
October 2009

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Recommended Citation

Laing, Gregory L. (2009) "Treason and Betrayal in the Middle English Romances of Sir Gawain," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol3/iss1/3>

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TREASON AND BETRAYAL IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES OF SIR GAWAIN

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Abstract. This article explores the themes of treason and betrayal which are common motifs of medieval romances, specifically those featuring the Arthurian knight Sir Gawain. Because loyalty to one's lord, nation, or family unit was critical for survival in the Middle Ages, the problem of treachery by close companions is often a recurring subject in romances from this period. Such themes revealed to their audience the fragility of these relationships and cautioned against overconfidence in the bonds of loyalty. Romances featuring Gawain, like the Middle English *Awntyrs off Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, conclude with the young hero learning to understand the dangers of duplicity. Positioning these messages about treason against the competing tradition of Gawain's own role in Arthur's betrayal, however, exposes a broader lesson about finding comfort in loyalty. Only by reading the lessons of the Gawain romances through the wider lens of those traditions surrounding the fall of Arthur's kingdom can we gain a full appreciation of the medieval warnings against treason and betrayal included in these romances.

Treason and betrayal both play significant roles in the literature of the Middle Ages. As Richard Firth Green points out in *The Crisis of Truth*, just like "truth," "treason" is a critical and enigmatic concept for the late medieval English world.¹ One does not need to look extensively within medieval romance texts to encounter numerous examples of treasonous behavior in the sources of both the British Isles and the Continent. From the infamous betrayal of Ganelon in the French *Chanson de Roland* to the myriad Arthurian stories chronicling the usurpation of the throne by the wicked and treacherous Mordred, subversion and infidelity are themes that stretch across the boundaries of nation, language, and even concepts of genre to occupy a momentous place in the corpus of medieval literature.² Within the romances of the Middle Ages, however, treason and betrayal become particularly important motifs employed by poets in order to deprive the protagonist of his or her rightful inheri-

¹ Richard Firth Green, *The Crisis of Truth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 207.

² As Charles Dunn and Edward Bymes point out, the classification of medieval texts into genre groups is "not entirely unambiguous," as a modern concept of genre does not translate completely into a medieval context. However, the term is frequently applied to medieval writing in order to assist in grouping texts with similar characters, values, and subjects together. I use this word here because treason does appear outside of one particular group of medieval texts. Charles Dunn and Edward Bymes, "Introduction," *Middle English Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 6. For more on the concept of genre, see also Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 203-18.

tance, to divide him or her from a true love, or to challenge the bonds of loyalty to others.

Despite a wide variety of subjects, protagonists, and themes that problematize efforts to draw broad conclusions regarding the romance genre, it is possible to glean what would have been a common understanding of acceptable and objectionable social behavior from among the many medieval romance narratives. As Corinne Saunders points out, "Despite their variety... the romances of the Middle Ages are linked by the motifs that echo throughout the genre: exile and return, love, quest and adventure, family, name and identity, the opposition between pagan and Christian."³ If these common plot configurations create mutual consensus, the frequency of behavior labeled as "treasonous" within these texts suggests that questions of loyalty occupy an equally important position as all other conventional motifs of this genre. Moreover, medieval romances are unmistakably products of their cultural milieu, reflecting those principal social values drawn from the environment of their creation.⁴ The later medieval period witnessed significant transformations to the conceptualization of "truth," and Green's extensive study proves that personal promises, loyalty, and faith are integral to the legal, ethical, and even theological organization of late medieval England.⁵ Such a strong dependence on the reliability of "truth" demonstrates that a growing apprehension of the exploitable nature of language dominates the consciousness of this time. Because words do not absolutely necessitate behavior, actions based upon the trust of language and the credibility of the speaker are endangered by the mistaken credibility of false statements. According to J. L. Austin's description of those obstacles to accepted speech, impediments to truth arise because of two main complications: either the speech is prevented from adhering to accepted forms, for example, deviating from the formalized conventions, or else the speech is given an undeserved level of credibility despite the fact that its speaker lacks sincerity.⁶ Treasonous behavior concerns itself with the latter model because the audience believes that the statements are realized and accurate, despite the disingenuous intentions of the speaker. The effects of treasonous behavior within romance plots indicate an awareness on the part of the poet of the unique threat of betrayal, by word if not by deed, to the stability of medieval society.

The Middle English Dictionary defines treason as, first and foremost, a "disloyalty, faithlessness, or culpable indifference to sacred obligations or allegiance" which manifests itself through a betrayal of one's governing body, either against one's king or country.⁷ This meaning clearly evokes the feudal structure of owed loyalty, created by the relationship between lord and retainer, designed to ensure a secure and organized government. Green identifies "treason" as the antonym of the equally imposing and wide-ranging word "truth."⁸ Because treason works to undermine the

³ Corinne Saunders, "Introduction," *A Companion to Romance from Classical to Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 3.

⁴ Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romance," *Medieval Literature* (New York, St. Martins Press, 1986), 99.

⁵ Richard Firth Green, 9.

⁶ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 16.

⁷ "Treisoun," *The Middle English Dictionary*, 28 Nov. 2007 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>

⁸ Richard Firth Green, 207.

bonds holding social order together through a destabilization of trust between lord and retainer, it prompts questions regarding the dependability of the feudal oath of loyalty. Just as the meaning of “truth” in *The Middle English Dictionary* begins with the importance of honesty in a legal and institutional sense, this understanding has the greatest social impact when it is violated.⁹ In addition to the conventional understanding of treason’s damage to legal government, undermining the system of truth also represents a danger that has the potential to destroy bonds of kinship and religion. Such acts of treason involve major transgressions of the system of oaths that bring together government, family, and church, thus challenging the dependability of language involved in the expression of feudal service, promises offered during the marriage ceremony, and the faithful observation of religious vows. Betrayal represents the ultimate threat to each of these important pillars of medieval society, marking it as a serious offense against both the individual and the wider community and thus meriting particular attention. In addition to the representation of treason as a felonious offense, *The Middle English Dictionary* also defines the term as any betrayal involving deception, as well as any “unseemly behavior, wickedness, or evildoing.”¹⁰ Unlike the initial focus on a betrayal with an impact on a society-wide level, this secondary meaning draws the word down to the level of personal relationships, where ethical judgment regarding the morality of an individual’s action is most critical. Moreover, in defining all deceptive activities as treason, the focus shifts away from societal reaction toward private responsibility to uphold “truth.” Thus, treason is distinguishable in a medieval sense within two discrete categories, “institutional treason” against the wider communal organization and “personal treason” against private relationships.¹¹ Although each of these acts of disloyalty differs in its effect, one universalized and one localized, they are both founded on an identical breach in the system of truth that governs interpersonal relationships.

In countless medieval romances, those characters who occupy a position near the hero or heroine typically perform the acts of treason. The consistency of the traitor’s social position in the retinue of close friends or the advisors of the king suggests that a certain level of credibility is necessary in order to facilitate the commission of a treasonous act. The familiarity of the traitor to the hero serves to heighten the act of treachery by counterbalancing the trust of the hero with the abuse of that trust by the traitor. As Anna Reuters suggests, the “close personal relationship” of these treacherous characters allows them to upset the bonds of trust critical to the hero.¹² *King Horn*’s Fikenhild, *Havelok the Dane*’s Godard and Godrich, and *Athelston*’s Wy-mound are just a few examples of characters who betray their friendships with the heroes of their respective romances.¹³ In all of these stories, however, the narrative voice makes explicitly clear to the audience how secretly deceptive, envious, or faith-

⁹ “Treuth,” *The Middle English Dictionary*, 28 Nov. 2007 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>

¹⁰ “Treisoun,” *The Middle English Dictionary*, 28 Nov. 2007 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>

¹¹ Richard Firth Green, 208.

¹² Anna Reuters, *Friendship and Love in the Middle English Metrical Romances* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 161.

¹³ The four romances mentioned were composed between 1225 and 1355.

¹⁴ “the worst child of woman”

less these characters are underneath their false exteriors of assumed loyalty. For example, the poet of *King Horn* initially depicts Fikenhild as “the werste moder child”¹⁴ prior to his decision to betray Horn’s secret love to King Aylmar.¹⁵ Taking only these notions of overt disloyalty into account, it appears that treason within Middle English romance is a fairly consistent feature bound only to the villainous character, easily identified and immediately perceptible, to provide the counterpoint to heroic ideals of loyalty, faithfulness, and truth.

In addition, betrayal is frequently tied to the hero’s pursuit of love. Treachery by a trusted companion forces a separation of the two lovers, creating a tension that can only be resolved when the treason is exposed, the perpetrator punished, and the lovers reunited. For example, the invidious steward from *Amis and Amiloun*, motivated by “tresoun and gile”¹⁶ toward Amis, discloses the details of the romance between Amis and Belisaunt to her father, forcing Amis to flee to his sworn-brother for assistance in punishing the steward and effecting a reunion between himself and Belisaunt.¹⁷ Likewise, *Bevis of Hampton* describes how Josian is abducted by the treacherous Ascopard, whom Bevis and his loyal companions must defeat before they can reunite the two lovers. Medieval romance typically incorporates betrayal, therefore, in order to facilitate the hero’s exile and thereby heighten the enjoyment of the anticipated reunion of the loving couple. In her study of the formulaic structures of medieval romance, Susan Wittig goes as far as to categorize betrayal as existing only within the larger formula-unit of love and marriage, denying it agency as an independent socio-political threat.¹⁸ Unlike the treason encountered in other Middle English romances, however, treason within the Gawain romances endangers not only the eponymous hero, but also the wider Arthurian world in which that hero resides.¹⁹

Given treason’s prominent function in the development of such plot elements, it is not surprising that many of the romances focusing on Sir Gawain also highlight the threat of treason or the betrayal of trust. While the use of treason in the romances of Sir Gawain appears to be the employment of just another stereotypical theme designed to challenge the hero, it actually functions in a distinctive way that separates these romances from other medieval romances. Unlike the previous examples of relationship treason, betrayal in the Gawain romances exists within a more complicated political environment that intrudes upon a straightforward understanding of how traitorous actions impact these narratives. While other romances are free of the onus of accumulated traditions and describe heroes capable of encountering and resolving issues of treason within the context of their single narratives, the betrayal attached to Sir Gawain is intensified by the cumulative portrayal of treason throughout the collec-

¹⁵ Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *King Horn* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), line 30 and line 650.

¹⁶ “treason and guile”

¹⁷ Edward Foster, ed., *Amis and Amiloun* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 407.

¹⁸ Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1978), 162.

¹⁹ References to the Gawain romances in this paper constitute *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Awntyrs off Arthur*. The scope of this analysis can be further expanded to include other romances featuring Gawain. The *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, also classified as romances, provide the larger Arthurian background against which the romances can be read.

tive Arthurian legend. Within the larger framework of these traditions, the treason in the Gawain romances is no longer an obstacle only for the individual hero, but one that echoes recurrent elements that are encountered at the conclusion of the Arthurian legend with the destruction of the Round Table. As a consequence, it is impossible to separate those romances centered on Sir Gawain from the collective weight of the treason that precipitates Arthur's ultimate downfall. Indeed, within the collective assortment of stories associated with the end of the Arthurian legend, the two most decisive moments of betrayal stand out as the adulterous love between Arthur's Queen, Guinevere, and Lancelot and Mordred's rebellion against Arthur. Both of these events are translated from the French source, the *Mort Artu*, into the Middle English of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*.²⁰ Although its narrative is altered slightly by the excision of the adultery of Guinevere and the addition Arthur's conquest of Rome, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* also focuses on Mordred's expropriation of England as the ultimate betrayal. The links of shared Arthurian tradition would suggest that the poets of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Awntyrs off Arthur*, creating episodic tales featuring characters pivotal to the larger story of Arthur's downfall, are mindful of how the inclusion of treason within their stories evokes or fits into the context of the Arthurian cycle. Thus, Gawain's close proximity to treason within these four texts merits a closer investigation of the possible association each provides between Sir Gawain and the final betrayal of Arthur.²¹ The connection of Gawain to treason may be lost in the larger, more epic betrayal of Arthurian literature, yet it is indicative of a moral lassitude that the late medieval world saw as being as destructive as outright treason.

The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is undoubtedly the most distinguished of the Gawain romances. An elegant example of complex alliterative verse, this poem captivates readers for both its stylistic grace and the moral uncertainty it casts upon the nature of Sir Gawain's actions throughout the story. That the theme of treason influences the narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is unquestionably manifest in the opening lines of the poem, wherein the poet discusses the end of the Trojan War and the destruction of Troy through betrayal. The poem begins:

Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesed at Troye,
The borgh brittened and brent to brondez and askez,
The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wrought
Whatz tried for his tricherie, the trewest on erthe.
Hit watz Ennias the athel and his highe kynde
That sithen depreced provinces, and patrounes bicom
Welnegh of al the wele in the west iles.²²

²⁰ Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster, eds., *The Death of Arthur: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), 1.

²¹ According to Marie Borroff, the manuscript of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is dated approximately to the late 14th century, the general time that Larry Benson and Edward Foster also estimate for the composition of *The Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. The late fifteenth-century date for *The Awntyrs off Arthur* cited by Thomas Hahn corresponds with Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, a contemporary version of the Arthurian legend based on the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

²² "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*, eds., Joseph Black, et al. (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2007), 236-7.

Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy,
 The wall breached and burnt down to brands and ashes,
 The knight that had knotted the nets of deceit
 Was impeached for his perfidy, proven most true,
 That was high-born Aeneas and his haughty race
 That since prevailed over provinces, and proudly reigned
 Over well-nigh all the wealth of the West Isles.²³

While the image of Troy allows the poet to connect his medieval story with the epic past of Virgil and Homer, it also emphasizes the destructive power of betrayal. Opening and closing with the treasonous deeds of Aeneas and the repercussions of Trojan defeat establishes the action of this Arthurian poem within a similar critical framework, dominated by the value of truth and the danger of deception. In his book *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered*, Barron argues that the image of the fall of Troy provides a positive perspective on Gawain's moment of "*intrauwe*"²⁴ by linking him to the foundational role Aeneas comes to occupy as the source of Roman and British heritage.²⁵ Despite this optimistic interpretation of the reference to Troy, Barron acknowledges that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ends "not with resolution but implication."²⁶ The betrayal evoked acts not only as a reconstitution of the Arthurian past, but also as a reference to the projected future of the Arthurian legend, eventually fulfilled in the treason of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*.

Gawain's temptation at the castle Hautdesert represents the pivotal moment in the narrative where Gawain's decision to "swear with trawthe"²⁷ to exchange daily winnings with his host Bertilak is put to the test.²⁸ Numerous critics agree that Gawain violates this agreement by keeping the magical girdle offered by Bertilak's wife. The concealment of the girdle forces Gawain to violate his word, and because he attempts to hide the garment, he further compounds his culpability by consciously acting insincere during his exchange with Bertilak. As John Burrow points out, Gawain "goes to confession, rather than to Mass, because he realizes that he has sinned in agreeing to conceal the gift of the girdle from Bertilak, against his promise; though, presumably, he confesses this, he neither makes restitution ("*restituat ablata*") by returning the girdle nor resolves to sin no more ("*promittat cessare*")."²⁹ Barron's critical study of the betrayal hinges on Gawain's violation of not only his verbal agreement, established in the "Exchange of Winnings," but also his responsibility to honor the host-guest relationship.³⁰ Gawain's treason involves the violation of acceptable social and moral behavior and thus necessitates his punishment at the Green Chapel before he can re-

²³ Marie Borroff, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 1.

²⁴ "deception"

²⁵ W. R. J Barron, *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 140.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁷ "swear with fidelity"

²⁸ "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 1108.

²⁹ John Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, Ed., Robert J. Blanch (London: Indiana University Press, 1971), 126.

³⁰ W. R. J Barron, 85.

turn to his proper place in Arthurian society. Bertilak's counterstroke allows Gawain to suffer a symbolic form of the physical punishment that would normally accompany the sentence of treason.³¹ The Green Knight's blow is followed by a moment of confession in which Gawain can cathartically express regret for his moral and social failings.³² Barron accepts both Gawain's admission of guilt and his subsequent pardon by the Green Knight as indicative of their reconciliation, allowing him to overcome the blemish of his betrayal and return to Arthur once again as the "true" knight representing "chivalric virtues."³³ This interpretation, however, minimizes the effect of Gawain's actions on the larger Arthurian corpus.

Despite the didactic episode in which the Green Knight enumerates the faults of Sir Gawain and Gawain's decision to keep the girdle as a constant reminder "in syngne of my surfet,"³⁴ the girdle fails to act as a symbol of humility and virtue in Arthur's court. The poem acknowledges the ineffectiveness of the green girdle as a "token of untrawthe"³⁵ because Arthur has transformed the very symbol of Sir Gawain's treason and shame into a badge of honor that he extends to all the members of his court, divesting the girdle of its original intent. The message of caution necessary to guard the hero's notions of truth and honesty is mislaid, stripping Gawain of the physical reminder of his past follies and thus contributing to his ill-fated involvement in the treachery of Lancelot and Mordred to follow. The repetition of the fall of Troy immediately following this moment serves to confirm the apprehension of the audience that treason will again rear its head to continue the larger pattern of betrayal and destruction that eventually consumes the Round Table.

It is notable that the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* details Sir Gawain's personal involvement in both episodes concerning treasonous behavior. Although Gawain himself is never explicitly labeled by the narrator as culpable in either the adulterous affair of Lancelot and Guinevere or the rebellion of Mordred, his close relationship to these deeds casts a questionable light over his character. Despite the absence of any overt characterization of disloyalty in Sir Gawain, would a medieval audience have recognized his behavior in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* as worthy of the label of treason? Closer examination of Gawain's conduct prior to each moment of betrayal reveals that his reputation is not above reproach. Turning first to the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere, the poet makes it very apparent to his audience that Sir Gawain and the other knights of the Round Table are conscious of the potentially disastrous results should this adulterous love persist. The bonds of loyalty to their king require them to reveal this "criminal" activity to their sovereign. Despite the dishonor that such a revelation would have on Arthur, it would provide the king with the opportunity to punish those disloyal to him. By denying Arthur the appropriate retribution for Lancelot's treason and adultery, the knights undercut the king's role as the purveyor of justice. Moreover, adultery between Lancelot and the Queen also

³¹ W. R. J Barron, 120.

³² Gawain's contrition is the first step toward absolution and reflects the beginning of his knightly redemption.

³³ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁴ "in proclamation of my fault"

³⁵ "token of deception"

represents a breach in the marriage vows, the sacramental commitment uniting social stability and religious belief. Lancelot's infidelity, therefore, represents the ultimate form of treason not only because he rejects the institutional authority of his feudal superior but also because he desecrates the family relationship that links husband and wife together through the Judeo-Christian doctrine of marriage. The stain of Lancelot's treason also risks impeaching the honor of the other knights who are aware of it, especially Sir Gawain for his counsel to ignore the danger. The meeting to discuss this matter between Agravain, Mordred, Gareth, and Gawain reveals the depth of this crisis for their characters. As they consider their response, Agravain asks, "How false men shall we us make? / How long shall we hele and laine / The tresoun of Launcelot du Lake?"³⁶ Agravain labels the knights aware of the adultery as co-conspirators in Lancelot's treason, and by remaining silent, the other Round Table members are only facilitating the betrayal of their king by protecting him from the truth. As if Agravain's charges do not contain enough reproach toward the other knights, he further points out that Arthur is their "eme,"³⁷ the uncle whose honor they are obligated to safeguard in order to preserve their family's honor.³⁸ Despite all of these conditions, however, Sir Gawain expresses reluctance to expose the adultery to Arthur:

"Well wote we," said Sir Gawain,
 "That we are of the kinges kin,
 And Launcelot is so mikel of main
 suche wordes were better blinne.
 Well wot thou, brother Agravain,
 sholde we but harmes win;
 Yet were it better to hele and laine
 war and wrake thus to begin."³⁹

Gawain's reluctance to prevent adultery because of his concern over Lancelot's might is an ineffectual justification for becoming an unspoken collaborator in the betrayal of the king. Dieter Mehl comments that "[t]his more pragmatic view leads him to dissuade Agravain from doing anything rash, and it is evident that the author is on Gawain's side in the matter."⁴⁰ While Gawain's reticence to denounce Lancelot allows him to sustain their friendship, it does not provide the moral excuse that Mehl suggests. His decision not to resolve the threat of treason facing his king makes him culpable for allowing Lancelot's behavior to continue. In the sense that Gawain must mask his true opinion of the situation before Arthur, he is likewise guilty of treason in

³⁶ Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster, eds., *Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), lines 1677-9. "Why should we make ourselves traitors? / How long should we conceal and hide / the treason of Launcelot du Lake?"

³⁷ "uncle"

³⁸ *Ibid.*, line 1681.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 1688 – 1695. "We know well," said Sir Gawain / "that we are the kinsmen of the king, but Lancelot has so great a power / that such words are better stopped. You know well, brother Agravain, / that we would only win harm from that; / so it is better to hide and conceal it / than to begin war and destruction"

⁴⁰ Dieter Mehl, "The Longer Romances," *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 188.

that he must employ deception to conceal the relationship. This problematic betrayal by Gawain is further highlighted when Agravain reveals Lancelot's true feelings toward the Queen to Arthur. Within this exchange he says: "And we have false and traitours been / That we ne wolde never to you diskere."⁴¹ In bringing the adultery to light, Agravain unequivocally makes charges of treason not only against Lancelot but also against the plural pronoun "we," implicating himself and all other knights with a knowledge of the affair. There is no excuse for Gawain's concealment of the adultery once it is made public, and there can be no circumvention of Gawain's guilt as he too is drawn into the treasonous cover-up that eventually destroys Arthurian society.

If the implication of one treasonous act is not enough, the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* places Sir Gawain in close relationship with another act of treason: the rebellion of Mordred. Like his prior involvement in Lancelot's betrayal of the Round Table, the poet never unequivocally connects Sir Gawain with the label of traitor. Instead, Mordred's usurpation of the rule of England in Arthur's absence is the focus of all of the narrator's acrimonious language. In addition to referring to him as a traitor and his acts as treasonous, the poem mentions that he swears "by Judas that Jesus sold."⁴² Such comparisons certainly taint Mordred's actions as overwhelmingly immoral, yet it is through the actions of Sir Gawain that Mordred receives the position of power that enables him to seize control of Arthur's realm. The severe reversal of Gawain's earlier defense of his friendship with Lancelot, prompted by the death of Gawain's kinsmen at Lancelot's hands, results in an unhealthy desire for revenge. Indeed, Gawain's pursuit of vengeance forces him to compromise his loyalty on political, religious, and even personal levels. The destruction elicited by the war between the forces of Arthur and Lancelot is so widespread and violent that even the Pope steps in to demand that "[but] they accorded well in trewth/he wolde the land."⁴³ Gawain, however, does not wish to end the pursuit of Lancelot:

But Gawain was of herte so keen
to him wolde he never assent
To make accord them between
any life were in him lente.⁴⁴

Gawain deliberately refuses to make the peace "in trewth" required by the Pope, opting instead to conceal his hatred for Lancelot until he can revive the conflict. This movement away from reconciliation requires Gawain to be disloyal to the spiritual and moral authority of the Pope, betraying the bonds of his Christian faith in pursuit of a worldly vengeance. This betrayal extends beyond a simple religious conflict by undermining the royal authority of Arthur, requiring him to leave the administration of his kingdom in Mordred's hands. Although the poet never names Gawain as a traitor,

⁴¹ Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster, eds., lines 1734-5. "And we have been false and treacherous / because we did not wish to disclose this to you"

⁴² *Ibid.*, line 3250.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, lines 2253-4. "unless they truly reached a settlement / he would place the land under interdiction"

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 2274-7. "but Gawain was so warlike in his heart / that he did not wish to ever assent / to make peace between them / while any life was left in him"

tor, it is his underhanded decision to extend the truce to Lancelot without effecting a lasting reconciliation that sets in motion the events that lead to the downfall of the Arthurian court. Thus, in the same way that Sir Gawain appears indirectly linked to the perpetuation of Lancelot's adulterous treason, he also obliquely shares responsibility for fomenting the revolution of Mordred by perpetuating Arthur's absence from his kingdom.

Drawing on motifs akin to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Awntyrs off Arthur* is a poem that also focuses on the exploits of Sir Gawain while providing the Arthurian characters an explicit admonition against the danger of treason. As Thomas Hahn describes the poem:

Like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and other alliterative poems, *Awntyrs* relies upon a remarkably literate improvisation, activating what is already inside the audience through its established formulas;...The repetitions within *Awntyrs* at the level of phrase, line, stanza, and episode are calculated not to appear novel, but to resonate with what the audience brings to the poem, at the level of conscious memory and of a cultural unconscious.⁴⁵

Where the poem has the most relevance for the discussion of Arthurian treason is the encounter of Sir Gawain and Guinevere with the ghost of Guinevere's mother, who carries a supernatural message for both the Queen and Gawain. These cautionary words are designed to foreshadow the eventual transgression that will lead to the ruin of Arthur's kingdom. Guinevere's mother warns her against the sins of carnality that threaten to corrupt her soul. She says: "That is luf paramour, listes and delites / That has me light and laft logh in a lake."⁴⁶ Guinevere's promise to rectify her mother's spiritual condition reflects an intention to guard against the vice of lust, as well as to provide the necessary religious services to ransom her mother's captive soul. Despite the Queen's apparent extolling of virtuous life, the events of this poem are contrasted with the other traditions surrounding the eventual fall of Arthur's kingdom. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* contrasts the piety and faithfulness espoused by the Queen in the *Awntyrs* by describing Mordred's betrayal: "He has wedded Waynorher to wife holdes, / And a child is y-shaped, the chaunce is no better!"⁴⁷ The disturbing realization that Mordred's treason has the potential to usurp Arthur's legitimate rule by the production of a bastard child with his Queen brings the treason right back to the carnal sins that threaten to overwhelm the spirit of Guinevere's mother. The sins attached to female sexuality are here amplified in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as a threat not only to the soul of the Queen in the commission of adultery, but they spread further to include the larger political risk to national unity should this treason lead to dynastic civil warfare. Moreover, the poet of *Awntyrs* provides Sir Gawain with a direct warning against treason in this spectral prophecy:

⁴⁵ Thomas Hahn, ed., "The Awntyrs off Arthur," *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 173.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 213-4. "The cause is sexual love, pleasures and delights, / that has brought me low and left me deep"

⁴⁷ Lary D. Benson and Edward E. Foster, eds., lines 3575-6. "He has married Guinevere and keeps her as his wife / and if a child is conceived, the situation is not better!"

Sir Gawain with a direct warning against treason in this spectral prophecy:

That sege shal be sesede at a sesone
 That myche baret and bale to Bretayn shal
 bring.
 Hit shal in Tuskan be tolde of the treson,
 And ye shullen tume ayen for the tydyng.⁴⁸

Just as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, despite Sir Gawain's possession of the essential knowledge to prevent Arthur's downfall, the warning is lost among the bustle of the court. With the appearance of Sir Galeron challenging Gawain in combat, the narrative shifts away from the concerns over future betrayal and toward the preservation of the honor and reputation of the Round Table. Arthur expresses apprehension over Gawain's decision to fight Sir Galeron by arguing, "I nolde for no lordeshipp se thi life lorne."⁴⁹ Ironically, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* describes how Gawain's dedication to killing the treacherous Mordred, in fact, requires him to sacrifice his life to ensure Arthur's lordship over Britain. Gawain's combats in the *Awntyrs off Arthur* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* share interesting parallels that suggest a link between the poems. Both of Gawain's opponents are eager to fight against the knight in spite of their problematic standing within the community. Sir Galeron admits freely to Arthur that his lands are "wonen hem in were,"⁵⁰ thus making them legitimate spoils of war for Arthur to pass on to Gawain in reward for his service, yet in the same line Galeron suggests that the victory is obtained through "a wrange wile,"⁵¹ directly accusing either Arthur (as conqueror) or Gawain (as recipient of the land) of questionable morals.⁵² Galeron, despite being an outsider in Arthur's court, does not hesitate to press his claim. Likewise, as Mordred prepares for battle against Gawain, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* records "[he] ne shuntes for no shame but shewes full high!"⁵³ Despite the narrator's criticism of Mordred as a traitor, he is described as not shrinking from the fight, but rather embracing his role in spite of the stigma it may incur. As Gawain faces both determined enemies, these scenes are laden with matching descriptions of brutal combat, involving weapons that slide before delivering the killing blow, and each results in Gawain suffering almost identical injuries to his head and neck.⁵⁴ Gawain's neck injury is reminiscent of the nick on the neck he receives from Bertilak as punishment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Likewise, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* concludes with a description of Arthur's

⁴⁸ Thomas Hahn, ed., lines 289-92. "This knight will be empowered for a time / and bring great strife and sorrow to Britain / This treason will be announced in Tuscany / and because of the news you will tum back"

⁴⁹ Ibid., line 470. "I would not see your life lost for any honor"

⁵⁰ "won in combat"

⁵¹ "an unjust trick"

⁵² Thomas Hahn, ed., line 421.

⁵³ Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster, eds., line 3715. "he does not hide himself because of shame, but shows himself proudly"

⁵⁴ Described in line 582 in the *Awntyrs off Arthur* as "[h]e gurdes to Sir Gawayn / Throgh ventaille and pesayn" and in line 3857 as "[t]hrough the helm and the hed on high on the brain;" in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

lineage, citing: "That was of Ectores blude, the kinge son of Troy."⁵⁵ Thus, these parallel passages imply a connection among all of these poems, one in which treason serves as the indicator of wider moral decay and the inevitable catalyst that joins the *Awntyrs* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* within the larger conflict that betrayal will eventually bring to the Arthurian world.

The many references to treason throughout the corpus of medieval literature suggest that the medieval audiences of these texts shared a common concern about the destructive nature of disloyalty. Because of the dependence on credibility, necessary for religious, political, and even personal bonds, treason represents the ultimate threat to social stability. The wide-ranging nature of treason extends beyond just offenses against the larger units of authority within the community, such as the king and the Church, to include, on a personal level, the corruption of an individual's moral values. These apprehensions are embedded in medieval narratives, particularly romances, which highlight traitors for their relationships to those betrayed and their credibility before abusing the bonds of loyalty. Treason within the Gawain romances, however, functions in a unique way by placing the actions of betrayal within a wider context of the Arthurian legend. Both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Awntyrs off Arthur* include themes about treachery that relate to the larger continuing elements of betrayal in the conclusions of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. In framing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* between images of Troy's betrayal, the poet sets the tone for what will happen to Gawain as his faithfulness is tested both in this story and in the larger Arthurian narrative. The use of the female's seductive power to facilitate Gawain's eventual breach of trust parallels Guinevere's role in the ultimate destruction of the Round Table. This critical moral decay of Arthur's court is further highlighted by the lack of reception for the girdle as the symbolic representation of Gawain's personal failure. Likewise, the *Awntyrs off Arthur* includes similarly explicit warnings against moral and political betrayal given directly to Gawain and Guinevere. As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the larger context of the Arthurian story, neither admonition succeeds in amending the characters' fates. Thus, the connection between Sir Gawain and treason within the Middle English romances provides an interesting perspective on the moral and social repercussions of betrayal, one that also operates within the larger context of the Arthurian world.

⁵⁵ Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster, eds., line 4343. "he was of Hector's blood, son of the king of Troy"