Romance Tradition and Unjust Lordship:
Gawain in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn*

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I

Among the late Middle English romances, Gawain plays the role as one of the most admirable and the most favored knights of all the heroes of Arthurian legend, and his high reputation as an ideal hero consistently predominates.[1] In *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn* (hereafter abbreviated as *The Awntyrs*), Gawain is frequently described as an outstanding representative of the Round Table.[2]

This stanzaic alliterative poem, probably written in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, is composed of two episodes, the first of which concerns the appearance of the ghost of Guinevere's dead mother to Guinevere and Gawain, and the second concerns the challenge of a knight, Galeron of Galloway, to Arthur's court and the single combat between Galeron and Gawain. In both episodes, Gawain, who plays a leading role, shows us his chivalrous virtues such as "bravery," "loyalty," or "generosity" as a "worþely wight" (614).

However, the way in which Gawain gains victory over Galeron in the second episode seems to be quite unsuitable for his renown as the greatest warrior. In spite of the tradition of Arthurian romance in which a knightly hero such as Lancelot in *The Knight of the Cart* triumphs effortlessly over his enemies, Gawain in *The Awntyrs* barely gains his narrow victory. In fact, although he is finally regarded as the victor, the result seems to be more like a draw. The *Awntyrs*-poet devotes many lines to the description of Gawain's inferiority (he is heavily wounded and his

[1]

favorite horse is killed), and when Gawain becomes dominant over Galeron, Galeron's lady begs Guinevere to have mercy on him. As a result, therefore, their fight is announced as being settled. In spite of Gawain's role as the bravest paragon of the Round Table, why does he not triumph completely over Galeron?

What has to be considered here is the cause of the battle between Gawain and Galeron. Galeron appears at Arthur's court, asking for "reson and riȝt" (350, 362) of Arthur, and demanding the return of his lands to him which he claims the king has wrongfully taken and bestowed on Gawain. Galeron then challenges any other knight assigned by Arthur to single combat in order to get them back. Although Gawain voluntarily offers to undertake the task, he is reduced to take action for the honor of Arthur, who unjustly seized someone else's lands. Is there any relationship between Gawain's uncertain victory which is unsuitable for a romance hero and Arthur's unjust lordship which is also unsuitable for the king who has a high reputation as a "king curteis and royalle"?[3]

In answering the above question, this essay attempts to clarify Gawain's role in *The Awntyrs*. First, I will demonstrate how he is described as an ideal knight in the poem. Next, I will discuss the lordship problem in which Gawain is involved in place of Arthur, and then examine what the *Awntyrs*-poet wants to suggest by Gawain's imperfect victory against Galeron. In addition, it might be useful to look at the historical background of the lordship problem of the poet's times.

Although the poem's structure and its authorship are beyond the scope of my purpose here, before moving on to the main discussion, it will be appropriate to refer briefly to them. Since the poem consists of two episodes which seem to be two separate and independent without any connection between them, the question as to whether we are dealing with one or two poems has been a significant argument regarding *The*

Awntyrs (e.g. Hanna 17-24; Spearing 126; Phillips 64). However, as A. C. Spearing suggests, such juxtapositional, diptychal structure is not uncommon in Medieval literature, with examples such as *Patience, The Book of the Duchess,* or *Golagros and Gawane*.[4] Furthermore, as I will mention later, both episodes seem to have some parallels and links with each other. For convenience, therefore, I intend to proceed with my discussion on the supposition that the poem is a single work written by a single author.

II

In Middle English romances, Gawain holds the unshakable position as the noblest representative of knighthood. His well-established reputation for courtesy is referred to in Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*: "That Gawayn, with his olde curteisye" (170), or in *The Romaunt of the Rose*: "Gaweyn, the worthy, / Was praysed for his curtesye" (*The Romaunt* 44).

Also in *The Awntyrs*, Gawain is described as the epitome of the perfect knight. For example, every epithet for Gawain in the poem such as "þe cheualrous kniȝt" (123), "sir curtays knyȝt" (153), or "Gawayn þe gode" (498, 539, 638) suggests a kind of admiration for him.[5] As such a splendid hero, Gawain shows chivalrous conduct in the poem which is related to his great fame. I will now examine how Gawain displays his chivalrous virtues in each of the story's events.

The first episode begins with hunting scene exercised by King Arthur and his court near the Tarn Wadling. Gawain and Queen Guinevere separate themselves from the rest of the party. After a sudden storm, Guinevere's dead mother appears to them, taking the shape of a terrifying ghost. In order to protect the fearful queen, Gawain, who "was neuer rad" (112), confronts the ghost and boldly approaches it:

> Þe burne braides oute þe bronde, and þe body bides;
> Therefor þe cheualrous kniȝt changed no chere.
> Þe houndes hiȝen to þe holte, and her hede hides,
> For þe grisly goost made a grym bere. (122-25)

In spite of the terror of every other living being, such as the hounds and birds (224-30), only Gawain has the courage to face up to the ghost without changing his countenance. What is explicitly shown in this scene is Gawain's knightly virtue of prowess or boldness which is praised by the ghost itself: "Sir Gawayn, / The boldest of Bretayne" (296-97).

Gawain's prowess is also described in the second episode. When Arthur and the court are at supper, an unfamiliar knight, Sir Galeron of Galloway, accompanied by his lady, enters and demands a joust in order to regain his lands which have been seized by Arthur and then been granted to Gawain. When Arthur asks the court: "'Vmbloke nowe, lordinges, oure lose be not lest; / Ho shal encontre with þe kniȝt, kestes you bitwene'" (462-63), Gawain bravely offers himself to take up Galeron's glove as the recipient of the land:

> . . . hit shal vs not greue.
> Here my trouth I you pliȝt;
> I woll counter with þe knight
> In defence of my riȝt,
> Lorde, by your leue. (464-68)

The motive of Gawain's voluntary action in this scene is not only to demonstrate his masculine prowess but also to reinforce his loyalty to Arthur. That is to say, while Galeron claims that Arthur's sequestration of lands belonging to him was unjust, and demands "reson and riȝt" (350) of Arthur, Gawain, who has deep loyalty to Arthur, willingly undertakes

the task of saving Arthur's grace and "riȝt" (although here Gawain mentions "my riȝt," it practically means Arthur's "riȝt"). In addition, the word "trouth," which Gawain uses in his speech, includes the concept of "loyalty," a sense which it mostly has in Medieval English literature.[6]

"Prowess" and "loyalty" which Gawain displays in *The Awntyrs* are the most significant virtues in chivalry. In his "Ideals of Knighthood in Late-Fourteenth-Century England," Gervase Mathew states that above all the chivalrous virtues, "prowess" and "loyalty" were held to mark a good knight and to bring him honor in Medieval English romances (358). Therefore, it is clear that in the poem Gawain is described as an ideal knight who has every virtue which is necessary for a romance hero.

Moreover, what has to be noticed here is that this ideal figure of Gawain seems to derive from one of the common patterns of romance, the simplification and typification of characters.[7] That is to say, characters in a romance tend to be stereotyped and not to possess any very marked individual qualities. A hero in a romance, consequently, is regularly described as a glorified and idealized knight who has perfect virtues (and, on the other hand, a villain is thoroughly evil). From this viewpoint, it is reasonable to conclude that Gawain in *The Awntyrs* fills the role of a typical romance hero, following the conventional pattern.

In spite of this romance tradition, however, Gawain's victory over Galeron is a kind of a draw, and is not suitable for a romance hero. I will now, therefore, explore the reason for his imperfect victory with regard to the lordship problem in the poem.

III

In the second episode of *The Awntyrs*, Gawain is compelled, though no doubt willingly, to undertake the task of fighting with Galeron because of the intruder's claim that Arthur unjustly sequestrated his lands. Such a

motif in which Gawain plays a role as Arthur's deputy is common in Middle English romances such as in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In this respect, therefore, it seems valid to suppose that Arthur's unjust behavior in *The Awntyrs*, which creates a sense of moral uneasiness in the modern reader, was an ordinary subject for the audience in the *Awntyrs*-poet's days.

Although the lawlessness in the late Middle Ages, especially in the fifteenth century, has been documented by many historians, the legal system was nonetheless recognized as a vital code, especially in justifying landownership (Powell 33, 38; Carpenter 205, 237). Regarding the social situation in the fifteenth century, Norman Davis states in his introduction to Paston *Letters* as follows:

> Those were times when titles to land were too often uncertain. Magnates, out of sheer greed or envy at the rise of new families, often found pretexts to dispossess less powerful men and if legal means failed they did not scruple to use force (8).

The legal insurance was, thus, essential for the landowners in order to defend themselves against these magnates' malpractices and to protect their own estates. The letters of the Paston family provide typical examples of the social disorder in fifteenth-century England, for there are extensive records of the litigation or the prosecution of the family's lordship (Davis 1-124). It is, thus, plain that the lordship problem was a common feature for later medieval landowners, and that they had to struggle against the injustice of magnates.

With this as background, I turn now to the theme of unjust lordship in the first episode of *The Awntyrs*. At the end of the first episode, just before the apparition of Guinevere's mother disappears, Gawain asks the

apparition about the territorial conquest of the king and his knights of the Round Table:

> ... quod þe freke [Gawain], 'þat fonden to fight,
> And þus defoulen þe folke on fele kinges londes,
> And riches ouer reymes withouten eny right,
> Wynnen worshipp and wele þorgh wightnesse of hondes?' (261-64)

Then the ghost warns him and prophesies the fall of the Table as follows:

> Your king is to couetous, I warne þe sir kniȝt.
> . . . .
> He shal light ful lowe on þe sesondes.
> And ȝour chiualrous king chef shall a chaunce. (265-69)

Undoubtedly, the poet regards "Wynnen wele" through "wightnesse of hondes" as a foul deed "withouten eny right," and Arthur as a "couetous" king, who will be confronted with "a chaunce," the fall of the Round Table. It is therefore obvious that the poet does accuse of Arthur of covetousness of the lands and power.[8]

If *The Awntyrs*, which consists of two episodes, was written by one poet as I have presumed in the early part of this essay, his strong criticism of royal misdeeds implied in the first episode may foreshadow Arthur's unjust lordship over Galeron, and may provide a clue to Gawain's imperfect victory over Galeron in the second episode.

Galeron, who appears at Arthur's court in full armor, enumerates the names of his estates and starts accusing Arthur: "Þou has wonen hem in werre with a wrange wile / And geuen hem to Sir Gawayn—þat my hert grylles" (421-22). According to his claim, although it is uncertain how legitimate it is, what Arthur did to Galeron through his covetousness is

exactly the kind of conduct which is criticized by the poet in the first episode. In the light of the poet's strict criticism, although it is only Galeron and his lady who distinctly accuse Arthur of unjust lordship in the second episode, here must also lie tacit criticism of Arthur.

As I noted before, the battle between Galeron and Gawain, although Gawain is at last conceded as a victor, ends almost in a draw. To be precise, when Gawain, who "grisly was wound" (600), tries to defeat his enemy and "þe coler cleches þe kniȝt" (618), the battle is suddenly proclaimed to be settled by Arthur, who accepts the appeal of Galeron's lady and Guinevere for intervention. Considering the poet's tacit criticism of Arthur, it is clear that the battle, different from the one in typical romances, contains a complex conflict. That is, while Gawain is required to gain a glorious success in the battle as an idealized and typical romance hero, the poet seems not to want him to achieve a great triumph over Galeron, for Gawain's motive for the battle is to justify Arthur's unjust sovereignty. Viewed in this light, Gawain's imperfect victory, or rather the vague outcome of the battle is the result of the poet's efforts to question the reason for their battle.

The important point to notice here is the following scene after their reconciliation. While Galeron abandons his claim to his lands, Gawain, taking the order from Arthur, generously releases them all to Galeron: "Here I gif Sir Galeron, withouten any gile, / Al þe londes and þe lithes" (677-78), and voluntarily asks his company to the Round Table (683-84). Although Gawain gives up his lands under the order of his king, considering his willingness to do so, it is plausible to suppose that what Gawain shows here is his another chivalrous virtue of "generosity." In addition to the virtues, "prowess" and "loyalty," which I mentioned before, "generosity" is also one of the significant characters which are required in an idealized romance hero. According to Gervase Mathew, it is primarily val-

ued "because of the detachment from possession and the disregard for wealth that it implies" (360). To put it the other way round, "generosity" can be regarded as the virtue which is the opposite to "covetousness," with which one becomes greedy for lands and power.

The opposition between "generosity" and "covetousness" is widely perceived as one of the common motifs in Medieval English romances. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, when Gawain recognizes that he commited a fault in his conduct, he confesses that because of his "covetousness" he lost his nature of "generosity": "To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake, / þat is larges [generosity] and lewté þat longez to kniȝtez" (ll. 2380-81).

The opposite relation between "generosity" and "covetousness" is also obvious in *The Awntyrs*. While, in the first episode of the poem, the apparition of Guinevere's dead mother blames Arthur by calling him "to couetous" (265) because of his unjust lordship, and Gawain also admits that seizing lands which belong to others is "withouten eny right" (263); on the other hand, in the second episode, Gawain shows his "generosity" with his "detachment" and "disregard" for lordship. That is to say, the reason why he returns the lands to Galeron is that, although Gawain in the second episode fights with Galeron as a deputy of Arthur, his action reflects the poet's critical opinion about unjust lordship. Furthermore, Gawain's behavior toward the lands suggests an ideal solution to the problem through his "generosity," which results from his imperfect victory. It can be concluded that the *Awntyrs*-poet wants to show us the possibility of solving the lordship problem in his days through his account of Gawain's imperfect victory and his generous behavior.

VI

What I have tried to do in this essay is, first, to verify how Gawain in

The Awntyrs is described as an ideal romance hero with knightly virtues, "prowess" and "loyalty." In connection with the lordship problem in the fifteenth century, I then investigated the reason for his imperfect victory against Galeron. In conclusion, in the poem Gawain plays not merely a role as a typical representative of the romance hero in the romance tradition, but also as the embodiment of the poet's views on the lordship problem. At the same time, moreover, he plays another role which suggests the ideal way of solving the problem, showing his another virtue, "generosity."

Although it relates to the social problem of landownership in the fifteenth-century England, *The Awntyrs* is fundamentally not a homiletic poem but essentially a secular romance as is illustrated by Gawain's role as an idealized hero typical of the romance tradition.[9] That the poet wants to present the poem as a romance can be proved by his use of other romance conventions, such as the use of the supernatural, the minute descriptions of the clothing and the splendid banquet.[10] In addition, it is obvious that the poet's criticism of unjust lordship in this poem is not as clear or direct as in *Piers Plowman*, for example. Rather, it limits itself to an implicit criticism suggested within the framework of the genre of conventional romance.

In *The Awntyrs*, imposing various roles on Gawain, such as a romance hero, as the embodiment of the poet's criticism against unjust lordship, or as the resolver of the problem, the poet adopts another characteristic of Arthurian romance, a verbal correspondence between the beginning and the end, and closes the poem as a conventional romance with lines: "In þe tyme of Arthore, / This anter betide" (714-15).[11]

Notes

1 Although in the later French romances Gawain's character was blackened,

his fame remained in England, except in the alliterative *Morte Arthur*, Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and *The Gest of Sir Gawain*. For Example, see Ackerman 493.

2   All the citations from *The Awntyrs* are taken from this edition, and line numbers are parenthesized in the text.

3   William Caxton in his Preface to *Le Morte D'Arthur* praises Arthur also as one of "the nine best and worthy" (Malory 3).

4   Spearing compares the structure of *The Awntyrs* to that of Diptych, one of the types of panel-painting in the later Middle Ages, which consists of two leaves completed in themselves yet still combined with each other ("The Awntyrs" 186). Also see Gordon 74-81.

5   Carl Lindahl points out that in conventional romance a knight is represented with his epithets (74).

6   The *OED* defines "truth": "The character of being, or disposition to be, true to a person, principle, cause, etc.; faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty. . . . *Now rare* or *arch*. (I. 1. a)," "One's faith or loyalty as pledged in a promise or agreement (I. 2. a)."

7   Martin S. Day enumerates conventional romance patterns (45).

8   Powell and Carpenter give some examples which also criticize the unjust lordship in those days, such as *Piers Plowman* (Powell 33-34; Carpenter 231-34).

9   Although there are some arguments about the genre of *The Awntyrs*, at least the second episode in the poem has been regarded as a standard romance. For example, see Dean 80; Spearing 125.

10   John Finlayson enumerates the characteristics of romance (59).

11   Hanna points out the other romances which have the same verbal correspondence (46-47).

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12

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13

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