A Look at the Didactic Literature Context of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure*

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**Introduction**

*The Awntyrs Off Arthure* is a fine example of early fifteenth century Northern English alliterative poetry, but one which students of medieval English literature are often blissfully unaware of. The poem does not enjoy anything like as high a profile as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; indeed, in many cases, the poem may not even feature on the background reading list of many under-graduate medieval English literature courses. It wasn’t until post-graduate studies that I myself encountered the *Awntyrs*, but when I did I wondered why this charming, curious, rich, and highly provocative short poem (at only 715 lines) was not considered a must-read text for students from the earliest stages of Middle English literature study. Getting to know the poem in greater detail, however, I soon realized that the answer to that question lay with the poem’s modern critical reception, which has been nothing if not rocky and checkered. Detractors of the poem have called it imperfect, because it comprises two apparently unconnected narratives, each drawn from irreconcilably different literary modes –religious didactic and secular romance. To many, this represents an error of structuring, and so, famously, it was suggested that the *Awntyrs* was really two
poems sewn together, and somewhat artlessly, too.\(^{(1)}\) Over the years, however, and particularly over the very last few decades, advocates have mounted an effective counter-offensive, with a basket of arguments proffered in its defence. Critical opinion on the poem is by no means near consensus, but, overall, reception appears to have become certainly more accommodating and positive.\(^{(2)}\) How long it will be before we see the \textit{Awntyrs} enjoy the kind of popular attention of \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} remains to be seen, but I, for one, hope the poem gains a wider readership than at present.

The purpose of the present study is to attempt to train a little much-needed light on the poem in regard to its literary and cultural contexts. Exploration of these contexts can enlighten aspects of the poem, but also provide us with a glance into life, thought and outlook beyond-the-diurnal for folk in early fifteenth century England. The \textit{Awntyrs} is very much a poem of its time, and as such is perhaps more resistant than some other poems of the period – \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}, or Chaucer’s \textit{Canterbury Tales}, for example– to critical approaches which place less importance on context, at least at an undergraduate level. There are enough immediately recognizable elements at play in \textit{Sir Gawain} and \textit{The Canterbury Tales} – adventure, rich description, satire, farce and the comedy of manners– to entertain a modern student/reader without too much recourse to context. The \textit{Awntyrs}, however, is a work which lives and breathes via its contexts; hence the modern reader is automatically required to put in a greater effort in order to extract anything like a full understanding or appreciation.

We will look at four works which pre-date the \textit{Awntyrs}, and which, variously, can help us to come to a greater understanding of the poem.
The first, *The Trentals of St Gregory*, is invariably cited as a source analogue for part of the opening episode of the poem, a frightening, and, at least for the Arthurians who witness it, a somewhat disturbing, encounter between the living and the dead, in the forest of Inglewood, in Cumbria, near the border with Scotland. Precisely what the *Awntyrs* poet took from this work of didactic piety illustrates well the principle that context informs the very meaning and impact of the poem: modern inability to fully appreciate the debt has no doubt been part of the reason why traditional conceptions of the *Awntyrs* tended toward the negative. The other three works in this study cannot be said to have any direct link to the *Awntyrs*, yet acquaintance with them can help to inform modern readership concerning an important part of the poem’s literary and cultural context. A brief look at Richard Rolle’s *Prick of Conscience* provides us with some of the current theological ideas of the time, many of which inform the religious aspect to the *Awntyrs*. Dating back centuries before the *Awntyrs*, *The Visions of Tundale* and *Owayne Miles* are poems which relate journeys of the living into the Christian underworld and back, virtually initiating the tradition in which the living come physically face-to-face with the dead, something which clearly has implications for the *Awntyrs*. It is hoped that this examination, then, can do three things: to help illuminate the meanings of the *Awntyrs*, to shed some light on how the poem might have been received at the time of its writing, and to open up a portal onto the thoughts and life of people in the later Middle Ages.

**Description of the narrative**

At the outset, a basic description of the narrative of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure* is needed. Firstly, and most conspicuously, the *Awntyrs*
comprises two radically different –in terms of content, not style– episodes of roughly the same length. The first relates the sudden appearance of a ghostly figure in the midst of a forest, and the second, the sudden appearance of a stranger knight at the court of King Arthur. In more detail, the poem opens as a retinue of royal hunters and their entourage of ladies and courtiers, led by King Arthur, conduct a hunt in the forest of Inglewood, in Cumbria, near to the border with Scotland. Sir Gawain and Queen Guinevere somehow get parted from the main company, and just they do, the day suddenly becomes heavily overcast and ominously dark. A spirit from the underworld soon confronts Gawain and Guinevere, yet unlike what might occur in other Arthurian romances –in which strange beings unexpectedly appear in woods– no contest or battle develops here. The spirit, it transpires, is actually the ghost of Guinevere’s deceased mother, and she has returned only to speak. It is what she speaks of that is frightening and disturbing. Based upon what was then a current motif of a physical encounter between the living and the dead –depicted in literature, in painting and in sculpture– the grotesque and sin-deformed Mother-ghoul, covered in toads and writhing snakes, gets the chance to berate the living over excess indulgence in worldly pleasures. If it were only that, the Arthurians might count themselves lucky –unfortunately, however, beyond imploring them to think about the sick and the poor and not worry only about the sumptuousness of their feasts and fashion, she predicts the end of the Arthurian dream, and in such detail that it sounds compelling and authoritative. Much of what she says in fact derives from the chronicle aspect of the Arthurian story (in the tradition of the *Brut*), with direct debt also owed to *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*. It is the territorial greed of Arthur (referring to his campaign against France and Rome) and his enthrallment to Lady Fortune, which will ensure his downfall
and the implosion of his realm. Her interlocutors listen respectfully and appear to accept the import of her words. Gawain appears properly chastened and Guinevere asks what she can do in order to alleviate the pain of her mother in Purgatory. In answer, the ghost requests the saying of special ‘trental’ prayers, so called because, deriving from the French, they involve the saying of thirty masses—the ten chief feasts of the year to be celebrated three times each. Her daughter promises to do this and soon enough the apparition disappears, and the episode ends with all the Arthurians returning to court, most of them no doubt wondering what had happened to end the day so precipitously.
In the second episode, which opens back at Arthur’s court near Carlisle, no mention is made of what actually did happen, and Gawain and Guinevere disclose nothing. It is simply forgotten about, and so an entirely new narrative can take over. This new narrative takes the form of another encounter, this one a little more down-to-earth. A Scottish knight, Sir Galeron of Galloway, his fair damsel beside him, enters the court and complains to the king about the unjust dispossession of his lands. He is treated with every courtesy, but the resolution of the case, it is decided, will have to be in the form of a duel, with, it turns out, Sir Gawain, who is Arthur’s strongest knight. When it happens, the fight is violent and bloody, and provides something of a contrast to the somewhat static, if arresting, content of the first episode. Gawain’s beloved horse, Grissell, is decapitated at one point, bringing a note of deadly seriousness into the event, which, from that stage on, descends into a ferocious, and not entirely chivalric, battle between two enraged and desperate men. Gawain gets the upper hand, but Guinevere implores an ending to the battle before anything worse may occur. The whole affair ends amicably, with Arthur praising Galeron for his courage, and then, magnanimously ceding back his lands to him, and accepting him into the court as a member of his retinue. Guinevere, in the final stanza, remembers her promise to her deceased mother, and delegates the saying of masses for the repose of her soul.

**The Awntyrs and Didactic literature**

The *Awntyrs* is a complex piece of literature, and as such there will be a range of interpretations concerning its various meanings and its place within the Arthurian canon. In this study, I am specifically focusing on the poem’s debt to, and use of, a number of works which
are designedly didactic in nature and form: each work looked at below was written with the express view of promoting a religious idea. The Trentals is virtually an advertisement for the costly liturgical practice of having trental prayer masses said. These masses were very popular, as was the poem, but it also suffered contemporary criticism from some quarters that it was simonaical (see especially the attack in Dives and Pauper\textsuperscript{(4)}). The Prick of Conscience is a treatise, written with all the clarity and matter-of-factness of a legal document, and the purpose of the book is made clear from the outset: to act as a spur toward Christian rectitude. Both The Visions of Tundale and Owaine Miles were patently fictions, although they may have been read by some as accounts of true events. Written by monks, these works had the same purpose: to bolster the idea that Purgatory was a real place and, by extension, whatever you did in this world would have consequences for the next. There is no doubt that the Awntyrs poet was well aware of these works, and, either directly or indirectly, made use of them, but he was doing so with great discernment. He was creating literature, a work of complexity and subtlety faceted by aspects of both the religious and secular. Clearly the author was a reader of secular romances, as he is heavily indebted to The Alliterative Morte and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and obviously possesses knowledge of the entire Arthurian tradition. The poet’s use of religious literature is highly complex and subtle, explanation of which would require a separate dedicated study, but I can summarize my own basic view as a necessary prelude to the study below.

By bringing in a figure from the religious didactic tradition, a ghost berating the Arthurians for being what everyone expects Arthurians to be—glorious, spectacular and chivalric, if usually focused on worldly rather than spiritual concerns—the poet fundamentally challenges
the whole Arthurian ethos. Yet, it is a complex challenge, because the very vehicle of the narrative is rich in that ethos, be it in terms of the stunning visuals of jewel-encrusted shields and ladies dressed in sumptuous fashion or in the obvious grounding in the centuries-old Arthurian tradition. Furthermore, the poet’s tendency to particularize the elements of his story add a complicating dimension to any reading which sees the poem as inherently religious in nature. The locating of the poem in Cumbria near the border with Scotland, and the creation of the figure of Galeron as a Scottish knight with a land grievance are not mere accidentals: they help to politicize the poem.\(^{(5)}\) No doubt many of the poem’s readers would have been on Galeron’s side during the description of the duel, themselves being Scottish land-owners with their own troubled history of land dispossession by the English. Of course, this is putting things in a very black and white sort of way, and is therefore too simplistic a reading of the poem, but it is clear that such particularities complicate any reading of the poem which seeks to categorize it as religious, as ultimately dealing in moral absolutes, or purely concerned with Christian rectitude. The Awntyrs poet borrows from the religious didactic tradition, I believe, in order to give bite to his poem, as a challenge to the ethos, and the conventions, not merely of the Arthurian legend, but to the ruling powers of the day. One of the functions of secular romance is to affirm the values of the armigerous classes through the presentation of ennobling archetypes. Yet, in the Awntyrs we arrive at a moment in which even Gawain, the most courteous knight and the pride of Arthurian chivalry, discloses what is never usually disclosed within the fantasy vehicle of Arthurian Romance, that knights sometimes do ‘defoulen the folke’ – trample upon the ordinary people– or invade (‘riches’ means ‘betake themselves’) other lands without any right: (261-4):
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‘How shal we fare,’ quod þe freke, ‘þat fonden to fight,
And þus defoulen þe folke on fele kinges londes,
And riches ouer reymes withouten eny right,
Wynnen worshipp and wele þorphg wightnesse of hondes?’

In the *Awntyrs*, through the precipitous appearance of a wraith from hell, rising from out of the depths of the Tarn Wadling lake in the forest of Inglewood in Cumbria, the fundamental ethos of the armed and ruling class, along with the literary vehicle which was often employed to support and promote it, is given a sudden, sharp and seriously unforgettable jolt.

*The Trentals of St Gregory*

No critic has identified sources for the second episode. The usual line is that the second episode relies on stock romance material, of the battling of chivalric knights, an element to be found in many texts. The first episode, in contrast, is said to be rich in terms of the source material employed. Incidentally, this approach has traditionally helped to bolster the idea that the *Awntyrs* is really two poems linked together, the first episode being the jewel, and the second being re-worked inferior metal at best. In the first episode, after all, we can discern the use, direct and indirect, of a number of identifiable sources. As stated, there is specific reference made to *The Alliterative Morte*, and knowledge of the chronicle tradition of the Arthurian story is evident. Clearly, also, the idea of an encounter between the living and the dead has a pedigree going back centuries. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the story of *De Tribus Regibus Mortuis*, or *The Three Dead Kings*, a version of which is related by John Awdelay, enjoyed great popularity, providing
a chilling reminder to those too attached to worldly concerns (which, from the view of a disgruntled or questioning citizen might mean anyone in power) of the transience of glory this side of the grave. And, the text which derives much from this same tradition, *The Trentals of St Gregory*, is clearly also an important analogue, and, as most would now agree, was directly plundered by the *Awntyrs* poet.

Use of the *Trentals* was first noted by Frederic Madden, as far back as 1839, in his edition of a number of romances including the *Awntyrs* (see Bibliography). Since then, almost every critic has brought it into discussion of the poem’s composition. The basic plot of *The Trentals of St Gregory* is as follows: the mother of Pope Gregory has died in a state of sin (having been adulterous and having murdered the subsequent off-spring), and returns as a spirit in order to ask her son to say prayers (‘trentals’) for her salvation; the son does so, and she is redeemed. In two of the four extant versions of the lesser-known ‘B’ version of the tale, the pope is interrupted in his prayer mission on three occasions by what appear to be affairs of state, all of which, in fact, turn out to be illusions created by devils in order to distract the pope so that his mother’s spirit can be taken back to hell. The rather lengthy passage of interruptions begins with a romance formula, ‘A wonder thyng the mene tyme befell’, and is written in a fast-paced action-packed style very different from the manner in which the poem has been up to that point.

According to the accepted wisdom, the *Awntyrs* poet took two main elements from the *Trentals*: the visually arresting encounter (with its emphasis on the grotesque appearance of the mother figure) between mother and off-spring, and the idea of the requesting of a promise to have prayers said which will help release the mother from purgatorial
torment. However, perhaps because the encounter has always been viewed as so vivid and impressive, and the completion of the prayers in the *Awntyrs* appears to be relegated to the final stanza, with no other reference made to it in the second episode, critics have tended to see the first debt as greater. Indeed, one critic even suggested that the final stanza was ‘just added by some kind soul to achieve the semblance of formal closure’.\(^{(6)}\) Hence, for most of the history of the poem’s modern reception, the promise mechanism was played down as a meaningful element in the narrative of the poem. Doing so, of course, opened the way for critics to view the poem as essentially bi-partite and, for many, essentially flawed, with much fanfare given over to the haunting first episode and something closer to derision given to the second episode.

Much in the approach of these critics was attributable to anachronistic modern expectations of what constituted good poetic form and can be countered by re-establishing the importance of the promise mechanism as essential to understanding the poetic mechanics of the *Awntyrs*. It is a case of seeing the poem as it would have been seen by its medieval readership/audience. Critic Helen Phillips, writing in 1993, was very suspicious of the simple bi-partite description of the poem:

‘The structure does not offer us simply two discrete sections which can be labelled secular or spiritual according to their subject matter, but a curious network of repetitions, recurrent patterns and episodes which become frames for other episodes, through which the secular becomes a context for the spiritual and the spiritual for the secular…’\(^{(7)}\)

From there, Phillips emphasized the importance of the final stanza, in
which Guinevere is seen carrying out the promise to her mother:

‘However it [the final stanza] got where it is, it creates a frame, in this case a frame for the whole rest of the narrative.’

In my own study, published in 2006, I sought to reveal precisely how indeed the final stanza ‘got where it is’ (see Bibliography). Basically, I argue that the episode involving Sir Galeron and his battle with Gawain is a distraction from Guinevere’s more important spiritual duty, to pray for her mother, failure of which will condemn her mother to everlasting torment. My argument derived from a reading of the lesser-known version of the Trentals, the so-called ‘B’ version. As stated above, in two texts of the B version, there is a long passage set between the giving of the promise and its completion (the full saying of the prayers), in which devils attempt to distract Pope Gregory from finishing his task. The passage, in contrast to the narrative up till then, involves a great deal which seems to be derived from romance narrative traditions. The 'promise-postponement' device helps to explain why, and how, two distinct generic modes may be accommodated within a single poetic frame. It is likely that the promise-mechanism would have been seen by contemporary readers as highly significant, and not as an element introduced at one point, and then largely forgotten about. Rather, the reader is lead to ask him or herself: which is more pressing -the needs of Sir Galeron, or the needs of Guinevere's deceased mother? If Guinevere is to be distracted by all the sound and fury of the second episode, then that will mean that worldly concerns have won the day. This way of viewing the poem also encapsulates a major contemporary medieval concern, that one’s spiritual duty –embodied in the need to fulfill the promise to the mother– should not be overridden by what are
essentially less important, worldly concerns –embodied in the claim of Sir Galeron– which is an affair of state. It sets up an important contrast, or conflict, within the work, between the claims of the spiritual and the claims of the worldly.

Finally, the poem’s contemporary readership/audience would have picked up on one last, but highly important resonance between the Awntyrs and the Trentals. In every text of the Trentals, be it A or B version, the mother always returns at the end of the poem, and she is transformed, from sin-deformed ugliness to radiant beauty. Indeed, her papal son, in every text, at first mistakes her for the Virgin Mary because she is so radiant and pure. The mother-figure does not return to show her condition to Guinevere. The absence of such a scene in the Awntyrs, then, would have struck the contemporary readership/audience with some force, imparting the idea that redemption for the Arthurians will not be so easily won, if at all. Viewing the poem in this manner helps us to appreciate what the poet was doing and helps us to see the poem as it would have been seen through early fifteenth century eyes.

The deceased mother figure in the Awntyrs and the Trentals derives from the well-established trend in literature and popular thought which saw the living and the dead in active commune with each other, a concept clearly encouraged by widespread belief in Purgatory. Through individual prayer, special masses like the ‘trentals’, the buying of indulgences and pardons, and the giving of alms, the living could alleviate the suffering of the dead. Such practices fed into, and helped to create, a general blurring of the lines between this life and the next: as Douglas Gray observes, ‘for many, if not most medieval people the material and spiritual worlds overlapped, or were fused.’ Belief in
the afterlife therefore heightened the impact of fictions describing it, leading to a situation in which many were deemed to be derived from true accounts. Or, as can be gleaned from any reading of *The Golden Legend*, weaving in a little fiction, or imaginative speculation, was deemed perfectly acceptable. It allowed Richard Rolle, for example, author of *The Prick of Conscience*, which we will look at below, to get away with confessing to his readers that his description of Heaven, which he likens to a city whose walls and streets are paved with precious stones and suffused with pleasant odours and soft, sweet music, was just made up out of his own head — ‘on myne awen hede!’ (line 8874) It sanctioned the use of sacred people’s names, like St Gregory, or their relatives, like his mother Sylvia, to be appropriated to spice up whatever apparently devout tale was to be told. Poor Sylvia, of course, not only had *The Trentals of St Gregory* to contend with, but *The Legend of St Gregory*, in which she is portrayed as doubly incestuous, first with her brother and then later with her son. Didactic fictions also encouraged a general tolerance for horror, the use of supernatural elements and even the bending of the rules of sacramental orthodoxy, if deemed necessary within the wider, didactic framework of the story.

It didn’t seem to matter to anyone, for example, that the ‘A’ version of *The Trentals of St Gregory* contravened sacramental orthodoxy by allowing the adulterous, child-murdering mother, who had died unshriven and unrepentant, to be redeemed through the prayers of her living son. The rule on eternal damnation, it seems, was here conveniently ignored, no doubt because the outcome of the tale, in which the prayers’ efficacy is proved, was seen as of most importance — the ends justifying the means. Interestingly, sacramental orthodoxy is preserved in the ‘B’ version, as the mother confesses her sins on her
death-bed, but it is the ‘A’ version, which stresses the grotesqueries of the mother’s appearance more than the ‘B’, which appears in more manuscripts. Indeed, in the Vernon Manuscript, the Trentals ‘A’ is copied twice and the first occurring text ends on the verso of folio 231, the rest of which is taken up by the manuscript’s only illustration, ‘The Pater Noster Diagram’, an editorial decision which strongly suggests esteem for the poem. Both versions, however, in the eleven manuscripts in which they occur, are invariably found in the company of pious and devout texts, like *The Pricke of Conscience*, *The Seven Penitential Psalms* and *Deo Gracias*. Despite the criticism in *Dives and Pauper*, the practice and tale’s popularity is undoubted, and the evidence suggests that the work enjoyed elevated status. Its modern-day relegation to foot-note status effectively marginalizes what was then very prominent literature.

**The Prick of Conscience and standard theological precepts & approaches of the time**

Many of the theological elements of the *Awntyrs* can be found expressed in *The Prick of Conscience*, Richard Rolle’s nearly 10,000 line poetic-treatise on the parametres of the moral universe and the condition of the living and the dead. As its survival in no less than a hundred and seventeen manuscripts suggests, the work no doubt contributed greatly toward common conceptions of what defined the Christian world and cosmos. Certainly, contemporary readers of the *Awntyrs* would likely have noted a number of resonances (listed below). Rolle’s conception of the universe was orthodox, drawn from a number of ecclesiastical and Biblical authorities, which he quotes in Latin and then translates into English. He approaches his subject with all
the seriousness and apparent intellectual robustness of a philosopher, repeatedly and seamlessly categorizing and sub-dividing areas of inquiry. Sometimes his focus, rather in the way that marks any good sermon, is small and intimate, if, on occasion, also unintentionally funny: at one point, he explains that male babies cry ‘a,a’ (denoting Adam) and female babies cry ‘e,e’, of course denoting Eve (from line 480). At other times he goes into discomfitting detail on the physical corruption of the human body after death. Often, however, his vision is on the grand and decidedly apocalyptic scale, telling of the Second Coming of the Lord and the End of Time, when all planetary motion will halt. He frames everything, of course, within the current standard conception of the Ptolemaic universe, with its spheres, containing planets, revolving around the unmoving Earth, the universe ultimately bounded by a sphere of Crystalline, and beyond that, the sphere of the Prime Mover. In the opening two hundred and fifty lines of Book Seven, drawing on The Guide to the Perplexed by Moses Maimonides, a major influence on Aquinas, Rolle cleverly combines scientific, or scientific-sounding, information –numbers and positions of planets, together with distances– with mystical information. For example, stating that while it would take an enormously heavy stone one thousand years to fall from heaven to earth, the righteous can travel that distance in the twinkling of an eye (from line 7727). This conflation of science and religion worked because it gave the appearance of intellectual robustness, and, for most, that was what really mattered.
The Medieval Cosmos, as depicted by Petri Apian, in Cosmographia (Paris, 1553). At the centre of the system is Earth, the inner regions of which contain Hell. Moving outward we have the spheres: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Firmament of Fixed Stars, Crystalline Heaven and Prime Mover. This text can be accessed at The Internet Archive.
Rolle’s fundamental purpose in writing his book, however, was not to provide a dispassionately clarifying description of Christian life and universe, spiced up with tidbits of scientific knowledge, but rather, as the book’s title suggests, to ‘prick the conscience’ of his readers, ‘….to stir ðam til right drede,’(342) or to affect the reader’s emotion in such a way as to make them sit up and think seriously about the meaning of existence. This basically involved instilling fear into the reader as a way of nurturing devotion to God, hence the emphasis on descriptions of punishments in Hell and Purgatory and on a judgmental pattern of existence. He admits that inducing fear without linking it to the nurturing of love or devotion to God is wrong (9491-9502), but does appear to spend an inordinate amount of time on depicting the terrors that await the sinful. So, the reader is treated to scenes in which sinners feel excesses of heat, cold, filth, hunger, thirst, darkness, sight of devils, beatings by devils, the gnawing of conscience, scalding tears, shame and disgrace, bonds of fire and despair (6551-82). Rolle’s justification for the graphic representation of after-life punishment can, in retrospect, be read as a general policy for all religious didactic writers. Inducing dread was seen as an essential weapon in the writer’s armoury. Hell provided an opportunity to bring dry theological concepts to vivid and colourful, if bloody, life, and to concretize the spiritual. I imagine such material helped to make sermons, at parish churches up and down the country, not only colourful but even entertaining.

*The Prick of Conscience and The Awntyrs Off Arthure*

As stated, there is no evidence of borrowing, but the *Awntyrs* poet, and his audience, would have been well versed in the *Prick* and its ideas. Specific elements in *The Prick of Conscience* which have relevance...
to, and resonance with, the *Awntyrs* are listed below. It is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive:

(a) Lady Fortune, together with her Wheel, reference to which is made in the *Awntyrs*, is cited as the agent of change in the sub-lunary world of material concerns (from 1273).

(b) The ghostly mother’s ugliness recalls the grotesque appearance of devils (from 2298).

(c) Rolle employs the clothes-motif, current in many medieval works, and discernible in the *Awntyrs*. The ‘clothes-motif’ means the employment of a character’s attire to suggest certain aspects regarding his or her behaviour and outlook. The sumptuous attire of the Arthurians in the *Awntyrs* is purposefully, if not explicitly, contrasted with the appearance of the deceased mother-figure who is naked, smeared with mud and covered with toads and snakes. At one point, Rolle states that vermin will be the clothing of sinners in Hell (6943); he also complains that ‘yhong men’ nowadays wear a clothes of ‘swylk uncomly pomp and pryde’, which was ‘never bifoř þis tyme sene.’ (from 1516)

(d) The author’s emphasis on actions the living can perform to alleviate the suffering of the purgatorial dead – prayer, fasting, alms-giving and having masses said – is clearly relevant to the *Awntyrs*, as this is what the mother-figure asks of the Arthurians, 3586-9, quoted in Hanna (1974), in the introduction, page 27.

(e) The fundamental conception of a moral, and morally retributive, universe is a basic idea in both works; Guinevere’s mother dwells in either Purgatory or Hell.

(f) The predictions of the Second Coming, which form the dramatic centerpiece in Rolle’s work, provide eschatological resonance for
the ghost’s prediction of the end of the Round Table. Contemporary readers of the *Awntyrs* would certainly have felt the parallel keenly.

**The Visions of Tundale and Owayne Miles**

*The Visions of Tundale* was (c.1149) a work of enormous popularity, indeed much greater than that enjoyed by the *Trentals*, and the *Prick*, but has now become irretrievably obscure. Originally written in Latin but translated into every major European language, including Serbo-Croat, and extant in no less than two hundred and forty three manuscripts from the twelfth to the fifteenth century,\(^{(12)}\) it is now probably unknown even to most undergraduate medieval students.\(^{(13)}\) Yet, it very likely influenced Dante in the creation of his own poem of an underworld journey,\(^{(14)}\) and the illustrations of one Dutch edition of *Tundale*, by Simon Marmion, are also said to have influenced Hieronymus Bosch, whose canvasses capture the very cruel, curious and grotesque nature of late medieval fears about eternal retribution.\(^{(15)}\) It would certainly have been known to the *Awntyrs* poet and his audience.

For many medieval readers, it is likely *The Visions of Tundale* may well have been thought to describe an actual journey of a living person to the Christian underworld, not as a piece of fiction, but rather as an account based on a real experience.\(^{(16)}\) The protagonist Tundale, an unscrupulous businessman, has suffered an attack which leaves him in a coma-like state lasting four days. During that time, the reader sees his spirit descend to the pit of hell in the company of an angel, who provides him with a glimpse of what is in store for him and all sinners who do not repent and reform their worldliness. The story is similar to the almost contemporary poem *Owayne Miles* (c.1180), which was
based upon what was actively promoted as a true account of a man’s excursion into the underworld via a cave situated in Ireland (indeed, interestingly, both *Tundale* and *Owayne Miles* were written by Irish monks). The cave story was, according to some, the invention of St Patrick who hoped to provide evidence to the indigenous ‘pagan’ population of the reality of the existence of the afterlife, and afterlife punishments for sinfulness. In *Owayne Miles*, the protagonist witnesses many terrible scenes, including the partial submersion of sinners in molten lead (a detail which is employed by the *Awntyrs* poet to describe some of the pains Guinevere’s mother has to endure, line 188), yet, upon utterance of the Lord’s name, he can escape actual participation. Things are not so fortunate for Tundale who has to not merely witness but actually briefly undergo the pains of the sinners. One particularly unfair instance of this is when he is has to suffer the same fate as monks and clergy who had been unfaithful to their calling: an enormous black-winged beast presiding over a frozen lake sucks up the unfortunate sinners and then spits them back out, each now filled with fire and a plethora of wriggling metal-tipped snakes, which slowly eviscerate them. Here, as elsewhere throughout the ordeal, the body is always allowed to repair, even when chopped to pieces by devils with sharp hooks, as would be the case for permanent residents, so that the whole process can be repeated endlessly.
A vision of Hell. Detail from ‘The Garden of Earthly Delights’ by Hieronymous Bosch. The bird figure may have been inspired by the passage in *Tundale* in which a winged-beast sucks up men of the cloth who have been found to be sinners. See Turner (1995), 93. © Museo del Prado
A Look at the Didactic Literature Context of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure*

Works like *Tundale* and *Owayne Miles* played an essential role in communicating the vaunted reality of the after-life. Interestingly, the latter work’s grounding in an actual location provides a glimpse of the extent to which the principle of ‘the ends justifies the means’ could be operated beyond the pages of a manuscript. Pilgrim visitors to the location of the tale, Station Island in Lough Derg, Donegal, were required to undergo a fifteen-day fast before entering a special cave said to be an actual portal to Purgatory. Throughout these preparatory fifteen days, in which they subsisted on a meagre diet of bread and water, priests bombarded them with prayers for the Office of the Dead (usually only delivered to the already deceased), having them spend extended periods half-immersed in the frigid waters of Lough Derg as they prayed, as well as no doubt outlining the various horrors they would see once inside the cave.\(^{(17)}\) It is understandable, then, that more than a few pilgrims suffered vivid hallucinations –of sadistic devils, perhaps, and of enduring agonies like semi-immersion in molten lead– when trapped in that dark pit.\(^{(18)}\) In a similar way, then, it is perhaps understandable that the literature of the later medieval period, much of it seriously deficient in the nutrients of good sense, and even good taste, is rife with such hallucinations. The vast majority of these hellish visions found their expression in works which sought to manipulate their readers or their audiences into a cowering belief in the Christian world and its overarching judgemental Cosmos; only a very few, like *The Awntyrs Off Arthure*, perhaps, sought to use the power which these visions engendered in order to shake up the foundations of the society from which they derived.
Endnote

The poet of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure* was attuned to the tensions, the fears and the issues of his time; he was also attuned to the literature of his time, and, as I hope the foregoing study illustrates, he actively and discerningly searched through and selected from a wide variety of works in order to construct his own, very original, piece. Precisely what the poet’s intention was cannot yet be defined to the satisfaction of everyone, but most would agree that it involves criticism of the Arthurian ethos, and by extension, criticism to some degree of the ethos of the contemporary ruling class. Unjust land appropriation, the prosecution of costly and morally unsustainable foreign wars, a lack of commitment to social responsibility, combined with a perceived haughtiness of demeanour, may well have been on the poet’s list of concerns over those in charge of the country. Framing such concerns within the hermetic bubble of the romance vehicle resolved the problem of overt expression, and borrowing the fire of orthodox Christian vitriol immunized the poem from attack. Furthermore, by embracing the elements of the religious didactic tradition, the poet could exploit the acceptance which such literature clearly enjoyed to ensure that his work would be well received. It generally appears to voice many of the concerns of the Christian view of life, and, for most people, compilers and readers, that was reason enough to welcome it, with or without whatever complex polysemic interpretations some might care to look for therein.
A Look at the Didactic Literature Context of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure*

Notes

(1) Hanna (1974), in his edition of the poem, divides it up into *The Awntyrs A* (lines 1-338) and *The Awntyrs B* (339-702), followed by ‘The Concluding Stanza’ (703-715). It was a bold editorial decision as it was taken with zero evidence from the four manuscripts as support.

(2) Moll (2003), among others, provides detail on the ups and downs of the poem’s critical reception.

(3) Comprehensive discussion of the poem can be found in a number of places; see Bibliography –Hanna’s introduction to his edition of the poem is full and wide-ranging; Moll (2003) and Allen (2001) provide more recent overviews concerning the historical debate over the poem’s worth and importance; and Shepherd (1995) provides not only a text of the *Awntyrs*, but also a full text of the *Trentals*.

(4) See Duffy (2005), 374-6.


(7) Phillips (1993), 87-8, also for flowing quote.


(9) Gray (2008), 51.

(10) As Duffy (2005) notes, the criticism did not impede popularity, which grew rapidly in the fifteenth century, 374-6.

(11) Torrell (2005), 112-3.

(12) Kren & Wieck (1990), 3.

(13) Foster (2004), argues in his introduction that the poem’s present obscurity misrepresents the poem’s enormous popularity between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. I myself had difficulties in obtaining a copy, and had to print out a copy of the poem from The Internet Archive.

(14) Picard (2007), 64: ‘…while one cannot isolate an exact passage in Dante containing an obvious borrowing from either of these texts [*Tundale* and *The Treatise on St Patrick’s Purgatory*], the similarities are too numerous to be merely coincidental.’

(15) Kren & Wieck (1990) reproduce illustrations from a fifteenth century Dutch manuscript of the poem, said to have influenced Bosch—see Silver
(17) Carroll (1999), Chapter Three, 81-104.
(18) The punishment of immersion in molten lead to various levels of the body which appears in Owayne Miles may be a literary rationalization of the actual practice which saw pilgrims standing in the waters of Lough Derg as they prayed, sometimes up to their knees, or necks, no doubt depending on both their ability to withstand it and their commitment to a sense of penitential sacrifice.

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A Look at the Didactic Literature Context of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure*

