

**MIRROR TO THE SOUL: THE UNDEAD IN LATE MEDIEVAL ROMANCE**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the role of undead figures in late medieval romance. Rather than focusing on the nature of the undead figures as representations of good or evil, this paper demonstrates that the undead characters of this period can be seen as more of mirrors to the living than as self-sustaining entities. This thesis explores three late medieval romances: *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Le Morte Darthur*. These works can be read as a guide to understanding medieval people's view of death as a reminder of one's moral duty. In addition, these texts demonstrate that the undead function as markers of judgement on the living—symbols that force both characters and readers to take inventory of their flaws. The importance of the undead rests not in and of themselves, but in the living's ability to correctly interpret the messages they bring.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

A dead knight approaches you with the cause of his death—in this instance a lance—still partially buried in his body.<sup>1</sup> He requests your assistance in removing it. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that you know he is already dead, you comply. Rather than thanking you for your help, or, better yet, at last being at rest, the knight launches into a tirade concerning tournaments and the harm they cause. Do you run away in fear? Or, do you realize that perhaps he of all people should be considered an expert on the subject? Tales such as this were not uncommon in the Middle Ages. Scholars such as Miri Rubin establish that this culture was particularly fascinated by death and dying: "the body in parts, broken, dismembered, fragmented was all too present [during this period], its significations threatening and troubling to the images of personal and corporeal wholeness which were promoted in the discourse of romance, in the efforts of physicians" (113). The harsh realities of this time period made death a very real presence for the living. However, despite the attention paid to death and the dead, the focus of the texts is not on the dead figures themselves. Instead, what is emphasized is living people's ability to deal with the ever present reality of death.

This thesis will examine three late medieval romances—*The Awntyrs off Arthur* (*Awntyrs*), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*), and *Le Morte Darthur* (*Morte*). I have selected these three works because, despite the disparate ways in which the living in these tales confront the dead, all three clearly show that the focus is on living people's response to death rather than on the dead themselves. In modern society, we tend to draw a clear divide

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<sup>1</sup> This story, taken from Thomas of Cantimpré's *De apibus*, is described in Nancy Caciola's article "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture."

between the good and the bad undead. On the side of evil, there are the undead (such as demons, vampires and revenants) that feed—either physically or spiritually—on the living. Contrarily, the good undead, such as benevolent ghosts, help people. Scholars' desire to separate these figures has led them to analyze medieval undead figures in terms of this dichotomy. However, despite there being good and evil undead figures in the literature of this period, medieval undead beings, whether good or bad, function in identical ways with respect to those who behold them. The society of the Middle Ages viewed the undead as beings that affected both the corporeal and spiritual state of the living. In medieval romances, these beings are for the most part symbols and reminders to the reader. Regardless of the undead figures' good or evil intent, they function as mirrors – specula – to the living.

To understand the obsession with death in the Late Middle Ages, it is crucial to understand how pervasive death was for this society, due in large part to the Black Death. David Herlihy writes that “[t]he significance of plague in medieval history can be easily exaggerated. But more easily still, it can be, and usually has been, ignored. It did not of itself redirect European history. But neither can the new directions of European history be appreciated without recognition of its role” (19). One cannot take for granted that medieval culture was changed entirely as a sole result of the Black Death. However, it is also impossible not to recognize that the traumatic outbreaks of the plague in England in 1348 and 1349, from which “some cities and villages, in areas as far removed from each other as England and Italy, fell in the late decades of the fourteenth century by 70 or 80 percent” (Herlihy 17). The Black Death in England caused a dramatic and long-lasting effect on the way medieval society considered death. Herlihy claims, “[t]he shock of plague disrupted the customary ways by which

society coped with the passing of its members. Over the centuries the medieval Church had softened the sting of death through comforting rituals” (60). However, in the wake of the plague, these rituals were disrupted or ignored entirely. In the course of the plague, “[t]he fear of the sick and dying easily expanded into a horror of death, into the sense that life itself was a desperate battle against death’s dominion” (Herlihy 63).<sup>2</sup> The continuing outbreaks of plague over the following centuries forced late medieval society to constantly recognize death as an unavoidable presence. The presence of death is clearly reflected in the art and literature of this period, which often conveyed the message “see to it that you approach the end of the world with a clear conscience” (Aberth 229). Artists and authors turned their attention to reflecting what was already apparent—that death is inevitable and everywhere—into a *memento mori*, a notice to the viewer to remember that death is certain, and thus it is crucial to always be prepared (and preparing) for the next life.

In a time of such uncertainty, “[m]edieval man wanted to talk to Death and have Death talk back” (Aberth 229). The literature of this period offers numerous examples of the undead.<sup>3</sup> Despite the significance of these creatures being shrouded in mystery, they are typically described by authors as the bearers of fear and the harbingers of disease and pain. The villainous and terrifying undead receive a great deal of attention from scholars. Nancy Caciola has contributed invaluable scholarship concerning these disease-ridden creatures in her article

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<sup>2</sup> See John Aberth’s *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, the collaborative work *The Black Death in England* and Norman F. Cantor’s *In the Wake of the Plague*, among others, for an introduction to the effects of the Black Death.

<sup>3</sup> Even before the plagues of the mid-fourteenth century, tales of the undead were often linked to pestilence and plague. The twelfth-century accounts of William of Newburgh reports several accounts of pestilent corpses spreading plague. Jacqueline Simpson details several such accounts. For example, the story of a man who “came out of his grave every night and roamed the streets, corrupting the air with his breath, so that plague broke out and many died....[The townspeople] tore the heart out, burned the body, and thus put an end to the plague” (391).

“Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture.” These beings show that the living undead were often a presence to be feared. Caciola notes that the ecclesiastical stance on animated corpses was that the body was merely a vessel possessed by a demonic spirit: “In essence, this ‘official’ view of reanimated corpses denies any transgression between the living and the dead, and instead make the central action a transgression between flesh and the demonic spirit” (13). However, Caciola states that, even when reading ecclesiastical accounts, it becomes clear that there was a pervasive contrary view: “If we separate the ecclesiastical interpretations of these events as caused by demons from the basic ‘cultural facts’ that they report, we are left with a different set of ideas: dead men sometimes roam from their graves and attack the living” (15).<sup>4</sup> According to Caciola, medieval society did not have a consensus as to what negative dead figures represented.

While Caciola focuses primarily on the negative versions of the undead, undead beings were not always seen as destructive. Works such as *Ancrene Wisse* suggest that anchoresses are entombed and are living in death. In addition, the Eucharist is essentially a ceremony dependent upon the concept of a living corpse.<sup>5</sup> Miri Rubin writes:

[The] affinity between the fragmented body and perfect deity within this culture hinged powerfully on the particular eucharistic configuration elaborated so formatively and ubiquitously in the later Middle Ages. The eucharistic divine

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<sup>4</sup>Caciola’s article details several of these accounts, such as Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium*, which “tell of the predations of living, not possessed, corpses” (19). In one tale, a dead man terrorizes his former neighborhood. A bishop suggest the possibility of demonic possession, but this is not the case, so holy water is of no use. And “[o]nly when the knight. . .chases the corpse back to its grave, and cleaves open its head ‘to the neck’, does it cease its troublemaking” (20).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Louise Noble’s *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*.

body was treated as a workaday body, in its regular accessibility, in the pain of its suffering; and yet it was quite different—it was glorious, eternal. It had been crucified but not destroyed. (111)

Through the eucharist, Christians “not only venerated [Christ’s] body, they believed they had a share in that same body when they partook of the host” (Abulafia 131). Christ, as the most important of all living corpses, represented, not dread and disease, but hope of eternal bliss. Not all undead, therefore, were seen as threatening; in fact, there was a great divide with the purely noble on one side and the purely villainous on the other.

Scholars approach medieval romances, on the other hand, with great caution; while the romance genre is replete with undead beings, these figures are problematic in that they do not fit easily into one category or the other. The ambiguous nature of medieval romance undead causes scholars to focus on establishing which side of the divide the undead figures belong to, or at least, which they belong to *more*. While this question is certainly a productive avenue for research in that it opens a discussion of medieval people’s belief system and prioritization of certain values, it can also be somewhat limiting. Due to this approach, what has been largely ignored is how the undead figures, from the holy to the evil and everywhere in between, affect the living. Once looked at from this angle, it becomes clear that, regardless of the undead figures’ intent—be it benevolent or malevolent—both good and evil undead function in almost identical ways with respect to those who behold them.

I have chosen the romance genre as my focus specifically because of its ambiguous nature. As Corinne Saunders has observed,

Romance provides a canvas for the battle between good and evil, which is enacted in the most dramatic and material ways, and often written on the body itself, in monstrosity, transformation, illness, healing and perfection. The Christian supernatural hovers beyond secular notions of magic, marvel and the otherworld in romance, sometimes rewriting these, sometimes blurring with them, and sometimes causing profound unease. (233)

Romance offers a middle ground: unencumbered by the rigorous demands of Church doctrine, romance allows the focus to shift away from a necessity to define the undead figure and towards an understanding of the position of the living. Just as any other sign, corpses can be a representative of good or evil, and can be interpreted correctly or incorrectly by those who behold the symbols. Late medieval romance demonstrates that the importance of confronting death lies, not with classifying the undead, but in what the living do with this encounter.

I have chosen these three particular romances because each one highlights a different method for how the dead deliver messages to the living and how the living interpret those messages. *Awntyrs* represents a straightforward encounter, with the dead directly appealing to the morals of the living. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* emphasizes that living a good life means nothing if one is unwilling to die a good death, and *Morte* demonstrates the ability of the undead to mark a knight as worthy or unworthy. Despite these differences, all three works reveal that what is important is not the dead but the living's ability to confront death.

## Chapter 2 “Be war be my wo”: Confrontations with the Dead in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*

As Corinne Saunders has noted, “[n]ot only God, his angels and marvellous creatures of the natural world, but also the spirits of the dead may function as divine messengers in romance” (223). The use of the dead as divine messengers is clearly demonstrated in the Late Middle English alliterative poem *The Awntyrs off Arthur*. Unlike the other romances discussed in this paper, *Awntyrs* describes an unmistakable example of the dead literally confronting the living. However, there is a curious twist. While in the other romances the focus is entirely on the effect this confrontation has on the living, in *Awntyrs*, the author takes this one step further by simultaneously drawing attention not only to the living’s ability (or lack thereof) to interpret the message of the dead, but also to how the ability to live righteously affects those who have already died. In other words, the dead in *Awntyrs* charge the living with the knowledge that the actions of those living do not have fleeting earthly repercussions but eternal consequences.

As I discussed in the introduction, the people of the Late Middle Ages were obsessed with concerns for the dead and dying. Michael Camille draws attention to this society’s obsession:

The fascination with mortification and skeletal display in the funerary art of the late fourteenth century attests to changing attitudes to the body, whose importance did not decline after death but rather continued to haunt the living in sepulchral simulacra long after. Anxieties and debates about the fate of the body after death and its proper reconstitution in the afterlife were especially marked in this period (85).

The artwork of this period demonstrates an increasing tendency for artists to depict dead figures interacting with the viewer, particularly with the figure of Christ: “Christ’s body in the increasingly somatised private devotions of the fourteenth century was also represented as interacting with the bodies of the viewers” (Camille 77).<sup>6</sup> The developing fascination of the dead confronting the living in the mid-fourteenth century clearly persists in the fifteenth-century *Awntyrs*.<sup>7</sup> However, it is not Christ or a holy figure of death that confronts the living; instead, it is the ghost of Gwynevere’s mother.

*Awntyrs* begins with Arthur, his knights, and his Queen hunting in the forest. In pursuit of deer, the company abandons Gwynevere and Gawain (who stays behind to look after the Queen). Suddenly the idyllic scene takes a dark turn: “The day wex als dirke / As hit were mydnight” (75-76), and the hunters “ranne faste to the roches, for reddoure of the raynne” (81). The scene is entirely and instantly reversed: day becomes night, good weather turns bad, and Gwynevere and Gawain become the hunted rather than the hunters (Jost 593).<sup>8</sup> Cursing

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<sup>6</sup> Camille cites particular paintings, such as *Zouche Hours*, in which “[Christ’s] blood mingles with the milk that squirts from the breast of His mother. . . . The devotional urge was not merely visionary but involved all the senses, especially touch. . . . The image of the Resurrected Christ in the *Zouche Hours* is an eroticised, gender-bending and penetrable body open to flows and fluid desires that signalled danger in other, lesser bodies” (77).

<sup>7</sup> The unity of *Awntyrs* has been an area of great debate among scholars. Many, such as Stephen H.A. Shepherd, cannot reconcile the two adventures that take place within the tale as belonging to one work or even one author (4). However, as Leah Haught has observed, “The desire to salvage or reconstruct the original form of the romance evident within these comparable analyses tends, however, to undervalue the codicological fact that the two episodes never appear independent of one another. . . . Regardless of whether the poem as we now know it was originally conceived of or composed by more than one author. . . . at some point someone decided that these two episodes should go together and the result was popular enough to warrant at least four different retellings of the resulting poem” (150). Haught goes on to say that we cannot place modern expectations of unity on the original audience of the poem (151). Both Shepherd and Haught detail the history of the debate. I see no reason whatsoever for separating them after the fact, and this paper will treat the two adventures as belonging to one unified tale.

<sup>8</sup> Haught draws attention to the importance of the ghost appearing in the middle of a hunt: “That the ghost interrupts this seemingly idyllic scene of recreational delight precisely at the moment in which the hunt’s systematic slaughter begins is, therefore, of considerable import. It not only links the ghost’s conversation with Guinevere and Gawain to the ritualized violence occurring around them, it also frames the rest of the

and wailing, a figure appears before the pair: "There come a lowe one the loughe... / In the lyknes of Lucyfere, laytheste in Helle" (83-84). Claude Schmitt draws attention to the river as an important marker in the Middle Ages: "The bodies of suicides were. . .thrown into a river, thereby depriving them of a Christian burial, and it was a river that marked, for a ghost of Yorkshire, an uncrossable boundary. Sometimes a river was the border between the land of the living and the land of the dead" (quoted in Roscoe 54). The scenery from "[t]he hunt, the locale, the river [would] all encourage an audience familiar with Arthurian romance to expect an out-of-the-ordinary intrusion" (Roscoe 54). When the out-of-the-ordinary figure does appear, its description is fearsome:

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.  
.....  
On the chef of the cholle,  
A pade pikes on the polle,  
With eighen holked ful holle  
That gloed as the gledes. (105-117)

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narrative within a context of female aspiration in much the same way that Morgan's aspirations haunt the action of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (143-144).

In addition, the spectre is “Serkeled with serpentis all aboute the sides” (120), and covered in toads (121).

However, her appearance is not only meant to inspire fear. Shulamith Shahar’s article “The Old Body in Medieval Culture” observes that “those who were considered to possess perverted or sinful souls were also perceived as physically repulsive” (164). This was particularly true for older women, whose bodies, after menopause, were considered dangerous: “the theory, implicit in scientific texts and explicit in some works of scientific popularisation [was] that the old female body was capable of producing poison” (Shahar 163).<sup>9</sup> In addition, “serpents and toads have a well documented association with demons who, although deterred by baptism, may reclaim the sinner after death” (Haught 162). That the body of the ghost is described as “blak to the bone” can also be linked to the skeletal displays described by Camille. Everything about her appearance marks her as a figure of death and as a being associated with evil.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Shahar does note that this was usually considered to apply more to women from lower classes (163). However, as the ghost’s message to Guinevere rests primarily on the leveling effect of death as well as reversal of fortune, I believe it still has merit. Furthermore, while distinctions may have been drawn between classes of women in terms of whether or not they could produce poison, the old body was indiscriminately stereotyped as negative (160-161). In addition, Shahar notes that “[d]iscourse on the body, both from the physiological aspect and as a symbolic representation, developed gradually from the twelfth century onwards. Discourse on the individual body. . .probably reached its peak between 1350-1500” (160), and “it is more common for women’s bodies than men’s to personify winter, evil traits, old age and death” (166). It is extremely likely that the author of *Awntyrs* would have been aware of and made use of these stereotypes. Michael Camille draws attention to medieval artwork (specifically a carving at the cathedral in Bourges) that some have considered as positively portraying the female form. He notes that while some may see a picture of beauty and grace, “this body is dead....For medieval viewers the body that is revealed beneath her shroud in all its sensuality was a sign not of promise, but of decay, not of the beauty but the fatal fallen nature of the female body” (78). Camille’s observation draws attention to the fact that the female form, whether beautiful or hideous, was a signifier of pain and destruction more often than not.

<sup>10</sup> Haught observes that “Female characters tended, after all, to fill the roles of archetype or stereotype throughout the Middle Ages” (155-156).

However, the message she delivers to the two nobles indicates that she is connected to evil only in terms of her appearance. The ghost informs Gawain that in her lifetime she “was of figure and face fairest of alle” (137), that “God has [her] geven of his grace / To dre [her] paynes in this place” (140-141), and that she has “comen in this cace / To speke with [his] Quene” (143). Gawain clearly believes the ghost that her spirit has been blessed by God in her mission, for he fetches Gwynevere and brings her before the ghost. The spirit immediately reveals to Gwynevere that she is her dead mother: “Welcom, Waynour, iwis, worthi in won. / Lo how delful deth has thi dame dight” (159-160). Once again, the ghost alludes to her beauty in life: “I was radder of rode then rose in the ron, / My ler was as the lelé lonched on hight” (183), but only to immediately juxtapose this image of youth and beauty with her current state: “Now am I a graceles gost, and grisly I gron; / With Lucyfer in a lake logh am I light. / Thus am I lyke to Lucefere: takis witnes by mee” (162-164). Note that the ghost does not attempt to hide her connection to the devil; this is the second time in the poem where the ghost refers to herself as being “lyke to Lucefere.” However, the author does not claim that she is one of Lucifer's demons. Instead, he emphasizes that her connection to the devil is an appearance. This is another example of romance blurring the lines between holy and evil; she may reside with the devil, but she is not attempting to trick the living, only to warn them. Thus, despite her likeness to Lucifer, the ghost is actually working on the side of good.

The fact that the ghost takes special care to reflect on her former beauty, as well as her former position as a noble (144), is key to understanding the next section of her speech. After revealing who she once was and who she currently is, the ghost implores Gwynevere: “For al thi fressh foroure, / Muse on my mirroure; / For, king and emperour, / Thus dight shul ye be” (166-

169). Though the ghost is delivering the message to Gwynevere, she specifically mentions that kings and emperors will also suffer her fate. Haught claims that the audience of the poem, being in all likelihood familiar with Arthur's fate, would not be surprised that his court and kingship are being challenged, but that it is surprising *who* issues the challenge and to *whom* it is issued (158). However, taking the mirror-metaphor into account, this becomes much easier to understand. Jane H.M. Taylor's "Un Miroer Salulaire" is concerned with the extremely popular use of the mirror in the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> In this in-depth study of the mirror in *Danse Macabré* works, Taylor contends that the English title, which omits the accent and thus changes the meaning, causes misunderstandings:

Its conventional English title is misleading: this is not the *Dance of Death*, but the *Dance of the Dead*. This is significant: what is presented to the onlooker is a procession of the living, partnered each by his own *mort*. . . . Each couple may therefore be regarded as representing facets of the same person, and the poem as a whole is constructed around this series of dual images. On the one side stands a procession of types, and it is the particular *trouvaille* of the *Danse Macabré* to present to the onlooker or reader a range of ranks and professions such that each may find his own equivalent and identify himself with one of the speakers (33-34).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor notes that "[her] own preliminary check-list, although compiled only from published sources, contains as many as forty-six distinct mirror-titles" (29).

<sup>12</sup> Carl Grey Martin's article "*The Awntyrs off Arthure, and Economy of Pain*," also draws on the use of the images during the Middle Ages that "stress the radical downward transformation that awaits all humanity, a state embodied by the grinning didactic corpse of the dead" (178). Martin asserts that these images portray "the living struggle with the sight of the dead, who offer their grim wisdom" (180).

In order for the mirroring to have full effect, the one who delivers the message and the one who receives it must be as close reflections of one another as possible. Remember that the ghost does in fact approach Gawain first, but as it would be unlikely for him to see himself in her image, it is necessary that Gwynevere be the recipient of the ghost's warning. Following the example of works such as *Danse Macabré*, *Awntyrs* has Gwynevere confront her own *mort*. Her mother was a queen, a beautiful woman, a member of the nobility and a blood-relation of Gwynevere. Her life represents an almost perfect reflection of Gwynevere's, and she beseeches Gwynevere to observe what she sees as a sign of what will come if she does not change her ways. If the lesson can be learned by anyone, if anyone is capable of understanding the penalty for not listening to the advice that the spectre has to offer, it is Gwynevere.<sup>13</sup>

The ghost commands her daughter:

Thus dethe wil you dight, thare you not doute;  
Thereon hertly take hede while thou art here.  
Whan thou art richest arraied and ridest in thi route,  
Have pité on the poer—thou art of power.  
Burnes and burdes that ben the aboute,  
When thi body is bamed and brought on a ber,  
Then lite wyn the light that now wil the loute,  
For then the helpes no thing but holy praier.  
The praier of poer may purchas the pes. (170-178)

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<sup>13</sup> Haught notes that the ghost “must identify herself as the ‘graceles gost’ of Guinevere’s mother, suffering in death for sins committed while alive, before her message can even begin to have hermeneutic significance for anyone beyond herself” (160). However, as I will return to, Haught believes that the message does not go through.

Haught observes the simplicity of the message the ghost delivers to Gwynevere:

Perhaps the clearest component of the ghost's initial message involves her encouragement of the queen to participate in charitable acts toward the poor. Unlike her earlier attempts to communicate through metaphors, allusions, and other methods of indirect insinuation, the ghost's description of the benefits of charity are remarkably straightforward. (167)

Due to the popularity of works that make use of the mirror-metaphor, I disagree with Haught's claim that the ghost's earlier messages would be considered unclear; however, I do concur with Haught that the ghost's insistence that Gwynevere give to the poor is entirely and unquestionably straightforward.

Yet, the clarity of the message only makes it more surprising that this is the part of the advice that Gwynevere entirely ignores. Gwynevere is moved by the sight of her mother. As the ghost turns to leave, Gwynevere asks if there is anything that can be done for her mother's suffering: "'Wo is me for thi wo,' quod Waynour, 'ywys! / But one thing wold I wite, if thi wil ware: / If aurther matens or Mas might mende thi mys" (196-198). The ghost replies: "Were thritty trntales don / Bytwene under and non, / Mi soule were socoured with son / And brought to the blys" (218-221), and Gwynevere, with what Shepherd describes as "the devotional equivalent of throwing money at the problem" (3), assures her mother that she will ensure "a myllion of Masses" (226), are performed. Gwynevere continues her questioning, asking, "What wrathed God most, at thi weting?" (238). The ghost responds, "Pride with appurtenance, as prohetez han tolde" (239). This answer is given in addition to her earlier claim that she "brak a solempne avowe" (205), about which only Gwynevere knows (206). Furthermore, she claims

that the state of her body is due to “luf paramour, listes and delites / That has me light and laft logh in a lake” (213-214), indicating that she had committed adultery and once again mirroring herself to her daughter.

There are two key things to pay attention to in this section: what Gwynevere takes heed of and what she ignores. Both Haught and Roscoe acknowledge Gwynevere’s failure to absorb the ghost’s full message. Haught notes that it is Gwynevere rather than Gawain who first recognizes that the apparition is a ghost, and suggests that this signals that Gwynevere has “a healthy amount of curiosity, suggesting that she may indeed be capable of insightful acts of interpretation” (160), but that, ultimately, “as the subsequent exchange between dead and undead suggests, wanting to understand and actually being able to do precisely that are two fundamentally different things” (160). Haught defends Gwynevere, claiming, “[n]othing in the character’s lived experiences as described by this particular text would prepare the queen to recognize any correlation between the ghost’s instruction and her own condition beyond that of a general example to be avoided by all who follow” (169-170). Roscoe, on the other hand, suggests that the mother and daughter are simply speaking *at* one another and not truly listening at all: “There is a sense that the living and the dead are not talking directly to each other. Some words make it across the dialogue, others float away into the air between the speakers. . . . Guinevere's answer displays an impressive loss of short-term memory. She says she will perform ‘a myllion of masses’, but says nothing of giving food to the poor” (55-56). While Haught is concerned with Gwynevere’s failure to understand the allusions to adultery and Roscoe with her failure to acknowledge the poor, both scholars contend, explicitly or

implicitly, that it is not Gwynevere's fault; it is the fact that the message is just not clear enough.

Neither seems to consider that perhaps Gwynevere understands and simply *chooses* to ignore. Certainly this would have been a consideration of the audience. Even if the ghost's advice is considered as "general" rather than specific, and even if "nothing in the character's lived experiences" would cause Gwynevere to think on actions she has already performed, the message should still be clear. Gwynevere recognises the figure as her mother and recognizes that her mother is addressing her directly. Certainly the young queen, who is described as being dressed "[i]n a gletevand gide that glemed full gay— / With riche ribaynes reversset, ho so right redes" (15-16,) would recognize in herself the pride and vanity described by the ghost. Furthermore, the exact timing of the adventure is a mystery; there is no way of knowing whether or not Gwynevere's involvement with Lancelot has begun. Though Haught finds the mention of "luf paramour" and "listes and delites" to be "not only brief, but also curiously vague" (169), the ghost has stated that Gwynevere alone is aware of the broken vow, indicating that she has full understanding of the situation. So, while Haught may find it "difficult to blame the queen for not understanding this reference" (169), it is unlikely that the audience would have the same level of forgiveness, or that it was the author's intention that they should. It is far more likely that Gwynevere hears what she wishes to hear—that there is a way to help her mother—and ignores what is inconvenient to her.

Gwynevere is not the only character who chooses to ignore the ghost's warning. Gawain proves to be just as curious as his companion, and he seizes the opportunity to seek the ghost's advice: "'How shal we fare,' quod the freke, 'that fonden to fight, / And thus defoulen the folke

on fele kinges londes, / And riches over reymes withouten eny right, / Wynnen worshipp in werre thorgh wightnesse of hondes?" (261-264). In this passage Gawain shows his concern for whether or not the current actions of the Round Table, namely seizing lands by force, is right. His specific question is answered and expanded on by the ghost: "Your King is to covetous, I warne the sir knight. / May no man stry him with strenght while his whele stondes. / Whan he is in his magesté, moost in his might, He shal light ful lowe on the sesondes" (265-268). If this is not specific enough for Gawain, the next message certainly is:

Fraunce haf ye frely with your fight wonnen;  
Freol and his foke, fey at they leved.  
Bretayne and Burgoyne al to you bowen,  
And al the Dussiperes of Fraunce with your dyn deved.  
Gyan may grete the werre was bigonen;  
There ar no lordes on lyve in that londe leved.  
Yet shal the riche Romans with you be aurronden,  
And with the Rounde Table the rentes be reved;  
Then shal a Tyber untrue tymber you tene.  
Gete the, Sir Gawayn:  
Turn the to Tuskayn.  
For ye shul lese Bretayn  
With a knight kene. ( 274-286)

This passage demonstrates the ghost's keen awareness of the current state of affairs of Arthur's court. By listing specific victories of the Round Table, the ghost proves that she is fully aware of

the Round Table's strength; surely this only adds to the reasons Gawain should heed her warning. However, the second half of the poem demonstrates that he is just as guilty as Gwynevere when it comes to ignoring what he does not wish to hear.<sup>14</sup>

After the ghost departs, the queen and Gawain return to court, and Gwynevere "syehem the selcouthes that thei hadde ther seen" (333). But, although "[t]he wise of the weder, forwondred they were" (334), they seem to treat the matter as a marvelous tale rather than a warning that should be heeded. Immediately after the tale is told, the company goes to eat a feast: "Prince proudest in palle, / Dame Gaynour and alle, / Went to Rondoles Halle / To the suppere" (335-338). Note that Arthur is described as wearing the "proudest" clothing. Something is clearly amiss; either Gwynevere and Gawain failed to deliver the ghost's full message, or Arthur and the entire court simply choose to dismiss it as Gwynevere and Gawain do. Regardless, the wealthy merrily enjoy their food; and "[t]here is no mention, however, of food for the poor, nor of food for the dead (mass). The eating is taken out of the context of charity and placed in a context of pomp" (Roscoe 58). Shortly after, a knight enters the court seeking retribution for Arthur's seizing his lands and giving them, "with a wrange wile" (191), to Gawain. This is precisely the type of behavior that Gawain was concerned with in his conversation with the ghost. Yet Gawain volunteers to fight the knight, Galeron, saying, "I woll fight with the knight / In defence of my right" (466-467). Roscoe points out that "Gawain in particular has a poor memory of the ghost. . . .His doubts gone, he claims with confidence to be on the side of right, the side that God will uphold. His view is shared by lords and ladies of the

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<sup>14</sup> In fact, when read as a way of demonstrating Gawain's failure to interpret the message of the ghost, the second half of the poem compliments the first half. This would indicate that the poem is in fact one unified work as opposed to separate poems.

court” (58). Once again, Roscoe assumes that if the message had been clearly understood and remembered, Gawain would behave appropriately. But there is no evidence of this in the text.

In fact, the author’s emphasis on decadence, pride and greed for land—all of which the ghost specifically paints in a negative light—is significantly increased in this section. Galeron’s appearance and clothing are described in no less than twenty lines, and the woman who accompanies him likewise has ten lines dedicated to her beauty and dress. This is not a matter of forgetting, but a matter of a prophecy being fulfilled. Martin Connolly comes closer to the mark, stating, “Galeron’s intrusion into Arthur’s court defers Guenevere’s fulfilment of her promise to her mother’s spirit to the very final stanza of the poem. . . . [I]t is the secular concerns, real or imaginary, that threaten to occlude the moral imperatives” (102). But this too seems a way of making excuses. It is not only Gwynevere’s promise of masses that has been deferred. The court goes to feast with no thought to the hungry poor, and the concern with looks (linked to vanity and pride) continues before Galeron’s entrance. And, though the woman with Galeron can possibly be excused because she did not hear the ghost’s message, there is no such excuse for the “[b]right birdes and bolde / [who] Had ynoghe to beholde” (374-375), when they admired her dress. Additionally, this reading strips Gwynevere and the others of agency, acting as though Galeron’s physical entrance is a spiritual impediment. Finally, the matter Galeron wishes to address should be immediately recognizable to Gawain as a fault rather than a virtue of the Round Table.

The subsequent battle between Galeron and Gawain makes evident the failure of the living to heed the counsel of the dead. Gawain goes into battle “gaily grathed in grene, / With his griffons of golde engreled full gay, / Trifeled with tranes and trueloves bitwene” (508-510).

So, the vainly dressed Gawain enters a fight over a dispute, despite the fact that the ghost has made it clear he and his king are in the wrong. Though Galeron eventually surrenders, the victory is less gallant than it is bloody. As I will demonstrate in my discussion on *Morte*, physical markings in battle signal the inner state of those fighting. Not only is the victory not easy for Gawain, but he actually comes very close to death: “[Galeron] gurdas to Sir Gawain / Thorgh ventaile and pesayn; / He wanted noght to be slayn / The brede of an hare” (582-585). Galeron has managed to pierce through the armour covering Gawain’s face and come very close to killing him. Wounds are often meant not only to represent inner flaws but also to highlight specific flaws based on location.<sup>15</sup> It is possible that Gawain’s head trauma is linked to his inability to learn the lessons given him by the dead. Regardless, Gawain’s victory over Galeron is as messy as his moral understanding. By the end of the fight, the two knights have been stripped of their jewels (587-591), and they are both badly beaten: “What, for buffetes and blode, her blees wex blak; / Her blees were brosed, for beting of brondes” (658-659). Krista Sue-Lo Twu writes that the knights’ “injuries render them indistinguishable in their mortality, just as all, regardless of rank, become the same in death. Just as the Ghost is ‘blak to the bone’, here as the exhausted combatants reach their physical limits. . . their faces become indistinguishable as their individuating facial features are bruised beyond recognition” (115). While I agree with this assessment, I believe it can be taken one step further. By describing both the ghost and the knights as “blak,” the author once again draws attention to the ghost’s

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, Andrew Lynch notes that Gareth’s wound to the thigh in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* is considered “sexually disabling” (98), and that it is one of several examples of metaphorical castration in the text (99).

prophecy being fulfilled. Were Gawain to meet the ghost at this point, perhaps he could find more to “muse” on in her “mirroure.”

In the end, Arthur grants Gawain the lands (654), Gawain bestows lands on Galeron and entreats him to join him at the Round Table (684), Gwynevere at last makes good on her promise to perform masses (703-706), and the author reminds the audience of the opening hunt (710-713). Twu acknowledges the cyclical nature of the romance, highlighting the almost identical first and last lines, as well as the fact that Gwynevere’s masses force us to remember the ghost:

[I]t emphasizes the cyclical, circular dilemma of Fortune intruding on romance.

When events of a kind as these keep repeating, no progress can be made. . . .The

‘mylion of masses’ do not avail Arthur’s court in averting its disaster, and

although they purport to salve the misery of the dead, they represent an

afterthought, rather than a program, for salvation. (122)

Haught likewise points out that “the redistribution of land...essentially recreates Galeron’s grievance all over again by stripping yet another lord, this time in Wales instead of Scotland, of his land” (184). Jon Whitman also observes that “[i]t is not just a ghost from the past that provokes anxiety in this work. This is a poem haunted by the specter of the future. Like a number of other medieval texts that depict spectral encounters between the living and the dead, the *Awntyrs off Arthure* makes the meeting an opening for the possible redemption of individual souls” (87). I agree with both Haught and Twu that the romance points to a pattern of behavior that is being perpetrated rather than amended, as well as with Whitman’s assertion that it is not only the past that haunts the living. However, they too seem to disregard the

ghost's message that "dethe wil you dight, thare you not doute" (170). The characters have not only dismissed the specific moral teachings of the ghost; they have also dismissed the message of death's omnipresence. They may be able to hear what they want to hear for the time being, but, in the end, they cannot escape the message death brings.

The living and dead not only speak to one another in this text; they are also revealed to be the same. The fate of Gwynevere and the Round Table knights is not eventual but something that begins immediately; it is not something that happens in an instant far in the future, but something that unfolds, and the characters' unwillingness to change in this world will leave them unprepared for the next. Unlike the heroes of *Morte* and *SGGK*, the living of *Awntyrs* ignore the warnings and signals of the dead. Refusing to give up what they have become accustomed to, the living continue as though nothing has happened. Though the tale ends with Gwynevere following through on her promise to perform masses for her dead mother, an audience aware of the queen's and the Round Table's fate would know the consequences of only observing one of the ghost's many lessons. The ghost has warned them that nothing but the prayers of the poor they have helped can help them in death, but the characters of *Awntyrs* are seen only to focus on the nobility; if the audience chooses to pay attention to the ghost's warning, they would be aware that this inability to heed the lessons of the ghost has repercussions not only in this life but also in the next.

### CHAPTER 3    *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT: LIVING WELL AND DYING BADLY*

The text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has received significant attention from scholars. However, what is often glossed over or ignored entirely is that the Green Knight is essentially an undead figure; he is beheaded at the beginning of the tale but simply picks up his head and makes plans to meet Gawain a year later. By the end, the knight aids in punishing Gawain for his cowardice. Instead of exploring the Green Knight as a character whose significance lies in his being an undead figure who illuminates the inner workings of the living, the focus of scholarship is on the knight's connections to the demonic and the problems with these connections (Luttrell 111-112; Blanch).<sup>16</sup> An abundance of scholarship argues the importance of the color green as a tie to the devil or to the fae, but the fact that the knight suffers no negative effects, despite having been beheaded, is often lost in the debate. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers an invaluable (and even rare) glimpse into the popular culture concerning the undead. For at the heart of this tale is not the morality or redemption of the knight, but the chivalry and honor of Gawain; this honor centers not only on Gawain's ability (or lack thereof) to keep his word, but also on his ability to accept death. As an undead figure, the Green Knight functions as a representation of death to Gawain—a reminder and even threat that Gawain must not only live with honor but die with it also.

As addressed in the introduction, the romance genre fits perfectly into the liminal state between holy and evil, allowing the reader to step into a morally complex world that holy texts

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<sup>16</sup> Robert J. Blanch's "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of Color Symbolism in 'Sir Gawain and The Green Knight,'" traces the history of the argument concerning the knight's position as a demonic creature, part of a vegetation myth, and embodiment of death in scholarship, before engaging in his own discussion of the significance and ambiguity of color in the poem.

do not provide. Corinne Saunders writes, “The otherworld is associated with magical medicine and healing, marvelous gifts, immortality, and wish-fulfilment, including hidden or forbidden desires. It is also, however, characterised by ambiguity, force, treachery, and transgression: it is a world where all may not be what it seems, the truth of which may be unknowable” (180). This ambiguity in romance texts such as *Sir Gawain* raises questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily: “The narrative has repeatedly raised questions concerning its events: are they to be placed as magic, marvel or miracle; is Hautdesert a human or faery world?” (198). Although the answers to these questions may indeed be “unknowable” and are certainly not simple, perhaps the key is to turn away from the impenetrable mysteries of the otherworld and look at how these marvels, miracles, and magic affect the lives and value-systems of the heroes and heroines from the non-faery world.

Written in the fourteenth century, the alliterative *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins with a Christmas celebration in Camelot. The men and women laugh and merrily play games with one another, plenty of food for everyone is present, and the greatest, most noble knights in the world are gathered under one roof. The description of those present emphasizes their youth and vitality: “For al watz this fayre folk in her first age” (54). They are the picture of life and wholeness. The Green Knight’s entrance disrupts this unadulterated peace and vitality. Though he is not described as a figure of grotesque horror, he is thought to be “Half etayn” (140), and “He loked as layt so lyght, / So sayd al that hym syghe; / Hit semed as no mon myght / Under his dynttez dryghe” (199-202). The people’s belief that none could survive the knight’s blows is confirmed shortly after by the knight himself. He claims that he comes in peace to the company and refuses Arthur’s offer to supply a fight by saying, “Nay, frayst I no fyght, fayth I

the telle, / Hit arn aboute on this bench bot berdlez chylder. / If I were hasped in armes on a  
hegh stede, / Here is no mon me to mach, for myghtez so wake' (279-282). His claim suggests  
that any who would fight him would meet a sure and sudden end. Instead he offers a game: he  
will give his axe to any man willing to strike him a blow in return for receiving a blow one year  
hence.

It would seem a significant advantage to be able to strike an unarmed man the first  
blow. Yet no one responds to his offer, and, rather than being reassured by his talk of peace,  
the people are more afraid of him than they had been before. After a hesitation to accept the  
knight's terms elicits mockery from the knight, Gawain proposes to accept the challenge on  
behalf of Arthur, claiming that his death would be the "lest lur" (355) of any knight present. The  
Green Knight takes his position and, without flinching, allows Gawain to strike his blow. Gawain  
severs the Green Knight's head from his body, and the description of what follows is startlingly  
violent:

[T]he scharp of the schalk schyndered the bones,  
And schrank thurgh the schyire grece, and schade hit in twynne,  
That the bit of the broun stel bot on the grounde.  
The fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe,  
That fele hit foyned wyth hir fete, there hit forth roled;  
The blod brayed from the body, that blykked on the grene. (424-429)

The rolling head and splattered blood seem for a moment to leave no doubt that the knight is  
dead. Yet he does not fall; instead he takes up his head and, head in hand, says "“Loke, Gawan,  
thou be graythe to go as thou hettez” (448). The author ends the first fitt of the poem with a

warning to Gawain: “Now thenk wel, Sir Gawan, / For wothe that thou ne wonde / This aventure for to frayn / That thou hatz tan on honde” (487-490). It does not seem to matter to the author or the characters whether or not the Green Knight is an agent of good or evil. What is important is that Gawain has given his word to accept a blow that will presumably kill him, and he must now follow through.

A. H. Krappe’s article “Who Was the Green Knight?” suggests that the Green Knight is a symbol of Death (as opposed to simply a supernatural being). However, his focus rests once again on identifying the knight rather than observing his effects on Gawain. With convincing research, Krappe draws this conclusion:

The mysterious Green Knight is none other than the Lord of Hades, who comes to challenge to a beheading game the heroes sitting around the fire. . . .His challenge is taken up by Gawain, the flower of knighthood, who thereby proves himself the equal of Herakles, who wrestled with Thanatos, of the Dioscures, who rescued their sister from the clutches of Aphidnos, ‘the Pitile,’. . . All these stories, of essentially the same pattern, have their basis and starting point in the simple psychological fact that to man there is nothing more terrible than Death and that it requires a knight *sans peur et sans reproche* to accept his grim challenge and to brave him. (215)

This conclusion would leave nothing to be desired if Gawain had indeed completed the challenge agreed upon exactly and if at the end of the poem he was still “a knight *sans peur et*

*sans reproche.*"<sup>17</sup> However, this is not the case. It is key to remember that both the narrator and the knight emphasize Gawain's knightly duties and ask that he live by a code and, if necessary, die by that same code. Though Gawain's thoughts are not given on the matter, this warning hints at Gawain's possible failure to accept his fate. Jill Mann's "Courtly Aesthetics and Courtly Ethics" points out that "Gawain's task is not motivated or supported by any external considerations—there are no maidens to be rescued, no countries to be delivered from the oppressions of a giant or a dragon, no wrongs to be righted. The only reason he has for keeping his promise is the promise itself" (205). The emphasis is placed on Gawain's decisions and the necessity for him to follow through on his promise. The Knight, however ambiguously associated with holiness or evil, is an undead figure whose importance does not rest in and of himself but in Gawain's ability to remain honorable.

Two related concepts are at work here. One is the medieval approach to the inevitability of death, and the other is the concept of a good death versus a bad death. Works such as the *Ars moriendi* quite literally function as a guide to dying well. While this text is dated shortly after *Sir Gawain*, its popularity suggests that English society at this time was greatly concerned with learning to accept death as inevitable. Caciola outlines the Church's and the society's concept of a good death and a bad death. A good death, as can be readily imagined, would be expected and accepted, allowing the dying person to die free of sin: "it is ritualized, foreseeable, even welcomed" (27). On the other hand, a bad death "is sudden or violent; those who die badly are torn too soon from this world and are unprepared for the next" (27). The Green

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<sup>17</sup> Note that, while Krappe initially steps somewhat away from a focus of the Green Knight as holy or evil, his conclusion is to link him with the god of the Underworld and in part of the article with the Devil (212). This is another point that is problematic, as I will return to later.

Knight's proposed game provides Gawain with the opportunity for a good death. It is important to remember that Arthur offered the Green Knight an immediate fight with the knights of Camelot, but the mysterious figure insists that he came in peace and instead delays impending death by one year. Therefore, Gawain is tasked not only with keeping his promise to accept the inevitability of death, but he is also given the time necessary to make amends and absolution; Gawain fails, at least in part, on both accounts.

After the allotted time, Gawain sets off to find the Green Knight and the Green Chapel. Claude Luttrell notes that this element of the location being a mystery is unique to *Sir Gawain* and is "absent from other versions of the Beheading Match, which focuses attention upon the enigma of the adversary's identity" (104). It is possible that the mystery of the location is a means of emphasizing that no one can know where death may find them. Regardless, Gawain's initial compliance in seeking out death and staying true to his word is a good start for the young knight. In fact, by having Gawain search for the Green Knight, the Gawain-Poet further emphasizes Gawain's knightly honor and by extension possible shame; this is a quest rather than an encounter. Attention is drawn to Gawain's position as a knight of Arthur's court; thus, once more we are reminded of the fact that the honor of not only Gawain but also the court he represents rests on Gawain's ability to keep his promise.

On this quest, Gawain stumbles upon a castle, whose host is—unbeknownst to Gawain—actually the Green Knight. The host claims to know the location of the Green Chapel and offers to take Gawain there at the allotted time. In the meantime, the host begins another game with Gawain: each day the host will leave the castle to hunt leaving Gawain to do as he pleases at the castle, and, upon the host's return, Gawain must give the host whatever gifts he

has received in the host's absence. In exchange, the host will give Gawain whatever he has acquired during his hunt. For the purposes of this paper I will suspend a discussion of Gawain's adventures and sexual temptation in the castle and focus instead on his refusal to accept death. After meeting the demands of the game on the first two days (Gawain bestows the kisses he has received onto the host), Gawain is finally tempted with something he truly desires: a way to avoid death by wearing a magic girdle. According to the rules of the game, Gawain should hand this girdle over to his host just as he has done with the kisses. Despite Gawain's earlier claim that he would be "als fayn to falle feye as fayle of [his] ernde" (1067), he, at least in this moment, fears death more than failing to strictly comply with his word of honour. It could be argued that Gawain accepts the belt simply because a chivalrous knight should not refuse the gifts of a lady; however, there is clearly more at work here.

Gawain *does* in fact initially refuse to accept the gift, claiming: "And he nay that he nolde neghe in no wyse / Nauther golde ne garysoun, er God hym grace sende / To acheve to the chaunce that he hade chosen there" (1836-1838). The lady does not press him further to accept on her behalf or as the duty of a chivalrous knight; instead, she tells him of the girdle's power to prevent anyone wearing it from being struck dead. It is then that Gawain considers accepting: "Then kest the knyght, and hit come to his hert / Hit were a juel for the joparde that hym jugged were: When he acheved to the chapel his chek for to fech, / Myght he haf slypped to be unslayn, the sleght were noble" (1855-1858). There is a curious juxtaposition of contrary terms in this line; Gawain thinks that if he can trick his way out of keeping his promise that it would be "noble." The word "sleght" is in and of itself a complex word. It can mean either "Wisdom, prudence; cleverness, ingenuity," or, "Slyness, cunning, craftiness; guile, trickery,

deceit” (*MED*). These definitions are contradictory: either Gawain is exercising prudence, a noble trait, or, he is being cunning and deceitful, decidedly negative traits for a knight. In the Broadview edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, James Winny simply translates this word as “trick” (283). This is not an inaccurate translation; however, it does oversimplify Gawain’s struggle. Gawain is planning to trick death, but his speech is phrased in a way that masks the deceit and focuses instead on the nobility and cleverness of such a plan.

However, Gawain does not have the final word regarding the justice or injustice of his actions. Instead, this role falls to the knight. Jill Mann states,

Gawain’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge makes it clear that renown is not merely derivative of prowess; it is an external standard against which the knight may measure his worth, an outer mould within which knightly endeavour may shape itself. A knight’s “prys” is the result of a collaboration between inward worth and outward renown. (“Price and Value” 180-181)

It is the function of the Green Knight to draw this “inward worth” into the realm of “outward renown,”<sup>18</sup> and, “as soon as he sees himself reflected in the Green Knight’s gaze, Gawain acknowledges the stain on his inward worth” (“Price and Value” 181). Scholars such as Christina Francis have explored this connection between wounds in knightly combat and markings of shame —whatever appears on the physical body can be interpreted as commentary on the

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<sup>18</sup> Loretta Wasserman’s “Honor and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” also notes the importance of outward recognition of internal worth: “Honor, as it is conceived within this code, is a peculiarly social value. It denotes the highest praise that society can afford an individual as measured by his equals, or the highest praise accorded a group viewed in competition with another. As such, it is a value that is necessarily visible and amenable to study. A claim to honor does not rest on self-estimation of worth, but must be, so to speak, transacted—claimed, or asserted, and then approved, or at least accepted by others” (78). Gawain has attempted to put his “sleight” into a good light; however, when the knight draws this internal action and judgement into the light, it is not approved.

spiritual state of the wounded.<sup>19</sup> When the Green Knight wounds Gawain he provides a physical marking to match Gawain's internal shame. Gawain does in fact acknowledge his inward shame once it has been brought to light and literally marked by the Green Knight: "This is the bende of this blame I bere in my nek, / This is the lathe and the losse that I laght have / Of cowardise and covetyse that I haf caght thare, / This is the token of untrawthe that I am tane inne" (2506-2509). However, while Gawain's dishonesty may be marked with shame, the underlying cause of this dishonesty, namely his fear and avoidance of death, is another matter entirely.

It is Gawain's fear of death that drives his decision and that results in his punishment. Mann has noted that "Gawain is held to the exchange of blows not because its terms are (as the Green Knight pretends) just, but because he has agreed to it as with the exchange of winnings, the agreement to exchange of itself creates an equivalence between the two sides. . . . [I]t is the matching honesty on both sides that makes the exchange 'euen'" ("Price and Value" 184). However, Gawain meets the knight to receive his blow, but he does not pay what is actually owed. Furthermore, Gawain does not accept his fate unflinchingly. As the Green Knight brings down his axe, Gawain fails to remain still and reveals his fear. Mark Miller's article "The Ends of Excitement in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" focuses on Gawain's fear at the end of the poem. Miller observes that to give in to natural desire, in this case Gawain's "natural desire for self-preservation" (216), is considered "in the Christian moral tradition. . .to become subject to a living death. If Gawain flinches—if he allows his desire for the sheer continuance of life to control him—then he has lost the very thing that animates him" (217). My introduction noted

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<sup>19</sup> Francis's work "Risking the Body: Blood as Symbolic Capital in Sir Thomas Malory's 'Morte Darthur'" will play a larger role in subsequent chapters, but is worth noting here.

that the undead were often seen as contaminating, infectious creatures. While Miller recognizes that Gawain is in danger of becoming a figure of living death, he does not address the connection this has to the Green Knight.

Gawain implies the Green Knight is infecting him. Shortly after Gawain has arrived at the agreed upon location, he claims “Now I fele hit is the fende, in my five wyttez, / That hatz stoken me this steven to strye me here” (2193-2194). Gawain displaces the blame onto the Green Knight entirely, but the story does not support Gawain’s claim to be a victim. Much like Gawain’s use of the word “sleght,” Gawain is attempting to transform a dishonorable act into an honorable one. The first two times the Green Knight raises the sword to deal his blow, he does not actually strike Gawain, and on the third attempt he gives Gawain only a flesh-wound. The knight explains to Gawain that the first two mock blows were a result of Gawain’s fidelity in having followed through with the game the first two nights at the castle. The third blow is a result of Gawain having taken the girdle and failing to give it up: “On the fautlest freke that ever on fote yede; / As perle bi the quite pese is of prys more, / So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi other gay knyghtez. Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wanted” (2363-2366). Gawain’s wound, while only a cut due to his otherwise faultless behavior, is a direct result of his decision not to fulfill the terms of his agreement. Though Gawain has been a ‘perle’ in life, he fails to maintain this perfection when facing what he feels is certain death.

As noted above, Gawain pays for his dishonesty with the cut he has received and by wearing the girdle. However, the Green Knight’s reaction to Gawain suggests that Gawain has paid due penance for his fear of death. When Gawain claims, “I biknowe yow, knyght, here

style, / Al fawty is my fare; / Letez me overtake your wylle / And efte I schal be ware" (2385-2388), the knight responds:

I halde hit hardily hole, the harme that I hade.

Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses,

And hatz the penaunce apert of the poynt of myn egge,

I halde the polysed of that plyght, and pured as clene

As thou hadez never forfeled sythen thou watz fyrst borne. (2390-2394)

Claude Luttrell draws attention to this curious forgiveness: "What are we to think, then, when the Green Knight gazes upon Gawain with heartfelt approval? . . . He expresses open admiration of Gawain, praises his conduct under trial at the castle as showing him to be so faultless as to be unparalleled among knights, and minimises his lapse" (111). Luttrell claims this praise is simply another devilish attempt on the part of the Green Knight, a ploy to lead Gawain to a sense of pride: "Slipping into priestly robes—the Devil could do this literally—the Green Knight has tried to extinguish in Gawain what in fact lends absolution lasting efficacy. He fails" (111). However, the Green Knight's conduct is less mysterious if we consider that, while Gawain's cut marks the shame of his deceit, it also reveals that he has learned to accept death, and "efte [he] shal be ware" (2388).

The Green Knight, though ambiguous in terms of holiness or evil, can be seen as a guide to accepting that part of living honorably is being prepared to die honorably. His admiration and forgiveness of Gawain stems from Gawain's acceptance of the final stroke and claim that he "shal be ware" next time he faces death. Rather than being associated with the demonic, the Green Knight can be seen, not as a reincarnation of Death itself, but as a reminder to Gawain

that death comes to all. Gawain must learn not only to face this one particular adversary, but also to face his inner fear. He must accept that there is no honorable 'sleight' he may employ to avoid the inevitability of death. The Green Knight, as an undead being, can make this a reality to Gawain in a way that common foes cannot. As a brave knight of Arthur's court, Gawain has faced and will face many foes. It is only when he faces an unkillable adversary that he is able to fully realize that, no matter how noble, strong, and brave one is, there is no way to trick or beat death. The Green Knight's role is that of a guide to the hero. He is less important in and of himself; his significance lies in what he reveals to Gawain and in how Gawain learns from his teachings.

#### CHAPTER 4    DICTATES OF THE DEAD: THE SEMIOTIC VALENCE OF CORPSES IN MALORY'S *MORTE DARTHUR*

Corpses are found (and made) everywhere in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. One can hardly turn a page without seeing a battle, joust, or treacherous deed that causes at least one death. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly observes, "bodies are constantly buffeted, smitten, beaten, lashed with thorns, slashed, cut, run through, broken, dismembered, and thrown from saddles" (59). Dead bodies in Malory carry meaning beyond representing the death of an individual. Corpses are used as a form of payment, such as when Arthur sends Sir Bodwell the head of a giant bidding "hym be mery for his enemy is destroyed" (124: 20-22), or when he tells a distraught Gawain: "yf I wyste hit might glad thy hert othir fare the bettir with hit, I sholde presente the with hir hedys thorow whom thou art thus rebuked" (129: 20-22). It is evident, as Andrew Lynch has noted, that "[b]lood is the basic currency of fights and quests" (91). However, it is not only in battle, nor is it strictly for the purpose of payment, that corpses function as a means of conveying a message. Throughout *Morte*, the dead body is used to comment on the actions of the living, to make a point, reward, and rebuke. This chapter examines three uses of the corpse in Malory in which dead bodies work to send a message to the living and promote the chivalric code of honor.<sup>20</sup>

The clearest example of the dead interacting with the living in *Morte* occurs in the "Sir Gareth" section. Gareth, after establishing his valor through "trasyng, traversynge, foynyng, and rasyng" (199: 31), turns his attention to love. Until this point, he has been able to behave

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<sup>20</sup> Until this point, I have dealt with animated corpses in medieval literature. This chapter includes corpses that are not animated. I have chosen to discuss them because, despite being dead, the corpses still function as a means of motivating action in the living—the living are still confronting death, and the focus still rests on what the living choose to do with what they learn from the dead bodies.

“as a noble knyght sholde” (195: 25-26), but resisting sexual temptation proves to be a more difficult feat for the young knight. Gareth and Lyonesse, his intended bride, “brente bothe in hoot love that they were acorded to abate their lustys secretly” (206: 16-17). Though they are not yet wed, Lyonesse makes plans to sneak into Gareth’s bed in the middle of the night. They are not careful in keeping these plans secret, and soon Lyonette, Lyonesse’s sister, is aware of the couple’s intentions and is “a lytyl dyspleased” (206: 24). As Gareth and Lyonesse lie in bed together, “he loked before hym and sawe an armed knyght with many lyghtes aboute hym, and this knyght had a longe gysarne in his honde and made a grymme countenance to smyte hym” (206: 39-42). After being struck “with a foyne thorow the thycke of the thygh” (207: 5),<sup>21</sup> Gareth continues his fight with the knight, “and than he lepe over hym, and unlaced his helme, and smote off his hede fro the body” (207: 8-10). However, much like the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, decapitation is the beginning rather than the end. After much confusion as to why the knight attacked Gareth, Lyonette appears and “toke up the hede in the syght of them all, and anoynted hit with an oyntemente there as hit was smyttyn off, and in the same wyse [s]he ded to the otheir parte there as the hede stake” (207: 29-31). Gareth is baffled and upset with Lyonette for her behavior, but she assures him, “all that I have done I woll avowe hit—and all shall be for your worshyp and us all” (207: 39-40). Ten days later, Gareth and Lyonesse attempt another rendezvous, which ends with similar results. A knight appears, Gareth strikes off the knight’s head (this time cutting it into “an hondred pecis” (208: 13)), and Lyonette reassembles the knight for the ‘worshyp’ of Gareth and the honor of all.

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<sup>21</sup> As noted earlier, this wound’s location has particular connotations. However, I am less concerned with the wound itself and more for the motivations behind it.

Scholars have paid a great deal of attention to Lyonette's role in Gareth's story. Siobán Mary Wyatt's article "'Gyff me goodly langage, and than my care is paste': Reproach and Recognition in Malory's Tale of Sir Gareth," provides an in-depth analysis of Lyonette's ability to draw out the best in Gareth: "It seems that Lyonet herself is Gareth's greatest challenge; if he can win her respect and cooperation then he must possess chivalric qualities that shine through [his] disguise" (132). Lyonette provokes and insults Gareth throughout his adventure, but "Malory's Lyonet . . . is an example of how female interference can produce positive effects on knights" (134). In addition to her role as an outspoken instigator, Lyonette's sorcery is a puzzling subject for scholars. After all, surely reviving the dead is a form of necromancy and should be cautiously examined – if not outright condemned. Yet, we find that "magical practices that might seem deeply disturbing are authorised by beneficent motivation. . . . They are powerful, transformative and mysterious, but Malory's vocabulary does not place them as 'nigromancy'" (Saunders 244-245). Surprisingly, despite paying close attention to the use of enchantment, scholarship ignores the role of revived knight.

That the focus is on Lyonette rather than the undead figure is understandable. Lyonette is a commanding presence who takes up a great deal of the tale. Furthermore, she seems to be the one in control of the situation. Corinne Saunders has noted the power women have in this tale: "Women in this tale literally make and unmake bodies, shaping the identity of the hero in the most acutely physical but also inexplicable ways" (Saunders 245). Lyonette is the orchestrator of the events, and so it is natural that she would receive the most attention. However, it is also important to evaluate her choice of methods; why is it necessary that she should choose to revive the dead rather than protecting her sister's virtue by some other

means? Instead of keeping her sister from Gareth entirely, Lyonette is seen to allow their behavior to a certain extent. Andrew Lynch accounts for this, stating, “The function of the fights is purely to let the young hero’s hot blood, saving his energies for the field and the procreation of legitimate offspring” (98). This would mean that Lyonette, recognizing Gareth’s need to release his passion in some manner, creates a more honorable means for him to do so.

While I do not contest this view, it does not account for the need to reanimate the corpse or for the publicity of the action. In both instances, Lyonette heals the knight for all to see; in the first, Malory writes that she “toke up the hede in the syght of them all” (207: 29), and in the second, that she came “before hem all” (208: 24). Malory emphasizes the publicity of the events. Furthermore, Lyonette’s claim that what she has done is not only for Gareth’s honor, but also for the honor of them all, draws attention to the community of knighthood. Terence McCarthy notes that “*Le Morte Darthur* is the history of a public world in which the central figure, the main hero, is the Round Table itself. The fellowship of knights is more important than any individual, and the honour achieved by an individual is, first of all, part of the collective honour of the community” (149). Lyonette does not prevent the encounter entirely because it is necessary to remind Gareth that his secret and individual actions are always a reflection on the whole.

The use of the undead knight can be accounted for with two considerations. The first is that Lyonette needs a means of physically marking Gareth’s shame. Though knights must certainly engage in combat to prove their worth, Malory’s text makes it evident that “the condition of the body signals the condition of the person” (Mann 239). Wounds reflect the external as well as the internal condition of a knight, and Malory’s knights must “carry their

wounds as a sign of their defeat” (Francis 6). To this end, Lyonette uses the knight as means of marking Gareth in combat. I have addressed why Lyonette does her work publicly, but not why she must animate the knight at all. Lyonette’s motivations stem from a desire to achieve two aims: 1) that Gareth is not defeated in battle against a knight, and 2) that Gareth is not in a position to justify his attempts to have extramarital sex.

These two aims work hand-in-hand throughout the text. Throughout *Morte*, being victorious in honorable combat is often considered the same as being innocent. When Lancelot is accused of adultery with Queen Gwynevere, he tells Arthur that he will prove his innocence through fighting: “there nys no knyght undir hevyn that dare make hit good uppon me that ever I was traytour unto youre person” (660:33-34). He likewise defends the honor of Gwynevere, attesting that she “ys as trew a lady unto youre person as ys ony lady lyvyng unto her lorde—and that woll I make good with my hondis” (660: 39-40).<sup>22</sup> If Gareth is able to defeat the knight, then he can justly claim to Lyonette “I have nat deserved all this dyspyte that ye do unto me” (208: 28-29). Gareth’s tale until this point has consisted of Gareth repeatedly proving his worth through the use of his sword. His rise in the fellowship of the Round Table is clearly marked; in fact, he is told before one battle that should he win (and he does) he would “be called the fourth of the worlde” (194: 45-46), after Lancelot, Trystram, and Lamerok. It is critical that he does not fail in defeating the knight. However, he cannot walk away from the encounter believing that his success in battle has washed clean his lapse in morals. Thus, Gareth must both succeed and fail in this scene.

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<sup>22</sup> For an overview of trial by combat in Malory’s time, as well as Malory’s use of this theme in *Morte*, see Jacqueline Stuhmiller’s article “‘Iudicium Dei, iudicium fortunae’: Trial by Combat in Malory’s ‘Le Morte Darthur.’”

Only an undead figure could solve this riddle. By striking off the knight's head, Gareth wins the fight and ensures that he remains undefeated in battle; however, Lyonette's reanimation of the body forces Gareth to recognize his internal failing. He may have won in terms of physical prowess, but he cannot "make good" his shameful intentions through the use of a sword. This is made evident by Gareth's second attempt to do just that. As previously discussed, the second time that Gareth fights the knight, there is a graphic scene in which he cuts up the head into one hundred pieces and flings the pieces from the window (208: 11-15). Despite being informed that Lyonette is attempting to protect his honor, Gareth seems to believe that he is still capable of winning and proving his worthiness through sheer physical force. Lyonette's subsequent gathering of the pieces and reanimation of the corpse yet again demonstrates once and for all that Gareth cannot ignore the code and achieve worship simply by force.<sup>23</sup> The undead figure is neither holy nor evil. In fact, he is insignificant as an individual (something that can be gleaned from the fact that he is unnamed); his importance rests in what he represents to Gareth and in his ability to prevent Gareth from behaving dishonorably. The corpse confronts Gareth, challenging him to analyze his behavior in relation to the chivalric code.

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<sup>23</sup> Kelly Nutter Clody notes that Lancelot's appeal to trial by combat when accused of adultery is rejected (112). Clody believes that this scene demonstrates that Malory is emphasizing the flaws of trial by combat: "[Malory's] decision to increase the role of the witness and, at the same time, dismiss judicial combat initiates a movement away from the traditional format a medieval reading audience would expect" (113). It is possible that this scene with Sir Gareth marks the beginning stages of Malory questioning whether or not a fair judgement can be obtained from trial by combat. Thanks to a discussion with Kathy Cawsey for thinking through the implications of trial by combat in Malory.

Throughout the vast majority of *Morte*, the function of the corpse as a reminder of honor to the living is more subtle than the literal resurrection that occurs in “Sir Gareth.”<sup>24</sup> However, there are examples of the corpse being used as a marker of shame. This can be seen most clearly with Sir Pedevere.<sup>25</sup> After Pedevere kills his wife in a fit of jealousy, Lancelot admonishes him for his shameful deed and commands him, “take this lady and the hede, and bere it uppon the, and here shalt thou swere uppon my swerde to bere hit allwayes uppon thy bak and never to reste tyll thou com to my lady, Quene Gwenyver” (175: 30-33). It is Gwynevere who decides what becomes of the recreant knight; she orders the knight to bear the head of the lady on his person: “ye shall bere this lady with you on horseback unto the Pope of Rome, and of hym resseyve youre penaunce for your foule dedis” (175: 43-44). We are told of Pedevere’s journey and how he was ordered, “nevir reste one nyght there as ye do another, and ye go to ony bedde, the dede body shall lye with you” (176:1-2). Pedevere obeys the Queen’s orders, yet, significantly, any further penance is absent from the text. Malory says only that after the woman’s burial “Sir Pedyvere fell to grete goodnesse and was an holy man and an hermyte” (176:7-8). Yet there is no indication that this lifestyle was anyone’s choice but his own. It would seem then that bearing the corpse to Rome was his penance.

As discussed with Gareth, a knight’s body is physically marked to indicate shame in combat; physical wounds work to indicate the value of a knight. But what happens when a knight’s shameful behavior does not mark his own body? Wounds signify a lack of prowess and

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<sup>24</sup> The remaining portion of this chapter draws on a paper I wrote for Dr. Kathy Cawsey’s seminar on *Le Morte Darthur* in the Fall of 2015 entitled “Life After Death: Active Corpses in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*.”

<sup>25</sup> Pedevere is not the only example of physically marking dishonor with the head of a victim. Gawain, Pellinor, and Balin all suffer a similar, though less detailed, punishment.

honor. However, Pevever's failure is not in failing to fight or failing to win; it is in unjustly killing a woman. The Pentecostal Oath explicitly offers women protection from male assault by charging knights "allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour, strenghte hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them" (77:30-32). A knight could earn no worship by harming a woman, but could earn much shame by harming her. Pevever's wife has not harmed him in battle; so, in the absence of the knight's body being marked, we find that Malory marks him with the body of his victim.

The method of rebuking a recreant knight by having him wear his victim seems to work not only as a deterrent for others but also echoes the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The Sacrament of Penance "consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction" ("The Sacrament of Penance"). In Malory, penance and reconciliation are not only important to the Church community, but are also important to being reconciled to the community of the Round Table. After carrying the body to Rome, Pevever is reconciled with the community as one who has paid penance. To fully grasp the extent of this penance, it is important to understand how this society viewed a dead body. Katharine Parks "The Life of the Corpse: Division and Dissection in Late Medieval Europe," suggests the possibility that, during Malory's time, corpses may not have been considered as simply dead or inanimate objects:

[N]orthern Europeans saw [death] as an extended and gradual process,  
corresponding to the slow decomposition of the corpse and its reduction to the

skeleton and hard tissues, which was thought to last about a year. . . .

[N]ortherners treated [the corpse] during this liminal period as active, sensitive, or semianimate, possessed of a gradually fading life. (115)

Furthermore, this view of the “continued animation of the corpse could be found at all levels of society and culture” (Parks 117). This would mean that Pedevere’s victim would not be considered entirely dead.

The corpse would be a clear way of chastising its killer, marking the knight with dishonor. And the “potentially active corpse that must be both protected and contained” (Parks 118) would be exposed to the public view. Pedevere’s shameful actions are rebuked with a physical display—a dead body that marks him and serves as a reminder of the code to all who behold him. Not only is Pedevere marked with his victim’s body, but he is also told to never part from her, including in the private area of the bed. Roberta Gilchrist notes that there was a concern for pollution, suggesting that “[t]he bodies of lepers and women were considered corrupt in their different ways. . . . A code of chivalric honour was relied upon to protect the inalienability of these particular boundaries” (59). Although Gilchrist is writing here about the living bodies of women, certainly death would not completely alter this view of contamination, particularly when considering that the bodies of the deceased were thought to still contain the soul (Camille 84).

So, Pedevere is not only marked as a knight would be in combat, but he is also contaminated by his deed. He must pay for his shameful actions, and so he receives his ironic reward for his unchivalrous behavior. Pedevere chooses to accept the justness of the payment and do penance for his crimes. Pedevere's penance is paid once he has completed this journey, though in his case his punishment seems to have changed him altogether into a better man. Once again the dead body itself seems less important than the changes that take place in the living. Pedevere's victim becomes a narrative device to show his development as a character. While her status is slightly higher than that of other victims in the text—she is after all given a Christian burial by order of the Pope himself—the focus remains on Pedevere and how he is changed by his encounter with the corpse.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to revealing the existing flaws of characters, corpses in *Morte* are also used to provoke action in the living. In the "Syr Trystram" section, the King of the Red City uses his own corpse to send a message and provoke knights to avenge him. Trystram and his fellow knights approach a vessel; inside they find "a fayre bedde rychely covered, and thereupon lay a seemly dede knight, all armed sauff the hede, and was all bloody wyth dedly woundys upon hym, which semed to be a passynge good knyght" (417: 7-10). The description of this knight is rather detailed for Malory, and in this passage we find startling juxtapositions. Malory first refers to the knight as "seemly," and this is immediately followed with the word "dede." The

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<sup>26</sup> Scholars have recognized that women in Malory seem to gain more influence through their deaths than they possessed when alive. See, for instance, Erin Kissick's article "Mirroring Masculinities: Transformative Female Corpses in Malory's *Morte Darthur*."

description continues with a dark image of “dedly woundys,” but this too is countered with the fact that he is “a passynge good knyght.” The reader is able to gauge the full extent of the tragedy only through the description of his blood-soaked body. Also key to this image is the fact that his head is left uncovered. This allows those viewing him to see him not as just another dead warrior, like those they leave on the battlefield covered in their armor, but as a man stripped of the potential he clearly possessed.

Only when Trystram is moved by the appearance of the corpse is he given the letter that explains the king’s death and the cause. In fact, he is told, “wyte you well that no man shall take that lettir and rede hit but yf he be a good knyght, and that he woll faithfully promise to revenge his dethe” (417: 18-20). Clearly the corpse is meant to move the viewer to accepting the quest if a knight must agree to revenge the knight without having read the cause of his death. Malory uses the corpse to provoke action in the living, to move them to pity and even revenge. This is important, too, because here we have a corpse directly demanding retribution for its death, whereas before we have seen the living use a corpse to send a message. Without seeing that the knight appeared a “passynge good knyght,” it is doubtful that Palomydes would have been moved to take up his cause. The corpse works, in this instance, not only to signify a wrongful death, but also to demand payment for that death. The living are confronted directly with death, and they are asked to hold those responsible accountable. So, the ability to mark a

dishonorable knight does not stop once an individual dies; instead, a person's corpse is often seen to gain power.

Lancelot's corpse has a far more powerful effect within the tale. Lancelot orders that his body be carried to Joyous Guard and buried (695: 35-36). This is one of the longest descriptions in *Morte Darthur* of what becomes of a corpse, and it arguably has the most impact. For fifteen days "his vyssage was layed open and naked, that al folks myght beholde hym" (696: 26-27). The effect this has begins immediately; when Sir Ector sees Lancelot's corpse he faints (696: 38-39). This is a conceivably natural reaction considering that Lancelot is Ector's brother, both by blood and in arms. But Ector's swooning is not the only consequence of viewing Lancelot's body. The sight of Lancelot's body affects the entirety of what is left of the Round Table. Malory concludes his tale with the knights dispersing to live in "their contreyes as holy men" (697: 24). This reaction is radically different from the other cases of corpses affecting the living. Before this, the sight of a corpse has provoked the living to be more honorable knights.<sup>27</sup> That Lancelot's death has such a different effect on the knights is perhaps not altogether surprising; at this point *Morte Darthur* is drawing to its conclusion, and the knights have learned (or failed to learn) the lessons previously given. Furthermore, Lancelot's fate, in his own view, is no one's

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<sup>27</sup> Pedevere is an exception to this rule. However, in his case, the corpse leading him to holy orders affected only him. It is to be assumed that for the rest it simply reminded them that killing a woman is dishonorable. Therefore, on the whole, corpses have hitherto worked to improve the conduct of knights or condemn shameful behavior.

fault but his own.<sup>28</sup> However, there is something else of interest in the nature of Lancelot's death, namely that he is treated much like a saint. Laura Clark remarks on the significance of the deathbed scene: "The sweet smell of the room after Lancelot's death and his beatific smile denote a saintly death as well. Without a doubt, Lancelot's death redeems him from his earthly ways and he dies 'ryght an holy man'" (Clark 76). His corpse is not presented as a normal body, decaying and threatening contamination, but as a holy relic.

Therefore, as his corpse is treated differently, so is the effect that viewing the corpse has on those who behold it. Rather than rebuking knights and charging them to be more chivalrous, Lancelot's holy body is a symbol of the last remnant of earthly knighthood. His body does not charge knights to perform valiant deeds, nor does it directly reprimand them for past conduct. Instead, Lancelot's corpse directs them to live for a heavenly cause. It should also be noted that, although Lancelot's death is compared to Galahad's by scholars such as Clark (76), it is Lancelot that provokes such drastic change. This has obvious narrative purposes—Malory's tale would have taken a very different turn had Galahad's death led all of the Round Table knights to pursue holy purposes. But more than this, Galahad's body does not have as drastic an effect as Lancelot's. Malory's choice to display Lancelot's body but not Galahad's has strong

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<sup>28</sup> Lancelot's death is a direct result of refusing to eat or drink after viewing the bodies of Arthur and Gwynevere. He claims, "whan I remembre me how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were pereles that ever was lvyng of Cristen people. . . . this remembered of their kyndnes and myn unkyndenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not susteyne myself" (695: 9-14). This is another example of dead bodies charging the living to remember the wrongs they have done.

implications in regards to Malory's treatment of corpses throughout the text. Lancelot is undoubtedly Malory's favorite knight. Throughout most of *Morte*, Malory depicts Lancelot as the "cheff of knyghthode" (194: 35-36). Even when Lancelot is clearly in the wrong, Malory seems to come to his defense. Marilyn Corrie notes the several "moments in Malory's text that establish Lancelot as the great hero of the *Morte*, a character whom the text tries to clear of wrongdoing repeatedly" (712). It seems that Malory's favorite living knight remains the favorite even after death. Despite having killed the unarmed knights Gareth and Gaheris, after his death Lancelot is still referred to as the "hede of al Crysten knyghtes" (696: 43), and the sight of his body inspires all other knights to turn away from secular concerns and towards spiritual aims. Contrarily, Galahad, who steadfastly pursued spiritual perfection, is all but forgotten after his death. Such preferential treatment to Lancelot's body indicates that Malory's treatment of dead bodies in the text has specific purposes. In addition, the differences between Malory's depictions of the knights' corpses suggests that, the more a knight is considered worthy and revered by others, the more impact his death has; the message the dead person delivers to those living is able to have a more profound effect.

The corpses in *Morte* work to motivate the actions of the living. The focus is removed from the dead in order to show how their deaths work to alter the behavior of those who behold them. The more who view the dead body, the more who are affected by the corpses'

message. Malory allows the corpses to become signs within the text that mark shame and worthiness. The bodies of the dead become visible symbols for the living community. These symbols provoke change and action in the living, allowing the dead to still influence the living. The focus is not on the dead themselves and their connection to good or evil, but is instead on the message they provide and how this message is used or ignored by those who behold them. The dead can reprimand, reward, or call to action, but the primary focus is the living's ability to interpret the language of the dead.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Surrounded by the dead and dying, the people of the late Middle Ages were continually reminded—by the Church, art, literature, and life—that a sudden death was not only possible, but likely. As Huber notes,

Understanding the macabre spirit of death-culture in late medieval Europe requires a familiarization with the terror and panic of epidemic disease, and, more generally, with the fear of catastrophe and sudden death. It is only recently, in the age of mass-media, where photographs, motion pictures, and, more recently, the internet have exposed us to the devastation wrought by such natural disasters as the south Asian tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina, and to such unnatural disasters as the Holocaust of World War II, that a large portion of the world population has become exposed to horrific images akin to those presented by the Black Death. On a cultural or psychological level, then, we can experience second-hand, through images, what most of the population of the medieval world experienced first-hand: wide-scale death, physical decay, and the subsequent crumbling of societal infrastructure. (Huber)

The response of many in medieval society to the pervasiveness of death was not only to accept it, but also to continuously prepare, both in terms of the body and the soul, to meet death when it came.

The complexity of beliefs and values of a culture could certainly not be summed up by looking at one particular genre, if indeed it is possible to do such a thing at all. As Nancy Caciola has observed, “even as ecclesiastics preserved notice of variant traditions, they also

reinterpreted them to conform to their own cultural standards and beliefs, leaving the impression of universality where diversity existed. . . . Indeed, the process of reconstructing non-canonical beliefs is fraught with complications rather than clarity. Not least among these complications is the fact that ‘popular culture’ does not, as such, exist” (4-5). Medieval romance is still very much connected with an elite class; however, while it may not be entirely free from ecclesiastical interpretations, it is a step back from purely religious views on death. Therefore, it can illuminate, for lack of a better word, popular culture’s views on death and dying in a way that Church doctrine cannot.

By directing readers’ attention to the living rather than the dead, late medieval romance tales of the undead illuminate the relationship between the holy and evil undead figures as messengers to the living. The significance does not rest in identifying the nature of the undead, but in how the living handle their encounters with death. *Awntyrs off Arthur, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur* offer vastly different approaches to the living confronting the dead. *Awntyrs* offers the most fantastical and yet also the most direct, and *Morte* provides a clearer view of how this society confronted death. Despite the differences in how the undead are presented, the message remains the same for all three works: namely, that all people must learn to face death having fully paid penance for the sins committed in their lives. All must be ready to meet death wherever it may find them. The romance genre reflects some artwork of this period, which depicted the living facing their own *mort*. The focus in this genre is on the living’s ability to recognize and accept the brutal equalizing truth of mortality and to live knowing that death may strike at any time. The undead figure is only a messenger. It

does not matter if the undead figure is labeled as holy or evil. Both sides have messages that the living should reflect on wrongs committed, repent, and live prepared for death.

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