

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 37 (2019)

Artikel: Secretly sinful mothers and the surveillance of women in Sir Gowther and The Awntyrs off Arthur
Autor: Stone, Kara M.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869561>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 02.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Secretly Sinful Mothers and the Surveillance of Women in *Sir Gowther* and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*

Kara M. Stone

This essay considers the secretive world of female desire and sin, which occupies a central role in many late medieval romances and which speaks to a larger cultural fascination with watching over women's conduct and actions. The late medieval romances *Sir Gowther* and *The Awntyrs off Arthur* depict women, more specifically mothers, as secretive and potentially sinful, with their transgressions happening outside the bounds of societal control. Because of these acts of secrecy, this essay argues that these women are subject to enhanced surveillance.

The popularity of two late medieval romances, *Sir Gowther* and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, central moments of which feature women being suspected of wrongdoing, speaks to a larger cultural fascination with uncovering, and punishing, secretive female behaviour.¹ In *Sir Gowther*, the mother is watched over by an otherworldly demon, who comes to challenge her honesty. After her sexual affair with this demon and her subsequent dishonest behaviour, she is only freed from her punishments once she confesses her past sins to her son. In *Awntyrs*, the ghost of Guinevere's mother is suspected while under the watch of Guinevere and Gawain, who question her to uncover the truth of her past and help to set her

¹ Raluca L. Radulescu and Corey James Rushton make the argument that recent studies of the romance genre “attest to an increased interest in what Middle English popular romance can reveal about contemporary culture, especially in relation to its evident lack of reverence for elite models of behavior and its traditional ‘appetite’ for taboo issues” (2).

free from her torments. Simultaneously, Guinevere's mother also watches over her daughter from the afterlife, much like the otherworldly demon watches over the mother in *Sir Gowther*, and intervenes directly with advice about how to avoid punishment in purgatory.

On the surface, *Sir Gowther* and *Awntyrs* may not appear to have much in common. The early fifteenth-century romance *Awntyrs* is an alliterative poem from the northwest region of England, rooted in both the Arthurian and the *memento mori* traditions, whereas the late fourteenth-century *Sir Gowther* is a romance from the Northeast Midlands² based on the *Robert le Diable*³ legend. Yet, despite their inherent differences, both texts focus on vivid scenes of maternal secrecy and suffering in otherworldly encounters. I argue that the framework of Surveillance Studies helps us better understand the anxiety about women's secretive actions that these texts encode and the comments they make on the threat of women's misbehaviour.

Surveillance is a post-medieval term that sheds new light on the treatment of women in *Sir Gowther* and *Awntyrs*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one meaning of the word "surveillance" is "[w]atch or guard kept over a person, etc., esp. over a suspected person, a prisoner, or the like; often, spying, supervision; less commonly, supervision for the purpose of direction or control, superintendence" (*OED*). The earliest recorded entry for this meaning appears in 1799, roughly four centuries after the composition of *Sir Gowther* and *Awntyrs*. However, although the term "surveillance" may seem anachronistic, its meaning of "[w]atch or guard kept over a [suspected] person" is a useful concept that applies to, and partially explains, the treatment of the mothers due to their suspected indiscretions because in both romances, women's acts of secrecy give rise to suspicion and surveillance. Since fatherhood in the Middle Ages could not be ascertained scientifically, the mother was charged with ensuring purity of lineage. This responsibility of women generated a social anxiety which created the need for their surveillance. Yet, since total human surveillance is impossible, it falls to supernatural forces to observe what could otherwise be kept secret in these romances. In this way, surveillance becomes a hermeneutic tool for identifying and analysing social anxiety about paternity and the need to control women's bodies.

² "Sir Gowther," *The Middle* for more on the variations in dialect between the two manuscripts of *Sir Gowther*.

³ For a detailed discussion on how the thirteenth-century French text *Robert le Diable* acts as a source for *Sir Gowther*, see Charbonneau 21, n. 2.

In addition to our modern concept of surveillance as defined above, the fourteenth-century encyclopaedia *On the Properties of Things*, a translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De proprietatibus rerum* by John Trevisa, may offer some context. This widely read encyclopaedia refers specifically to the inherent differences between men and women. Trevisa writes, "And malice of soule is more in a womman þan in a man, and sche is of feble kynde, and sche makeþ mo lesinges, and is more schamefast and more slow in worching and in meuyng þanne is a man" (*Liber Sextus*, Chapter 7, ll. 27-30). By focusing on the notion of women's feeble nature ("feble kynde"), which suggests a natural proclivity for sin, I argue that the late medieval perception of female weakness, especially related to sexuality, is highlighted in the mother figures in these romances. Specifically, *Sir Gowther* and *Awntyrs* showcase the mothers' subversive actions by vilifying them and extending a threat of punishment onto their offspring.

The two mothers clearly do not live up to the societal expectations of mothers as outlined in Trevisa's encyclopaedia. Trevisa links the Latin *mater* with Aristotelian concepts of matter: the mother "puttiþ forþ þe brest to fede þe child and is busi to norische and kepe þe childe" (*Liber Sextus*, Chapter 7, ll. 1-2). Motherhood is defined in relation to a woman's physicality and focuses on her body as a place of nourishment and growth. This definition could explain why, in *Awntyrs*, the punishment of Guinevere's mother is directly related to her maternal body, where serpents hang from decaying flesh, and why Gowther's mother is unable to nourish her son, ending with him violently tearing off her nipple. Both texts invite this interpretation through the desecration of the mothers' bodies and by highlighting their magnified physical suffering; the texts do not allow their actions to remain undercover. Instead, the mothers' torment is on display, making them imperfect examples of motherhood both for the textual and extra-textual observers.

This need for dramatic depictions of the corporal suffering of the flawed mothers speaks to underlying societal fears of covert female action. Women by nature were meant to bear and nurture children, but socially the only mothers that were considered legitimate were those that were married.⁴ As Felicity Riddy suggests, "the household ideology [. . .] locates the woman as wife and mother within the home; her do-

⁴ For more on motherhood, marriage, and the preservation of lineage, see McLaughlin 43, where she discusses the way in which religious and social texts from the period affected the way in which women were the crucial link in lineages. See also Goodich 304-05, who explains the sacramental importance of marriage as the only permissible form of sexual expression since it encourages the procreation of children.

mesticity is represented as a prime virtue and she herself as the repository and maintainer of bourgeois values” (68). Shannon McSheffrey also explains that “sex and marriage were tightly woven into the fabric of medieval English society” and further argues that “bonds of marriage and sex were simultaneously intimate, deeply personal ties and matters of public concern, subject to intervention by everyone” (4). Since paternity could not be ascertained beyond doubt, it was the woman’s responsibility to safeguard the lineage through her legitimate offspring. In a society where lineage and bloodlines were so important, the mother was entrusted both with producing and nurturing a legitimate family, and these romances reflect the social anxiety surrounding mothers who complicate their domestic roles and how their actions may affect their children.

Against this backdrop of societal concerns about legitimacy, Sir Gowther’s mother emerges as a particularly devious character because she has an illicit affair with a devil – but even more so because she *almost* succeeds in guarding her secret from her husband, her son, and society. The trope of a fiend disguising himself as a lady’s husband and impregnating her was common during the late medieval period, with many scholars believing it to be based on the popular legend of *Robert le Diable*.⁵ In narratives of this kind, women unknowingly have sex with the devil and produce illegitimate, satanic offspring. The wide circulation of such tales reflects late medieval society’s preoccupation with the ability of women to safeguard legitimate lineages as much as its fascination with moments of female secrecy.

Significantly, though, the mother in *Sir Gowther* is not initially presented as an evil character cloaked in secrecy. Rather, the Duke of Austria marries this beautiful maiden, who is described as:

a ladé non hur lyke
 For comly undur kell;
 To tho lyly was likened that lady clere,
 Hur rod reyde as blosmes on brere (32-35)

A lady, none surpassing her in beauty under her head-dress; she was likened

⁵ In the introduction to their translation of *Sir Gowther*, Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury suggest that most scholars accept that “the source narrative most often cited in relation to *Sir Gowther* is a French poem entitled *Robert le Diable*, a five-thousand-line *roman d’aventure* composed in the late twelfth century” “Sir Gowther,” *The Middle*. For another detailed discussion on how this text acts as a source for *Sir Gowther*, see Charbonneau 21, n. 2.

to a lily, that bright lady, her complexion was rosy as a blossom on the briar⁶

This initial description of the lady is typical in medieval romance, where the woman's heightened beauty reflects her inner virtues. Yet, despite their exuberant wedding celebration, after ten years of marriage, the Duke decides to separate from his wife because she has not fulfilled her wifely duty of bearing him a child:

Ten yer and sum dele mare
 He chylde non geyt ne sche non bare,
 Ther joy began to tyne;
 To is ladé sone con he seyn,
 “Y tro thu be sum baryn,
 Hit is gud that we twyn;
 Y do bot wast my tyme on the,
 Eireles mon owre londys bee”;
 For gretynge he con not blyn. (52-60)

After ten years and somewhat more [of marriage], he had not begotten a child, nor had she born one, [and] their joy began to wane; to this lady he soon began to say, “I believe that you are barren, it is good that we separate; I only waste my time on you, [since] my lands are heirless;” he could not cease weeping.

Here, the duke, although weeping while delivering his message, places blame directly on his wife for not producing a legitimate heir for him and therefore not living up to her potential as woman and mother.⁷ His primary concern is for an heir to inherit his lands and with each year that passes without a son being born, his joy diminishes. From a societal viewpoint, the duke positions his wife as a failure in their marriage. In desperation, she leaves her husband and the confines of his society in the castle and flees to the comforts of the natural world of the orchard.

It is at this moment that the duchess is most vulnerable because, as is typical in medieval romance, the orchard or the natural world outside of the bounds of society is a place where otherworldly or supernatural

⁶ All translations are mine.

⁷ The text allows for the interpretation that the husband is infertile since it does not specifically say that the wife is barren. The husband instead implies that she is barren by saying to his wife that “Y tro thu be sum baryn” and that they should separate (“twyn,” 56-57). However, despite the vagueness surrounding their lack of an heir, the wife is ultimately blamed for failing to tell her husband about the demon in the orchard and covering up the encounter.

things can occur.⁸ This narrative detail is also important in light of a woman's responsibility within the confines of the domestic sphere, suggesting that once the woman leaves the protection of the household, potential threats to her honour and legitimacy lurk.⁹ In this passage, she is particularly vulnerable because, after speaking with her husband, she is upset, as is visible in her pale features, and she is left alone to decide what she can do to change her fate:

Tho ladé sykud and made yll chere
 That all feylyd hur whyte lere,
 For scho conseyyd noight;
 Scho preyd to God and Maré mylde
 Schuld gyffe hur grace to have a chyld,
 On what maner scho ne roghth. (61-66)

The lady sighed and looked unhappy and pale because all failed, for she could not conceive. She prayed to God and merciful Mary that they should give her grace to have a child, in what manner she did not care.

In her frustration, she offers a desperate plea to heaven directed at both God and Mary, in which she does not care how she has a child, as long as it happens, and so she sets herself up as potentially susceptible to sin. Although God and Mary are acceptable addressees for her prayer in this moment, somehow a demon seemingly intercepts her desperate prayer and preys on her vulnerability in the situation. This further suggests that there is a direct relationship between the natural and the supernatural worlds where demons can also spy or watch over women and come to earth to test their honesty.

This scene between the duchess and the demon has received much critical attention, especially about how to read the mother's culpability and Gowther's conception. Notably, Jane Gilbert focuses on how "the child's monstrosity relates to [his] parents" (330) and Margaret Robson suggests that the mother is "angry and resentful of her husband's treatment of her" and is "prepared to go to any lengths, take any man or fiend" in order to save her marriage ("Animal Magic" 141). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen also claims that the mother is "not so frightened [by the supernatural revelation] that she cannot see advantage in the impregna-

⁸ Erich Auerbach discusses *aventure* in romance, where "fanciful depictions of the miracles and dangers [await] those whom their destiny takes beyond the confines of the familiar world" (421).

⁹ For more on the mother's identity in romance in relation to the domestic sphere and the threat of the outside world, see Charbonneau and Cromwell.

tion” (222), and most recently, Emily Rebekah Huber contends that the mother’s “encounter with and subsequent rape by the devil in the orchard not only transgresses boundaries between this world and the otherworld, but boundaries across species” (289). Other scholars have also discussed whether the duke should be blamed for setting the duchess up for failure,¹⁰ whether this prayer leads to her seduction by the shape-shifting demon,¹¹ and finally whether she and her son should be blamed for her actions.¹² For this essay, I do not wish to reopen these previous debates. Instead, I focus on how the text presents the mother’s character as secretly sinful *after* the orchard scene, which is reflected in her physical punishments and through her son’s inability to conform to society as a child. I accept that although her actions can be read as subversive, Gowther’s mother unknowingly has a sexual relationship with a demon because he is disguised as her husband. The text specifically mentions that the demon was in the likeness of her husband (“as lyke hur lorde”) and had *his* way (“is wyll”) with her, not that she initiated the sexual encounter herself:

In hur orchard apon a day
 Ho meyt a mon, tho sothe to say,
 That hur of luffe besoghth,
 As lyke hur lorde as he myght be;
 He leyd hur down undur a tre,
 With hur is wyll he wroghtth. (67-72)

In her orchard, upon a day, she met a man who, though truth to say, besought love of her, as like her lord as could be; he laid her down under a tree and worked his will on her.

After such an emotional conversation with her husband about their marital troubles within their castle, the action moves outside of the cas-

¹⁰ Gillian Adler questions the “pattern of male violence and abuse” in this romance by arguing that the “pressure to correct her husband’s accusation and assuage his anger drives the duchess to pray for help but her plea is answered with yet another punishment against her” (49).

¹¹ Andrea Hopkins asserts that unlike the mother in *Robert le Diable*, the “seduction of the Duchess of [Austria] is the result, it is hinted, of her carelessly worded prayer [. . .] and the fact that the Devil takes the form of her husband, greatly lessens her guilt and responsibility for her son’s nature” (151).

¹² Concerning the debate on whether Gowther can be considered sinful or responsible for his actions, Samantha Zacher posits, “the fact that Gowther is born of an unholy union between devil and human mother complicates matters because it adds biological aberrance to the litany of sins Gowther commits” (427).

tle quickly and the text offers no clues that would give the demon away to the duchess. At first, only the reader is privy to the fact that this is a demon in disguise. However, immediately after the deed, the duchess realizes she has been fooled. Right after he lays her under a tree and “his will is done,” he sheds his disguise and speaks to her:

He seyde, “Y have geyton a chylde on the
That in is yothe full wylde schall bee,
And weppons wyghtly weld.”
Sche blessyd hur and fro hym ran,
Into hur chambur fast ho wan,
That was so bygly byld.
Scho seyde to hur lord, that ladé myld,
“Tonyght we mon geit a chylde
That schall owre londus weld.” (76-84)

He said, “I have begotten a child in you that in his youth shall be very wild and [he] will wield weapons strongly.” She blessed herself and ran away from him fast into her chamber, which was so strongly built. She said to her lord, that gentle lady, “Tonight, we might get a child that shall rule our lands.”

It is in her actions *after* the demon presents the truth to her that the duchess becomes culpable, since upon hearing that the fiend has impregnated her, she blesses herself and runs back to the shelter of her room, the symbol of an orderly medieval social realm. Although she blesses herself after hearing the demon’s proclamation, this action does not prevent the demon’s words from coming true, and much like his ability to intercept her prayer, he still has power over her. Therefore, to hide her extramarital tryst, she immediately announces to her husband that they might conceive a child. Here, she disguises her demonic encounter as a message from God and convinces her husband to sleep with her to mask her actions. In what may be called a “mock-annunciation scene,” she also capitalises on her moment with the demon by covering it up as an act of God’s will to end their marital strife:

“A nangell com fro hevon bryght
And told me so this same nyght,
Y hope was Godus sond;
Then wyll that stynt all ovr stryfe.”
Be tho lappe he laght his wyfe
And seyde, “Dame, we schall fonde.” (85-90)

“An angel came from bright heaven and told me so this very night, I hope [he] was God’s messenger; then that will stop our strife.” He seized his wife and said, “Lady, we shall try [for a child].”

The duke’s willingness to try to conceive a child with her after she says she had a visit from a heavenly messenger suggests that he, too, wants to save their marriage. His main concern is still for an heir while she disguises her tryst with the demon by seducing her husband as a cover for her actions. It is due to her secretly deceptive behaviour here that the mother must be watched over and ultimately her actions must be exposed, since her outdoor tryst goes against her duty to produce a legitimate heir. Since her interaction with the demon happened outside the indoor protection of her husband’s castle (the domestic realm where women were expected to remain), she makes herself and her son vulnerable to doubts about his legitimacy. Despite her attempts to change the outcome of her actions, as the demon prophesied, she conceives and gives birth to a monstrous child, and until she confesses the truth, her son is unable to conform to society.

Sir Gowther’s experience of childhood relates directly to his mother’s failure to live up to her expected role as nurturer. Her actions, like her fiendish lover’s seed, thus bring about her child’s monstrosity. Gowther is a monstrous baby who is described as fierce and unruly. Despite multiple attempts by his mother and father to rein him into conventional behaviour, Gowther resists. The Duke tries to comfort the lady by sending for the best wet nurses in the country, hoping that they may be able to nurture his son. He kills nine wet nurses (“Nine norsus had he slon,” 119) by sucking them dry of their milk until they die. After the failure of the other women to nurse her child, his mother tries to nurse him herself. However, when feeding from his mother, he tears her nipple off (“rofe tho hed fro tho brest,” 130). Gowther clearly rejects the society into which he has been cast, as shown by his mother and the Duke’s failed attempts to nourish their monstrous child.

The mother and the noblewomen who try to aid her in nurturing her son suffer violent physical consequences because of her deceptive behaviour. Gowther’s destruction of his mother’s nourishing breast and his slaying of the wet nurses illustrates that the text participates in the monitoring of women’s bodies and behaviour by symbolically declaring that this type of treatment is what secretly sinful and deceptive women deserve. His mother’s attempts at nursing do not change Gowther, and this allows for my suggestions that she must repent openly, both to be able to nourish her son and to be forgiven for her actions. It is only after his mother confesses to Gowther that she can provide the spiritual

nourishment he needs to undergo his transformation into a Christian knight. Without this confession to both her son and the reader, even his mother's society cannot cover up for her moral lapses. She must initiate the transformative process herself by undergoing contrition.

Yet, Gowther's mother does not initially confess openly and honestly to her son. Instead, Gowther must confront his mother since she is the only one who could know the identity of his father, and it is her duty to safeguard her family's honour through the fostering of legitimate offspring. He demands that his mother tell him "withowt lye" who his father was, and, after her initial lie she finally relates what happened in the orchard (220-21). She explains that a fiend in the likeness of her husband begot him ("A fende gat the thare, / As lyke my lorde as he myght be," 231-32), to try to make her son understand how she was deceived by the demon. In doing so, she tries to excuse herself from some of the blame in this situation. After the truth of his parentage is thus established, Gowther and his mother embrace and cry together ("Then weppyd thei bothe full sare," 234). This moment creates for the first time a bond between mother and son, and her honesty restores them both to their rightful status in society. The image of mother and son crying while embracing brings their relationship back into the realm of suitable actions as defined by the medieval views of the mother as nurturer and preserver.¹³

Gowther's mother does not fully transmit her sins to her son since he eventually becomes a saintlike hero validated by both God and the Pope. Although the mother's actions initially create a monstrous offspring who aids in desecrating her flesh and destroying her society until she confesses her actions, her son still becomes a knight and leaves his monstrosity behind. He learns the truth of his mother's past from her directly and as a result can move on with his transformation. Therefore, her confession works, and Gowther sheds his past that has been clouded by his mother's deceit once her actions are sufficiently revealed for him, their society, and the reader.

The presentation of Gowther's mother is in many ways comparable to the portrayal of Guinevere's mother in *Awntyrs*. Although there is no immediate source for the content of *Awntyrs* outside the context of the larger Arthurian romance tradition and *The Trental of St Gregory*, a late fourteenth-century poem whose literary origins can be traced back to the thirteenth century, the scene between Guinevere and her mother

¹³ The role of tears in formal penance was widely known at the time and illustrated a true and enduring moment of penitence and restoration. For the role of tears in contrition, see Swift.

aligns the poem with some of the popular “Purgatory Poems” that circulated in late-medieval England.¹⁴ These poems speak to a larger cultural interest in the bonds between the living and the dead and the graphic maternal transformation in *Awntyrs* is a powerful example of the *memento mori* tradition, where the mother’s ghost serves as a warning of what can happen to secretly sinful women in the afterlife.

Guinevere’s mother has received much critical attention, particularly regarding how her ghostly appearance should be read. Most recently, for instance, Alexander J. Zawacki suggests reading the appearance of Guinevere’s dead mother to her daughter as an “apt visual metaphor of the double-decker cadaver tomb” (87), or as Chelsea Henson posits, as an warning to her daughter “of the spiritual dangers of material and sexual excess” (3). I accept both of these readings of the mother as helpful in understanding why she comes to speak to her daughter in the poem. Yet, to my knowledge, no previous scholarship has viewed this fundamental moment between Guinevere and her mother’s ghost through the lens of surveillance. Therefore, my argument that the uncovering of Guinevere’s mother’s secretive behaviour, as well as her observation of her daughter’s potential for sin, is reflective of the pervasive social anxiety about secretive female action, builds upon these previous critics’ suggestions that her appearance is a much-needed warning both for her daughter and for the other characters about how vanity and excess are treated in the afterlife.

In *Awntyrs*, the most striking scene of female surveillance occurs during a moment that illustrates the current torment of Guinevere’s mother as a result of her past. The mother appears to her daughter as a wailing ghost in purgatory, where her beauty and riches have been completely stripped away and replaced by physical signs of suffering and torment.¹⁵ Guinevere remembers her mother as a beautiful woman adorned with

¹⁴ *The Trental of St Gregory*, according to Stephen Shepherd, “has long been recognized as a source [for *Awntyrs*], obviously because of the ghost’s request for a trental [i.e., thirty masses; see also footnote 20], but also because of corresponding incidental details – such as the darkness which attends the ghost, the man’s challenging request for the ghost to identify itself and the emotional, even homely exchange thereafter between mother and child. The other two versions of the story type come from the *Gesta Romanorum*. He also notes the importance of the mother appearing to St Gregory, who was “one of the most important early proponents of the doctrine of Purgatory,” and “he originated the scheme of saying thirty masses for the help of departed souls” (367-69).

¹⁵ The mother’s punishment reflects Jacques Le Goff’s claim that “belief in Purgatory [. . .] requires a projection into the afterlife of a highly sophisticated legal and penal system,” and his description of Purgatory as a place “where venial sins might be expurgated” (5).

pearls and jewels while alive but now her ghost is wailing and covered in mud. These physical manifestations of punishment are directly opposed to the traditional late-medieval values associated with mothers as nurturers and preservers, as discussed above, and serve as a scare tactic for the living to avoid sin and consequently future punishments.

Right before this crucial passage in which the mother's ghost appears, the opening of the poem depicts Guinevere herself in exquisite detail, foregrounding her richness, beauty, vanity, and excess. Henson presents an ecocritical reading of this moment which hints at one reason, I argue, Guinevere needs to be watched over. She suggests that Guinevere is "all materiality" and that she "is a creature to be admired for her decorated exterior" (8). Henson concludes that although excess can be positive, as it initially seems in this opening, "waste [. . .] almost always carries negative connotations" (5). Indeed, Guinevere is described as wearing a glittering gown ("gleterand gide," 15) trimmed with rich ribbons ("riche ribaynes," 16) and rubies of royal array ("rybees of riall aray," 17) with a hood of bluish hue ("hode of hawe huwe," 18) that shields her head from the rain and the other natural elements. Guinevere's depiction is typical of a medieval blazon: she is presented as a beautiful, fair, and noble queen, much like Sir Gowther's mother. Although her depiction could be read as representative of any beautiful lady in the genre, this instance is not merely a standard rhetorical device. Instead, her portrayal prefigures her conversations with her mother's ghost, since Guinevere both embodies and recalls her mother's earthly image through her excess.

Guinevere's depiction as a richly arrayed queen contrasts greatly with the vivid representation of her mother's suffering ghost. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that shortly after this detailed description of Guinevere's material beauty, the natural elements change swiftly, and her mother's ghost appears. This narrative detail of the mother's sudden intervention suggests that female surveillance works on multiple levels in the romance, and that her mother has been watching over Guinevere from purgatory all along, since she comes at this moment to warn her daughter directly. Thus, in addition to Guinevere's and Gawain's careful watching over of her ghost and uncovering of her previously unobserved sins, Guinevere's mother also participates in surveillance tactics by observing her daughter's actions and presenting herself as an example of improper female conduct.

The darkened atmosphere of a lunar eclipse presages the visit of the otherworldly mother visit and contrasts her ghostly appearance with Guinevere's beauty. Immediately after a flame erupts from the lake ("a

lowe one the loughe,” 83), the first glimpse is of Guinevere’s mother’s shade. Yet, this hellish sight is not recognisable to Guinevere and Gawain as her mother:

In the lyknes of Lucyfere, laytheeste in Helle,
 And glides to Sir Gawayn the gates to gayne,
 Yauland and yomerand, with many loude yelle.
 Hit yaules, hit yameres, with waymynges wete,
 And seid, with siking sare (84-88)

In the likeness of Lucifer, the most loathed in Hell, and glides to Sir Gawain in order to block the gates, yowling and lamenting with many loud yells, it yowls and it laments with tearful wailing and said with sighing bitterness

Instead, Gawain and Guinevere turn to speak to the shade. Her form changes from a flame into an otherworldly being who wails and laments loudly. It is not until this description that Guinevere recognises the shade as a woman:

Bare was the body and blak to the bone,
 Al biclagged in clay, uncomly cladde.
 Hit waried, hit wayment, as a woman,
 But on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde.
 Hit stemered, hit stonayde, hit stode as a stone,
 Hit marred, hit memered, hit mused for madde. (105-10)

Bare was the body and black to the bone, all clodded in clay, unbecomingly clothed; it cursed, it wailed, like a woman – but neither on its skin nor on its face did it have any covering. It stammered, it was bewildered, it stood as a stone, it lamented, it murmured, and it gazed madly.

The corpse is so affected by the suffering that its sex is at first unrecognisable, but the wailing (“waymenting”) is a distinctively feminine trait to the observers (“like a woman,” 107). With the identification of this ghost as a suffering female by her wailing, Gawain and Guinevere work together to unveil her past actions by asking her about her torment. This emphasis on her distinguishable wailing suggests an emotional connection between femininity and wailing and heightens the suspiciousness of her past. There is also a deeper significance to her wailing, since from a religious perspective, weeping is important for the sufferer

to demonstrate repentance.¹⁶ The mother's wailing, then, much like the tears of Sir Gowther's mother, simultaneously acts on an evocative and penitential level and gives Guinevere an insight into her mother's otherworldly plight.

Even more distinctly related to her stripped identity and intense suffering as commonly found in the *memento mori* tradition, the mother here is also described as black to the bone ("blak to the bone," 105) and covered in clay ("biclagged in clay," 106), completely devoid of the earthly riches or physical beauty that once adorned her body. In the afterlife, her previous material possessions are not valued and now Guinevere's mother is punished for her sins by being stripped and covered in the clay of the earth as an eternal reminder of her mortality and sin, which is displayed for her daughter and the reader. Leah Haught suggests that the mother's ghost appears "as a degraded version of her former self [and] the ghost's naked disfigured façade ominously mimics the earlier description of Guinevere's youthful beauty" (7). Therefore, she contends, the mother "is typically understood as a central figure in an otherworldly condemnation of Arthurian vice" (5). Guinevere's mother visually represents the vices she comes to warn her daughter about. The power behind her gruesome image, being unveiled for her daughter and the reader, illustrates medieval society's preoccupation with unearthing secretive female behaviour, since she can only serve as a visual condemnation of these vices through coming clean about her own indiscretions with her suffering body on display.

Whereas these initial descriptions show the mother as stone-still and staring bewilderingly at Guinevere, the details that follow vividly portray the torments that result from her previously undetected sins:

On the chef of the cholle
 A pade pikes on the polle
 With eighen holked ful holle
 That gloed as the gledes.
 Al glowed as a glede the gost there ho glides,
 Umbeclipped in a cloude of clethyng unclere,
 Serkeled with serpentes all aboute the sides –
 To tell the todes theron my tonge wer full tere. (114-21)

¹⁶ Hopkins suggests that Origen gives a meaning to tears as an act of penance that was followed in the Middle Ages: "the remission of sins is achieved when the sinner consents to an infusion of divine grace, which excites in him tears of repentance. These tears are the visible sign of a divine pardon already acquired, which has loosened the bonds of eternal punishment incurred by the sin" (50).

On the top of the jowl, a toad picks on her head, with sunken eyes completely hollow that glowed like embers. All glowing as an ember, the ghost, she glides there, encompassed in a cloud of obscure clothing, encircled with serpents all around her waist – to tell the number of toads thereon would be very tedious for my tongue.

The mother is described vividly, with toads on her head, sunken eyes hollowed out in her skull, and serpents clinging to her every limb. Literary and visual representations of suffering in purgatory often included creatures such as snakes and toads clinging to the sinners' bodies.¹⁷ Despite the motionless stance of Guinevere's mother here, she is covered with animated, vile creatures that serve as terrifying reminders of her suffering. Arrayed with jewels while alive, she is clothed with just as many creatures clinging to her body in the afterlife, so many that the narrator says that it would be very difficult to tell how many toads there were on her body (120-21). The description here is excessive and unnerving, yet Guinevere still does not recognise her mother.

Her mother thus reclaims her past human identity and reintroduces her royal lineage. She explains that when she was alive, she was “the fairest queen of all (“of figure and face fairest of alle,” 137) and she was “cristened” with “kings in my kynne” (138). Much like her daughter, Guinevere's mother was once the most beautiful queen, yet now has sunk to a state of great despair as a result of her past. Despite her current suffering, she specifically asks to “speke with [the] Quene” referring to Guinevere, and so she clearly makes her purpose as messenger known (144). She details the causes of her suffering in purgatory because of her earthly wealth, power, and beauty. She ends by exclaiming how dreadful her death has been (“delfulle deth has me dight,” 154) and requests once more to see her daughter (“Lete me onys have a sight / of Gaynour the gay,” 155-56). With this emphasis of her wish to see and speak to her daughter, it is tempting to speculate that she sees her own,

¹⁷ The mother's shade that appears in the *Gesta Romanorum* is covered with snakes and serpents. Visual depictions of purgatory often include serpents surrounding the suffering souls; for instance, see the Royal 17 B XLIII f. 132v image of St Patrick, which depicts him surrounded by the souls of the dead and snake-like demons in Purgatory. This image accompanies the text of *Sir Gowther* and *St Patrick's Purgatory*, c. 1451. Caroline Walker Bynum explains that there was a “parallel shift, in the twelfth century, from a twofold eschatological landscape of heaven and hell to an at least partially three-tiered afterlife, including the in-between space and time of purgatory, to which most Christian souls go after ‘personal death’ for a propitiating and cleansing that may (or may not, depending on the prayer-work of those on earth) continue until a far-distant Last Judgment” (6).

living image mirrored in Guinevere.

Gawain brings Guinevere to speak with her mother and much like Sir Gowther's and his mother's moment of transformation and truth, this conversation between Guinevere and her mother becomes the focal point of the romance. Here, the symbolism of the mother and daughter as mirror images is further emphasized, as the shade again stresses her current torments ("Lo, how delful deth has thi dame dight," 160), and recounts her days as queen, when she was more beautiful than even her daughter ("I was radder of rode then rose in the ron / My ler as the lele lonched on hight," 161-62). These traits, which include a rosiness of complexion and soft, pale skin, are coveted traits for women in the courtly tradition. They are also associated with Guinevere in her current state and her mother uses them to compare her past life to her daughter's current position. She adds an important interjection that now she is a "graceless gost" (163) and details a haunting premonition to her daughter to "[m]use on my mirrou" (167), implying that this could be Guinevere's fate someday as well. Zawacki claims that "by inviting Guinevere to think upon her eventual death and decay, the ghost – like the cadaver tombs – is similarly inviting us as readers to think upon ours" (91-92).¹⁸ In this way, the ghost's surveillance of her daughter and invitation to her to think about her own destiny invites readers to reflect upon their own lives as well.

Couched within the imagery of the mirror, mother and daughter are united symbolically and genetically, and Guinevere must mend her ways so that she does not further mirror her mother and suffer the same fate. Her mother demands that her daughter take heed of her warning:

Hit were ful tore any tonge my turment to telle;
 Nowe wil Y of my turment tel or I go.
 Think hertly on this –
 Fonde to mende thi mys.
 Thou art warned ywys:
 Be war be my wo. (190-95)

It would be difficult for any tongue to tell my torment fully; now I will tell

¹⁸ Zawacki explains that this moment in *Awntyrs* is analogous to the medieval cadaver tomb. He claims, "all of this – the confrontation between a living monarch and a dead one, the accompanying message of death and decay, and the overall tradition of the *memento mori* – finds clear parallels in *Three Dead Kings*, attributed to John the Blind Audeley" (91). Further, he contends that "like the reanimated kings, the revenant that was Guinevere's mother bears warnings about modifying one's earthly conduct in order to avoid divine retribution in the afterlife" (91).

of my torment before I go. Think earnestly on this: seek to remedy your sin – you are warned, indeed. Take caution by the example of my wretchedness.

Concerning female surveillance, it is particularly important that Guinevere's mother describes her current suffering as resulting from past, undetected sins. She must reveal these sins to her daughter and therefore also to the reader before she can be set free. She tells Guinevere that it is because of sexual love, pleasure, and delights that she has been left deep in a lake to suffer ("luf paramour, listes and delites / That has me light and laft logh in a lake," 213-14). This disclosure has subtle implications that may relate specifically to her daughter, since Guinevere, although not specifically in *Awnnyrs*, but typically in other Arthurian legends, is depicted as lustful and adulterous.¹⁹ Consequently, her mother's mention of "luf paramour" here explains why she suffers so extremely in the afterlife and why she comes to speak with her daughter directly. She offers otherworldly intervention to intercede on her daughter's behalf, while also asking for help to aid her own soul in the process.

The specific reference of Guinevere's mother to her past sexual indiscretions ("luf paramour"; see *MED*, *paramour*, n. 1[a], 2[a]), combined with her earthly vanity and excess, is enough to suggest that she can be viewed as a suffering, secretly sinful mother, especially considering her physical description as a ghost. After the shade declares to Guinevere that "thou art warned" (194), Guinevere exclaims, "wo is me for thi wo" (196), indicating that it pains her to hear about her mother's misfortune and that she wants to alleviate her suffering. Since her mother finally reveals the truth about her lustful and sinful past, Guinevere is now able to help alleviate her mother's suffering through prayer and by agreeing to initiate a series of trentals on her behalf ("Were thritty trentales don," 218).²⁰ This final step is only possible because her mother's actions are now uncovered. As a result, Guinevere simultaneously learns from her mother's past actions, avoids potential future punishment, and helps her mother.

The focus upon otherworldly transformation and suspicion of sexual

¹⁹ Haught explains that Guinevere "is commonly associated with the sin of adultery in both the romance and chronicle traditions from Geoffrey of Monmouth onward, making it difficult as David Klausner notes, to view the queen 'without this aura of moral blemish'" (5).

²⁰ See *Awnnyrs*, n. 218, where Thomas Hahn explains that a trental is "a series of thirty Masses in memory of the dead" and that here "the mother requests for nine hundred masses to be said for her soul."

secrecy suggests a cultural preoccupation with the mother's earthly actions. When the deceased mother returns to the child, the warning about her status in the afterlife is so jarring because she was not honest about her actions while alive, and her image reflects this secrecy. Much like the need of Sir Gowther's mother for contrition to start Gowther's moral transformation, the visitation of Guinevere's mother to divulge her sins and to warn her daughter speaks to a larger, cultural paranoia about a mother's secretive actions, particularly sexual ones, and how they affect the child. Since gender norms prescribed that women be faithful to their husbands and nurture and protect their children, the failure of these mothers to uncover their lustful and sexual actions affects their children's position in the world. Therefore, in both romances, the children must act as mediators between the mothers and the society that watches over them. In doing so, they try to set their mothers free from their pasts by uncovering their truths and by guarding themselves against similar misfortune.

References

- Adler, Gillian. "Canine Intercessors and Female Religious Metaphor in *Sir Gowther*." *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 48.1 (2017): 49-71.
- Auerbach, Erich. "The Knight Sets Forth." *Middle English Romances*. Ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995. 411-27.
- Awntyrs off Arthur*. In *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Ed. Thomas Hahn. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-awntyrs-off-arthur>. Accessed 10 October 2018.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Charbonneau, Joanne A. "From Devil to Saint: Transformation in *Sir Gowther*." *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*. Ed. Phillipa Hardman. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002. 21-28.
- Charbonneau, Joanne and Desiree Cromwell. "Gender and Identity in the Popular Romance." *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*. Ed. Raluca L. Radulescu and Corey James Rushton. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009. 96-110.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Gowther among the Dogs: Becoming Inhuman c. 1400." *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997. 219-44.
- Gilbert, Jane. "Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*." *Medieval Women: Text and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*. Ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. Turnhout: Brepols, 2000. 329-44.
- Goldberg, P. J. P. "Childhood and Gender in Later Medieval England." *Viator* 39.1 (2008): 249-62.
- Goodich, Michael. "Sexuality, Family, and the Supernatural in the Fourteenth Century." *Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household & Children*. Ed. Carol Neel. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 302-28.
- Henson, Chelsea. "'Under a Holte So Hore': Noble Waste in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*." *Arthuriana* 28.4 (2018): 3-24.
- Haught, Leah. "Ghostly Mothers and Fated Fathers: Gender and Genre in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*." *Arthuriana* 20.1 (2010): 3-24.
- Hopkins, Andrea. *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Huber, Emily Rebekah. "Redeeming the Dog: *Sir Gowther*." *The Chaucer*

- Review* 50.3-4 (2015): 284-314.
- Le Goff, Jacques. *The Birth of Purgatory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- McLaughlin, Mary Martin. "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries." *Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household & Children*. Ed. Carol Neel. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 20-124.
- McSheffrey, Shannon. *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
- MED Online* [Middle English Dictionary Online]. University of Michigan Press, 2018. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED32364>. Accessed 10 May 2019.
- OED Online* [Oxford English Dictionary Online]. Oxford University Press, July 2018. www.oed.com/view/Entry/195083. Accessed 10 October 2018.
- Radulescu, Raluca L., and Corey James Rushton. *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009.
- Riddy, Felicity. "Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text." *Speculum* 71 (1996): 66-86.
- Robson, Margaret. "Animal Magic: Moral Regeneration in *Sir Gowther*." *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 140-53.
- Robson, Margaret. "From Beyond the Grave: Darkness at Noon in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*." *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*. Ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert. New York: Routledge, 2000. 219-36.
- Shepherd, Stephen H., ed. *Middle English Romances*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995.
- "Sir Gowther." *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-gowther>. Accessed 10 October 2018.
- "Sir Gowther." *Six Middle English Romances*. Ed. Maldwyn Mills. London: Dent, 1973. 148-68.
- Swift, Christopher. "A Penitent Prepares: Affect, Contrition, and Tears." *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*. Ed. Elina Gertsman. New York: Routledge, 2012. 79-101.
- Trevisa, John. *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De proprietatibus rerum*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Zacher, Samantha. "*Sir Gowther's* Canine Penance: Forms of Animal Asceticism from Cynic Philosophy to Medieval Romance." *The Chaucer Review* 50.4 (2017): 426-55.

Zawacki, Alexander J. "A Dark Mirror: Death and the Cadaver Tomb in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*." *Arthuriana* 27.2 (2017): 87-101.

