflexible moral and philosophical grounds that are seen in the modern period" (435). Animals were often viewed as living entities that were not so different from human beings. The fact that they were regarded so highly raises the question of why Lord Bertilak slaughters them in the hunting game and why the poem depicts the multiple hunting scenes in the way it does. The description of the hunt focuses on the chase instead of the animals' deaths, relating that, "Thay brayen and bleden, bi bonkkes they deyen...bi thay were tened at the hyghe and taysed to the wattres" (Gawain Poet 1163-9). The passage does not dwell on the moment of demise but rather on the pursuit of the animals and on the various types of hunters working together.

One possible interpretation is that the text depicts the hunting campaign as an exercise in ecological stewardship that culls the population of animals to ensure the survival of the strongest (Ralph 440). Ralph contends that the story presents animal

⁶ The allusions to baptism seem to further this reading, as baptism symbolizes rebirth and change.

hunting “in ways that raise difficult and still unsettled questions about truth and morality in the context of practices of animal hunting as well as games of deceit between humans” (442-3). The hunting game may be unnecessary and cruel, especially in the cases of the boar and the fox. It does, however, provide a show of strength and secures food and hides necessary to keep warm in the winter. The lines depicting the men field-dressing the deer carcasses are quite detailed. They start by removing the internal organs: “Sythen thay slyt the slot, sesed the erber/ Schaved wyth a scharp knyf, and the schyre knitten” (1330-1). They then work on breaking down the bodies and getting them ready for transport, removing the heads for convenience—though not before removing the choice cuts of meat from them: “Bothe the hede and the hals thay hwen of thenne,/ and sythen sunder thay the sydes swift fro the chyne...” (1353-4). The detailed description of each act makes it apparent that the hunt is not only for sport but also for sustenance. Each part of the animal that can be used is used. Bertilak’s hunt is not an affront to nature because hunting is itself natural. It is entirely appropriate for Bertilak to interact with the other creatures within the forest and to play an active role in the ecosystem.

The balance created in the ecosystem by Bertilak’s hunting party is typical of the treatment of deer in the Middle Ages. In “Deer and Deer Farming in Medieval England,” Jean Birrel describes the high status that deer were given among prey animals within England: “Deer were managed in the Middle Ages, skillfully and intelligently, using methods which showed considerable understanding of the animals’ habits and needs” (113). Deer were hunted for food and sport, though there were many laws governing when they could be killed, as well as who could hunt them. Deer roamed free instead of

in cages, and they were protected from poachers, as well as from other predators (113-114). Although they were farmed for their meat, the creatures were never domesticated: They were not amenable to farming in the same way as the usual domestic livestock. They had to be hunted to be killed, and the right to hunt them was strictly restricted to the king (or his officers or grantees) in the royal forests and, similarly, to the private owners of chases and deer parks. (115)

The protection of deer both from other wildlife and from humans led their numbers to swell. By allowing the creatures to roam free, the lords enabled the deer to live their lives without the restrictions placed upon domesticated animals raised as food sources. They were hunted instead of slaughtered, and, as such, stood a chance of survival during a hunt. The hunt strikes an ecologically responsible balance for wildlife so the excess deer population will not slowly die from malnutrition.

In addition to carefully maintaining the surrounding ecosystem so deer can thrive, the people of Bertilak Castle are careful to use every part of the animal, making sure that they die not merely to furnish a trophy. After their deaths, the prey are field-dressed, and their meat is prepared for the journey back home. While breaking down the bodies and harvesting what they can use, the knights pay homage to the other animals of the forest that have aided them in the hunt, paying special attention to the crows that would give the deer's position away:

Bothe the hede and the hals thay when of thenne,

And sythen sunder thay the sydes swift fro the chyne,

And the corbels fee thay kest in a greve. (Gawain Poet 1353-5)

Although the birds are not tame, they have actively assisted in the chase. The knights take care to provide them with a reward for their help, solidifying their partnership. The poem goes on to say:

Thenn thurled thay ayther thik side thurgh bi the rybbe,
 And henged thenne ayther bi hoghes of the fourches,
 Uche freke for his fee as falls for to have.
 Upon a felle of the fayre best fede thay thayr houndes
 With the lyver and the lyghtes, the lether of the paunches,
 And bred bathed in blod blende ther-amonges. (1356-61)

Not only the crows but the many soldiers—dog and human alike—who partake in the hunt are fed. The hounds are fed liver and various other entrails mixed with bloody bread as a reward. Inner organs—especially the liver and lungs—are the most nutritious parts of an animal to eat. Because they have done most of the work, the dogs are rewarded with the more valuable body parts. The hunting party is a transspecies group working together to achieve a goal, and the rewards are divvied up accordingly among different animals. Bertilak and his men are not bloodthirsty trophy hunters but an integral part of the region's ecosystem.

Although Bertilak's castle is often seen as the more barbaric of the courts because of the hunting scene, the more accurate division between the two courts can be seen clearly by examining the ways they celebrate the Christmas season. The beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is filled with images of merrymaking in Camelot. At Arthur's Christmas celebration, the knights readily show their skills at combat in a tournament. They joust against one another during the day and then return

to the castle at nightfall to feast upon the flesh of many animals (41-5). While at first glance this seems quite jovial, beneath the surface is the bloody truth of what a tournament means to a knight's body. In "Not All Fun and Games," Natalie Anderson describes the very brutal realities that accompany tournaments. She observes,

The tournament, with all its elements of theatre and spectacle, was the ideal showground for martial skill, chivalric values, and medieval masculinity. But, behind the glamour, was a dangerous sport that often involved life or death circumstances...while the swords might be blunted, the equipment was not far removed from that used in real warfare, and the injuries sustained could reflect that. (Anderson par. 1-2)

It was highly likely that tournament participants would sustain serious bodily injuries or die. Arthur, however, stands separate from his court. Instead of joining the celebration, he distances himself, refusing to eat until something amazing happens. This amazing event could range from a story of epic conquest to a fearsome battle between one of his knights and a challenger (89-99). The thought that someone might die to satisfy his demand for amusement does not seem to trouble Arthur, since after the Green Knight's departure, he states "never-the-lece to my mete I may me wel dres,/ for I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake" (474-5). Now that he has seen something amazing, he can eat. Instead of feeling concerned over the possible death of his nephew or the fact that a headless, giant green man with a battle axe is running loose in his kingdom, Arthur immediately concentrates on the fact that he has now seen something amazing and can eat his Christmas dinner. There is no indication that the king joins the tournament, nor that it is anything more than a means to keep his soldiers in fighting shape. There is a

clear division between the king and his subjects, one that—when set in contrast with Lord Bertilak’s castle—seems cold and almost cruel.

Bertilak Castle celebrates the holiday season in a much different manner than Camelot does, preferring hunting—in which Lord Bertilak actively participates—and leisure to a tournament. Instead of distancing himself or demanding entertainment, Lord Bertilak calls for merriment and joins the celebration immediately, reveling with his soldiers in a game of keep-away. The prize is his own hood, which will go to the person who creates the most cheer in the festivities. Bertilak refuses to exclude others and goads Gawain into claiming the hood for himself, although he does state that the citizens will make sure that Bertilak keeps his headwear, since he spreads the most Christmas cheer (981-90). He welcomes Gawain into his kingdom heartily and makes certain that he is treated fairly, unlike Arthur’s reception of the Green Knight.

The character of each kingdom can also be seen when its citizens hear of Gawain’s quest. In Camelot, Arthur and his knights continue feasting after the Green Knight proclaims that Gawain will need to seek him out (491-4). Lord Bertilak’s subjects, however, lament at Gawain’s leaving, and a guide attempts to dissuade him from pursuing his quest, encouraging him instead to flee for his life:

For I haf wonnen yow hider, wywe, at this tyme,
 And now nar ye not fer fro that note place
 That ye han spied and spuryed so specially after...
 Forthy, goude Sir Gawayn, let the gome one,
 And gos away sum other gate, upon Goddes halve! (2091-119)

After leading Gawain to the Green Chapel, the scout describes the Green Knight who resides there. He beseeches Gawain to leave, stating, "I schal lelly yow layne, and lauce never tale/ that ever ye fondet to fle for freke that I wyste" (2124-5). The guide has promised Gawain never to tell anyone if he should flee, since he values Gawain's life over the honor the knight would gain by futilely chasing what the scout perceives to be the harbinger of death. He is genuinely concerned about Gawain's fate, and that concern stands in stark contrast to Arthur's actions.

Just as there is a difference in the way the two lords interact with their subordinates, there is also a dramatic difference in the way they treat women. In Camelot, Guinevere is subdued and almost non-existent in the story, except that she is described as bejeweled in precious stones that glitter and shine (74-80). She is also painted as frail in the poem when Lord Bertilak states that Morgan half-imagined Guinevere would die at the sight of the Green Knight carrying his head (2459-62). She has no speaking lines and is not addressed directly. The scenes at Bertilak Castle present women differently. Throughout Gawain's stay, both Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak take an active role in testing the young knight, alongside Lord Bertilak. They each devise their own trial and enact it. Lady Bertilak forms a trial of seduction that he must pass, while Morgan le Fay devises the possible decapitation, and Lord Bertilak presents a trial based on trade (Battles 335). Although the sorceress does not actively appear during the tale, her magic courses through the pages, causing change within the story.

Lord Bertilak and his knights treat other earthly beings with respect and comradery, though it could be argued that this treatment is strategic, as it helps him

hunt. Morgan le Fay chooses him to be her champion, transforming him into the form of the Green Knight. Her reason for choosing Lord Bertilak may be his ties to the animal community and the religious affiliations of his citizens. In her book *Critical Ecofeminism: Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, Greta Gaard takes a brief look at religious archetypes and how they influence peoples' connections with other beings. While religions with a patriarchal sky god tend to distance humans from one another—as well as from plants, animals, and the earth itself—and to value humans above other life forms, earth gods are different. They treat humans like every other life form, equalizing life as a whole (ch. 8). Gaard states that “prior to patriarchal, monotheistic religions, history and archeology show a different value was placed on women, nature, fertility, and the cycles of the earth” (ch. 8). Morgan le Fay may choose the green man to enact her trial because of the green man's connection to the earth gods.

Medieval literature often incorporates elements of both Christian and Pagan mythology—sky gods and earth gods. In many Pagan pantheons, women and animals are considered equal to men, since they are all sentient beings. In early forms of Christianity, however, humans are seen as stewards or rulers of the earth.⁷ In these religions, plants, animals, and women are seen as being subservient to men and are said to be put on the earth to serve them. There are usually elements of both Christian and Pagan religions in Arthurian tales because, although the Roman incursion had previously converted England to Christianity, the religion wasn't as strictly differentiated

⁷ The earliest forms of Christianity were influenced by Greek and Hebraic traditions. One of the major tenets taken from the Hebrew Scripture is the belief that both nature and human society are “created, shaped, and controlled by God, a God imagined after the patriarchal ruling class. The patriarchal male is entrusted with being the steward and caretaker of nature, but under God, who remains its ultimate creator and Lord” (Adams 16, 18). The view of men as stewards of the earth has been passed down through the ages and is still found in today's society.

from the previously established religions as it is now. At this time, there were not always strict borders between Christianity and Celtic Paganism, in personal practice, and it is more accurate “to think of medieval religious culture as a commingling of unofficial and official belief that varies over space and time—forming not a series of cultural compartments, but a spectrum” (Watkins 147). There were many different flavors of “local religious culture” that deviated from the official religion as Celtic beliefs intermingled with the culturally dominant ideals, an act encouraged by priests who sought to close the gap between the two religions (Watkins 145). Many featured Animism as a key component and would have considered themselves part of nature rather than above it. Nonetheless, the shift from Celtic Paganism to Christianity meant that views of Earth were slowly changing. Women, animals, and the world itself started being viewed as tools for a patriarchal society to subjugate rather than as equals. Unfortunately, when a society’s attitude toward the earth changes, so does its treatment of it. Subjugation of the earth leads to natural disasters, deforestation, and a loss of habitat for many plants and animals. One important aspect of the tale is that women are the ones to initiate and carry out two of the three trials Sir Gawain faces. Given that women are “the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters [because of] inequities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty” (Gaard ch. 6), Morgan le Fay can be read as acting in response to the environmental exploitation, to inspire change in Arthur and the rest of the city.

In Arthur’s court, real people really do get hurt, but this harm is presented as a game—as entertainment. Morgan Le Fay meets Arthur on these terms—she presents

the deadly challenge as entertainment for the court. When the Green Knight arrives at Camelot, he issues a challenge to anyone bold enough to play his game:

If any freke be so felle to fonde that I telle,
Lype lightly me to, and lach this weppen—

I quit-clayme hit for ever, kepe hit as his auen. (Gawain Poet 291-3)

Although he seems open to playing with any knight who may rise to his taunts, this is mostly pretense. The game is meant for Arthur, and if any other knight were to accept the challenge, it would be an insult. Walker observes, “[t]o this point the ‘gomen’ had been called for the highest of those present to take up the challenge to prove the worth and honor of Camelot. Under those circumstances to nominate anyone other than Arthur to respond to it would have been a slight to the king” (123). The other men in the hall have no choice but to let Arthur respond first. If he accepts the Green Knight’s challenge and participates in the beheading game, he very well may die. The visitor looks anything but human, and his appearance suggests that he may be part of the supernatural realm and therefore immortal. If Arthur refuses to participate in the Yule games, however, he will forsake his honor—a fate much worse than death for someone who aims to pursue the path of chivalry. Arthur has no choice in the matter. The game is not designed to be a fair one, and Morgan le Fay has set up the challenge in such a way that Arthur has no choice but to accept.

Gawain, however, twists the rules of the court in his favor. As he volunteers, Gawain states that he is the weakest of Arthur’s knights in both strength and intellect. He presents himself as an untested youth rather than a renowned knight:

I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feeblest,

And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes the sothe.

Bot for as much as ye ar myn em, I am only to prayse:

No bounté bot your blod I in my bode knowe.

And sythen this note is so nys that night hit yow falls,

And I have frayned hit at yow first, foldes hit to me. (354-9)

By stating that the game is beneath Arthur's dignity and posing as a lowly knight keen to earn a name for himself, Gawain is able to bolster both the king's honor and his own, while also removing Arthur from potential harm. Unfortunately, this changes Morgan le Fay's plan to save Camelot. There is no longer any way to ensure that the heart of the city—the king—will be influenced by her lesson. Gawain is the next in line to the throne, however, and could one day change the customs of his country.

A straightforward reading of the text holds that Morgan le Fay does not have an ulterior motive and that her goal is nothing more than to cause Guinevere unwarranted stress. The Green Knight does remark that Morgan hopes that her plan would have an alternate ending. She desires:

For to haf greved Gaynour and gart hir to dye

With glopnyng of that ilke gome that gostlych speked

With his hede in his honed bifore the hyghe table. (2460-2)

While this is an amusing idea—no doubt the sorceress would adore being the cause of such strife to her brother—it is not her main goal in the story. Morgan le Fay is the only main character within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* who never appears in person within in the text, yet she manipulates people like a trained tactician and sets all of the events of the story into motion. She must be viewed much like a solar eclipse—readers

cannot see her directly and must instead look at the effects she has on the world around her.

Morgan has traditionally been seen as a somewhat disruptive character. At times, she actively hunts her half-brother and tries to slay him, while at others she aids him or attempts to save his life. While it would certainly be consistent with her character to play a prank on Guinevere, according to Lord Bertilak the sorceress's main goal in infiltrating the castle is to test the Round Table:

Ho wayned me upon this wyse to your wynne halle

For to assay the surquidré, yif hit soth were

That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table. (2456-8)

Morgan le Fay is not the only one who tests the knight, however. She is part of a triad. Gawain must undergo three different tests in Wirral. The other two trials are initiated by Lady Bertilak and Lord Bertilak. Many scholars have drawn connections between the hunting and bedroom scenes, since they happen simultaneously. This might be because "beneath their effortless charm and gaiety, both conceal a potentially deadly purpose" (Battles 330-1). The gruesome aspect of the hunt shown alongside the bedroom scene as the narration flashes back and forth shows that the two trials are equally deadly and gruesome. If Gawain fails any of the trials, he will be beheaded. Both Lady and Lord Bertilak are hunting with precision and purpose in order to test Gawain and hopefully to fulfill their goals in reversing the changing relationship humans have with nature, as well as the fate of Camelot. They both understand the consequences should they fail, and so they continue their trials mercilessly in the hope

that some good will come of these actions, despite the fact that it is not Arthur undergoing the trials.

Although Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay both play large roles in Gawain's journey, much of the female agency has been written out of present-day renditions of the poem. Several lines have been altered throughout the ages, and "the common denominator for these changes is that they reduce women's agency and subordinate them to men, even when the poem implies—or expressly states—that the opposite is true" (Battles 324). The section in question reads thus:

"Thagh I were burde bryghtest," the burde in mynde hade,

"The lasse luf in his lode"—for lur that he soght

Boute hone

The dunte that schulde hym deve,

And nedes hit most be done. (Gawain Poet 1283-7)

Traditional readings of the text have changed the meaning drastically, denying that Lady Bertilak knows anything about the Green Knight or his challenge. By amending line 1283, Battles believes that critics have reduced her to a pawn, while in the original text, the poem makes clear that she is a co-conspirator and is aware of the Green Knight's challenge the entire time.⁸

This is further evident in the green girdle and Lady Bertilak's explanation that it makes the wearer impervious to harm. At this time, Gawain has told her nothing of the challenge. Stating that the girdle protects a person and makes the wearer impervious to harm as a way of enticing Gawain to take it reveals to the audience that Lady Bertilak is

⁸ For more information regarding the amendment of line 1283, see Battles's article "Amended Texts, Emended Ladies: Female Agency and the Textual Editing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*."

keenly aware of the danger he faces and is tempting him (Battles 326-30). Lady Bertilak also tests Sir Gawain's attitude toward women by suggesting that if someone denied him affection, he could simply take what he wants by force. Gawain refuses, however, stating that rape is not courtly and is frowned upon (Gawain Poet 1495-500). Battles argues that "the poem's conclusion makes it clear that she is not only passively carrying out Sir Bertilak's orders, especially since both she and her husband ultimately act at the behest of Morgan le Fay" (331). He argues that Lord Bertilak is not only transformed by Morgan le Fay, but also gets his power—and possibly his kingdom—from her (337).

Many still believe that the tale is one about men—one in which women have little agency. Scholarship concentrating on the poem typically overlooks the agency of Morgan le Fay and her comrades, preferring to focus on Gawain and Arthur—as well as on the Green Knight. Gawain's challenge is glorified to the point of ignoring the sorceress's goals, creating a cycle of frustration in which Morgan le Fay is very often vilified, if acknowledged at all, and the androcentric gaze is perpetuated in scholarship. Heng argues that "Morgan's responsibility for the plot mechanism has been resurrected, debated, minimized, multiplied, classified, and reimagined—only to be appropriated once again (albeit with difficulty) to serve the masculine narrative, whose priority customarily goes unchallenged" (501). The story is not centered around Gawain, as many suggest. Although everything happens to him and much of the tale follows him, he is only one piece of a larger picture. Reducing the female characters within the poem to pawns reduces the overall effectiveness of the tale and diminishes the richness of the characters within it.

In many heroic tales, the champion brings lessons from the pastoral forest back to his kingdom and shares his newfound wisdom, influencing others and changing the future. Gawain attempts this by telling everyone about his encounters, about his new allies, and about the green sash he now slings across his chest. If Gawain were in a seat of power, this might have worked. Had Arthur been the one to undergo the trials, he might have been able to pass on the knowledge gained from his experience and hopefully save Camelot from its tragic end. The Gawain Poet, however, has different plans. Instead of heeding Gawain's words and learning from his subordinate's trials, Arthur makes a mockery of the sash and believes it to be a joke. He and the knights of the Round Table wear a green sash across their chests as a fashion statement for the rest of their lives. The fatal divide between the domains of "nature" and "culture" fails to be healed, and the kingdom continues on its path. Nothing changes, and thus Camelot starts its fall from the top of Fortune's wheel.

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The Fallen and Forsaken: Ecofeminism and *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*

In *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*, readers are given a glimpse into what may await them after death. Guinevere's deceased mother makes an appearance in the tale under a laurel tree, and her arrival offers a warning of the fall of Camelot and all who follow its king. The ghost in question does not look as she did in life, nor does her state reflect the cause of her demise. Her wounds were inflicted not before death but after it, and they continue to agonize her spectral form as a type of punishment for the sins she committed during life. Because of her eternal damnation, she returns to Terne Wathelyne. She aims to break the cycle that threatens to bind her daughter's fate to her own, beseeching Guinevere to aid the poor, give up pride, and cease her adulterous actions with Lancelot. She then disappears, leaving the forest without a trace. Despite her warnings to Guinevere and Gawain—as well as her uniquely horrifying appearance—the apparition is promptly forgotten when Arthur and his knights return from their hunt. Her story is overwritten by a tale of chivalry and battle prowess that divides the land, injures people, and slays animals before its eventual end. Although the ghost's tale heralds the eventual fall of Camelot—and suggests how to avoid it—it is suppressed by the more traditionally heroic tale found in Gawain's confrontation with Galeron. Nonetheless, by haunting of the latter half of the story, Guinevere's mother speaks for those who have been silenced. Through an ecofeminist lens, *The Awntyrs off Arthure* can be read not only as tale of one spirit's suffering but also as a story of how England and its inhabitants fare under the policies of the conqueror Arthur and his Round Table.

Because of the poem's seeming lack of cohesiveness, past readers have tended to interpret the tale as two separate stories rather than one. Roscoe argues that "[m]ost critics agree that the poem is made up of two episodes (ll. 1-338 and 339-702) with a brief conclusion (ll. 703-15). The question is whether the episodes are joined in an aesthetic whole" (49). The episodic nature between the two halves can create a disunity for the reader between the stories and lead to the belief that they were written as two different tales that were later stitched haphazardly together.⁹ Alexander Zawacki refutes this, however, arguing that the poem was immensely popular with medieval people and that, were it two independent stories, they would have been separated to cater better to the audience:

If medieval audiences derived their enjoyment of this text solely from the ghoulish thrills of the ghost and saw the tournament scene as a poorly-joined sequel of dubious authorship (as Hanna and Fichte do), we should expect to find the episodes presented as independent tales in at least one manuscript. However, this is not the case; all four extant manuscripts join the two episodes together in identical fashion. (Zawacki 89)

Zawacki goes on to argue that there are certain indications that multiple tethers link the two stories together. Some of the connections he focuses on are a sense of doom that immediately permeates the pages due to the autumn/winter setting (89-90), the thematic underpinnings of the fragility of the human existence in the ghost, Guinevere, and Galeron's clothes/armor (90, 93-94), and the closeness of death—both through the ghost and through the very real threat of worldly demise in the knights' duel (95). As he

⁹ The story has been described by J.O. Fichte as a "deeply disconnected work, potentially even incoherent" (qtd. in Zawacki 88).

notes, the introduction is not peaceful, as many would assume: “The hints of morbidity found in the autumnal setting and the terror of the hunted animals is made incarnate in the thread of a sudden and unpredictable downfall” (90). The animals within the text continually reflect the destiny of the characters, as well as of Camelot. The death of Grissell foreshadows the death of his master, while the snakes and toads crawling around and through the ghost’s body—in as much as spectres have bodies—are physically intertwining themselves with the harbinger of fate. The deer are no exception, and the hunt joins with the knights’ battle to bookend the poem, as well as the legend. Just as the kingdom begins and ends in violence, so too does the story.

As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthure* begins and ends with the implication of bloodshed. The beginning of the poem states that Arthur has come to Carlisle “with dukes and dussiperes that with the dere dwelles,/ to hunte at the herdes that longe had ben hydde” (4-5). The king has arrived with many of the nobles in his court to hunt deer. After Guinevere’s mother manifests in the forest and the caravan makes its way toward Rondoles Halle, the hunting aspect of the tale lies seemingly forgotten in the forest until the conclusion of the second half. The narrator states that:

This ferely bifelle in [Ingulwud] Forest,

Under a holte so hore at a huntyng—

Suche a huntyng in [a holt] is nocht to be hide. (709-11)

The use of the hunting scene as a framing device creates a structure that confines the events into one story, episodic though it may seem. It bookends the tale and serves to isolate it from the events of other Arthurian legends as it creates a definitive beginning and end to the story.

Guinevere also remembers to have prayers said for her mother's spirit in the conclusion—though nothing is said of feeding the poor (703-9). The ghost is not mentioned within the second half of the poem, but she still has agency within the story, as well as an eerie effect on how audiences read the tale. The ghost's prominence in the first part of the story means that "[s]he remains at the edges of the text, continually haunting it. The haunting effect is created by a number of verbal echoes in the second half of the poem which function like cryptonyms" (Roscoe 57). Food—or the lack thereof—is one of the verbal echoes that Roscoe points to in his analysis of material that connects the two halves. The ghost lingers in the minds of readers while Galeron makes his appearance at Rondoles Halle, joining in the merrymaking with the other knights. Even though the specter haunts the scene, there is no mention of food being offered to the poor. Another verbal echo can be discerned in the ghost's lamentations, which connect to the wails of Gawain after his horse is slain. The cries of the ghost overpowering Arthur's horn can also be linked to Arthur's position as a righteous king being challenged in the latter half of the story (Roscoe 58-9).

The ghost has more of an influence than just verbal echoes, however. One effect she has on the story can be seen when Guinevere beseeches Arthur to stop the battle. After Sir Galeron's lady requests her assistance in saving the knights, the queen can be seen showing signs of humility, setting her pride aside to help another being: "[Than wilfully] Dame Waynour to the King went; /ho caught of her coronall and kneled him tille" (625-6). The ghost causes a small change within Guinevere. Removing her crown and asking for Gawain's and Galeron's lives to be spared established a connection between the earlier, ghostly scene and the knights' battle. Guinevere also has prayers said for

her mother in the last stanza of the poem. There is a seemingly glaring contradiction in her actions, however, as she is never described as interacting with the lower class. The fact that she does not feed the poor, as her mother's ghost commands, may not be an oversight or intentional condemnation by the author, but rather a psychological defense of Guinevere's against the idea of mortality. As Zawacki contends:

After leaving the Tarn Wadling [...] she cannot fulfill her mother's charitable requests without confronting, in some way, her own mortality. The two concepts are inextricably linked by the ghost's own message. While the action which the queen does fulfill—the singing of masses to redeem her mother's soul—is of course also linked to mortality, it is not linked to Guinevere's own mortality, but rather to that of her mother. This action is crucial to any understanding of the queen's psychology in the poem: the only death she is facing is her mother's, which is at a safe remove and therefore less existentially threatening. (Zawacki 98)

Zawacki also contends that Gawain goes through a similar rejection of the ghost's words as he continues to follow Arthur and fight his battles (97). Instead of warning Arthur of his impending fall, Gawain decides to repress the memory, opting instead to hope that the ghost is wrong in her prediction and that the wheel will not continue to turn. As the audience is aware, however, that their hopes are in vain. Zawacki's analysis of *The Awntyrs* makes it possible to view the two halves as one cohesive story with realistic characters rather than as a disjointed attempt at unifying two completely different tales into a single romance. With the unifying psychological aspect in mind, the poem can be examined to its fullest extent—throughout the tale, characters repeatedly

act as though ignoring warnings about the future will somehow allow them to circumvent the inevitable.

In *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, King Arthur is not described as just a king but as a conqueror. Although this is a side of him that modern renditions of Arthurian legends rarely expand upon, stories written before Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* frequently feature the king as a battle-hungry warlord intent on expanding his territory and bringing all of England under his rule to keep the Saxon invaders at bay.¹⁰ *The Awntyrs off Arthure* continues the tradition by naming him "conquerour kydde" (3). He is called both covetous and chivalrous in this poem, which indicates that it may be part of the transition between the two major prevailing views of Arthur that remain in existence: warlord and chivalric king. Gawain seems to recognize the danger that following such a king poses, and he shows concern when speaking to the spirit about what future awaits those who support Arthur and his quest:

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

The king's army has invaded many lands and taken them as his own. Of course, the obvious concern with warfare is the bodily harm that the opposing armies will suffer. Undoubtedly, many will lie dead or seriously injured who would not otherwise otherwise have suffered this fate had Arthur not invaded their lands. In addition to battle wounds

¹⁰ Tales within *The Mabinogion* paint him as such a conqueror, often intent upon winning despite the deaths of many of his men. His ruthlessness is the way he obtains his allies—such as Gawain—and unites all of Britain under a single leader. *Alliterative Morte Arthure* also portrays him in this way by depicting his conquering of Rome and the decisions that lead to it.

the soldiers will receive, civilians will find themselves in economic ruin due to the invading horde. Lynn argues that “[c]haracteristically, medieval armies did not have elaborate logistic arrangements to maintain themselves on campaign and often turned to pillage and plunder. Since the logistics of medieval warfare was so precarious, it is not surprising that supply became a weapon, both in offense and defense” (Lynn 33-34). Although the army might attempt to pay for the supplies they need, depending on the numbers, the supplies could be more than a village could afford to spare. It takes a lot of supplies to keep an army clothed, armed, and fed; Gawain’s language, here, seems to acknowledge that small communities would find it hard to cooperate due to the amount of materials needed to fuel the war machine. It would also be completely unrealistic to transport the huge quantities of food required to sustain the soldiers, since caravans make easy targets and travel slowly.

In her book *Medieval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War in Europe 300-1500*, Helen Nicholson examines the intricate balance that a mobile army must maintain with its surroundings while attempting to supply itself:

Foraging could be risky, and it was not unusual for foragers to be ambushed and killed...In addition, while foraging for food from the enemy was part and parcel of war—taking resources from the enemy for oneself—foraging for food from one’s own side is a bad strategy: it arouses local hostility and may lead to the locals attacking the army which is supposed to be protecting it. (122-3)

In a fertile land like England, there is always another farm or village along the path of conquest.¹¹ It is a common invasion tactic to acquire rations and other supplies from the

¹¹ “Until recent times armies lived off the land; their logistical support systems were so rudimentary that nothing else was possible...Many campaigns were renewed for years, devouring both woods and

newly invaded people, since not only will this support the army, but it will also put the villagers at a disadvantage, should they decide to rebel.¹² When villages are not present, however, forests are a likely source of nutrition, as the soldiers can forage and hunt animals *en masse* to feed their comrades. Although turning to the wild seems viable and natural, the number of people being fed would be astronomical, especially when Arthur wages war on Rome. It would result not only in many deer and other wild game being killed but also in their habitat being invaded and their food sources depleted by scavenging humans. Medieval audiences would have been intimately familiar with the agricultural and economic impacts of raiding warfare, and most could bear witness to its ecological impacts.

The implications of a conqueror king invading many different kingdoms, then, are bleak not just for the lords who rule over the lands and may be put to death if they do not strike a bargain. Innocent villagers and wildlife in the conquered lands also suffer, and the earth's natural resources are depleted in order to sustain the army. According to Guinevere's mother, Arthur has invaded many countries across Europe, and their people have had to pay a hefty price for his audacity and greed:

Fraunce haf ye frely with your fight wonnen

Freol and his folke fey ar they leved;

Bretayne [and] Burgoyne [is both] to you bowen,

croplands in the process... The short-term damage to partially domesticated landscapes was evident to anyone with eyes. The long-term ecological transformations of the early medieval period are difficult to assess, since the long term was a matter of peacetime recovery processes" (Tucker par 7-11).

¹² "War could be conducted in a variety of ways. Raiding or ravaging was one; it weakened the enemy by destroying supplies of crops and livestock and demoralizing the people of the country" (Nicholson 128). While supply chains would become the go-to tactic later in history—or in short-distance wars—raiding and scavenging were popular in areas with fertile land.

And al the dussiperes of Fraunce with your dyn deved;

Gyan may grete the were was bigonen—

There ar no lords on lyve in that londe leved. (274-79)

France, Breytayne, Burgoney, and Gyan have all fallen before King Arthur and his court. Although many have been displaced or slain in the various wars the knights have waged to unite the kingdoms, war is also the means of Camelot's fall in this rendition of the legend. The boundaries of the war are drawn in water—a site of change in medieval texts (Classen 35). The ghost states that, “Thus shal a Tyber untrue tymber with tene!” (282). During their conquest of Rome, the army will get to the Tiber before being forced to turn back toward England. For Gawain, however, demise lies in Dorsetshire—a coastal area along the English Channel¹³: “In Dorsetshire shal dy the doughtest of alle—/ Gete the, Sir Gawayne!” (295-6). Although Arthur's armies have pillaged nature, nature is, in turn, able to delineate the site of his demise. Arthur's thirst for conquest and the subjugation of others' lands allows Fortune to turn her wheel, catapulting Arthur from the top and crushing him beneath its weight:

[False Fortune] in fight,

[That] wonderful [whelewryghte,]

Shall make lordes [lowe] to light...

Yet shal the riche [Romans] with [you] be auronen

And with the Ronde Table the rentes be reved—

Thus shal a Tyber untrue tymber with tene! (270-82)

¹³ Gawain's death here is consistent with *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. In it, he dies upon the seashore while trying to land his knights. Mordred's army is waiting for the knights on the coast, and they proceed to overwhelm Arthur's forces (*Alliterative* 3724-3863).

The ghost goes on to predict that Mordred will cause the fall of the Round Table and that Brytayne will be lost when Arthur goes to Rome. Covetousness drives the king to invade Europe and make his way toward the Eternal City. Until the transgression against the people of Rome happens, he will be in Fortune's favor, sitting safely on top of her wheel. Theoretically, if Arthur makes no move against Rome, Camelot will continue to thrive in this version of the tale, growing and becoming more powerful as it slowly absorbs other nations. If Arthur does not take Rome, Mordred will not have his chance to take the throne, and the kingdom will prosper. Because readers know the inevitable fate of Camelot, however, one can assume that Arthur does not heed the advice the spirit gives—if Guinevere and Gawain even tell him. He will invade Rome, invoking Fortune's fury. Once her wheel turns, he will die, and another, greater ruler will rise to take his place.

In an important scene in *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Arthur meets Fate in a dreamscape with nine different influential kings from both the past and future. In the dream, he is told that the wheel is going to turn soon and that his time as king is nearly over:

At the mid-day full even all her mood change...

About sho whirles the wheel and whirles me under

Till all my quarters that while were quasht all to peces." (3385-91)

While Fortune favors a hero, she is graceful and kind. At exactly noon, however, she turns vicious. The depiction of Fortune in the dream occurs because Arthur has reached the top of her wheel and now—as is the nature of wheels—it is time for him to descend and fade into legend. The description from *Alliterative Morte Arthure* matches the nature

of Fortune within *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. In the prophecy that the ghost gives, Arthur will fall when he is at his most powerful. Since *The Awntyrs* seems to take place in the same timeline as *Alliterative*, it is probable that Arthur eventually continues his quest to conquer Rome and that Gawain will die bloodily, in a battle with no hope, while storming a beach for his king.

Because of her position outside the world of the living, the ghost is able to act as a herald for Fortune and her wheel. She knows of the sins committed by the Arthurian court and its members—including her daughter—and the path down which these sins will lead them. The spirit was once subject to Fate's wheel, too—and quite possibly may still be because of the constant cycle of forgetfulness in which she and the readers are entrapped. Guinevere's mother has a firm grasp of the future as well as of the atrocities of the past, and she is able to bridge the gap of time by being located outside of it. Additionally, because she is dead, she is capable of crossing the boundary between humans and other animals. In life, she was solidly part of the nobility and would have identified with the human side of the nature/culture binary. After death, however, this changes. When she appears before Guinevere and Gawain, the ghost is surrounded by elements of the natural world:

Bare was the body and blak to the bone,
 Al biclagged in clay, uncomly cladde...
 Al glowed as a glode the goste there ho glides,
 Unbeclipped [in] a cloude of clethyng unclere,
 Serkeled with serpentis [that sate] to the sides—
 To tell the todes theron my tong wer full tere. (105-121)

Her body is naked and coated in clay, with only a thin burial shroud wrapped around her. She is surrounded by frogs and has serpents encircling her. A tempest also arises before her appearance, and she takes it with her when she leaves:

Withe a grisly grete the goost away glides,
 And goes with gronyng sore thorgh the greves grene.
 The wyndes, the weders, the welken unhides—
 Then unclosed the cloudes; the son con shene. (326-329)

The spirit is incredibly powerful and either wields the forces of nature or allows them to follow her. The ghost disappears into the trees after her interaction with Guinevere and Gawain, physically distancing herself from the human aspects of the world. Although the text doesn't say whether the snakes and toads follow her, there is no mention of them afterwards, suggesting that they too go farther into the forest. With the disappearance of the ghost, the second half of the tale begins, and the poem concentrates on Arthur and the knights who are part of the hunting party. The story moves from the realm of nature to that of culture as it switches its focus.

Although the first half of the story features two female characters who are central to the action of the tale, they are quickly silenced in the second half, as the focus starts to shift to Gawain and Galeron's fight. In her article "Ghostly Mothers and Fated Fathers: Gender and Genre in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*," Leah Haugh examines the ghost of Guinevere's mother in the poem and the way she influences the mirrored structure found within the two halves of the story; the ghost's interaction with Guinevere shows limitations on concepts of power, as well as of history and of temporal stability

(3). Haugh analyzes the poem as two halves of one story, in which the second section silences the female discourse in the first:

The economy with which Guenevere summarizes her supernatural encounter...effectively complete[s] the systematic silencing of feminine discourse initiated by Gawain's earlier interruption of the mother-daughter exchange. After being described as an active participant in an initially female-centered dialogue over a hundred and twenty lines long, Guenevere's unusual experiences are both reviewed and responded to in less than two lines. (14)

After Arthur returns and he and his entourage head toward Rondoles Halle, Guinevere "sayes hem the selcouthes that thei hadde ther seen" (*Awntyrs* 333). The two lines describing their adventures with Guinevere's deceased mother are the last time that the ghost is mentioned in the poem. She has no dialogue after this point, nor is she seen by any other character. An important event that should have been thoroughly explained, been taken seriously, and have affected what the characters do for the rest of the story is instead brushed off merely as an amazing encounter. Although the ghost has dire information that, if heeded, could save Camelot, the knights ignore her warning and proceed as if she had not uttered a word.

Within the first section, readers already see hints of forced silence. It is never stated what "solempne avowe" the ghost has broken, though it is hinted that it may have been of an adulterous nature (*Awntyrs* 205). The poem also never explains how the ghost knows of Guinevere's future or the ruin of Camelot. Brett Roscoe, in his article "Reading the Diptych: *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, Medium, and Memory," examines the ghost's section and the way the second half of the poem overwrites the queen's

experience at Terne Wathelyne. Instead of an accidental silencing or a consequence of having two stories merged into one, Roscoe believes that the disappearance of the ghost is intentional, in a plan to haunt the second half of the tale and to create a duality within the poem that keeps audiences in a constant cycle of memory and forgotten shadows. Like Fortune's wheel, it keeps spinning, putting the audience in a state of continuous turmoil as it recalls echoes of the ghost and then—almost as quickly—distracts readers, encouraging them to forget her:

...the *Awntyrs* recalls the darker edges of chivalry...Focusing on the formulaic play of the text reveals that the audience is not just encouraged to 'keep in mind' the downfall of Arthur, but also to forget it. A 'crypt' is where the dead are buried, and the ghost of the first episode is buried under the second. It is only a partial burial, however: there are still limbs protruding from the ground on which Gawain and Galeron fight. (60)

Because of the disconnection between the two halves of *The Awntyrs* and the forgetfulness that the text facilitates, Roscoe believes that the perfect atmosphere for the uncanny is created and that "[t]hrough a spectral encounter that is forgotten yet remembered, the poem haunts its audience and casts a critical shadow over the Arthurian court" (49). Throughout the second half of the story, readers are encouraged to question the future that the ghost has predicted both for Guinevere and Camelot as a whole. The absence of the spirit leaves audiences wondering whether she will ever return as well as why she would appear if there were no hope of changing the future. Although readers know that Camelot is fated to fall, each Arthurian legend treats its destruction as something new—something that can be prevented or at least forestalled.

If the nobles of the court take Guinevere's mother seriously and attempt to avoid the collapse of their civilization, then Arthur and his knights may change, leading to glory instead of a fall. Her words are reduced to mere echoes, however, and the silence leads to ruin.

It is not only the ghost and Guinevere who are systematically silenced within *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. The ghost's entwinement with animals and the forces of nature encourages a closer consideration of the roles of other non-human elements throughout the tale. The animals within the poem have their own tales—ones that are ignored, though they eternally serve their knights. For a horse, combat is as deadly as—or more deadly than—it is for a knight, particularly if the opposing faction does not hold chivalry in high esteem. When a horse falls, it is possible that its master will be crushed beneath its weight, potentially killing the knight, crushing their bones, or pinning them beneath the creature. If unseated during the fall, the rider will have to worry about a multitude of other injuries.¹⁴ Although horses were trained in the art of combat and were hard to kill—even more so due to the armor, called barding, in which they were clad—a blow to the leg could seriously injure the steed and cause the knight great harm. Slaying a horse would be more practical in war than in a duel, however, since it would be unchivalrous for a knight to kill another's mount.

In the Middle Ages, horses were generally treated better than other animals within the courts—probably due to the fact that they were considered the most noble of animals (Miller 962). They still sustained needless and deliberate injury at the hands of

¹⁴ "Horseback riding injuries often occur to the arms as riders try to break a fall. These injuries include bruises, sprains, strains, and fractures of the wrist, shoulder, and elbow. The most serious horseback riding injuries can damage the pelvis, spine, and head and may be life-threatening" ("Horseback" par. 2).

other knights, however, and were frequently mutilated to convey symbolic emasculation of their owner (Miller 959). Docking a horse without its master's permission was a serious offense. Miller writes, "[b]y removing a phallic-like extension of the horse the aggressor rendered its owner—whether a knight or layman, monk or priest—symbolically less powerful and publicly deprived him of reputation" (Miller 959). While this common form of mutilation was meant to symbolically castrate the knight, offenders were also known to dock the horses' ears, cut their lips, and even slay the animals (Miller 988). Instead of fighting the knight or simply discussing a perceived slight, humans would mutilate the animals close to their enemies, causing significant harm to innocent creatures in order to bolster their own pride as they whittled away at the reputation of others.

Ill treatment of horses often occurred at the hands of their own riders as well. During the battle between Gawain and Galeron, "the burnes broched the blonkes that the side bledis" (499). The two knights treat their horses with little care while in battle, spurring them until their flanks bleed. After Grissell is beheaded, however, Gawain shows conflicting emotions over his death:

"Grissell," quod Gawayn, "gon is, God wote!

He was the burlikest blonke that ever bote brede—

By Him that in Bedeleem was borne ever to ben our bote,

I shalle [revenge] the today, if I con right rede!" (547-50)

Notably, Gawain shows no remorse over his treatment of the horse. Though the treatment of Grissell—as well as Galeron's horse—may be due to an adrenaline rush caused by the thought of imminent death, the poem does not mention that Galeron ever

bandages the wounds caused by his spurs or intends to do so. Gawain, of course, is unable to do so because of Grissell's death, and the poem does not state whether the horse he borrows suffers the same wounds to its flanks.

One section that defines Gawain's character and his relationship with his horse occurs in his fight with Galeron. The opposing knight intentionally beheads Grissell in the battle, an action that is regarded as beyond unchivalrous:

With a swap of a swerde [squeturly] him swykes—
 He stroke of the stede hede streite there he stode;
 The faire fole fondred and fel, [bi the Rode!]
 Gawayne gloppened in hert—
 [He was swithely] smert;
 Oute of sterops he stert
 Fro Grissell the goode. (540-46)

At first, it seems that Gawain is actually quite distraught over Grissell's death. This makes sense, since the two would ride into battle together. People tend to form attachments to their animal companions, even when they don't face certain death together. After Galeron sends a servant to fetch a Frisian horse for him, Gawain has a different reaction, however:

“No more for the faire fole then for a rissh rote!
 But for doel of the dombe best that thus shuld be dede,
 I mourne for no montur, for I may gete
 Mare.”
 Als he stode by his stede

That was so goode at need,
 Ner Gawayn wax wede,
 So [wepputte he full] sare. (553-59)

Although he nearly gives into sorrow at the sight of his deceased friend, Gawain states that he does not weep for the loss a mere horse and that he is simply sad to have the beast die in such a way. This directly contradicts his actions, hinting that he may be lying about the reason of his sorrow.

One reason for his outburst and denial of his grief may be that Galeron offers him a lesser horse to fight on. In “‘Have This Horse’: The Role of Horses and Horsemanship in Medieval Arthurian Literature,” Cynthia Jeney looks at how people in the Middle Ages interacted with horses and the ways in which these behaviors carry over to Arthurian legends. In medieval Europe, “persons important enough to be considered of the noble classes were expected to have a respectable seat upon an animal large enough to intimidate those of lower birth and social station” (Jeney 16). War horses were physically imposing—more so than other horses—and were bred specifically for riding into battle. They were trained in the art of war and learned to trust their knight in any circumstance. To be taken seriously among the nobility—as well as to display their power—knights rode large horses that physically as well as symbolically situated them above others. Jeney quotes Ramon Lull, stating “[t]o a knight is given a horse, and also a courser to signify noblesse of courage. And because he is well horsed and high is why he may be seen to be free from fear” (16). Galeron has physically lowered Gawain and brought him down before him, and in the process he has slain another being. Grissell’s tale is not told in *The Awntyrs*; readers are able only to view the circumstances of his

death and the actions of those around him that have led to that death. Like Camelot, Grissell's fate is entirely avoidable. Had the characters listened to the spirit's warning, they could have been saved. Instead, Camelot will die as its head is cleaved away, and the next kingdom to arise and take its place on the wheel will be but an echo of Camelot's glory.

Arthurian legends are renowned for images of equality, justice, and heroism. The images conjured, however, rarely include women or animals. Horses and wives are routinely denied their own stories—their own voices—and instead stand in for a knight's chivalric reputation. They are very rarely valued outside of the roles assigned to them—roles often steeped in servility. When they step outside of those roles and attempt to have a voice, they are either silenced or forced into violence in an attempt to be heard. Although heroism dictates that a knight should value companions and treat them with care, this is very rarely the case. As seen through Gawain's show of false mourning for his slain horse and the immediate dismissal of Guinevere's mother's ghost by the court, the display of love that knights show toward women and animals is often insincere, and the performance of caring for them often supersedes actual companionate intimacy.

The Awntyrs off Arthure—though carrying his name—is anything but Arthur's story. Although Arthur is present in the tale, the poem concentrates on the influence he has had on Camelot and the people within it. Grissell and Guinevere—as well as the ghost of Guinevere's mother—are systematically silenced throughout the story. Their tales are not told, and they suffer as a result. The ever-clever wheelwright Fortune is ignored in favor of false security, even when she sends a messenger. Fate, however, cannot be ignored for long, no matter how hard a person tries. By silencing characters

throughout the tale in order to reassert a masculine narrative, Arthur and his knights doom themselves. By ignoring the very real prophecies that the ghost proclaims—as well as the issues they bring to light—Arthur brings ruin and chaos to his kingdom. Camelot will fall, and under its broken walls will lie the silent stories of its people.

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Wedding Bells and Silent Yells: An Investigation on Ecofeminism in *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*

Fairytales usually follow a very simple structure: a prince or princess is separated from the rest of society due to a curse, a perceived difference from others, or the hatred of a stand-in parent—most often a stepmother. The main character falls in love with someone they just met, overcomes their trial with little setback, and lives happily ever after with the person of their choice. While unrealistic, the format is popular because the formula works; while flawed, this formula presents a story that the public perceives to be entertaining enough to invest in, and the basic outline is passed on for this reason. Intrinsic to the traditional fairytale outline, however, are many characterization complications and ethical problems that should be examined. *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure* (hereafter known as *The Weddyng*) features a relatively early example of this particular fairytale formula.¹⁵ Dame Ragnell has been changed into a bestial form by her stepmother, and the catalyst to undo the spell is very specific: the curse can only be broken if the greatest knight in the land grants Dame Ragnell sovereignty in their relationship. The curse forces both Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell to interact with the customs of Camelot in new ways, challenging the societal norms and the place of those norms within the court. When examined through an ecofeminist lens, *The Weddyng* may be understood as a tale that addresses the problems of sovereignty for women and of nature within Arthurian

¹⁵ Different cultures around the world have their own types of fairytales, complete with their own formulas. Although there are many kinds, this chapter looks at one specific formula that originated in Europe and is tied closely to medieval romance. The type of fairytale is less important than the relationship between the two types of writing—fairytales and medieval romance—however, as the connection between them shows societal issues that are being addressed in the current-day world were often also a problem in medieval England. In this chapter, the issue being addressed is the lack of sovereignty that many disenfranchised groups face both in our own realm and that of literature, insofar as the two are ever separable.

legends, as well as the toxic relationship that characters have with nature and the animals that reside within it.

The origin of fairytales is a source of contention among scholars. Ruth Bottigheimer argues that, since there are no documented fairytales before the 1550s, they likely originated with Straparola (in Leek 294). Because of the oral traditions found in both medieval romance and fairytales, however, the form can also be understood as having existed much earlier—though the relationships between medieval romance and fairytales are “ill-defined” (Leek 294). In general, though, Leek argues that “[t]he narrative patterns of many medieval romances and anecdotes are similar to modern fairytales. That similarity, not their ideology, makes them fairytales because genre cannot depend on ideological content” (296). That *The Weddyng* follows a similar structure to many present-day fairytales is not a coincidence; rather, the link between medieval and modern texts hints at a relationship between the two. Because of their similarities, medieval romances and fairytales usually have overlapping areas of interest.

One of the ideas central to both types is the concept of sovereignty. Although it is usually thought of as a governmental issue dealing with who is the “sovereign” ruler of a nation, how much power a monarch has, and what groups of people have the ability to govern themselves, the idea is applicable to individual people and animals as well. Individual sovereignty is the idea that one is sovereign over one’s own self, which includes both one’s body and mind. *The Weddyng* examines the idea of individual sovereignty on several different levels throughout the text while also implementing sovereignty in regard to ruling and land ownership. The Arthurian court understands

sovereignty in the political sense, while the tale's depictions of nature tend to engage with the more psychological dimensions of the term. Dame Ragnell, as a mediator, activates both sites of sovereignty. Gawain, Arthur, and Dame Ragnell demonstrate different levels of sovereignty within the nobility, while Sir Gromer-Somer Jour poses the question of if whether is possible or ethical to rule over nature and the different animals that exist within its domain. The question of sovereignty and what it means for each character in *The Weddyng* can be examined through the use of the Loathly Lady trope and the way each character is affected by that trope.

The idea of sovereignty is often an integral component of tales featuring a Loathly Lady. The type of sovereignty that is sought, however, changes depending on where the tale was originally written, with Irish texts concentrating on ruling kingdoms while English texts focus on the idea of sovereignty in marriage (Bollard 46-47). While scholars debate the manner of the trope—whether it involves a spectrum of different types of sovereignty or a subversion of the Irish version¹⁶—*The Weddyng* seems to incorporate elements from both Irish and English versions of the tales. Although not technically a king, Gawain is Arthur's oldest nephew and is thus potentially first in line to the throne, since Arthur has no legitimate male heir. Were Camelot not destined to fall, Gawain could inherit the throne and Dame Ragnell would be the future queen of Camelot, thus gaining sovereignty over the kingdom, as in an Irish tale. The story also directly deals with the idea of sovereignty found in the English version of the Loathly

¹⁶ An ongoing debate exists over how the Irish and English ideas of sovereignty are related. J. K. Bollard doesn't believe that there is enough information to say that there is a spectrum, because scholars are missing the Welsh tales necessary to call it such (42). Instead, he believes each author creates a new way of using the trope (56). Manuel Aguirre, on the other hand, believes that "there is a fundamental continuity between [the types] with a subversion of the meaning of the original tale" (276). Though there seems to be no general consensus as to how the Irish and English Loathly Lady tales are related, the two feature similar outlines.

Lady tales, as Dame Ragnell seeks sovereignty in marriage to break her curse.¹⁷ While typically the Loathly Lady seems at least to be in control of her forms, Dame Ragnell has no such ability. What makes the poem special among other Loathly Lady tales is that a curse has been placed upon Dame Ragnell by her stepmother. The only way to break the curse is by marrying the greatest knight in all the land and gaining sovereignty in their marriage.

Intrinsic to Dame Ragnell's quest is a glaring contradiction. By placing the curse on her and forcing her to seek sovereignty in marriage, the stepmother has not only taken away her ability to choose her form but also her choice of marital status. If she either refuses to seek or fails to gain sovereignty in marriage, Dame Ragnell will spend her days cursed. If she does seek sovereignty, she is limited in whom she can marry.

When speaking about the curse, she says:

For I was shapen by nygramancy,
 With my stepdame—God have on her mercy!—
 And by enchauntement
 And shold have bene oderwyse, understand,
 Evyn tyll the best of Englonde
 Had wedyd me, verament;
 And also he shold geve me the sovereynté
 Of alle his body and goodes, sycurly.

¹⁷ There are alternative theories about what exactly Dame Ragnell means by sovereignty in marriage. In his article "Fertility Myth and Female Sovereignty in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*," John Bugge argues that "the sovereignty that Ragnell asks from Gawain, and which he freely grants her, is actually to be understood in a sexual sense" (199). He believes the poem to be based on an old fertility myth and asserts that since female sovereignty "was in fact regarded as a necessary condition for conception" that this is what Ragnell was seeking (200).

Thus was I disformyd. (691-699)

The curse states that Dame Ragnell must marry the greatest knight in all the land.¹⁸

She asks for this greatest knight by name, telling Arthur, “Thou must graunt me a knyght to wed—/ His name is Syr Gawen” (280-1). She is specific about which knight she wishes to marry, because there is no other choice. She must marry Gawain to have even a chance of breaking the curse. In this way, the stepmother has decided Ragnell’s future husband—or at the very least sent her down an arduous path, should Gawain decline her proposal.

Gawain’s fate is also decided for him, though in his case by Arthur. Unlike Dame Ragnell, however, Gawain is afforded a much higher level of sovereignty in the story, as he still has—or appears to have—the option of making choices. Just as in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*, land has unjustly been stripped from other nobility and given to Gawain by Arthur with little regard for the human or animal populations living in the territory. When Sir Gromer-Somer Jour confronts Arthur about it and tells him that the king’s life is now forfeit, Arthur is able to use the rules of chivalry to bend the situation to his advantage. He beseeches Sir Gromer-Somer Jour:

A! Syr Gromer-Somer, bethink the well,
 To sle me here, honour getyst thou no dell.
 Bethynk the thou art a knyght;
 Yf thou sle me nowe in thys case,

¹⁸ Arthurian legends go through phases that favor different knights. In early Welsh stories—such as *Culhwch ac Olwen*—Sir Kay is depicted as one of the greatest knights, while Lancelot becomes more popular after his appearance in Chrétien de Troyés *Enec and Eride*. This tale was likely written when Gawain was in favor with fans of Arthurian legend, as seen in the tale’s clarity as to which knight is the greatest.

Alle knyghtes woll refuse the in every place—

That shame shall never the froo. (64-9)

The king calls into question the knight's honor and convinces him that, should he slay Arthur there, Sir Gromer-Somer Jour would never rest in the company of other knights again. He states that only disgrace and exile would await him if he "shalt have to sle me in veneré,/ Thou armyd and I clothyd butt in grene, perdé!" (82-3). Sir Gromer-Somer Jour grants the king his life for one year, allowing Arthur to leave on the condition that he tell no one of their interaction or of Arthur's new quest. Arthur's sovereignty is compromised, after their interaction, both as a ruler and as a human being. As a man, his life now depends on the outcome of his adventure. If he is unable to answer "whate wemen love best, in feld and town" (91), he will be slain by Sir Gromer-Somer Jour. If he answers correctly, he can go free. As a king, however, his sovereignty is challenged in a different manner. The king has taken Sir Gromer-Somer Jour's land and given it to Gawain, ignoring the fact that people and animals already live there. A member of the nobility has challenged Arthur due to his carelessness and favoritism, and, because of his actions, the power of the throne is diminished. Arthur's sovereignty as king is threatened, and Sir Gromer-Somer Jour is able to entrap him into making a deal.

Arthur immediately breaks the contract by telling Gawain, and although the encounter is supposed to be a secret, the knight needs to use little to no persuasion to elicit this confession. The two scour the lands in search for the truth of what every woman truly wants in the world, until Arthur meets Dame Ragnell in the forest. She will tell Arthur the answer, but for a price: he must allow her to marry Gawain. Although Arthur states that the decision to marry "[a]lle lyeth in hym alon" (293), he is able to

manipulate Gawain through rhetoric and force him to agree. When the two meet, Arthur says, “[a]las, I am in poynt myself to spyll,/ for nedely I most be ded” (331-2). Arthur starts their conversation by saying how he may as well kill himself, since he will die anyway. Courtesy dictates that the response should be to the contrary, and Gawain does not falter in his chivalric response:

“Nay!” sayd Gawen, “that may nott be!
 I had lever myself be dead, so mott I the—
 Thys is ill tydand!” (333-5)

Arthur then immediately launches into the story of his encounter with Dame Ragnell and her price. By controlling the beginning of their conversation, Arthur is able to entrap Gawain using the rules of chivalry. Gawain is unable to take back his words—especially since Arthur is his king—and must consent to the marriage. With his role as king—as well as his rhetorical skills—Arthur’s sovereignty is able to diminish Gawain’s.

Due to the pretty yet deadly trappings of chivalry, Gawain is honor-bound to agree to the marriage to save his king. The choices he is able to make affect not only his fate, however, but Dame Ragnell’s as well. If Gawain were to turn down her proposal, change his mind, or make the wrong choice, her life would be drastically changed for the worse. Bugge states: “[e]ither choice involves an unacceptable negative outcome. And, although it has never been noted in the criticism on *Weddyng*, either choice would also be only about Gawen, reflecting only the stark polarities of the male ego’s construction of desire” (Bugge 205). Arthur, however, removes Gawain’s ability to choose through the way he structures the conversation, prioritizing his own desire over

the knight's. Just as Dame Ragnell's sovereignty has been stolen from her, so too is Gawain's.

Nonetheless, by allowing Dame Ragnell to decide her own fate, Gawain has given back to her a small piece of what was stolen from her by her stepmother. There is no indication that he does so for her own sake, however. When asked which form he would prefer for her to take during the day, Gawain starts his decision-making process by bemoaning how difficult the choice she has given him is.

“Alas!” sayd Gawen, “The choyse is hard!

To chese the best, itt is forward

Wheder choyse that I chese! (667-9).

If she is beautiful during the daytime and loathly at night, Gawain would have great renown through Camelot for having a gorgeous wife in waking hours, but during their intimate time at night, she would be less than appealing. In the reverse situation, Gawain would be publicly humiliated by an unsightly wife during the day (670-4). Unable to choose between the two, Gawain abstains from choosing, stating that while he would choose the better one, he isn't sure which one that is:

Now fayn wold I chose the best;

I ne wott in this world what I shall saye!

Butt do as ye lyst nowe, my lady gaye;

The choyse I putt in your fyst. (675-8)

In lieu of making a decision, Gawain decides to let Dame Ragnell make her own choice, granting her the sovereignty required for the curse to dissipate. It is not through grace nor affection that Gawain breaks the curse but rather through indecision, an

indication that Ragnell's sovereignty is but a side-effect of his indecisiveness.

Afterward, the two are said to live happily ever after—at least until she dies five years later. Before Gawain abstains from choosing and the curse is broken, however, Dame Ragnell reveals through her curse the biased and toxic relationship that the members of Camelot's court have with nature.

Theoretically, the nobility of the Arthurian court should have no objection to Dame Ragnell marrying Gawain. She is the perfect match for him in social status, and she saves Arthur's life by solving the riddle Sir Gromer-Somer Jour gives him. Knights were of noble blood and, as such, had to marry other members of the nobility. As a dame, Ragnell has one of the more powerful aristocratic positions. The narrator makes a point of describing her finery, stating:

She was arayd in the richest maner
 (more fressher than Dame Gaynour);
 Her arayment was worthe .iij. .m. mark
 Of good red nobles styff and stark,
 So rychely she was begone. (590-4)

Although she resembles a witch or a peasant,¹⁹ Dame Ragnell is extremely wealthy, and she is well within her rights as a dame to ask Arthur for Gawain's hand in marriage. Despite this, however, the aristocrats lament Gawain's fate. They continually reject Dame Ragnell because of her appearance and attempt to hide the marriage ceremony from the majority of Camelot. Guinevere even asks her "to be maryed in the mornygn, erly—/ 'As pryvaly as we may'" (570-1). Although Dame Ragnell is of a powerful social

¹⁹ As explored below, the idea that a richly dressed woman can be seen as a witch or peasant based on her physical features is a key part of the contradictory standards of the court.

status, her appearance and mannerisms are not perceived as noble enough for the aristocrats of Camelot, and, as a result, she is viewed with acute disdain by the court.

In theory, Dame Ragnell should be welcomed warmly into Camelot. She has saved King Arthur from certain death at the hands of Sir Gromer-Somer Jour in the forest, and she will soon marry the greatest knight in the realm. Arthur escorts her into the city to denote her importance—though doing so may be more an insult to him than an honor for her—and the people take note of it (515-21).²⁰ Despite her actions and high place in society, the nobles fail to welcome her warmly, instead weeping for Gawain (543-4). One reason for this may be the intense social stratification among the nobility. In her article “Aristocratic Veneer and the Substance of Verbal bonds in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell and Gamelyn*,” Colleen Donnelly looks at the social dynamics between members of the aristocracy in Camelot and the strength of the verbal bonds they create among themselves. When analyzing the dynamics between Ragnell and the other aristocrats, Donnelly states:

Ragnell has clearly established her right to marry Gawain; she has kept her promise, and, even if she does not look it, she is a lady. Knowing she is a lady does not alter Arthur’s or the court’s repulsion. It is no longer enough to be born noble; aristocrats are revealed to be a cliquish lot who embrace only those who in turn embrace their customs and rituals. They are hypocrites to whom

²⁰ Stephen H. A. Shepherd—the editor for this version of *The Weddyng*—states in his footnote that “[i]n asking Arthur to ride ahead, Dame Ragnell effectively makes him a servile escort” (258n5). The poem follows this moment by describing the journey, stating that “[t]hey Kyng of her had greatt shame;/ Butt forth she rood, though he were grevyd” (515-6). The ride serves to frustrate and insult Arthur, just as his words have insulted Dame Ragnell.

appearances matter more than integrity and commitment to verbal bonds—
principles that should be the essence of their culture. (Donnelly 332)

Although Dame Ragnell has wealth and status befitting nobility, she is not seen as being a part of the aristocratic world of the court. For the courtiers, appearance and conformity matter more than who a person is or what unique experiences they could offer to better the kingdom. Dame Ragnell is treated as an outsider from the moment she enters the castle, and the nobility's refusal to accept her demonstrates a clear divide in their society between what is considered socially acceptable and what is not. After this rejection, Dame Ragnell starts incorporating animalistic tendencies into her behavior, and her appearance is likened to a boar. Although her looks are the reason for her status as an outsider, Dame Ragnell is able to use them to her advantage as she reveals the social stratification in the aristocracy.

Because of the narrator's exaggeration of Dame Ragnell's appearance, some critics theorize that the poem is actually a parody of the Loathly Lady trope. Rebecca Davis claims that the story borrows elements of the story from other writers and adapts them, shaping the work into a type of satire (431). She makes the argument that Dame Ragnell is actually named after a demon (435) and that her appearance is exaggerated for comedic effect (433): "Accuracy or economy of description are unimportant to this narrator. The poet produces humor through hyperbole and an accumulation of absurdities" (433). Another explanation, however, is that Dame Ragnell's appearance is used to bridge the dichotomy between humans and animals in Arthurian legend.

Ragnell's appearance is one of the major sources of contention within the story—one that highlights the disconnection between the court and nature. When Arthur first meets Dame Ragnell, the narrator remarks on her appearance, stating that:

Her face was red, her nose snotyd withall,
 Her mowith wyde, her teth yalowe over all,
 With bleryd eyen gretter then a ball;
 Her mowith was nott to lak;
 Her teth hyng over her lyppes,
 Her chekys syde as wemens hypes;
 A lute she bare upon her back,
 Her nek long and therto great,
 Her here cloteryd on an hepe. (231-239)

At this point in the poem, Dame Ragnell is considered unattractive, though she is not represented as bestial yet. After she arrives in Camelot and is rejected by the nobility, however, Dame Ragnell is described with animal-like characteristics:

She had two teth, on every syde,
 As borys tuskes—I woll nott hyde—
 Of length a large handful. (548-550)

Her appearance is likened to that of a boar with tusks. The comparison is not made merely because she doesn't fit the conventional ideas of beauty found in Camelot; instead, Dame Ragnell is seen as shameful and hideous because several of her traits are associated with animals and nature.²¹ The narrator likens her to an animal, stating

²¹ There may be more to explore, here, in the depiction of Dame Ragnell as a boar. Boars are dangerous animals, certainly, but they are often used in very conflicting ways in medieval literature.

that she is “as ungodly a creature/As ever man sawe, without mesure” (228-9). During the first meeting between King Arthur and Dame Ragnell, she also plays with the word fowl, changing it to distance herself from the insult while also forcing Arthur to acknowledge her status as a lady:

“Now farewell,” sayd the Kynge, “lady fowl.”

“Ye syr,” she sayd, “ther is a byrd men call an owll—

And yet a lady I am.” (315-7)

Despite the fact that she may not resemble a lady, Dame Ragnell is, in fact, one. Medieval audiences would have seen a connection between her status and her being, as nobility was thought to be inherited not just as a title but as a set of innate characteristics passed down through aristocratic bloodlines. In medieval romances, the noble characters—whether their lineage is known or not—appear as the epitome of beauty and strength, having the qualities of being noble in their very bones (Naughton 343-344). The quality is intrinsic, and it cannot be taken away by the court’s refusal to acknowledge it. By rejecting Dame Ragnell, the nobles have managed to reject both the natural status of a lady that she has been born with, as well as the affiliation with nature that she brings with her.

After being shunned in the court and compared to a boar, Dame Ragnell begins incorporating animalistic tendencies into her behavior. Although her appearance is

Marcelle Theibaux’ 1969 article on “The Mouth of the Boar as a Symbol in Medieval Literature” highlights the potential associations. The boar can be used as a representation of sexual force (296), a sign of strength and excellence in the hands of a hero (287), and ferocity—as well as strength as a vice—in the hands of an enemy (287). This being said, I have not yet been able to fully explore more recent research on this kind of imagery.

considered unsightly amongst the nobility in the poem, her mannerisms truly appall and astonish them:

When the servyce cam her efore,
 She ete as moche as .vj. that ther wore;
 That mervaylyd many a man.
 Her nayles were long ynchys .iij.;
 Therwith, she breke her mete ungoodly—
 Therefore, she ete alone. (604-609)

Dame Ragnell's mannerisms are frowned upon because they are considered unrefined and animalistic. There is a strict division between humanity and the rest of the natural world, though it is not inherent. The distance between culture and nature is one that humans have socially constructed. Rosi Braidotti explains that the idea of nature as understood today is a cultural construct because "the notions of nature and culture can only be formulated inside an *already established* cultural order" (qtd. in Alaimo 10).²² Just as nature is a cultural construct, culture is part of nature, as are human beings. Every animal group has its own dynamics and communication systems, as well as its own behavioral tendencies. Dame Ragnell demonstrates this by exhibiting more conventionally animalistic mannerisms at the wedding feast. She refuses to let society dictate how much she should eat, and she uses the tools that she was born with to her advantage. She uses three-inch long nails to cut and eat meat, appalling the other nobility to the point that they leave her to eat alone. Other creatures use claws and fangs to hunt for food, and she exhibits a kinship to them through her actions.

²² For more on the idea of medieval people and their changing relationship to nature, see chapter one.

Dame Ragnell is not the only person in *The Weddyng* with ties to the natural world. Scholars routinely associate Sir Gromer-Somer Jour with nature. The general consensus among scholars seems to be that the loose translation connects him to nature as the “summer’s day man” (Trimnell 294). Although Trimnell argues that the mixture of English and French in his name is wishful thinking and should be de-emphasized (295), there is precedent for “jour” being used in English. According to the *OED*, “jour” has been used for the word “day,” as in *Merlin* sometime between 1450 and 1500 and in W. L. Nash’s *Churchwander’s Acct. Bk. St. Giles, Reading* in 1538 (*OED*). Reading his name in the slant translation has “led many of the poem’s editors and critics to characterize Gromer Somer Joure as an otherworldly figure or as representative of the uncivilized natural world” (Trimnell 294). Sir Gromer-Somer Jour is only ever seen in the forest and is quiet enough to sneak up on a hunter—as well as his prey—without being detected. The poem describes him as “a quaynt grome” (50), and he allows Arthur one year to find the answer to his riddle—the same time limit the Green Knight gives Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although the name by itself may be a coincidence, his other traits help reinforce Sir Gromer-Somer Jour’s association with nature. In his attempt to regain the land that has been stolen from him, Sir Gromer-Somer Jour interacts with the world of man. He refuses to submit to human rule, however, and is unable to complete his task. His sister Dame Ragnell, on the other hand, is able to achieve her goals because of her unique position in the story. At the end of the tale, she does regain her family’s property by playing by humanity’s rules and marrying Gawain while still influencing the Arthurian court.

Because of her relationship with both the world of the aristocracy and that of nature, Dame Ragnell is able to act as a mediator between the two. She is of noble blood, but she has a direct connection to nature in both her transformation and her family ties. As a result, she is able physically to bring nature into the Arthurian court. Dame Ragnell forces the aristocrats to face their reaction to—and their treatment of—nature; she refuses to let them ignore the fact that although they presume to reign over it, the nobility are just as much a part of nature as the animals they cast judgement upon. With her mediation, however, comes the brutal truth that natural beings are not allowed sovereignty by humans unless they subject themselves to human order. To win back his land and sovereignty, Sir Gromer-Somer Jour would have to submit to the rules of Camelot and address his grievances with Arthur before the court. For the summer day's man to continue being in nature, he must submit himself to the whims of human society. In the poem, the knight would technically win Arthur's life were Dame Ragnell not to interfere, but he would never regain his sovereignty or land. Dame Ragnell is able to bring nature into the court, but she is only able to gain sovereignty by fulfilling the traditional marriage role, becoming more normative and socially acceptable in the process as her reward. Sir Gromer-Somer Jour, on the other hand, refuses to submit to human order. As a result, he loses both his home and the prize of Arthur's life. He fades into mere legend and is never seen again in the story.

Fairytales are tricky texts. While the protagonists may overcome the obstacles facing them and live happily ever after, the ending usually carries some form of bittersweet sorrow to darken the pages. In *The Weddyng*, Dame Ragnell is able to break her curse, but she only lives for five years after doing so. The greatest knight in all

the land gains love in his life before he loses it terribly to the darkness of death. King Arthur wins his life from Sir Gromer-Somer Jour, only to lead Camelot to rot and ruin. Among the most bitter of endings, however, is the truth behind sovereignty in the Arthurian court. Sovereignty, the text implies, can only be gained when characters conform to the patriarchal human society they inhabit, accepting a state of disconnection from and conflict with nature. Natural beings are subjected to the revulsion and whims humans, and the era of chaos begins.

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Conclusion

The relationship that humans have with nature is damaged and has been for a long time. In my thesis, I have examined some of the ways in which medieval literature portrays a shift in humanity's perception of the natural world. In the first chapter, I examined *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with the understanding that the current ecological crisis had already begun. I argued that Morgan le Fey, Lady Bertilak, and Lord Bertilak act as a triumvirate of power in a plan to stop the ecological crisis that medieval society has set in motion. By aligning themselves with nature, the three aim to change the future and prevent the fall of their kingdom. In the second chapter, I concentrated on the untold tales of *The Awntyrs* and the reason for—and the consequences of—their suppression. By silencing characters throughout the tale to reassert a masculine narrative, Arthur and his knights doom themselves and their kingdom. In the third and final chapter, I claimed that *The Weddyng* addresses the problems of sovereignty—or rather the lack of sovereignty—that women and nature have within Arthurian legends, while also looking at the way characters treat the nature-culture binary within the tale.

One surprising theme from my work is the particular role of the mediator between civilization and nature in each of the poems. In *Sir Gawain*, Lord Bertilak, though human, occupies a space that lies somewhere between nature and culture. He takes the form of a green man to celebrate Christmas in Camelot and to finish his game with Gawain, giving him the appearance of a type of forest spirit—but one specifically engaging in human ritual and sport. His court works with animal companions to create their way of life, surviving by cooperating not only with hunting dogs but also with

creatures of the forest, such as birds. In *The Weddyng*, Dame Ragnell has animal characteristics as part of her curse. She uses her form to reveal the biases of the court against nature. In *The Awntyrs*, the specter is a dead human, yet her form is intertwined with denizens of the natural world, as snakes and frogs surround her and coil around her form. She brings attention to silent voices, as she exists outside the boundaries of the world. All three characters exist in a liminal space beyond the binary of nature and culture, and they act as mediators between the two domains. In this way, the three are representative of a solution to the problem of how people interact with the world. Cooperating and interacting peacefully with other creatures to survive while listening to their voices and respecting their sovereignty will influence humanity to coexist peacefully with other earthly beings. This path is essential for the survival of the planet, as well as of the people and animals on it.

Continued survival, however, can only be obtained by breaking the binaries of nature and culture that humans have created and returning us to our place among the rest of the natural world. Ecofeminism provides a way to bridge the gap between humans and nature by listening to the voices of disenfranchised groups. By using an ecofeminist lens, it is possible to remove the circular logic that has been perpetuated by patriarchal societies in an attempt to diminish nature and those associated with it. The poems selected for my thesis all carry within them the underlying theme of silent voices—including silence that has been intentionally wrought and the silence created by the lack of a mutually understandable language between two types of beings. In all three of the pieces, characters must partner with nature to overcome—or attempt to overcome—limitations put in place by societal constructs. The characters who play

mediator roles take on characteristics of nature while still retaining human-like visages. Despite their efforts, however, each mediator fails to create a large enough impact to change their story's outcome. In *Sir Gawain*, the triumvirate is unable to influence Arthur through Gawain. In *The Awntyrs*, the ghost and those who are witness to her prophecy are silenced in the second half of the poem. In *The Weddyng*, Dame Ragnell is forced to submit to human rule. In all three poems, the destruction of Camelot is imminent, and, in all three, the characters fail to avert the impending crisis because of the divide humanity has placed between itself and nature. When viewed from the modern era—with its similar disposition toward nature and ongoing cultural struggles—the message, then, becomes clear: if humanity does not correct its thinking and continues to isolate itself from nature while subjugating the natural world for economic or personal gain, modern civilization will fall and become the new Camelot. It is only by succeeding where the mediating characters failed that humanity, now, can divert the ongoing ecological crisis.

In addition to the broad concerns outlined in the introduction, my work has revealed some specific moments that I hope to explore further in the future. Dame Ragnell is cursed, which gives her an appalling appearance, but this fails to explain the connection she has to the boar or why her attributes are associated with one. Although Fortune and her wheel, the specter, and the animals all have connections to one another, I have yet to discover how Fortune interacts with nature directly or how the culture of spectacle in Camelot influences the way people interact with nature in *Sir Gawain*. These are all questions that I aim to examine in the future. I intend to research exactly what makes some characters able to be mediators, while others reside squarely

within their own factions, and then apply the answer to modern problems. I hope to develop my understanding of the many medieval worldviews and their connections with nature—as well as with the modern world—as I continue work in this field.