

Awntyrs off Arthur

anon

*a late-fourteenth century Middle English verse narrative in the
Arthurian tradition*

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Thomas Hahn (Ed), 1995. *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. The story has been taken from Oxford Bodleian Library MS Douce 324.

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Awntyrs off Arthur

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late fourteenth century

In the tyme of Arthur an aunter bytydde · by the Turne Wathelan, as the boke telles – In the days of King Arthur, the story tells, an adventure took place beside Lake Wathelene, when the king had come to Carlisle with all his noblemen. King Arthur came to hunt the deer that had been left alone all winter. He went with his knights and retainers into the heart of this forest. **Thus to wode arn thei went** – To the forest they ride, in their noble attire, the king and the queen and all the court with them. Sir Gawain leads Queen Guinevere, he, magnificent in his hunting gear, she, riding a white pony draped in silk and with a saddle studded with gemstones. Over her head she wears a hood of grey fur and over her shoulders a rainproof cloak set with sapphires. **Al in gliterand golde gayly ho glides the gates with Sir Gawain, bi the grene welle** – Gaily she glides along the paths with Sir Gawain, beside the green and fecund lake. Sir Gawain stays with the queen, and they dismount at the foot of a hillside. King Arthur rides on with his earls, shouting instructions, giving directions, assigning to each lord an oak tree beneath which he should wait with his bow and his hunting dogs.



Beneath the trees they wait, intending to worry the does as they arrive. Chases begin, pursuits and killings in woodland and upland, the deer that remain in the dim heart of the forest hide themselves for fear. By the rapids of fast-flowing streams falling from the fells the dogs seize the deer and cause them much anguish. The hunters whoop and cry, in the woods and on the hillsides, release their dogs, prepare to launch themselves, give no quarter. The greyhounds speed through the woodland after the deer, then lie panting in the shade. The king blows a signal, his noblemen follow fast along the trails made by the animals and many fine warriors converge upon the king – a satisfying sight! – happy to be summoned; all but Sir Gawain, the most magnificent of them all, who stays with Queen Guinevere. He has alighted with her in the shade of a large grove of laurels and box trees. The morning is wearing on and suddenly a strange thing happens, a weird thing that I must tell you about, if you will let me. The sky darkened until within the forest it became as black as midnight. The king was annoyed by this lack of light and dismounted from his steed. His noblemen followed suit and they all led their horses quickly out onto the surrounding hillsides, running now, fast towards some limestone crags as the hail began to cascade down from

the sky! A fire appeared over the lake, as though the devil himself was emerging from its depths! It took upon itself a form, moved onto the land, and filling the air with ungodly screams it began to approach Sir Gawain. ‘A curse on the body I once had!’ it wailed to him. ‘Now my cares have begun! Oh woe is me!’

Queen Guinevere was terrified. ‘What is this?’ she asked Sir Gawain.

‘It is an eclipse of the sun,’ he replied, reassuringly. ‘I have heard learned men describe such a thing.’

‘The other knights have all forsaken me,’ cried Queen Guinevere, unconvinced. ‘Sir Cleges, Sir Kay, Sir Cador! All ungallant! All disloyal! They have abandoned me to a grisly ghost that has come for my soul!’

‘Be quiet, my Lady, and don’t be afraid,’ replied Sir Gawain firmly. ‘I shall speak with this spirit and find out what is ailing it.’

The ghost was naked and its black bones protruded through a festering clay. It cried and moaned like a woman, and there was not a square inch of its body that was not disgustingly infected in some way. The body cursed, it stuttered, it hesitated, it whispered, it groaned as though it had lost its wits. Sir Gawain approached this grisly corpse. Bounding down to the lake shore, he was not afraid! Let no one believe that he was afraid! He could see on the back of its neck a toad biting into the base of its skull; its eyes were sunken and glowing like coals; **al glowed as a glede** – like coals glowed this ghost, clothed only in filth, encircled by snakes and with so many toads clinging to its rotting body that Sir Gawain could not have begun to number them even if he had wanted to.

The warrior drew his sword. The rotting corpse stared back at him, unflinching, Sir Gawain maintained his stance. An almighty wail came from this tormented ghost. The greyhounds that remained in the forest ran terrified into the thickets and hid their heads, birds began to screech uncannily from the trees and the noblest and most valiant warriors on the hillside could not escape from hearing chins and jaws chattering with fear.

Sir Gawain raised an invocation: ‘As Christ was crucified to cleanse us all of our sins,’ he yelled, ‘tell me, ghost, and make it the truth! What business have you here? Why do you haunt these woods?’

‘I was once the fairest lady in all of Christendom,’ replied the apparition. ‘There were brave and worthy kings in my family. But God has ordained that I should suffer penance in this place. I have come to speak with your queen. A queen once myself, I was fairer than beryl, or Brangwen, Queen Isolde of Cornwall’s beautiful maid. In all of life’s pleasures I was greater than Queen Guinevere: in wealth, in palaces, parks, income and prop-

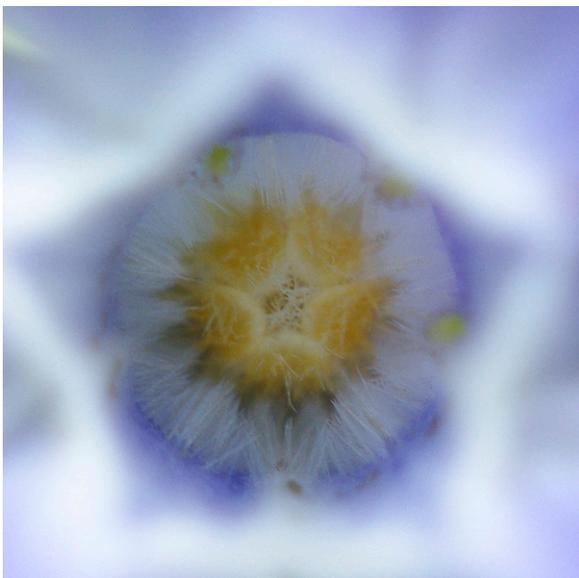
Found in four other surviving Middle English manuscripts, the Awntyrs off Arthur, or the Adventures of Arthur, is a highly literate work composed in the style of a diptych, that is, a panel of two separate scenes hinged at the centre. The story here is broadly identical to that found in Oxford Bodleian Library MS Douce 324, dating to the mid-fifteenth century, with minor differences corresponding to variants seen in other surviving manuscripts, lying in Lambeth Palace Library, London, Lincoln Cathedral Library and in the Robert H Taylor Collection, Princeton, New Jersey. These manuscripts all preserve versions of a lost original that was produced in northern England, perhaps Carlisle, possibly in the late-fourteenth century.

erty, in towns and lands, in mountains and valleys. But now I have exchanged wealthy living for this cruel suffering, clothed and buried in clay. Lo! Sir courteous knight! See how death has treated me! Let me have a few moments with Queen Guinevere!

Sir Gawain returned to Queen Guinevere and brought her before the ghost.

‘Welcome, Guinevere – impeccable as you are, I know, and beautiful,’ said the corpse. ‘Lo! See how death has disfigured your mother? I once had the complexion of roses and lilies; now I am a graceless ghost and live in a lake. Take warning! For all the fine ermine that you wear, take heed of what my mirror reveals. King or emperor, all will end up like me. Have no doubt that death will take you in the end, so listen to me now. When you are dressed to the nines and riding with an entourage, alleviate the suffering of the poor, for it lies in your power to do so. The men and women who bow and curtsy to you now will do you little good when they stand about your bier; only prayers will help you then, the holy prayers of the poor whom you have given to from the food off your own table. Only this will purchase relief from your suffering.’

‘You live on dainty dishes served from the finest kitchens while I suffer dismally beneath a lake, rotting and naked, tormented by fiends who plunge me into cauldrons of sulphur and molten brass. It would exhaust any tongue to have to list all my punishments, but I must speak to you of them. Take heed and mend your ways! Be warned by my suffering.’



‘Mother!’ cried Guinevere, distraught. ‘I hate to think of you suffering like this. Which of your sins has most displeased God?’

‘Excessive pride,’ replied the rotting corpse. ‘It grows bitter branches, as many wise men have preached. By climbing high on these boughs one imagines that one can ignore Christ’s teachings, but the branches will break and the injuries sustained from the fall can be healed only by prayer and the pain of penance in Purgatory.’

‘How, then, should we live?’

‘Show humility and consideration for others, these are the most important things,’ said the ghost. ‘Have pity upon the poor, whom Christ loves. Then next to this embrace charity, then chastity, but above all else, the giving of alms to the poor. These gifts of the Holy Ghost cause no loss to those inspired by them. As a queen in your court, keep these sentiments close to your heart. Life lasts for only a short while, before you have to move on.’

‘How shall *we* fare,’ interrupted Sir Gawain, ‘we who live by pride and are duty-bound to fight and slaughter on many a foreign field, seizing wealth and winning honour for

our king?’

‘King Arthur is too covetous, I warn you, Sir knight. Let no man challenge him while he grows in majesty, riding high upon Fortune’s wheel, but he will topple from it as suddenly as Fortune, that marvellous wheelwright, can raise a man up and then kick him back down again. He will find that his luck runs out upon a sandy beach in southern Britain. France has fallen to you, the Roman tribune and the legions under his command in Gaul are defeated and killed, Brittany and Burgundy and all of France bow to you – Gironde has not a single nobleman left alive! – and soon the whole of the Roman Empire will be yours, its rents and tributes weighing upon the Round Table. But a treacherous Tiber is framing your downfall. Go, Sir Gawain, get thee to northern Italy! Soon you will lose Britain, through your brother Mordred’s treachery! He will seize the throne while King Arthur is away, be crowned at Carlisle and cause grief to you all. You will learn of this in Tuscany, you will turn for home, and the Round Table will fall from its pedestal in Dorset. Hear this, Sir Gawain, bravest of all British warriors! You will meet your death near a stream. King Arthur will be mortally wounded in Cornwall.’



‘Mother!’ cried Queen Guinevere. ‘Will Masses and other church services lessen your torment? Is there anything else that I could pay for? My anguish would be eased if I knew that services in monasteries could cheer your mood, or that the prayers of bishops would bring you to heavenly bliss. But if you really are my mother, as you say you are, I wonder that your beauty has been reduced to this!’

‘Why should I try to deceive you Guinevere? I broke a solemn vow that only you and I know about. There! No one else knows about this. Do you have any doubts now?’

‘Then tell me truly, mother, what will alleviate your grief? I will make sure that churchmen sing for your sake; but those horrible snakes and toads that cling to your body and bite you, they make my flesh crawl! Your bones are so black!’

‘It is lovemaking, excitement, romance and delight that has cast me deep into this lake. All the world’s pleasures have been sucked away from me by these snakes. They torment me Guinevere! If nine hundred Masses were sung for me in one day, my soul would quickly be brought to heaven!’

‘Christ who was crowned with thorns, crucified and died for us, may He bring you to bliss!’ cried Guinevere. ‘As you were christened at the font, mother, Gentle Mary, who bore the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, give to me the grace to be able to help you, to cause Matins and Masses to be sung for you!’

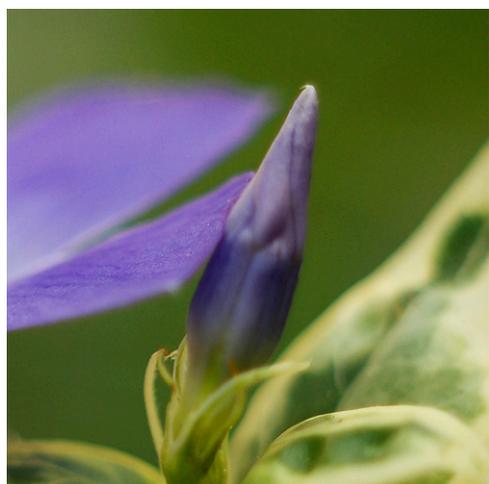
‘I have a great need, Guinevere, to be healed with Masses. And in the name of Jesus

Christ, donate much that you own to the poor and to the hungry, while you live here on Earth.’

‘I give you my word on this!’ cried Guinevere. ‘And I will remember you with a thousand Masses!’

‘Goodbye, Guinevere, and good Sir Gawain. I have no more time to speak with you. I must continue my way through this wild wood back to the place where I live out my woeful existence. For the sake of Christ, think upon the danger and the misery that I am in. Feed the poor for my sake, and commemorate me with Masses and Matins. Masses are a medicine to we who are dead. They ease our suffering. We think a Mass is as sweet as any spice that you will ever taste.’

Then with a grisly screech, the ghost moved away, groaning, back into the green woodland. The air cleared, the wind took the clouds away, the sky emerged and the sun began to shine. The king blew his hunting horn, the people who had been left in the forest below responded and when they were all together, they rode to the queen. She described what had just taken place, and those with any knowledge or experience of the world were astounded.



The proud King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and all their entourage, rode to Randalholme Hall to have supper. The king sat chewing his meal in the hall beneath a silk canopy embroidered with birds, magnificent in his fine clothes of exquisite design; they were beautifully tailored and intricately decorated with topaz and love knots. A musician entered with a percussion instrument to delight the gathering. A strikingly attractive lady appeared, leading a knight. She approached King Arthur and greeted him courteously: ‘Sir King, matchless as you are and without equal, may I present to you an errant knight? Will you show to him the honour that befits your own magnificence?’ The King glanced at her with his large grey eyes and moved his silky brown beard in her direction, displaying the most regal countenance that a man may ever see. ‘Welcome!’ he said. ‘This man shall receive the honour due to him. Would you like to tell me where he is from?’

The woman who stood before him wore a green dress and a woollen cloak embroidered with gold thread in the shape of birds. Her hair was platted with coloured ribbons and precious stones, her headscarves were decorated with jeweled pins and she wore a gold tiara. The knight behind her was dressed in full shining armour with exquisite white chain mail, he carried a silver shield with a heraldic emblem of black bears and wore a helmet decorated in burnished gold. His horse was draped in white silk almost to the ground and above its nostrils was a steel spike set in its face armour that made it look like a unicorn. His gauntlets shone with rubies like glowing coals and his plate armour glittered with gemstones. Behind him rode a young squire whose horse shuffled nervously

at the sight of so much grandeur and festivity. The ladies in the hall looked in wonder at this knight and at his companion, and the warriors looked on in admiration at the jewels, and with equal admiration at her figure.

‘If it pleases you,’ repeated King Arthur in a loud voice, ‘you may tell me what brings you here. What is it that you seek? Where are you bound? Tell me, Sir knight, why do you sit so silently in your saddle?’

The knight lifted his visor and with a noble countenance, spoke: ‘Whether you be king or already emperor, I challenge you to find a champion to fight with me. This is what I seek.’

‘If you are truly a knight,’ replied King Arthur, ‘you will stay with us and be entertained, and you will tell us your name.’

‘My name is Sir Galeron of Galloway, Strathclyde and Lothian. You have seized my lands through the use of a trick and ceded them to Sir Gawain, much to my annoyance. But he will wring his hands in anguish before he is able to rule over them. I swear by all the gold in the world, he shall not have them! While I yet live, he must win them in a fair fight, with sword and lance. I will face any champion you care to name, rather than being made a laughing stock like this!’

‘We have come here to hunt,’ replied the king, ‘and we are not equipped for battle. And yet, you shall have your champion by midday tomorrow, so I suggest that you sleep well tonight.’

Sir Gawain led him out of the hall to a pavilion that had been erected nearby, draped in purple cloth embroidered with birds picked out in gold thread. Inside was a bed chamber, a small chapel and a main living area in which a charcoal fire burned. His horse was led to a stable and given hay of the finest quality. They set a board over trestles and laid a tablecloth over it, produced condiments for a meal and candles for light. They served this knight and his worthy lady with the finest of foods, on the best silver. They poured strong Italian wine into goblets – thus did Sir Gawain cheer their guest, with delightful dishes spread out upon a table.

When Sir Galeron had retired to his chamber to rest, King Arthur summoned all his knights together. ‘We must be careful that no dishonour ensues from this,’ he said. ‘Who wants to take on this knight? Decide it amongst yourselves.’

‘There is nothing to resolve,’ said Sir Gawain. ‘Here is my hand. I will take on this knight myself, my lord, in defence of my possessions, if it pleases you.’

‘It pleases me that your response is so swift, but it would not please me if my own nephew were to be killed.’

‘Sir! God defends those who are in the right, and it will be a foul insult if this knight escapes without a good bruising!’

Early in the morning, when dawn had brightened the sky, the combatants were dressed and went to hear Matins and a Mass. A suitable area was hastily constructed on level ground, a little way away at Plumpton; the lists were quickly constructed, for it was the first time such a contest had ever taken place there. The king commanded that three pieces of bread soaked in wine should be given to Sir Gawain, to fortify him. He commanded also that the Earl of Kent's son should see to Sir Galeron's needs. Sir Galeron had a fine breakfast in his tent and put on his shining armour. After this, he went to see Queen Guinevere and asked to place the beautiful lady he had brought with him under her protection. Then both he and Sir Gawain mounted their horses and everyone rode to the field where the combat was to take place. All dismounted again except for these two brave knights.



King Arthur's throne is set upon a platform. Many shouts ring out in support of Sir Gawain!

Sir Gawain and Sir Galeron readied their horses; their armour shone with glittering gold! Noblemen brought them quickly to the jousting area, with the help of sergeants-at-arms, as was the custom. The two knights settled themselves, then spurred mercilessly at their horses, brought their lances into position and shattered them against one another. Lances splintered against shields! They turned again and drew their swords, brought harsh blows down upon each other's chain mail, hacking vigorously. Sir Gawain was decked in green with gold griffins etched onto his shield and his horse reared as he brought blow upon blow down onto his adversary. The other spoke in anger: 'Why do you draw so much suffering upon yourself by contesting this issue so spiritedly?' and he swung at Sir Gawain's neck, giving him a wound that would trouble him for the rest of his life. His blow was astounding! Fifty links of Sir Gawain's chain mail were shattered, his collar-bone fractured and his shield destroyed. Sir Galeron hacked at the shield and let out a hideous laugh. Sir Gawain grimaced and boiled with rage: 'I will reward you for this,' he hissed through his teeth and closed upon Sir Galeron in a fresh assault, cut through his emblazoned shield and his bright armour and in a storm of rage pierced Sir Galeron to the bone. Sir Gawain's shining sword is now covered in blood. Sir Galeron stared back questioningly and redoubled his own efforts, stood in his stirrups, rained down his own blows, came at Sir Gawain as though he was mad! His lady shrieked hysterically to see all the blood. The crowd liked what they saw.

But a treacherous stroke! Sir Galeron has cut off the head of Sir Gawain's horse Grissel! Sir Gawain's steed staggered and fell, Sir Gawain paused, stunned into an anger beyond measure, and leapt from his stirrups just in time. 'Grissel!' he cried out in anguish and grief. 'You were the best horse that ever lived! By Christ who died for us, I shall avenge

you today if my word counts for anything.’

‘I can lend you another horse if you wish,’ shouted Sir Galeron, ‘as good as the one you have just lost.’

‘You can stick your horse where the straw rots!’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘I grieve for the dumb beast that lies dead at my feet, not at any need to borrow another. I have plenty of my own.’ And as he knelt at the body of his reliable friend, the tears streamed down his cheeks as he vowed revenge.

In the face of such emotion, Sir Galeron clung to his nobility and wishing to do nothing dishonourable in front of the crowd, he spurred his horse and galloped to the other side of the enclosure.

‘Go on, wait out the rest of the day over there, you coward!’ shouted Sir Gawain.

Sir Galeron dismounted and walked back towards Sir Gawain, with his sword brandished. It was gone noon, and soon they were hitting one another again with their shining swords. Their shields were torn, their armour covered in blood, and they fought together like two hungry lions, skillfully wielding their weapons.

Believe me, Sir Gawain lacks no desire to fight! He stabbed at Sir Galeron beneath his shield, plunged steel through armour and penetrated his midriff, wounding him badly, for it was a good sword. Sir Galeron drew back, staggered and froze; stunned, he aimed a powerful blow in return, struck Sir Gawain about the neck where he had already wounded him badly and came within a hair’s breadth of killing him outright. They beat at each other savagely, strewing gemstones and steel links across the grass. Shields on shoulders offered little protection as each hacked away at chain mail with a heavy sword. Sir Gawain’s father King Lot of Orkney and Sir Lancelot du Lac began to regret that this contest had ever been agreed upon, so grievous was the fighting. Queen Guinevere wept for both of the combatants; her grey eyes shed tears for Sir Gawain’s wounds, but Sir Gawain was giving more than he received now. Many areas of Sir Galeron’s body had suffered bitter punishment and were now bare of protection. Sir Gawain struck Sir Galeron to the ground. Slipping and sliding, groaning and groveling, Sir Galeron tried to rise with unsanctionable haste and, gaining his balance, launched himself desperately once more at Sir Gawain. But of the two, his legs were the weaker, I am pleased to say, and the final blow he aimed merely glanced off Sir Gawain’s thigh. Sir Gawain seized him roughly by the scruff of the neck. His lady screamed. Turning to Queen Guinevere she pleaded: ‘Lady, use your power, have mercy upon that knight, if it pleases you!’

Queen Guinevere went quickly to the king, removed her crown and knelt in front of him. ‘As you are a king of kings, in income unsurpassed, and I your lawful wife – these warriors have lost so much blood and are so tired, their shoulders are shattered behind their shields. Sir Gawain groans. I can hardly bear to listen to him! If it pleased you to bring these two knights to a reconciliation, it would bring comfort to all who are here.’

While Queen Guinevere addressed the king, Sir Galeron spoke to Sir Gawain: ‘I never

imagined any warrior could be half so powerful as you,' he said, 'Here, by Christ, I release to you all my claims.' He raised his voice. 'In the hearing of this royal assembly I relinquish my lands. I pay homage to this knight as to an invincible warrior.'

'I give over all my wealth and income!' he called to King Arthur, and kneeling, he proffered his sword. King Arthur rose and commanded that all hostilities cease. The king ordered silence. Sir Gawain obediently said nothing. Knights leapt over the barriers, rushed to the scene, helped both the injured men to stand and led them to the king. They were scarcely able to walk, either of them. Wherever it could be seen, their skin was black with the impact of swords against mail, from the bruising and the congealed blood. They were both brought before the high platform. Without any delay, King Arthur witnessed their formal reconciliation.

'I give to Sir Gawain all of Glamorgan,' called King Arthur then, 'its castles and forests, its wealth and its gold. He shall be the Prince of Wales and hold lands in Ireland as well, walled cities, strongly built, and two baronies in Brittany. Sir Gawain, I shall invest you as my heir on this one condition, that you reach an accord with Sir Galeron and return to him – return to this marvellous warrior whose ferocity shall be an asset to us all – some of the lands that he formerly held.

'Here I offer to Sir Galeron with an open hand,' replied Sir Gawain, 'all of Galloway and the lands of Strathclyde as far as Loch Lomond. But if he desires Lothian as well, with its beautiful forests and fortifications and King Arthur's Seat,' he said turning to Sir Galeron, 'whether under our lordship you might choose to stay with us and were King Arthur, perhaps, to invite you to join the Round Table, you would still have to contest it once more with me in the field.'

Sir Galeron and Sir Gawain returned to Carlisle with King Arthur and all his knights. Here their dreadful wounds received careful attention from the finest surgeons, and with much comfort from the king and the queen they soon recovered. Both were made dukes, and Sir Galeron married the beautiful lady who had introduced him when he had first ridden into King Arthur's hall. The happy couple received some fine wedding gifts and Sir Galeron was made a knight of the Round Table.

Queen Guinevere sent word to all the churches and religious institutions in the land for their psalms and prayers, their processions and their services. She commanded that a thousand Masses be sung in memory of her mother, and she instructed learned churchmen and the most powerful bishops to ring the finest bells throughout Britain!

These unusual events took place in Inglewood Forest, beneath bare branches during a royal hunt; a strange adventure that happened once in the time of King Arthur.