

**Domesticating the Monster: Transformation, Identity, and Social Change in Four
Middle English Romances**

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Abstract

The landed gentry in England emerged as a significant audience for vernacular literary works in the late 14th and 15th centuries. Great social and economic changes meant the barriers between social classes were becoming more blurred. Many of the landed gentry were able to ascend to the nobility through a combination of this shifting social paradigm and canny use of their wealth, but lacked the social prestige needed to solidify their position. Their wealth and widespread literacy allowed them to shape the way they participated and were represented in the world of Middle English literature during this turbulent time, to address this difficult and tenuous position.

The gentry's need for acceptance and stability among the nobility was often in a position of tension with their desire to establish themselves as a separate and distinct social class, free from the threat of land appropriation and exploitation by those above them on the social ladder. The interplay between these factors will be analysed through a comparative analysis of four different romance texts from the so-called *Gawain*-cycle, which can be argued to have been composed with a landed gentry audience in mind. In addition, the ways in which several scenes of physical transformations from monster into human feature in these romances will be explored, with an eye towards illustrating how these transformations relate to blurring social boundaries. These transformations seem to serve to integrate the monstrous figures, who exist on the margins of society, into the elite in-group, thus defusing the anxiety their presence causes. They reveal themselves as useful allies and marriage partners, the same way the gentry likely would have hoped to be perceived.

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Introduction

This thesis' primary focus is on examining the link between scenes of physical transformation and social ascension in four 14th and 15th century Middle English romance texts, namely *The Wedding of Dame Ragnelle and Sir Gawain*, *The Carl of Carlisle*, *The Awuntyrs off Arthure*, and *Sir Amadace*. It will analyse the ways in which these texts are shaped by the new conceptions of nobility and gentillesse taking root in literary works aimed at the social elite of England at the time, and the effect of the blurring of social boundaries at the time. To fully explore these topics, some explanation on the status of the landed gentry, these texts' main audience, their manuscripts, and the social and economic situation they found themselves in must be explored up-front.

The Landed Gentry and Literary Participation

The 14th and 15th centuries in England were a turbulent time, in which many of the traditional social structures, economic considerations, and political situations that the populace had grown used to were changing. In the wake of such domestic issues like the peasants' revolt and the demographic changes caused by the onset of the Plague, as well as the ongoing Hundred Years' War, many old certainties were eroding. But these changing situations also gave rise to opportunity for social advancement and expanded cultural participation for groups traditionally considered to be the 'middle classes' of the late Middle Ages: the landed gentry in the countryside and wealthy merchants in growing urban centres. As tenuous as the hold of these groups on social status may have been, they nonetheless often attempted to elevate themselves to the ranks of social elites. This aim was not simply an issue of prestige, it was also an issue of protecting oneself and one's assets such as estates and land from predation by the higher aristocracy. This obviously did not occur overnight but was a slow process that came to a head in the late 14th and 15th centuries in particular due to a combination of economic, social, and political factors. Certain royal policy decisions to the ascent. The centralisation of small provincial land holdings under single families, who were able to use these as economic and social power bases, was also a major factor in the emergence of the gentry around this time as a "distinct caste at the lower end of the aristocracy" (Johnston, *Gentry* 4). A unique gentry identity began forming during these centuries as well, pushed on by the needs of these newly aristocratic families to educate their children in proper genteel behaviour and justify their place within the social elite. The gentry's ascension into the aristocracy was often enabled by their material wealth and the practice of restraint; a late medieval policy "in which individuals with sufficient annual

income were often compelled to accept knighthood” (Ladd, *Antimercantilism* 10). Distrainment was “a common feature of the gentry’s economic existence” which was” associated with the highest social status short of nobility” (Johnston, *Distrainment* 438). In return, the distrainment fee also became a visible and explicit “marker of aristocratic identity” (439). Entering the knighthood elevated these gentry landowners to the social elite, but did not bring with it a pedigree of noble heritage. While their status may have been assured by the payment of the distrainment fee, what was not entirely secured was their legitimacy within the higher ranks of society.

This relative lack of legitimacy also caused the gentry to feel a need to solidify and argue for their position. As they were “almost universally literate and [had] the necessary means to procure literary texts” (Johnston 4), many of the gentry used this ability to commission and collect literary works that reflected their needs and concerns. A new subset of the romance genre, capable of responding to this social change due to its heavy use of motifs and a new-found attention to the needs of its growing gentry audience, quickly emerged. Johnston describes the ‘gentry romance’ as “fill[ing] the cultural needs” (5) of the class. The prototypical gentry romance concerns itself with the “quotidian concerns” (6) of the gentry household. Protagonists are often directly involved in estate management and the selection of heirs and capable wives and must often defend their lands against appropriation and encroachment by the higher nobility. In addition, many of these tales include a focus on legitimising the material means the gentry had used to ascend to the social elite, sometimes even explicitly citing a number of forty pounds, as in *Sir Amadace* and *Eger and Grime*, once again showing the explicit link between distrainment and nobility (Johnston, *Distrainment* 439).

The gentry emerge onto the literary stage in the late 14th and 15th centuries at a turbulent time. From the 1340s onward, a combination of economic, demographic, and political changes combined to create a “major disruption of social structures” (Bertolet, *Introduction* 3) that impinged upon many aspects of daily life. The Black Plague’s impact on the demographics of late medieval England is well-known, as well as the Hundred Years’ War and its impact on the political landscape and personal allegiances are but two of the many events that made these centuries unruly ones. The gentry were not the only class to be affected by a rising sense of anxiety, but in their particular case these changes found them unable to find stability in the shifting circumstances. They sought acceptance among the social elite, and through their cultural output, attempted to both define a place for themselves and to distinguish themselves as a separate social class. The cultural output surrounding this social

context emerges, as well, as “diverse, but ultimately affiliated, forms of cultural practice” (8) composing not only of romance texts, but also covering the gentry’s consumption of hunting manuals, etiquette books, and books of heraldry, signifying an aspiration to ascend to a higher social standing. In short, “romance continued to serve and mediate the social anxieties of an élite audience” (Johnston, *Distraint* 436), not only serving to shore up the position of the gentry, but attempting to assure the higher aristocracy of the gentry’s value as well.

Competing Economies

One other destabilising element that must be considered is a large-scale economic change linked to the rise of the ‘middle class’, and the way in which this fact interacted with traditional conceptions of the feudal economy that benefitted the aristocracy. As the later Middle Ages progressed, financial institutions and new methods of commerce based on money exchange, loans and debts began to emerge alongside more traditional feudal methods of goods exchanges. The slow development of the moneyed economy was not without its critics. Authors like Langland agitated against profit motives among middle-class urbanites, and Chaucer’s stereotypical Merchant in the *Canterbury Tales* is a profit-hungry hypocrite. The contrast of hiding deep personal debts in secrecy while “sownyng alwey t’increes of his wynnyng” (*CT*, ll. 275) clearly shows the typical aspects of the merchant class in literary works; selfish and concerned with little but their own advantage. As shall be discussed, however, several romance texts in the textual corpus nuance this portrayal. Often, the gentry and merchant classes were even in close relation, and the literary works produced in this environment do not shy away from presenting a mutually beneficial relationship between the two classes. According to Ladd,

successful guildsmen became merchants, successful merchants tended to buy land outside of town, and children of the rural gentry often moved to town and joined the estate of merchants through apprenticeship or marriage. (Ladd, *Antimerchantism* 10).

The barriers between these social classes, both of whom took advantage of an emerging moneyed economy, were blurry. We shall see this reflected in literary works in, for example, *Sir Amadace*, where the connection between a merchant and a knight becomes a central theme in the story. These economic concerns were but one area in which the new middle classes thus found themselves free and able to work for their own advancement and profit, able to

successfully create connections with others of similar social standing for mutual benefit.

However, where such connections exist, there are also anxieties. Many among the social elite feared that the old feudal systems of exchange would be supplanted and the relationships between individual actors in the economic system disrupted. A lingering fear existed that a “potential for such exchanges to supplant social bonds” (Sweeten, *Interreliant* 32) could come to fruition and change a familiar way of life and social engagement. The new economic situation was, however, one where profits were easily made for the emerging middle class, and they stepped up in their roles as consumers and commissioners of literary works. Spending for these classes, the same way it had always been for the higher nobility, became a method to self-identify; contemporary didactic texts such as *Wynnere and Wastour* argue that “the spending of wealth aids in self-identification” and that “failing to spend according to one’s station blurs the lines between different social classes” (Sweeten, 37). This aspect and its connection to scenes of conspicuous consumption, aristocratic identity and social ascension will be discussed at length in the second chapter.

Manuscript Contexts

However, we must also ask ourselves in which ways manuscripts belonging to the gentry, especially manuscripts containing romance texts, distinguish themselves. How can we see that a manuscript is likely owned or commissioned by a gentry household? This is primarily a question of production environment, and as such ties in quite neatly with our earlier mention of the gentry using literary texts as a method of self-expression. The gentry themselves were often the ones that read their manuscripts and had a hand in creating them as well. One of the hallmarks of many of these anthologies are signs of “production within the informal milieu of a household” (Johnston 3). Elements such as a plain unadorned appearance, and the use of several scribes each writing short stints all point to a production environment where literate gentry audiences could determine the contents of their own manuscripts and order the texts to suit their needs. This production environment, however is often at a remove from the urban environment where professional manuscript makers and clerks do the majority of the work. Gentry manuscripts often feel relatively unprofessional in comparison, but in return give us a view into what many gentry families would have considered their ‘personal’ libraries. The gentry made use of “drastic changes [in manuscript production]” that allowed the swift copying of texts using booklets, and the rise of widespread vernacular (Middle English) text copying. Both of these changes “conveniently facilitate[ed] provincial copying and circulation of provincially oriented texts” (Johnston, *Gentry* 14)

centred around the manor and household environment.

This close connection between gentry landowners and their manuscript production meant that texts were often “being produced in the immediate vicinity of their readers” (Johnston 102). There is even evidence that the eldest Thornton, whose miscellany contains many Middle English romance texts, composed his manuscript himself, and certainly had a hand in ordering and grouping the texts within it. While Thornton is among the relatively few gentry landowners that can be considered “an identifiable compiler/scribe” (Finlayson, *Reading* 637), his situation must nonetheless not have been unique. A general trend of manuscript compilation and creation within the gentry context shows a trend towards in-house small-scale manuscript production. Furthermore, the gentry romances discussed earlier find their most eager consumers in this environment, and it is no wonder many of the texts discussed earlier are solely preserved in compilation manuscripts linked to gentry households. The fact that all of the texts used in our corpus are sourced from miscellanies, often with connections to gentry families such as the Percys and Irelands, makes it clear that we can use this as a base from which to examine the gentry’s participation in literary culture. In short, gentry manuscripts are often identifiable by their production environment and textual content more than any other factors. A combination of a close and often personal connection between manuscript makers and their consumers makes these texts particularly suitable to examine through the lenses of audience self-perception and representation. The relatively small distance between audience and production is thus an advantage for gleaning from these texts what the audience considered to be relevant to their own lives: themes that crop up in these texts can be considered to be, with some caveats, to be issues that mattered or somehow spoke to the landed gentry audiences that consumed them.

Research Question

In what ways do motifs of physical transformation occur in several Middle English verse romances, and how can the themes of transformation and re-integration that these texts contain reflect on both the ascension of the gentry to the social élite, and the discourse surrounding nobility in the 14th and 15th centuries?

Thesis Statement

I posit that these scenes of transformation reflect a deep anxiety over the blurring of social boundaries as a result of large-scale societal changes in late medieval England. Several literary texts in our corpus incorporate these transformation scenes to show that these new, liminal and monstrous figures could be useful allies and peers once ‘domesticated’ and made

recognisably human. This, in turn, speaks to attempts to assuage this anxiety by the gentry class, and shows an attempt to reinforce their presence in the vernacular literary landscape.

Methodology

These texts will be analysed through a combination of close reading and comparative analysis. The close reading especially will involve applying the aforementioned lenses of liminality, gentility and identity, and placing these texts in their social and historical context. Furthermore, a comparative analysis technique will be applied, whereby multiple texts are read alongside one another. As all texts are relatively short and originate from similar production contexts, it is likely this will result in readings that both speak to general trends in the corpus, and yet reflect the nuances of each individual literary work. Using a comparative framework of analysis is a technique that often remains unapplied in the study of verse romance texts, as most scholars seem to focus their analysis primarily on singular texts. However, with a corpus such as this one, comparative analysis may be more useful than focusing on single texts in isolation. The romances selected consist mostly of smaller, less-prestigious texts that we can presume all had a similar reach based on their manuscript contexts. Their readership, as Johnston argues based on which manuscripts these texts were found in, is partly to be located among the lower end of the social elite, in the landed gentry who became a new potential audience for romance literature. Comparative analysis is furthermore a helpful tool for observing variations on a common theme and motif. As many verse romances tend towards the formulaic, we can look at Cooper for a convincing argument that it is in these specific details that authors can shape the reception and themes of a text.

Corpus Selection

The preliminary texts selected are *The Wedding of Dame Ragnelle*, both versions of *The Carle of Carlisle*, *Sir Amadace*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain* and *The Awuntys of Arthur*. All are verse romances, in Middle English, and are generally shorter texts, and commonly use stock motifs and storylines. Specifically, the motifs of physical transformation and ascendancy to the social elite feature in all these texts, to a greater or lesser extent. For example, while *Dame Ragnelle* and *Carle of Carlisle* include both motifs, *Sir Amadace*'s moment of transformation is not emphasised as heavily, and there is no social ascension in *Awuntys of Arthur*, but rather, a critique of élite behaviour and a lingering question as to why one would want to join the aristocracy. The majority of the texts selected for this corpus, barring *Sir Amadace*, belong to what critics such as Thomas Hahn have dubbed the *Gawain-cycle*. These are a group of popular romances that, while quite disparate in theme, plot, and

sometimes style, all share a focus on Gawain as the protagonist, and present him as the “unsurpassed flower of chivalry” (Hahn, *General Introduction* 2). They furthermore share thematic elements such as supernatural characters and the inclusion of transformation sequences in their climaxes. While, as Hahn comments, the “precise nature and extent of [their] popularity within specific social contexts has remained vague” (Hahn 3), we know that several important collectors of English-language romance texts in the 14th and 15th centuries had some of the Gawain-texts in their libraries. It is also argued that these gentry collectors may have had a hand in writing and commissioning these texts themselves, providing a very direct link between their daily concerns and the literary material they consumed and produced. Most notably, they show up in collections such as John Paston’s inventory of romance texts, Thornton’s collected miscellany, and the Ireland family’s manuscript library.

Generally, the Gawain-texts occur clustered together with other popular romances and texts on chivalric behaviour, such as manuals on hunting with hawks, descriptions of familial coats of arms. This shows that the concerns of the *Gawain*-poems were in the same vein as these practical texts. They were intended as ways to both claim a genteel identity through the consumption of romance, and, in a sense, as didactic texts explaining the importance of chivalric behaviour. This theme reoccurs throughout the entire cycle, with Gawain continually using diplomacy and courtesy to bring peace and mutual understanding to tense and threatening situations. Furthermore, his even-handed approach to the liminal, ‘monstrous’ figures discussed earlier provides the catalyst for their physical transformations into full, human members of the Arthurian court. Their themes coincide with both the materially-minded ‘gentry romances’ and traditional Arthurian romance, which makes these texts particularly well-suited to analysis. In addition, the continued use and adaptation of traditional motifs such as that of the giant and the loathly lady provides another avenue of analysis, and one that shows the inventive use of traditional stock storytelling tropes by the authors behind these texts. They deftly use traditional storytelling techniques to speak to the concerns of a new, gentry audience. The *Gawain*-romances and *Sir Amadace* each represent their own vision of aristocratic behaviour and turn a nuanced eye towards questions of liminality, the blurring of class boundaries, and the means for social ascent in late medieval England.

Thesis Structure

This thesis will attempt to answer questions concerning the interplay of these socio-economic elements with elements of monstrosity and physical transformation in four different

Middle English romance texts. The theoretical framework chapter will give an overview of research goals and methodology, as well as a grounding in the two main lenses of analyses used during the research. These are Johnston's concept of 'gentry romances', primarily based on his codicological and cultural history work in the recent *Romance and the Gentry*, and Cohen's seven theses on the role of the monster in literature, sourced from his introductory chapter in *Monster Theory*. The main body of work will be organised into three main thematic branches, each an individual chapter, dealing with a different aspect of the interplay between transformation, social class, and the discourse on nobility. Cooper's work on the re-use of stock motifs will also play a role in the analysis. The ways in which medieval romance motifs were re-used and re-adapted is the focus of her *The English Romance in Time*, and our corpus contains its share of re-used and adapted stock characters. The addition of Cooper's theories will allow us to use this lens to examine the ways in which monstrous stock characters such as the giant and the loathly lady are shifted into new forms that match the literary goals of the gentry.

The first chapter, *New Conceptions of Courtesy*, will focus on the theme of gentillesse and courtesy, and the ways in which the dialogue about this virtue shapes several romances. Nobility is, as *Dame Ragnelle* and texts like the *Wife of Bath's Tale* show, being renegotiated in a shift away from a claim to nobility by blood and instead to one of nobility by conduct. To be 'gentil' means behaving according to certain rules and parameters, which Ragnelle frequently challenges the Arthurian court on. Though she is a lady by birth and reminds Arthur of this at several stages, she also exhibits a nobility of character that allows her to criticise the court's behaviour even though her outer appearance is monstrous, as only Gawain is able to see past her appearance and eventually transform her back. Furthermore, courtesy as a concept is broadened in *Carle of Carlisle*, with the monstrous figure imposing his own, twisted yet still legitimate, version of courtesy on Gawain. The key to getting into the Carl's good graces is for Gawain to navigate the strange trials he's presented with, showing an extension of respect to the Carl's rules and behaviour. The question of sovereignty is addressed in both these texts as well. Texts such as *The Awntyrs of Arthure* also criticise the behaviour of members of the court, implying that their use of courtesy is a smokescreen for violence and other immoral acts, and that merely using the surface trappings of nobility without also supplementing them with proper (pious) action will land the Arthurian court in the same situation as she is in once they pass on. These texts combine to show that ideas of nobility, and by extension who could qualify as noble, were being renegotiated and discussed in literary works.

The acquisition of material goods increasingly came to be a legitimate way to enter high social strata in the later medieval period, and the way several romances use this fact in their thematic layers is explored in the chapter *Material Wealth and Social Ascent*. Most notably, an undercurrent of concern with material goods runs through the entirety of *Sir Amadace*, with the motif of the spendthrift knight used to call attention to both the kinship between the lower nobility and the merchant classes. In addition, the tale's suggestion that the perception of nobility is subjective and often only confirmed by material wealth, as evidenced by Amadace only being recognised for a knight after he is dressed in precious gold, is another common motif recognised throughout the corpus on display. The moral dimension of the text is challenged, however, by the fact that he's wearing stolen gold. *Carl of Carlisle*, too, concerns itself with the showing of wealth. The Carl manages to leverage his personal wealth and marriage connections to ascent to the ranks of the Arthurian court, but the text is not entirely uncritical of this. The Carl's attempt to elevate his own social rank is portrayed as crass and self-serving, but he nonetheless obtains the desired result of becoming an accepted member of courtly society after having shed his monstrous form.

The final chapter *Transformation and Assuaging Anxiety* explores how these texts also feature implicit or explicit pairings of social elevation and physical transformation, with the monstrous or supernatural characters (re)gaining their human form as a physical symbol of their transition from outsider to member of the in-group. The fact that this motif returns throughout the Gawain-cycle allows us to put multiple instances of physical transformations together in a comparative analysis. However, each of these instances seems to see these transformations in a different light. We can contrast *Carl* with *Ragnelle*, as earlier, to find that Dame Ragnelle insists on her nobility despite her monstrous form and returns to it effortlessly when Gawain grants her sovereignty; she remains noble throughout despite the temporary physical change, but this does not affect her inner life. The Carl, meanwhile, may be turned into a human by Gawain beheading him, and bowing to the Carl's courtesy, but clearly does not regain the accompanying social status; he is only knighted and fully accepted into courtly society after giving a lavish feast. In this case, it is as much his physical transformation as his giving of material goods that cements his social status. Meanwhile, the White Knight in *Sir Amadace* is a more unique example of a posthumous physical transformation, namely that of a merchant into an (albeit ghostly) knight. The figure of 40 pounds once again makes a return here, as it could be seen as the distraint fee paying the way for the merchant to become a knight. But it is also another way to emphasise the unity between Amadace and the merchant. They are, ultimately, both of the same class morally, and both are shown to be virtuous and

generous in their own ways. The kinship between knight and merchant goes beyond merely helping one another financially but shows a kinship of conduct and behaviour. The fact that a reversal of the usual motif, of human transforming into supernatural ghostly figure, ultimately enables the same result of social ascension and unity, is remarkable.

Theoretical Framework

The Landed Gentry as Emerging Audience

The newly-established gentry were able to make themselves participants in elite culture through the collection and consumption of literature, often commissioning or collecting texts that spoke to their particular concerns in daily life. On this basis, Johnston posits the existence of the subgenre of ‘gentry romance’, in which themes like land encroachment by the upper aristocracy, estate management, and proper conduct play a main role. In Johnston’s work *Romance and the Gentry* and Thomas Hahn’s overview of the audience of the *Gawain*-romances, these authors argue that we can see that this emerging literary patronage and their habit of miscellany production in a household environment allowed the landed gentry to see themselves represented in literary works, and gave them an imaginary space in which to assert their new, uncertain identity in a time of social change. The presence of popular romance texts alongside texts containing instructions on courtly behaviour and lifestyle in compilations owned by readers belonging to the landed gentry, like the Thorntons, show that these concerns are represented side-by-side. The romances reinforce the same principles of behaviour that the didactic texts teach; their focus on proper courtesy, politeness, and the extension of sovereignty allows a gentry audience to see what standards of behaviour are (in theory) expected of them. Furthermore, Johnston’s identification of themes that speak directly to the concerns of the gentry in romance texts, such as land expropriation and pressure by the higher nobility, further underscore that this audience was actively sought after, and saw their concerns reflected in, the romance literature of the time. Thus, this thesis will partly look at other popular romance texts from this angle, and try to identify which thematic elements could make them appeal to a gentry audience.

In a salient example of this diverse manuscript context and the themes which gentry readers would have considered important, we can observe Thornton’s well-known compilation manuscript. Known by the shelfmark Lincoln Cathedral 91, it contains a series of romance texts interspersed with religious and medical texts, a broad collection quite typical of gentry landowners. However, in addition to Arthurian texts such as the *Awuntyrs off Arthure*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Perceval of Galles* stand romances more specifically concerned with issues of land expropriation and economic hardship, which many of the landed gentry faced in their daily lives as they managed their lands and attempted to their livelihoods from conflict. In fact, as Johnston argues, “implicit recognition of a common genus underlying his gentry romances encourages us to read them as a series and to be

attentive to the social class issues emerging from this textual collocation.” (Johnston 174). Thornton’s ability to clearly recognise and drill down to the core of what romances were to a contemporary audience made him able to realise that the ‘gentry romances’ he had sorted together were similar enough to be grouped. This realisation was doubly bolstered by the production context of many gentry households, in which works of literature were “most often being produced in the immediate vicinity of their readers” (Johnston 102); these gentry collectors seemed interested in texts that spoke to their own concerns and experiences, and made a particular effort to include them, grouping them together. However, there are several ways in which Thornton’s division of the romance portions of the manuscript makes his case unique, and shows that the gentry audience had a sophisticated understanding of what made these texts tick. The landed gentry were, in the 14th and 15th century, becoming part of the social elite, and were able to serve as an audience for literary works that speak to their concerns, and their unstable status as new arrivals. They frequently made it into the nobility based on income or advantageous marriage deals, rather than lineage alone, which shows the broadening of potential ways into the elite.

These romances speak to gentry families like the Thorntons and their motivation to “carve out a space for the gentry’s participation in romance” and “express a desire for this class’s independence” (Johnston, *Gentry* 204-205) from the higher nobility in the face of issues such as land expropriation. Hardman’s work on the didactic elements of miscellanies can further explain this element of the Thornton collection and its focus on nobility of action over nobility of blood. Many household miscellanies were used “in the home”, playing a role in the “education of children” (Hardman, *Domestic* 16-17), and several annotations in religious poems included in the Thornton manuscript support the idea that the children in the household would have been taught to read aloud using these texts (Hardman 23). While there is no clear evidence in the text or its annotations that the romance texts were used to educate children, the genre certainly lends itself to reading aloud in front of an audience, and indeed, the thematic layers of many of these texts, centring around the application of proper moral and courtly behaviours, not discount a didactic use for these texts as well, even if this is not directly obvious. In short, the Thornton manuscript not only shows us how verse romances were categorised by a contemporary audience, which features they needed and recognised in romance texts, but also shows us that the thematic strands across a collection can inform one another, and reinforce a central idea, rooted in the social context of the compiler.

Thornton can be taken, with some caution, as a model for a member of the landed gentry and their awareness of and tastes in literature, showing the tension of ascending to a

new and tenuous rung on the social ladder, and the often-difficult social position that comes along with it. A few of the texts, directly or obliquely, speak to their concerns, and Thornton's grouping together of these works shows an engagement with the romance genre that attempt to make a coherent thematic group. This is a rare thing to find in the world of miscellanies, and shows the extent to which Thornton consciously seems to use the organisation of his compilation manuscript to speak to his historical and social context, using a collection of texts from a variety of sources, and applying them to speak on specific concerns.

Monster Theory

Cohen's introduction to *Monster Theory* forms a coherent framework for a way to read interactions with monsters and the monstrous in literary texts. Cohen establishes seven theses that he considers fairly universal and applicable to a wide range of time periods and literary contexts, a method of "reading cultures from the monsters they engender" (Cohen, *Theory* 3) that rejects cultural specificity. While the present paper delves into a quite specific and detailed case study by looking at how monsters play into a specific discourse on nobility and social status in a localised and linguistically-unified corpus, Cohen's framework nonetheless provides a starting point from which to analyse these characters and, more importantly, their functions within the text. Firstly, Cohen posits that the monster "signifies something other than itself," that it "inhabits the gap" (*Theory* 4) between what is known and comfortable and its "threat[ning] propensity to shift" (5) into new shapes to once again prey upon the new anxieties of a culture. The monster is furthermore threatening because it "resist[s] attempts to include [it] in any systematic structuration" (6), and its mutable form, as we see time and again in the Gawain-texts, allows it to slip between social categories and distinctions easily. One day, the Carl of Carlisle may be a giant with hands the size of bread loaves and burning eyes, the next, he can be transformed into a perfectly palatable member of the aristocracy through simple deals and acts of spendthrift. The monster, in this way, represents the threat of social boundaries crumbling, and indeed, this is one of the anxieties directly addressed by stories such as *Carle of Carlisle*.

This element of threat is, however, also alluring. Cohen describes an alternative function of the monster, that of "an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self" (17) that is temporary; eventually the fictional threat will be tamed, contained, or defeated, and the audience will re-emerge into "the world of comfort and light" (17). The monster contains both anxiety and desire, and for this reason an audience's reactions to it can be in as equal a state

of flux as the monster's physically changeable shape. They are "always at the verge of irruption "(20) into an audience's consciousness once again. Cohen ultimately indicates that reading the depiction of the monster is to read a culture's anxieties and fears, but also its perception of difference, whether this lies in gender, race, or in our case, class and social status. In this sense, it is a largely useful framework, though not all portions of it will be utilised equally heavily. It fits in well with the social aspects Johnston points out as being particularly fraught at the time when most of these texts were collected. There is, I would contend, a reason why transformations and ascensions to a new social rank are frequently paired across this corpus.

However, there seems to be a slight disagreement between Cohen's framework and the way the monsters in the Gawain-poems are portrayed. The monsters in these texts do not haunt at the edges of society, but instead are fully integrated members of the social elite, their monstrous origins seemingly completely forgotten. They are stripped of their threatening, supernatural nature, and are instead integrated into a form that seems much more palatable to an audience, such as the aristocracy, who likely would have been threatened by the ascension of new members of the landed gentry into their social group. Cohen's generalized framework does not map neatly one-to-one onto this specific case study, but this is perhaps unavoidable given his initial goal to make a theory broadly applicable to many different cultural contexts. By rejecting specificity this theory can be broadly applied, which is an advantage to creating some basic standards of interpretation, but it also inevitably fails to capture specific and contextual mismatches in certain texts and cultural traditions. This, however, is not an indictment, but rather, an opportunity to nuance Cohen's observations further and use these mismatches as a jumping-off point to examine how this particular corpus of literature deals with monstrous characters in a way that is different from Cohen's norm.

Using Cohen's *Monster Theory*, the concept of the monster in the medieval mindset will be established. The monstrous, in this sense, is miraculous, and often something beyond the reach of human comprehension. Cohen often refers to it as something that cannot be grasped, and because of this incomprehensibility, the monstrous has an attractive power. However, the popular romances on offer not only frequently portray monstrous characters as reasonable and capable of interaction and moral action, but as having been human all along, with positive, human virtues hidden under a monstrous appearance. What can the monsters in these popular romances, with changeable forms and courtly sensibilities hidden underneath, tell us about the conception of the monstrous in the later Middle Ages by their deviation from the general pattern? As Cohen reminds us, "the monster exists only to be read" (Cohen,

Monster 4), and by examining these themes closely and applying this theory to a reading of gentility and identity in these texts, we can attempt to see how these liminal, monstrous characters would have been read and understood by a contemporary audience. One aspect that fits into reading the monstrous characters is their origin as stock characters and the situations involving them as stock motifs, which is the third main contribution to this thesis' theoretical framework.

Alteration of Motifs

Cooper's work, finally, serves as an introduction to the re-use of stock characters and motifs. While her work, *The English Romance in Time*, is primarily focused on the survival of romance motifs into later 17th-century plays, the way Cooper discusses the medieval audience's intrinsic "comprehension of the codes of romance and [...] their resonance" (Cooper 2) allows the application of her work to the medieval use of motifs in romance as well. Cooper provides us with constant reminders that the ways in which these set elements are arranged and ordered, and the ways in which authors can alter the details to make a specific point, allow the author to bring certain issues to the forefront of their work. Romances often create meaning through the re-use of the familiar, which, as their appeal spread, put many of these motifs into common usage. "Audiences expected to respond actively to them, and the writers encouraged such a response" through a myriad of forms both in the oral performance and by including thematic elements that particular audiences would recognise. This aspect is something Johnston singles out in *Sir Amadace*, for example, in the frequent reference to the sum of thirty pounds throughout the story returning as a way to appeal to members of the landed gentry, for whom the sum would have been familiar as the distraint fee. In short, the re-use of motifs offers a way for an author to engage with their audience in a way that "resona[tes] with what is currently known and therefore living" (15). The motif also shapes the audience's horizon of expectation, and the authors are able to take advantage of this fact by "choos[ing] the particular angle on a motif that suits" (22) the message they intend to deliver. Repeated motifs can prime an audience by confirming or rejecting their prior assumptions, and while it is impossible to reconstruct the exact mindset with which a medieval audience would have approached these texts, the social and manuscript contexts in which these texts can be placed offer us some, albeit limited, lenses through which to view these motifs. Cooper's work on the re-use and adaptation of Arthurian motifs provides us with a helpful theoretical framework with which to observe how stock motifs can change with age and be adapted to suit the needs of different authors and contexts. The romance

genre relies heavily on the adaptation and re-use of familiar stock motifs that are altered by authors to provide fresh twists on already-known formulas, and this is the case for the stories of physical transformation that occur in the *Gawain*-cycle as well. Their frequent correlations with beheadings, as in *The Carle of Carlisle* and *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, also solidify their status as common motifs.

Johnston also focuses on the adaptation of stock motifs to suit a gentry audience in his work, but neglects to pay attention to motifs of physical transformation that run through much of the corpus of *Gawain*-romances and *Sir Amadace*. While his work on *Sir Amadace* and its descent from ghost story folktales and moral *exempla* gives us some angles for analysing this particular text, his corpus does not include many of the *Gawain*-romances that feature monstrous characters. These physical transformation motifs, however, are one of the most interesting sections to focus on. They show that the monstrous forms of the characters that these transformations apply to are changeable, and can be pulled off to reveal the human, courtly figure underneath. Such a thematic element would have appealed both to the gentry trying to find their place in aristocratic society, and to the nobility, who may be calmed by the assurance that proper conduct can be taught and the monsters eventually civilized and made palatable. By looking at the transformations not as remnants of older narratives, or parts of a folklore tradition, the focus of this thesis shifts to seeing how widespread motifs are used and altered to suit particular audiences and historical context. These texts not only speak to the tensions inherent in the lives of the landed gentry, such as encroachment, ennobling fees, and the need to maintain appearances through conspicuous consumption, but also honestly show the ways in which ascension to a new social class could and often did happen.

For example, the *Carle of Carlisle* serves as a point of departure for a critique of his need for material spending and the fact that he essentially buys his noble title and his daughter's hand. The *Carle* is, despite his monstrous appearance, a canny negotiator. It is, however, left up to the audience whether this is a positive virtue or not. And indeed, this even-handed stance seems to dominate in the corpus. The focus on the landed gentry as a new audience and the use of material wealth by these classes as a new status marker is looked on, not as a disruption of the old order, but as part of a new and changing status quo that authors can tap into to find new audiences for their work. The use of stock motifs that can be altered and changed to suit the needs of the storyteller is one of the ways in which the romance genre remained relevant and appealing to a variety of audiences throughout the medieval period, and it is in the changing use of these set motifs and the ways in which the fine details of

familiar scenes are altered that we see authors able to tailor their texts to appeal to particular audiences

How did our audience read romance?

As especially the Thornton manuscript has received much critical attention, and is generally thought to have been at least partially planned out, it provides us a good opportunity to talk more generally about the manuscript context of these romances. A 2005 article by Pearsall suggests, miscellanies such as these are primarily brought together by a combination of “choice and chance” (Pearsall, *Whole* 29), with factors such as the availability of local exemplars and collector interest being the main limitations to the variety of texts collected. Johnston furthermore adds that manuscript creation often occurred “within the space of the gentry household or by scribes living and working quite closely to the manuscripts’ owners” (Johnston, *Gentry* 90), or by commercial scribes hired by the manuscript owners directly. Therefore, we can take these collections of texts to be very close to the interests, and indeed the ambitions, of their landed gentry readers. The fact that these Gawain-centric romances occur in a variety of different manuscript contexts, yet share thematic links, makes them valuable objects of study. Finlayson argues that Lincoln Cathedral 91 creates an environment in which romance was not only seen as a textual genre unto itself, but also one in which this “anthology” of romance texts is divisible into “representative sub-types”, each consistently collected in “internal groupings” (Finlayson 666) organised around several basic romance structures. These range from those allegedly based in real history, such as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* or the *Alexander*-romances, to the more fantastical and adventurous. The range, while wide in both scope and literary quality, also shows Thornton to be a compiler who recognised internal divisions within the genre and understood that different types of romance spoke to differing concerns and differing audiences, and had different basic story structures at their cores. This sequential ordering reveals “a rhythm and range of chivalrous, heroic, and edifying contexts” (Evans, *Re-reading* 114), drawing the reader in and allowing them to progress through a representative range of texts, each identifiably categorised by a medieval reader as romances, but executing on the parameters of the storytelling mode differently each time, and speaking to different concerns and reasons for reading in each text. This method of organisation can be termed an “implicit recognition” (Finlayson 666) of difference in the broad romance genre, a recognition that these various different texts were able to be divided into loose groupings that were nonetheless poetically, structurally, and often thematically connected. These deeper connections, despite the diversity

inherent in the types of stories told within each of these texts, were something that apparently Thornton was able to recognise as he compiled and organised his material. The fact that a reader from the landed gentry was able to recognise and sort these texts according to not only their surface features, but according to the individual differences in structure and quality they had, compared to one another, likely shows a familiarity with the basic structures and storytelling devices of the romance genre, and one that Thornton made use of during the compilation process. It is through this process of ordering and dividing the collection of diverse texts that we can begin to understand how a potential audience would have understood and valued the concept of romance literature, and what they considered relevant to their own concerns. However, while Thornton's work contains a large variety of romance texts, they are not all of equal length or indeed poetic skill, giving us some idea of how broadly even a medieval audience interpreted the meaning of romance. There seems to be a greater concern with formal elements and general features over a concern for poetic and stylistic quality, which leads to Thornton's selection process being diverse. These Middle English verse romances are generally seen as "more ephemeral and less prestigious" (Finlayson 634) than their French counterparts, but were still considered worthy of inclusion as reading material, and show the diversity and broad interest that could bring a contemporary reader to engage with a large corpus of vernacular romances.

Chapter 1 – New Conceptions of Courtesy

By looking at the ways in which the concepts of courtesy, nobility, and ‘gentillesse’ are presented in the text corpus we can establish the baseline of ‘gentle’ or ‘gentil’ behaviour, what behavioural expectations were set for the social elite. We must first consider what, throughout the corpus, is considered to be courteous, noble, and ‘gentil’ actions. What ideal behaviours, if any, were the authors of these texts attempting to reflect in their work? And, most importantly, what lessons on normative, ideal behaviour would a potential audience be learning? For this, a look will be taken at loathly lady tales, *The Carle of Carlisle*, and *The Awuntyrs of Arthur* examining the ways in which Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* sets up and introduces new expectations of gentillesse, which the Arthurian court is then tested on in the romances. The ways in which these texts interrogate and “respond to emergent ideological concerns” (Johnston, *Watered-down*, 9) provide recognisable and memorable learning moments for readers, and may indeed show the possible didactic elements to these romance texts as well, in addition to the commentary they provide on an ongoing social discourse. One of the key thematic lines throughout all the corpus texts is the granting of sovereignty and the extension of respect to those placed at the margins of elite society. Whether that marginality includes a monstrous physical shape, as is the case with Dame Ragnelle or the Carl of Carlisle, or a class division, as with the merchant in *Sir Amadace*, bringing marginal characters into the fold of elite society by treating them respectfully is a consistent theme. Given the texts’ consumption by audiences that, themselves, often had a tenuous and shaky grasp on their presence among the nobility, seeing this precarity reflected in the literary works may have offered them some solace. Seeing monstrous figures whose acceptance as (physically normative) members of the elite in-group was assured after their moral qualities were proven, or their acceptance across a class division, with Amadace’s realisation of his kinship with the dead merchant and financing his funeral, brings up the importance of action over lineage when considering who qualifies as noble. Throughout these texts, a new awareness of the broadening of the norm of nobility is visible. Those who were traditionally outside of the bounds of nobility either due to their marginal geographical position, their monstrous appearance, or their lack of familial pedigree are now accepted into the Arthurian court because of the content of their actions. This shifting norm is evidence of a discursive space that, in the later Middle Ages, was being continually discussed and re-shaped to formulate new answers to the question of how one could be considered a member of elite

society.

Establishing Gentilesse through Loathly Ladies

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Dame Ragnelle*, two variations of the loathly lady tale, respond to and help establish new behavioural norms for the social elite, one based not on blood relations and family heritage, but on acting in accordance with norms of 'gentilesse', which allowed members of the landed gentry to be included in this conception as well. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the motif of the loathly lady has its mirror in *The Wedding of Dame Ragnelle*, but Chaucer's work establishes the essential nature of the shift in perception of nobility around this time quite well. As the knightly protagonist settles in for bed with his loathly new wife, he admits himself distressed. Not, as one might think, about her appearance and age, but also about her background and lineage: she is "comen of so lough a kynde" (Chaucer, *Canterbury* ll. 1101) that the aristocratic, Arthurian knight does not consider her a proper match. But, she retorts,

But, for ye speken of swich gentilesse
As is descended out of old richesse,
That therefore sholden ye be gentil men,
Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen. (ll. 1109-1112)

Despite the knight's insistence on "old richesse" as a guarantor of proper conduct and gentility, his own blunt actions and observations in criticising the old woman show neither. His argument, that there is a mismatch in pedigree and therefore status between them, is shown to be flawed and based on arrogance. She asserts that, whatever their origins may be, it is a person's behaviour that defines them as gentil or not:

Look who is the most vertous alwey
Pryve and apert, and moost entendeth ay,
To do the gentil dedes that he kan:
Taak him for the grettist gentil man. (ll. 1113-1116)

With this, she offers an alternative way to acquire gentilesse, one that broadens the conception of the term and one that takes the ability to be 'gentil' away from lineage and places it solely in individual virtuous action. In this case, true gentility is only acquired when an individual consistently acts with gentlemanly, noble deeds. One's character is the true marker of moral virtue, and to think anything else is to be ignorant of the true origin of gentility. Only the people who are "most vertous alwey", the most persistent in their application of proper virtues

and “deedes”, will gain renown as the “grettist gentil man”. We will see both the praise of consistent moral behaviour throughout many of the Gawain-cycle stories, with Gawain taking the role of the most moral, and thus most admirable, knight at court. There is also direct criticism in *The Awuntyrs of Arthur* of paying lip service to gentility while continuing to indulge in immoral behaviour.

Nobility shows itself as a socially constructed virtue in Chaucer’s text, and one that is being debated both by the characters within the piece, as well as by society at large. The way in which the expectations and criteria for genteel behaviour change shows an evolving discourse that these literary texts are contributing to, and through which authors can choose to voice their support for either side of the discussion. *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* serves as an argument for the, apparently increasingly popular, opinion that gentillesse derives from one’s actions and not simply from birth, and many of the texts in the corpus of this thesis concur in this observation as well. Of course, as all characters who grapple with this, both in Chaucer’s work and in many of the Gawain-stories, are part of the social elite, it is not a discussion or a discourse conducting itself throughout every layer of society. Rather, it seems to be a discourse limited to a certain upper crust of society, and, as Johnston would argue, is at times a discourse being put in the spotlight primarily by members of the lower nobility looking to justify their own elite position through the advantageous use of literature. Chaucer, while a member of the bureaucratic and courtly elite, was clearly also sensitive to the prominence of this discussion in his contemporary surroundings, and has the characters in this piece explicitly argue for a ‘newer’, revised conception of nobility that breaks with the traditions of ‘old richesse’. In this way, the conception of nobility is being broadened, and members of the lower nobility such as the landed gentry show themselves capable of capitalising on this discourse, and show their ability to justify their place in society through appeals to this moral behaviour, adding a didactic and polemic layer to a set of romance texts.

Throughout the Gawain-cycle, the hero shows himself both a champion of the Arthurian court as well as an advocate for liminal figures placed outside of it, and mediates between his own courtly sphere and the outside world. It is by acting morally, extending sovereignty and self-determination to those that lack it, and showing respect even to those placed outside of the Arthurian courtly milieu that Gawain overcomes the challenges in his path. He shows himself as a fair arbiter between different strata of elite society, and shows himself able to respect and extend courteous behaviour to all. In this sense, the texts’ focus on moral behaviour can be seen from multiple angles. It is, in part, a justification for the moral nature behind nobility, arguing for the inclusion of the landed gentry into the social elite by

essentially stating that they belong there if they act morally and dutifully. Furthermore, it communicates to more established aristocratic families that their ‘old riches’ no longer automatically guarantees a goodness of character. The necessity of emulating Gawain’s successful peace-making and sovereignty-granting tactics emerges as a way to further understanding between disparate social classes. No matter what differences exist between the members of the social elite, a shared system of moral values can be found in this adherence to gentillesse. These concepts run throughout the various texts making up the Gawain-cycle, and the focus on Gawain’s virtuous and genteel actions is one of the themes that connects the varied corpus together. It becomes a didactic element, an inspiration for its gentry audience to match Gawain’s own gentillesse, which clearly found resonance throughout this collection of texts.

One example of this is the critique that Dame Ragnelle delivers to the Arthurian court in the eponymous romance, whose treatment at Arthur’s court proves that their gentillesse is conditional. Arthur and his knights make excuses and divert Ragnelle’s demands multiple times, despite being reminded of the agreement they made with her. Similar to the Loathly Lady in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, Ragnelle brings to attention the failings of proper gentillesse and courtesy among those that are supposed to be the most aware of these behavioural standards, and demands better of the court. The criticisms in *Dame Ragnelle*, unlike those of Chaucer’s Loathly Lady, come from a peer who insists on her noble status despite her physical alterations of shape. Ragnelle herself points this out in her first interaction with Arthur, claiming herself as part of the in-group of nobility that they both belong to. She furthermore asserts her moral qualities despite her outer appearance, claiming that “thoughe I be foulle, yett am I gaye” (*Ragnelle* ll. 300-301), and states that “yett a Lady I am” (ll. 319), doubly affirming her nobility in both action and pedigree. She is, despite how she may look on the surface, well-positioned to both judge and improve the conduct of her fellow members of the social elite. However, she proceeds to do this from a different social position than Chaucer’s woman of *loughe kynde*. Ragnelle, indeed, has even more of a claim to peer criticism than the figure in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, given her unqualified assertion of noble status. While her explanation is focused more on the elements of sovereignty and freedom of choice extended to her, *Dame Ragnelle* nonetheless weighs in on the noble discourse by reminding its readers that true virtue comes from internally-motivated moral action. The Arthurian court may pretend to gentillesse, but, like in many of the other texts in the corpus, they lack the substance to back up their veneer. In one such example, Ragnelle demands that she and Gawain “trowithe plighte us togedir before all the chivalry” (*Dame Ragnelle* ll. 528-

529), pledge to wed before the assembled knights. Despite this being “his graunt” (ll. 530) to her and a part of their agreement, Gawain is nonetheless the one who comes forward and proclaims he is “redy of that I you highte / all forwards to fulfille” (ll. 534-5). The king himself, as demonstrated throughout the text, refuses to act. And, upon her wedding day, the court attempt to keep her a secret, advising her to wed “pryvaly as ye may” (ll. 571). Ragnelle refuses, again citing Arthur’s promise to her: she will be “wedded alle openly” (ll. 575) at “Highe Masse tyme” (ll. 578). The court’s vanity and its need to keep up the appearance of good behaviour means they forsake the substance of gentillesse for its façade.

Arthur dallies in honouring binding agreements and the court continually refuses to give Ragnelle the respect she, as their peer, is due, proving their lack of dedication. Ragnelle may look the part of a monster, and her table manners betray little of her aristocratic origins, but her presence nonetheless reminds both the reader and the characters that the Arthurian court must respect and learn from her in order to ensure a good conclusion. Gawain once again must dedicate himself to showing proper gentility through the extension of sovereignty, respect, and self-determination, in a way Arthur cannot or refuses to do. This results in the restoration of the positive status quo, Gawain gaining a noble wife, and Arthur being spared from death once more. His respectful actions place Gawain in the role of a mediator, who can effectively hear, and respond to, Ragnelle’s criticisms of the court in a way the court itself is unable to. This perceptiveness is what ultimately enables Gawain to show his gentillesse the correct way, the way that the text implies should be imitated. Arthur himself claims that “of alle knyghtes thou [Gawain] berest the flower” (ll. 372) and the aspirational, didactic element to these stories is expressed clearly in sentiments like these. Through the extension of respect and the broadening of the category of nobility, Gawain shows himself as an example of gentillesse for the audience to live up to. He occupies a mediating position and through this is able to apply his gentillesse in a practical way. Ultimately, while Ragnelle’s criticisms are valid, Gawain’s actions show that, with the right attitude and understanding, normalcy and order can be restored. Ragnelle’s arguments and the fact that Arthur must rely on her shows a “threat to the social order” (Leech, *Dame* 215), but it is a threat that is tameable and comprehensible, able to be integrated into the fabric of the court’s social world, the same way a challenge to old definitions presented by a social discourse can be overcome and re-integrated. The attention Ragnelle draws to the “shadowy places of a culture’s values and morals” (215) through showing that the nobility’s gentillesse has limits when it must apply equally to all, crops up throughout the Gawain-cycle. In many cases, the noble behaviour extended to fellow aristocrats does not cross over into an understanding of liminal figures,

who would otherwise be part of, and affirm their membership of, the social elite. In two other examples, the eponymous Carle of Carlisle and the Turk in *The Turke and Sir Gawain* receive similar treatments of post-quest normalisation and transformation, with both turning back into humans after being decapitated. This is an aspect that will be examined more carefully in later chapters, however. For now, it can suffice to say that Ragnelle's presence both challenges and affirms the norms of gentillesse, by provoking a crisis through Ragnelle's loathly form but noble substance, and then allowing Gawain to reinforce the 'proper', acceptable courtly solution. This can be contrasted with *The Awuntyrs of Arthur*, as will be discussed later, where these sensible and clear solutions are instead nuanced and made more opaque, and violence is the solution the court agrees on; a solution seemingly not supported by the tale itself. While the criticism inherent in Ragnelle's pointing out of ignorance and hypocrisy among the nobility is tameable, the moral rebuke of Guinevere's mother is much less easy for the characters in *Awuntyrs* to act upon.

Testing Gentillesse

In *Awuntyrs off Arthure* the court's failing to adhere to norms of gentillesse is consistent and there seems to be no change to a negative status quo. Unlike in texts such as *Dame Ragnelle*, there is no restoration of a positive status quo is made possible by Gawain's application of gentillesse. A more critical reading of the court's behaviour is thus shown *Awuntyrs off Arthure*, where the characters remain static and unable to change, trapped in a circle of violence. Their inability to see past the façade of their own is pointed out in the first section of the tale, which revolves around Gawain and Guinevere's encounter with the ghost of Guinevere's mother. She warns them both that the court's sin and lack of moral action can land them "caught oute of kide to cares so colde" (*Awuntyrs* ll. 151), the same way she is. Arthur's leadership is also questioned, with the ghost naming him "covetous" (l. 265) and claiming that "whan he is in his magesté, moost in his might, he shal light ful lowe on the sesondes" (ll. 267-268). Gawain seems to recognise his own failings, and asks what he as a knight can do to make up for the violent actions he has committed, but receives little answer. The ghost of Guinevere's mother, indeed, seems to see the court's lack of proper behaviour as a deficiency in their virtue. Given the story's focus on moral behaviour, it is easy to question whether the Arthurian court even deserves to be called noble, and whether, by extension, the social elite is a group one should aim to join. Arthur and his knights and ladies, in this story, fail to fulfill even the basic expectations of praying for the dead after their passing, let alone their failure to demonstrate they 'do the gentil dedes that [they] can'; therefore, their

identification as members of the social elite is flawed, and seems to be a façade. Guinevere's "gleterand gide that glemed full gay" (*Awuntyrs*, ll. 15), the shining gown and other accoutrements, are a sign of the court's façade. They may shine bright on the outside, but there is an inner corruption and lack of moral action that is, as argued by the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Dame Ragnelle*, ideally supposed to underlie the noble appearance. Once again, as in *Sir Amadace*, the veneer of aristocratic behaviour is stripped back to reveal a morally deficient social upper class, whose conflicts are "not external, but internal in nature" (Robson, *Darkness* 234).

The ghost's admonition to "hertly take hede while thou art here" (ll. 171) does not seem to be followed by the characters, as they seemingly take the advice but refuse to apply its principles in the subsequent second part of the narrative. While there is some debate as to the exact connection of the two parts of *Awuntyrs*, the argument that both stories serve to reflect on one another as a diptych, but are not a completely unified whole, gives credence to the critical bent that the story seems to follow. (Robson, *Darkness* 221) The thematic concepts from the first section are misapplied or simply forgotten by the Arthurian court, who continue in their violent solutions to problems of land encroachment and overreach. Gawain and Galeron's conflict is decided through combat and ultimately settled through Gawain's generous gifting of a portion of his lands, but this does not seem to free the cast from their inevitable fate. They continue on, without paying mind to the ghost's words, and seemingly paying only lip service to the prayers and religious foundations suggested, with these being mentioned only in the final lines. They do not, as the ghost suggests, "mende thy mys" (*Awuntyrs* ll. 193) and realise the failure to live up to the demands of gentillesse. Arthur's ultimate solution is for Gawain and Galeron, the aggrieved party by Arthur's arbitrary and biased judgements, to engage in a duel to decide the rightful owner. The duel is lavishly described and echoes many of the stock elements of battles in romance literature, but their refusal to consider the problem from a diplomatic angle is apparent: Arthur's only solution to structural problems is through a violent lens. Gawain's question to the ghost, concerning what fighting men who "defoulen the folke on fele kinges londes" (ll. 262) must do to maintain their moral standing, seems to be ignored entirely. Combat and needless bloodshed continue to be the unquestioned mode through which the court's conflict resolution operates. The end of the duel comes when Gawain and Galeron have fought each other to a draw, and Gawain offers, of his own free will, to give the lands back to Galeron in a show of respect and a restitution of what has been unjustly taken. This, it feels, is only a first step towards renovating a harmful status quo, but it is the only step the cast in the story is willing to take.

The ghost's admonitions serve to highlight the exact ways in which the Arthurian court refuses to evolve, refuses to push its own boundaries. They do not seek to make morality, the doing of good deeds, into the centre of their nobility, but instead seem to cling to a façade that does little to hide the rotting structure underneath. Galeron's lands, which Arthur has "wonen [...] in werre with a wrange wile" (ll. 421) and given to Gawain unjustly, in Galeron's estimation, show that managing the overreach of royal power and land encroachment remain consistent themes throughout the Gawain-cycle. It is, once again, through the extension of Gawain's respect on behalf of the court, something Arthur himself consistently refuses or seems unable to do, that peace is restored.

Gawain, it seems, is the only member of the Arthurian court who seems interested in, if not always successfully, pursuing the new definition of nobility, underscored by moral deeds, focusing on proving his nobility and putting the virtues of generosity and respect into practice, clearly marking him out as a role model. As Hahn remarks, Gawain's place in the English Arthurian tradition is one of a moral compass and continual figure of inspiration, continually "prov[ing] the worth of familiar values" and the "rules governing the social order" (Hahn, *Introduction* 5), an example to the reader and the fictional court both. But in *Awuntyrs*, this dedication to the maintenance of the social order feels like a detriment, as this order is shown to be, if not crumbling, then on unsure footing, with a court unable to adapt its violence and encroachment to a changing definition of their social role and expectations. Ultimately, *Awuntyrs* presents us with an aristocratic court that refuses to give up the violence and conspicuous consumption that keeps them in power. They seem to only pay lip service to the necessary steps to save the ghost of Guinevere's mother from damnation, even when the importance of morality and religious observance is stressed and reinforced through her shocking presence and detailed descriptions of her appearance. Arthur's lack of good judgement and arbitrary land division permits a conflict to occur, and it is only through a combination of strength of arms and Gawain's diplomatic attempts that the situation is de-escalated. It seems, then, as if the Arthurian court is in a rut, and *Awuntyrs* seems to beg the reader a salient question. If this is what the elite are like, why would any reader in the lower nobility want to join them? *Awuntyrs* presents an Arthurian world caught up in cycles of immorality, whose entire moral centre balances on a structure of which the fragility is easily shown. The characters are unable to orient themselves towards a better understanding of what it means to be noble unless Gawain intervenes and gives the right example.

Another test of courtesy, which succeeds in the end, comes in *The Carle of Carlisle*, in which Gawain, Kay and Baldwin find themselves facing the eponymous Carle, whose

monstrous appearance, as with the loathly ladies mentioned above, belies an inner nobility. Gawain goes along with the Carl's proposed tests and obeys his rules as a guest in his home, despite their danger and breach of social norms. In return, he is able to understand the Carl and becomes a vital component of his physical transformation from giant into human. Baldwin and Kay, however, are much less generous and accepting of the Carl, suggesting at multiple points to behave violently towards him or kick his door down to gain shelter for themselves. Kay even underscores this attitude by commenting that "if he jangle and make itt stout, [he] shall beate the Carle all about" (*Carle* ll. 107-108) before the group reaches the castle. However, they are let in, and the Carl's hospitality is extended to them, albeit in a way that may seem shocking to their sensibilities. The Carl's four "welpes of great ire" (ll. 205) seem, as well, to contribute to the image of an inverted noble hall, serving him as a conventional aristocrat would be accompanied by his horse, falcon, and dog.

There was a beare that did rome,
And a bore that did whett his tuskes fome;
Alsoe a bull that did rore,
And a lyon that did both gape and rore (*Carle* ll. 209-212)

This strange familiarity alerts the audience that there are perhaps more similarities between the Carl and an Arthurian noble than may be seen at first glance, which foreshadows the Carl's later ascent to full acceptance among the aristocracy. In this way, the Carl's home gestures toward its owner's movement within the porous boundaries of the concept of nobility and his ability to switch between social classes. The fact that the Carl is able to rise in status is not left unproblematised, however, and the poem calls attention to the transactionary nature of his social climbing. The Carl's ascendancy to the social elite and the role it plays in showing the complex relationship between social class and its material means of reinforcement (Pollack 18) will be considered in more detail in a future chapter, but Gawain's continual respect of the Carl's courtesy, however, once again gives him the opportunity to show the proper behaviour that should be extended towards these figures by the nobility. *The Awuntyr of Arthur*, too, complicates this conception of nobility by introducing a critique of the Arthurian court and its inability to keep up with the changing requirements of gentillesse.

A more nuanced alternative is perhaps provided by the kinship between merchant and knight which, as Putter and Johnston argue, forms the core of *Sir Amadace*, a romance using its roots in the spendthrift knight motif to speak on the precarious social position of the lower nobility, and the material necessities that maintaining an elite lifestyle requires. There is, as

the story shows, such a thing as an overabundance of generosity, an application of gentillesse that goes overboard and lands its protagonist in an unfortunate situation. Amadace's overly generous spending on servants leads to his self-imposed exile from his lands with only his squire in tow. He is only able to return to his previous noble lifestyle after assisting in the burial of a dead merchant, whose ghost leads him to shipwrecked treasure. With the treasure in his possession, Amadace is recognised for the knight that he is. He is invited to a joust, and through winning it, acquires all the trappings of the successful romance hero. Amadace regains his noble stature and reclaims his position in the social elite at the conclusion of the text, but it nevertheless leaves us with a slightly soured opinion of the nobility. Amadace's recognition as a noble is based, ultimately, not on his genteel behaviour, but on his display of wealth, as it is only after his dressing in golden clothing that he is recognised by noble peers as a member of the elite. He may possess the gentillesse internally, but until he is clad in "gold webbe" (*Amadace* ll. 530) and mounted on a horse, he cannot be recognised as possessing internal qualities. Or, rather, it seems that the external appearance of gentillesse takes precedence over showing it through proper behaviour. The nobility in *Sir Amadace* are shown to be similar to the Arthurian court in *Dame Ragnelle*, in that they do not adhere to the substance of gentillesse the way Amadace does.

The text seems to argue that the appearance of nobility is only useful in so far as it is socially recognised. Amadace regains his lost property and gains more besides, finishing the story with the trappings of the typical romance hero, but he must first assert his social position through the appearance of nobility before his internal nobility can prove him to be a true member of the elite. Meanwhile, his close kinship and recognition of sameness with the dead merchant, whose posthumous transformation will be focused on in chapters 3 and 4, provides him with the means to prosper again through the ghost's advice. In the recognisably materialistic world *Amadace* sketches, wealth seems a more important indicator of nobility than pedigree and lineage or one's moral behaviour, despite this moral behaviour proving an essential component. Had Amadace never overspent, he may have continued his comfortable existence as a knight without needing to re-assert his nobility through wealth. It would be unfair, nevertheless, to say Amadace is entirely *immoral*: his generosity to the merchant, recognising a kindred soul and providing for him, shows that he has mastered the act of accomplishing what 'gentil dedes that he can' within his (reduced) means. Amadace's generosity is ultimately repaid, but it shows that gentillesse alone is not enough to prosper, and gestures to the limits of 'gentillesse' and behaviour alone. Without the appearance to back it up, one's behaviour only counts so much.

Discussion

Within these texts, the concept of nobility is tackled in multiple ways, some more and some less critical and observant of the conflict between ideal and reality. Chaucer's old woman sets out a new ideal of nobility, one based on morals and personal virtuous action, to contrast with the old assumption that nobility was something solely based on pedigree and inheritance. Nobility must be actively worked at. The *Gawain*-cycle seems to repudiate the assumption that gentillesse must be aspired to and brought into practice in daily life for it to be of use. The most salient example of this is the frequent occurrence of Gawain extending courtesy to figures that would otherwise fall outside of the Arthurian court's perception of nobility. He is depicted as capable of open-minded and diplomatic outreach. It is in this context that we see Gawain performing the 'gentil dedes that he can', and affirming his own nobility, often in ways that contrast with the rest of the court's inability to respond to problems so gracefully. Gawain's diplomatic approach may serve to remind the readers both of the "moral and ethical strictures of the nobility" (Pollack 20) and the ways in which these strictures are often broken or disregarded. The veneer of noble appearance that papers over and is used to excuse entirely immoral actions is something Chaucer's old woman already warns about, and it is a problem many of these romances seek to address, if only to assure readers that, given the proper applications of gentillesse, order can be restored and normative behaviours can be re-asserted.

However, not all of the texts remain this positive: *Carle of Carlisle* and *Sir Amadace* show that economic power and marital connections also suffice to buy one's way into the nobility, and that nobility, as in *Amadace's* case, is always a balancing game between keeping up appearances and genuine moral action. And *Awuntyrs* seems the most critical of all, accusing Arthur of immoral 'wiles' and unjust land allocation, and casting its critical gaze on the court's inability to pay their moral dues, not only in this world, but in the next as well. It is a harsh view of the social elite that seems to question why anyone would want to be a part of this in-group, if their solutions to a complex problem are to reduce it to a violent conclusion. Even Gawain's intervention cannot fully wash away the doubts that remain in a reader's mind, unlike in many of the other romances discussed. So, based on this, what can be said about the status of the discourse surrounding nobility in these 13th and 14th-century verse romances? These texts, each in their own ways, participate in this discourse by generally nuancing the issue, and by showing that the new demands of 'gentillesse' can conflict with the demands of material reality. Whether it is Arthur's royal overreach in *The Carle of Carlisle* or

Awuntyrs, or Amadace's inability to keep his household afloat due to an overabundance of spending, the difficulties of estate and land management begin to haunt these romance narratives. The Arthurian court remains a potent image and set of characters for the authors of these romances to use in the pursuit of defining what the core of nobility is and should be, but they are not limited solely to this setting. A text like *Sir Amadace* shows that romances can take place partly outside the confines of the courtly world, and can still speak to the concerns and discourse that the social elite engage with through these literary works. *Amadace* is a text where the expectations and the conceptualisation of ideal behaviour established in this chapter butts up against material reality, and in the following chapter, this idea will be expanded on to show how conspicuous consumption and wealth became signifiers of nobility and enablers of social ascent.

Chapter 2: Material Wealth and Social Ascent

Introduction

As mentioned, the corpus of texts under review primarily stems from a period in which the economy of late medieval England was undergoing rapid and dynamic change; across western Europe a “major disruption of social structures” (Bertolet and Epstein, *Introduction* 3) and a “reshaping [of] longstanding social relationships” (*Introduction* 9) was taking place. Many of the structures of the old, feudal economic system coexisted alongside elements of a new, money-driven economy bolstered by the growth of urban centres and the depopulation of rural areas after the Black Plague (*Introduction* 3). This new economic environment that many of the old aristocratic families and new members of the élite, such as the landed gentry and urban merchants, found themselves enmeshed in also left its mark on these texts in a tangible and clear way. Their clear focus on the realities of everyday existence and the tension between the old and new within this economic system mark these romances out as being socially aware and engaged with concepts that would have been recognised by gentry audiences. This is partially enabled by the authors’ ability to change set story motifs and themes to further reflect what a contemporary audience would have recognised from their own life. By re-using familiar elements in a way that speaks to contemporary concerns, these texts are kept fresh and new to match the changing social context they are produced in. The thematic elements common throughout these texts provide a clue to their primary intended audience. These texts seem to reflect the daily realities and struggles of the landed gentry and merchant classes, and as such, it is likely that these were the intended audience. We can take the Thornton family of Yorkshire as an example.

The Thorntons’ background as recently-ennobled members of the landed gentry creates an emphasis on courteous behaviour in the texts assembled in the Lincoln’s Inn Thornton miscellany, that makes sense from both a didactic viewpoint and the family’s social and historical context. These romances speak to Thornton’s desire to carve out a space for the gentry’s participation in all spheres of social life, whether they be cultural or political, and there are certainly didactic elements to many of these texts. We have been able to see in the previous chapter’s focus on the element of courtesy and gentillesse in the *Gawain*-texts, to name one example. In the selected corpus, the majority of pivotal and climactic moments are solved by the application of courteous behaviour. Furthermore, given that the theme of land encroachment occurs throughout many of the *Gawain*-stories, these texts may “express a desire for this class’s independence” (Johnston, *Gentry* 204-205) from the higher nobility in

the face of issues such as land expropriation. Thornton can be taken, with some caution, as a model for a member of the landed gentry and their awareness of and tastes in literature, showing the tension of ascending to a new and tenuous rung on the social ladder, and the often-difficult balance of expectations that came along it. *Sir Amadace* and *The Carl of Carlisle* engage with these themes in different, but complimentary ways, showing how material concerns and their economic needs can affect a protagonist embedded within the social elite. Both *Amadace* and *Carle* deal with the ascension into, or reclamation of, of elite status by an outside, liminal character. This character's initial status or appearance is considered monstrous and unfit for nobility, but through the course of the plot and intervention by a helpful third party, they manage to integrate themselves within the social elite. However, the methods and wealth needed to 'buy' their way into a higher social class shed light on the ways in which the authors use this motif to speak to a complex and not entirely uncontroversial shake-up of the social order happening contemporaneously. This discourse was clearly alive in late medieval England, as we've been able to see from the previous chapter, and a new way of looking at nobility was starting to take root.

However, romance is not the only genre that exists in conversation with economic concerns, and looking at another text maybe helpful to frame the exact ways in which *Amadace* and *Carle* handle these concepts. Texts such as *Wynnere and Wastour* support this increasing concern with spending as a means to solidify social status and to conform to social expectation. Importance is put on the confirmation of social status through the spending of wealth, with Sweeten arguing that in this work, conspicuous consumption "aids in the self-identification" of the nobility by pointing out that their spending habits are one of the ways in which they distinguish themselves as a separate social class. Furthermore, "failing to spend according to one's station blurs the lines between individuals of different social standings" (Sweeten, *Interreliant* 37). It is clear that, in late medieval England, social status and the recognition of membership of a particular social group depended for a large extent on the ways in which an individual or a household spent their money. Both *Amadace* and *Carle*, however, seem intent on focusing on the reverse side of this phenomenon, where spending wealth is used to solidify one's membership of and gain entrance to a particular social stratum. Spending "fits in with the hierarchies of both natural and social construction, normalising and performing the relationships [between classes] by demonstrating their differences in spending" (*Interreliant* 37). It is spending *like* a noble, with a massive feast and the accoutrements of high culture collected in his castle, that eventually gets the Carl of Carlisle access to a knighthood at the Arthurian court. Spending in this way unites Sir

Amadace and the unnamed knight and ushers in a kinship between them based on shared generosity. Furthermore, this kinship and equalisation of debt between them allows the unnamed merchant to become the noble ghostly White Knight, posthumously raising his status. The *fake it until you make it*-principle seems to work for both of these characters, with both gaining (albeit oftentimes belated) legitimate recognition of their status by authority figures as a result of their financial decisions. But, as previously mentioned, this does not come without these texts also touching on some of the deeply-rooted anxieties about economic change, the dismantling of social barriers, and the blurring of the distinct lines of class membership. These texts were used by the newly-ennobled landed gentry to underscore their right to be a part of the social elite through material wealth, but their authors were oftentimes critical of the ways in which this wealth was made and spent. This chapter will focus on the way these elements occur in *Sir Amadace* and *The Carle of Carlisle*, the two parts of this textual corpus which most easily allow readings that place them in this specific socio-economic context. A close look at these texts reveals two works that engage with concepts of economic and social anxiety and the blurring of class divisions in a real and tangible way, whereas many of the other texts discussed previously do this from a metaphorical angle. This thus also serves to outline the context for the readings on monstrous transformations discussed in the following chapter.

Disrupting the Romance World

We see in these texts that the material concerns of the landed gentry are impinging on the narrative world of the romance. The typical lifestyle becomes much more difficult to maintain or adhere to for characters in liminal positions like Amadace or the Carl, and in this instance, they must rely on ingratiating themselves with the aristocratic world through shows of conspicuous consumption and wealth. This could, according to Johnston, resonate with the tenuous position many members of the landed gentry found themselves in, being part of the social elite, but not stably so. These two motifs are reflected in the texts in different ways, and with different emphasis: *Carl* concerns a character's ascent into the social elite through marriage and shows the options available to rich landowners for social advancement. Meanwhile, *Amadace* concerns itself with what a penniless knight could do to reverse his ill fortune and regain a place among the upper social strata for himself, but it also seems to imply a closer kinship between the merchants and nobility than many would see at first glance. By zooming in more closely on *Amadace*, a text whose implied meaning and stated moral are quite dissimilar, we can argue that the author used the motif of the spendthrift knight to draw

attention to the similarities that exist between members of the lower nobility and other social groups. The knight and the merchant are not dissimilar at all. They both possess the same quality of generosity, illustrating that nobility of action can be found among any social class, and is not the exclusive purview of the (higher) nobility.

The tale begins with the very direct bearing down of material concerns on the romance world. Amadace's desperate situation of "hething and scorne" (Amadace ll. 17) is a result of his financial mismanagement. He admits that it will be a long time before he is "of all these godus qwitte" (ll. 14). His primary strategy to save, to "wende [...] out of the countray" (ll. 34), abandon his household and cut costs by limiting his conspicuous consumption, is shared by other romance protagonists, such as Lanval and Cleges, and is itself a familiar motif. However, the fact that this happens to a member of the aristocracy is a relatively uncommon occurrence in literature. Amadace acts less like a noble in this way, and more in line with the behaviour of the stereotypical debt-ridden merchant. One of the ways a contemporary audience would have recognised this characterisation is through Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where the Merchant provides us with a In the General Prologue, Chaucer's Merchant is described as "sowing alwey th'encres of his winning" (*Prologue* ll. 275), putting his personal profit and the increase of both his wealth and potential for trade with the mainland "for any thyng" (ll. 276). This prioritisation of personal, monetary gain above all else is a typical critique of the merchant class in literature. In addition, Chaucer's Merchant is also covering deep debts with his "estat gouvernaunce" (ll. 281); a potential mirror for Amadace's own hidden debts and the dead Merchant's posthumous debt. The merchant in *Sir Amadace* not only is shown to be akin to the knight in his behaviour and social role, but also provides an interesting refutation of the Chaucer's stereotypical portrayal of the merchant. In addition to this, Sir Amadace's fleeing of his household to escape debt is similar to a strategy often employed by the merchant class themselves. While the origin of this motif in a romance setting is likely in Marie de France's *Lanval*, the fact that this fictional circumstance bears a resemblance to an actual tactic among merchants would have attuned a contemporary audience even more strongly to the text's themes of bonds between merchants and knights. The dead merchant does not prioritise profit, as we are told he gives freely of his own possessions. Yet, in his turn, Amadace has some distance from the typical knight, as he seems concerned with wealth and has to manage his spending in a way few romance protagonists even consider. Both characters exist alongside one another, the boundaries between their social classes blurred and uncertain through their mutual sharing of certain traits.

Abandoning his land and travelling, without servants, accompanied by a single

servant, Amadace's role is that of a knight initially failing in the performance of his social role. He cannot keep on his servants, and thus, is no longer able to afford the lifestyle befitting his aristocratic position. His giving of "full riche gyftus" (ll. 40) to "squiers and to knyghtis [and] pore men" (ll. 41-42) before his departure is, however, a sign that his inner generosity is not diminished by his lack of wealth. Amadace nonetheless generously helps others financially during his journey, despite often not having the finances to spare for this. This is furthermore demonstrated both by his generous actions in the case of the dead merchant, whose debts of "thritti powunde" (ll. 250) he clears without thinking of the cost and whose "Cristun berunge" (ll. 284) he assures in addition. This is furthermore supported by the fact that he leaves "even forty powunde" (ll. 60) in his coffers before his departure, signalling his retention of his knighthood through the distraint fee, despite his financial hardships. No matter how penniless Amadace is presented at the opening of the tale, he clearly retains his prior mentality towards money. Though overly-generous spending on others is what initially caused his dire situation, he continues this habit in paying for the dead merchant's burial. Amadace's generosity applies to all equally, and shows an egalitarian distribution of courtesy across social boundaries. Though he was "in mowring broghte" (ll. 443) and in a severe situation, he "forgot [noghte] his curtasé" (ll. 444) during his wanderings and keeps to his chivalric code. However, the recognition of knighthood by society at large also depends on Amadace's appearance and the way he performs his knighthood. In this way, Amadace complicates the concept of how one signals knighthood through appearance, not only through inner virtue. The restoration of Amadace's knightly prowess and appearance occurs in the middle of the tale and begins after his encounter with the White Knight in the forest after assuring the merchant's burial. Even in a meeting between equals, who act courteously to one another, the language of the poem is laced with terms that suggest commercial deals; "wages" and "costages" (ll. 493-494) are discussed, and Amadace is promised "ten thousand" if he undertakes the task the White Knight sets him (ll. 494). Once again, the language of a down-to-earth business mentality interacts with and exists alongside the characters' elite status within society. The knight and the merchant can, once again, converse as equals in the arena of commercial and monetary matters, showing that even in their approach to material goods, they have more in common than sets them apart.

Social Mobility

Sir Amadace argues, then, that the shared moral dimension of generosity is what binds the knight and the merchant together despite their difference in social status. Intriguingly, this generosity seems ultimately to be what posthumously ennoble the merchant in his ghostly form as the white knight. However, this transformation will be touched on in more detail in the following chapter. In material circumstance, Amadace and the merchant have a kinship as well. They are both penniless as a result of their generous gift giving, both without a home, alone with only a single companion (Amadace's squire and the merchant's wife), and destitute. The text equalises and equates the two, and seems to ask if the difference between these social classes really is as stark as would be assumed. The only difference between Amadace and the merchant, by the time the two meet each other, seems to be a title. Both are of equivalent moral virtue, as shown by their generosity, and of equal financial means. Both perform their nobility by giving, conforming to one of the expectations of a genteel noble. They further consider each other as equals when Amadace and the white knight eventually decide to "part between us toe / the godus thu hase wonnun and spedde" (ll. 503-4) in the tournament, an equitable deal that explicitly mentions the acquisition of material goods that pleases and enriches both of them. Amadace and the White Knight come to the deal amicably, proving the kinship of the two principal characters once more, proving that by cooperating even with those of other or equal standing, mutual benefit may be gained. A simple message, but one that nonetheless may have spoken to an audience hoping to persuade others within their social circle of their worth, and emphasise the use and gain in material wealth as an argument to back this up. So, if merchants and knights can be equal in all these ways, if the merchant can conform to social expectations of nobility and act in the same way as the knight, this imbues the text with another layer of meaning when viewed as an attempt to justify and assert a position for the lower gentry in the upper strata of society. The gentry families were ennobled recently, and had to, as Johnston argues, play catch-up in making sure their influence translated to acceptance and prestige among the rest of the social elite.

Amadace's reacquisition of the trappings of the typical romance hero is not complete, and armed as he is with lands, a retinue, and a wife in the form of the king's daughter, he has re-affirmed his position in society. His inner courtesy and outer appearance now match up perfectly, and the story proceeds into its final stretch. The conclusion, however, does not seem to problematise the central question much, and indeed, to many critics poses more questions than it answers. The White Knight's moral question taken to an extreme seems to be more of

a leftover of the exemplum tradition, as its “cruelly literalistic interpretation” (Johnston, *Knights* 737) of the deal is played for shock value. Questions of performativity, and the porous borders of social ranks that allow Amadace and the White Knight to not only recognise each other as alike in actions and morals, but as “mine awne true fere” (ll. 817), true friends, are not touched on as prominently as they are in the preceding sections of the tale. So, as has been mentioned, the muddled moral of the story’s ending is inconsistent with the thematic focus of the rest of the tale. The fact that Amadace is only recognised when he has regained a properly aristocratic appearance shows that society, despite Amadace’s inner qualifications, has difficulty recognising him as a knight. It does not assign him the role fully until he is able to look the part, at which point he is able to reap the rewards from it. Similarly, the White Knight’s deal with Amadace is based on a mutual recognition of courtesy and nobility, and mutual benefit is derived from this agreement, showing both their chivalric natures. Amadace concerns itself not only with the mundanity of a knight in debt, but with the down-to-earth process of regaining one’s aristocratic bearing, and the social benefits this confers. Furthermore, Amadace presents himself as a shipwrecked victim to hide his financial mismanagement, and manages to pass it off. In the world of the romance, outer appearance is often assumed to mirror a character’s personality and inner virtue, and in this case, Amadace performs the role of the rich knight maligned by fate through his surface appearance of rich dress. He “pretends what he is not” (Foster 417), in the sense that he pretends to have more money and lands than he has, and through this lie wins back his social status, making his knightly behaviour and generosity once more in line with his appearance.

Considering the landed gentry audience suggested by the manuscript this tale survives in, this could be a point of recognition for the potential audience. The need to confirm and reaffirm one’s elite status through conspicuous consumption and shows of wealth is a topic that also occurs in *Carl of Carlisle*, in which even the transformation of the titular Carle does not seem enough of a reason to induct him into the Arthurian court. Like many of the landed gentry, the Carle seemingly is more than aware of the habits, details and status symbols of noble life, and it seems no accident that a manuscript like Thornton’s contained not only verse romances, but texts on hunting, hawking, and heraldry as well. The landed gentry seem intent on proving themselves legitimate members of the social elite by sharing and acquiring the knowledge needed, but are also kept at a distance. The anxiety over the weakening of boundaries between classes and the breakdown of traditional social structures that their rise represents is palpable. And yet, even though the Carle holds to his own rules of courtesy and seems knowledgeable on the norms and values of chivalric society, he is still not accepted

until he marries his daughter to Gawain, cementing a mutually beneficial marriage contract, and lets King Arthur partake of a rich feast. Only then is he knighted, showing that the Carle's physical transformation is but one of the steps required to win him a place among the Arthurian court. He must also spend like an aristocrat to be accepted as one. A critical eye towards these tales may reveal some ways in which they reflect the anxieties surrounding social and economic entanglements of the landed gentry and the aristocracy, but seem to solve them and reassure their audiences as well. *Amadace*, in dressing himself in the golden clothing and armour he stole, regains his social standing in the eyes of the king and princess, his fellow aristocrats. And yet, the idea that this recognition of wealth and social status is predicated on theft and looting is one that the tale does not grapple with sufficiently. It seems to simply gloss over the morally questionable actions needed to maintain or gain a position among the social elite, neglecting to interrogate what this depiction of *Amadace*'s reversal of fortune might tell us about the anxieties surrounding the blurring of boundaries and increased social mobility. If all that is needed to recognise a penniless knight as a sure-fire tournament winner is a nice suit of golden armour, then the surface façade of nobility may ultimately be a more readily available way to enter a higher social stratum, without necessarily having the gentillesse to back it up. *Amadace*, however, softens this blow by having the knight show a key virtue of generosity, which is shared by the merchant. Both do noble deeds by giving freely, and thus the anxiety is dispelled and they earn their place at court. This concept also finds expression in *The Carle of Carlisle*, in which the Carle's nobility is only affirmed and recognised after giving a large feast. However, the Carle possesses many of the attributes of nobility and the hallmarks of aristocratic life, and is indeed so well-versed in them that his daughter reminds the knights of their own rules of courtesy and chivalry.

In this sense, we can see that anxiety over the blurring of social boundaries exists and comes up in these texts, but also seems to be mediated and moderated. This serves a double purpose for a potential newly-ennobled audience keen to prove themselves as genuine. Through their representation in these texts they can show that they, like the Carle, understand and can appreciate the common virtues of gentillesse that they and the higher nobility strive for. Furthermore, a text like *Amadace* underscores mutual understanding and cooperation across social barriers can lead to mutual benefit, and that gentillesse and noble virtues can be found in unlikely places. Wealth is clearly a genuine marker of social status in these texts and realising its use and potential becomes a necessity to ascend to the higher echelons of noble society. *Amadace* and *Carle* both engage with the anxiety surrounding this process by making the circumstances of the principal characters' ascension into a higher social stratum rather

baldly materialistic, but at the same time, emphasising the nobility and gentillesse that they always had within them. Once again, the anxiety over propriety, and how to gain the necessary social prestige to establish oneself as a member of the nobility, comes to the fore, but it is tempered by positives as well. If only, the argument seems to be, some leniency could be extended towards the Carl and Amadace, they would fit right in with the aristocratic status quo. This feels like exactly the sort of message that Thornton and other members of the landed gentry, seeking approval and justification for their social position, would have used to their benefit.

Discussion

Sean Pollack's assertion that *Carle* shows the "permeable limits and meanings of social, political, and cultural identity" (Pollack, *Border* 22) in the ambiguous border regions of late medieval England can also shed some light on the equally permeable social boundaries. In *Carle* and *Amadace* economic concerns show themselves as part of the everyday life of the nobility, and these texts seem more thoroughly enmeshed in the economic and social contexts of their time than many other romances. The Carl is an, albeit monstrous, ruler in his own right, who demands his own unique courtesy and whose "social ambiguity" and changeable body make him "a likely candidate for social mobility" (Pollack 18); he represents, in a more physical way than Amadace does, the changeable and shifting categories of the nobility. But, while the thematically appropriate moment of transformation does happen, the fluid class boundaries and economic realities of the relationship between the gentry and the aristocracy impinge on this ideal one-to-one connection, muddying the waters. The text complicates and nuances the process of ascension from one social rank to another, questioning the baldly economic and marital means by which this can be accomplished by a canny member of the lower nobility. We again see, as in *Amadace*, that an act of conspicuous consumption and showing of wealth is used to confirm a character's status as part of the aristocracy, by which these two texts assert that economic means form a legitimate way to accede to a higher social rank, and this motif forms a common thread throughout multiple narratives. Using both of these texts, it can be argued that a new, transactional way of acceding to a new social rank is making itself known in late medieval verse romances.

The traditional ways to confirm one's nobility and social rank are allowing for alternatives as an audience that is "clearly not courtly but is, at the same time, still elite" (Johnston, *Distraint* 460), for whom wealth becomes an additional marker of social status, is

able to use it as a way to accede to a higher social class. *Sir Amadace*'s focus on material goods may have "offer[ed] readers" among the gentry and mercantile class "reassurance" (*Distraint* 436), confirming their right to their social position, while also complicating and putting attention on the often baldly economic and practical ways in which this ascension happens. Furthermore, the ways in which authors work with and transform traditional motifs to suit their new audiences and their contemporary values, ambitions, and needs, shows the ways in which motifs can be revitalised and shaped depending on the needs of a particular audience. Authors alter familiar motifs to speak to a changing social order and engage a new potential audience to their works. The fact that both of these texts occur in miscellanies owned and composed by members of the landed gentry supports this fact as well; as Johnston argues, this facet, along with a new focus on proving nobility through deeds and adherence to social norms allowed for the landed gentry to use texts like these to argue their position in society and their claim to noble status on grounds of both unmistakable wealth and obedience to behavioural norms was a legitimate one. We see that the fear of spending being used to "supplant social bonds" (*Interreliant* 36) is not unfounded, but *Carle* and *Amadace* seem to suggest that the moneyed economy also has its role in strengthening and equalising social bonds, creating new ones between the gentry and merchants, both middle-class participants in this new economy. Furthermore, money and goods were used to strengthen one's place in the social elite, and were used to bolster tenuous connections and bring liminal figures into the fold. One major motif that plays a role in all texts discussed so far is a physical transformation, often accompanied by a single moment where a previously monstrous character transforms or regains their human form, signalling an acceptance and inclusion within the in-group of the court or social elite. The next chapter will examine this tendency of inclusion in light of the anxiety felt by the aristocracy as well, with an eye towards the ability of the monstrous to be defanged and stripped of its ability to threaten the social status quo through inclusion and incorporation. The same process that alleviates the economic anxieties can be seen to be applied to the social anxieties at play as well.

Chapter 3: Physical Transformation and Tempering Anxiety

Throughout the *Gawain*-cycle corpus feature implicit or explicit pairings of social elevation and physical transformation, with the monstrous or supernatural characters (re)gaining their human form as a physical symbol of their transition from outsider to member of the in-group. The fact that this motif returns throughout the *Gawain*-cycle allows us to put multiple instances of physical transformations together in a comparative analysis the concept of monstrous characters physically changing to acceptable, comprehensible forms to establish their entrance into the courtly in-group. This works to combat the potential anxiety found as a result of changing social and economic changes. Presenting liminal figures not as threats but as potential allies would reflect the way the landed gentry would have liked to be seen by the upper aristocracy. The physical transformations these characters undergo serve to reinforce the legitimacy of their position within the social elite. If the medieval conception of the monster as a sign or portent forms the background from which many of these characters were drawn, we may be able to ask ourselves what signs the liminal figures in the *Gawain*-texts attempt to show, and whether they, in a strict sense, can count as monsters at all. We can look at Jeffrey Cohen's work on conceptions of the monstrous in medieval culture for many of the elementary concepts that will structure the way these characters will be considered. He posits seven theses or aspects which define a monster, one of the most vital of which is its ability to disappear from cultural works and then reappear at another time, often with a changed set of associations and meanings. In short, Cohen argues that, instead of transforming, the liminal figure "turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else [...] [it] by definition returns" (Cohen, *Culture* 4-5). The monsters provide new and continued ways to interpret them, showing themselves adaptable and continually-present motifs in their own right. As mentioned before, the reuse of these motifs in popular romances forms one major way in which we can infer intended audience, and the use of the monstrous figures in these texts is no different.

However, taken on a more literal level, characters like Ragnelle, the Carl, and the White Knight are not necessarily monsters in the typical romance sense in that they are enemies to be defeated. The figures in the corpus, despite their sometimes-threatening appearances do not present themselves as adversaries to be overcome by force. Rather, like the Green Knight is in his appearance, they become re-framed as tests of Gawain's courtesy and adherence to chivalric virtue, that can be reasoned with and, through the extension of respect and open-mindedness, reintegrated. We can see their reappearance in a different light

as well, as their monstrousness vanishes. It is taken off to reveal their true, human form through these physical transformations. Their vanishing happens consistently, with many of the liminal characters disappearing at the end of their stories, leaving only their advice and admonitions behind; they do not reappear and their physical transformations cap off their monstrousness. The physical transformations redefine them. If the monster's true fate is to forever re-appear and be reconstituted according to the anxieties and fears of a particular culture, what can we make of these shifts, these attempts to 'solve' or tame the monster and turn them back into a human form? Are they, as Sean Pollack states, "a fantasy of reintegration between two distinct social and economic classes" (Pollack, *Border* 17), or simply a rejection of difference? These stories repeatedly seem to argue that monsters can be changed into upstanding citizens and stripped of their threatening, strange, liminal nature through understanding and communication. The monstrous appearance of the figure in medieval literature in this sense also produces noise, "semantic disorder [...] a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation" through transgression of norms (Hebdidge, *Culture* 153). Noise forms an "aggression against code-structuring messages" (Cohen, *Kyte* 269) and prevents the clear transmission of information, and the clear understanding of what others are trying to teach and communicate. The appearance of the monsters, their outlandish looks and inhuman proportions, are often what is focused on in their initial appearances. This initial inability to be recognised as having an interiority and capacity for change provides a barrier to their being understood by, and reconciled with, the court. Gawain is seemingly the only one able to look through this visual disturbance and find the common ground between monster and man.

The noise of mutual misunderstanding blocks out the ability to compromise, to see, and to understand the other. Time and time again in these texts Gawain seems to be the only one who can bridge the gap and incorporate the liminal figure back into courtly society. The incorporations of these maybe-monstrous figures into the social in-group shows a possible solution to the anxiety discussed in the previous chapter by showing time and again that mutual understanding, cooperation, and a diplomatic attitude can bridge the divide. These texts make a case for incorporating the liminal figures of the merchants and landed gentry into the social elite through the application of chivalric norms. In this sense, these texts bring together the third major strand of this thesis, showing how the steps towards the inclusion of the landed gentry in the social elite could be made. These monsters do not exist "only to be read" (Cohen, *Culture* 4), but rather exist to point out flaws and gesture towards possible social reconciliation. They are not a constant "incorporeal" (Cohen 5) threat, lingering in the

liminal spaces, but they are brought in and reconciled with society. The monsters' changeable nature works in their advantage, as it allows them to instead be tamed and transform back into comprehensible, recognisable and nonthreatening members of aristocratic society. They are not a "rebuke to boundary and closure" (Cohen, *Monster* 7) but rather seem to enforce these boundaries, and close their own narratives fully part of the social elite, their liminal pasts forgotten or brushed aside. They become known, categorised, and stripped of what made them so threatening to the status quo, in return for social recognition of their status and membership of the social in-group. They are transformed from "otherworldly intervention[s]" and "threat[s] to aristocratic well-being" (Rider, *Worlds* 116) into beneficial relations and even, in the case of Ragnelle and the Carl, wives and in-laws. In addition, they remind the court of the proper way to behave as members of the nobility, whether through literally instructing the characters on how to act in accordance with the new expectations of nobility (as Ragnelle's Loathly Lady counterpart in the Wife of Bath's Tale also does) or through emphasising in a more metaphorical way the potential conflicts inherent in land appropriation and the potential benefits to an understanding, diplomatic attitude. Gawain seemingly has the ability to look through the noise and come to an understanding and appreciation of the monsters on their own terms, which the other knights and members of the court cannot, to successfully bring about the transformations that allow these three characters to become members of Arthurian courtly society. He is, among the varied cast, often the only one who embodies the diplomatic, courteous and nonviolent aspects of the new nobility discussed in the first chapter: Gawain exemplifies gentility, and the moral imperative to treat others well. In this case, the Arthurian court can be seen as a stand-in for the social elite of late medieval England, and their struggles over the acceptance of the liminal figures throughout the *Gawain*-texts a reflection of the outside position of the gentry collectors of these texts. By looking at three different types of liminal figures in these texts, the Loathly Lady, the giant, and the ghost, we can examine the ways in which the different romances consider and reframe these character types.

Ragnelle

Just as the loathly lady motif informed the discussion on gentillesse in chapter one, the motif also facilitates our understanding of how the integration into the social in-group via physical transformation proceeds. In this way, Ragnelle's close adherence to the Loathly Lady motif works in the story's favour as it becomes a baseline from which the other tales deviate. Ragnelle is threatening to the courtiers because they cannot understand her, and as such,

cannot communicate with her. They cannot recognise her advice on its face value because of who is dispensing it; their fear of the foreign makes them unable to consider her critiques. However, Ragnelle's monstrous form does seem to precipitate a confusing crisis of categories, shown, for example, by the fact that her descriptions in different places in the story do not match. In her first appearance during Arthur's hunt, she is described as having a "nek long and therto great" (ll. 238), and her "tethe hyng overe her lypes" (ll. 235). Meanwhile, during the banquet, the description states that she "had two tethe on every syde / as borys tuskes" (ll. 548-9) and that a "nek forsothe on her was none iseen" (ll. 555), which form two seemingly contradictory descriptions. The point of these lists of hideous features is not to give a precise description, but to present an image of overwhelming monstrosity and deformity that is impossible to properly describe or recount and which spreads before the audience like an "imperilling expanse" (Cohen, *Monster* 7) that "no tung may telle" (Ragnelle ll. 244). Yet, in her attitude, Ragnelle conducts herself like a member of the court, and, as she asserts to Arthur at their meeting, "yett a Lady I am." (*Dame Ragnelle* ll. 316-317) This courtly attitude continues as she demands to be treated like a proper lady at multiple points. She insists that she and Gawain wed "openly [...] elles shame wolle ye have" (ll. 507-508). Her demands to be treated as an equal and as a figure who has sovereignty over her own decisions, however, are only really respected by Gawain. As we see in *Carle*, he is again the one who initiates the bridging of the gap, and the one whose initial extension of courtesy and respect to the monstrous figures makes their incorporation possible. However, Ragnelle is a suitable figure to level this criticism specifically because of her outsider position. Her appearance, as is traditional in Loathy lady tales, belies an intelligence and sense of moral virtue, as well as an inherent sense of gentillesse, that others must strive to match. Gawain, through his extension of sovereignty towards her, is the only one who seems to understand this.

Ragnelle, furthermore, reminds the Arthurian court of its own flaws. While Ragnelle challenges the court's "perception of difference" (Cohen, *Culture* 20) by showing that a monstrous appearance can hide a courteous soul underneath, the difference here is one of appearance and not of mentality or background. Ragnelle's usurpation of the male power of critique, as Leech argues, requires her death to normalise the status quo once more. But in another sense, Ragnelle is already tamed and defanged by her physical transformation, accepted and integrated as a member of the Arthurian court through her emergence as a beautiful noblewoman. However, as with the Carl, there is an element of outside norms being imposed on a 'monstrous' existence. Ragnelle insists, from the very beginning, that she is

noble, speaking from a position of confidence and power. She presents herself as an aristocratic peer to the king in their first meeting, able to demand of him a request in trade for her valuable information. In short, Ragnelle recognises in herself an importance and ability to judge on the court's moral failings that is not recognised by the court itself. To them, she is a liminal figure, and remains so until her physical appearance matches theirs. It is not Ragnelle's fault that the court does not understand her, and dismisses her, until they are shown her inner virtue and value.

Carle of Carlisle, on the other hand, focuses on the way the Carl physically transforms to ascend to a higher social stratum, but also on the way his portrayal changes or outright ignores many of the traditional elements associated with giants as stock monstrous characters. Whereas Ragnelle's role as the Loathly Lady is fairly traditional and comparable to the *Wife of Bath's* Tale, the Carle shows that liminal figures were being updated and given new meaning. They are becoming divorced from their traditional roles, to take up new positions at the edge of courtly society and illustrating new ways of using these stock characters to speak to a blurring of borders between social classes. Cohen's *On Giants* gives us some indication of what the giant represents in medieval literature, and by comparing the usual Middle English romance giant, such as the Giant of Mont St. Michel in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* or those in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, with the Carle, we can see interesting divergences from the stock archetype. Social mores are reinforced by the giant, as its physical body and presence "encodes an excess that places him outside the realm of the human" (Cohen, *Giants* xi), encodes a moral warning against gluttony and excess through projecting these sins, in an exaggerated form, onto a non-human figure. The giant is often perceived as a man-eater, as well, taking the sin of gluttony to the logical extreme of consuming humans, such as the Giant of Mont St. Michel in the *Alliterative Morte*, whose demise marks the chivalric protagonist as a restorer of normative values, connected to and in possession of the virtues of temperance and a sense of justice. In short, the giant becomes the antithesis of the ideal of the temperate Christian knight and shows how the same virtues that the knightly protagonists in romance possess can be inverted and turned to grotesque exaggerations. However, unlike the usually gluttonous giants, whose monstrous appetites often include the consumption of humans in an act of cannibalism, the Carle is not a glutton. His form may be huge and intimidating, and the descriptions of his body relying heavily on crude and food-related comparisons to insinuate this element as well, but he is not the one engaging in over-consumption or bloodlust. Arthur and his court, rather, are the ones hunting to excess on the Carle's land, killing "fife hunderd and moo" (*Carle ll.* 105) deer. And outside of hunting season, in the "grece-tyme of the yeer"

(ll. 31) at that.

The threats to the Carl's lands come not from himself or from his own mismanagement, but from the characters the audience perhaps most easily sympathises with. This forces any potential audience to reckon with the fact that this type of land appropriation was one of the points of contention between the landed gentry and the higher aristocracy, and often led to conflict and mutual distrust. His 'monstrous' form seems to be only a surface façade hiding a perfectly civilized country landowner behind it, the low-brow references to foods or simple implements in the description of his body a reflection of the knights' low opinion of him. The Carl is, for all intents and purposes, closer to the knights in behaviour and mentality than they may think. He holds to his own peculiar code of honour, but unlike the cannibalistic and murderous giants, has one nonetheless. While similar in appearance, his role within the narrative and the way he plays this role is markedly different from the way in which the giant typically operates within romance narratives, and shows a deft handling by the author of this old motif to spin new meaning from it. In this sense, then, it is no surprise the giant's function and form are again changed, and he is instead cast as a landowner on the borderland, whose hunting grounds are encroached on by Arthur and his court at the hunt, taking an unreasonable toll on the landscape. This, then, does not seem to be the giant encroaching on the territory of humanity, but rather, Arthur tramping on the rights of the Carl as local landowner. The Carl's lands are, according to Pollack, placed in an intentionally liminal region on the border with Scotland, and one that reflects the "asymmetrical political and personal relationships" between border landowners and royal authority (Pollack, *Border* 14). Arthur, in this tale, is again presented as a bit of a tyrant, claiming too greedily of the Carl's hunting lands, starting his hunt in the morning and "by noone of the same day / a hundred harts on the ground lay", (*Carle* ll. 69-70) indicating an excessive hunting pattern on land that is not his own. His personality and inner virtue ultimately prove him to be a noble figure rather than a monstrous one, but his initial introduction primarily stresses his inhuman size, using often grotesque imagery to describe him. Introduced as a "lothsome wight" (*Carle* ll. 188) with exaggerated, extreme features befitting those of a giant, his hands "like breads" (ll. 186) and fingers like "teddar-stakes" (ll. 185), with his eyes "brening as fyer" (ll. 181). Thus, the *Carle*'s giant-like appearance once again typifies his place outside of the courtly world, with the crude comparisons of his limbs to food items and household equipment showing his essential difference with the courtly knights who enter his home. The physical change of decapitation, unlike texts such as *The Turke and Sir Gawain* or *Dame Ragnelle*, does not confer the direct benefit of a new social status once it occurs. The Carl proves his

suitability for knighthood through an act of conspicuous consumption, and by treating his daughter's hand in marriage as a mutually beneficial transaction.

If the transformation and its accompanying change in social class from border gentry to courtly aristocrat were a simultaneous affair, *Carle of Carlisle*'s thematic layer could be seen as "crystallizing a fluid social system into a tidy binary" (Johnston, *Distraint* 445), a single moment of change occurring at a clear moment of dramatic physical change, a re-birth from a decapitation. But, the author of *Carle* takes a different turn, defying the binary by placing the moments of social and physical transformation at two different times, with the physical change in addition to the Carl's show of wealth accomplishing the ascension to a new social class. The author quickly nuances the portrayal of the act of social ascension, however. It turns out that, as previously mentioned, the Carl's new appearance seems only a part of the prerequisites of ascension to the aristocratic in-group. His new human appearance and stature, which the story specifically mentions as the once-maligned figure "[standing] up a man / Of the height of Sir Gawaine" (ll. 398-9), only gets him halfway there. With his giant stature stripped and replaced with the height and social recognition of an aristocratic man, it ensures that the Carl can proceed to the next step. The story ends with the lavish feast and its associated act of conspicuous consumption, which proves that the Carl not only looks like a nobleman, but can act and spend like one too. In *the Carle of Carlisle*, the titular Carle himself is presented as, if not literally a giant, then at least as gigantic in his proportions. His home is, as with the Mont St. Michel giant's, a space antithetical to the noble hall that the aristocratic central characters are used to, and this alien-ness frightens them. The Carl's unique take on the courtesy and land rights that he demands shocks the Arthurian courtly sensibilities of Kay and Baldwin. But, nonetheless, he emerges as a fellow noble in the end, cognizant of courtly behaviour and courtly expectations, cementing them through wealth and marriage links. He is allowed to become human again because his space on the margins of aristocratic society gives him a foot in both worlds. He is a monster that can be reasoned with: gigantic in proportions but, ultimately, not in his interior world and sensibilities. The knights and the Carl ultimately are more similar than they are different. A similar (though not as obvious) recurrence of a similar concept in *Sir Amadace*, and shows that this line of thinking occurs in multiple texts of this type, though not as literalised as it is here.

The liminal, mysterious figures, whose appearance may seem monstrous or anxiety-inducing, become useful allies when the attempt is made to understand them. The Carl changes into a perfectly palatable member of the court through his participation in typically noble activities, and is physically transformed and rid of his monstrous form in the conclusion

to the story. The Carle's beheading thus becomes a sign of his crossing over from one world to the next, from monstrous creature transformed "by nigromancé" (ll. 405) to human, from threat to pacified ally, "wealthy and domesticated" (Pollack 18) by a show of courtesy.

The Carle's tests of courtesy and his initially monstrous appearance hide an inner virtue, and an ability to be reasoned with beyond that of the giants in other Middle English romances, but which nonetheless does not go un-nuanced by the author. No longer a simple moral warning as other giants may be, he is stripped of the monstrous elements of gluttony and cannibalism and instead endowed with his own sense of justice and honour for Gawain to appeal to. The Carle is a complex figure in his own right, able to represent a social class whose tenuous position straddling the liminal line between class boundaries opens them up to a sense of danger, but also a sense of opportunity and willingness to change. Following Gawain's example, *The Carle of Carlisle* teaches that a potential ally and friend can be found even in the unlikely liminal spaces that may initially inspire anxiety and uncertainty. While the Carl and Ragnelle may reflect the idea of the monstrous figures undergoing some ritual or breaking of a curse to finally join the social elite, *Sir Amadace* give us a different, posthumous change, that occurs as a result of generosity and mutual respect.

The White Knight

In *Sir Amadace*, the posthumous transformation of the merchant into the white knight us raises questions concerning the interpretation the presence of this ghost using our analytical lens. It is still a physical transformation, but the only one in which the border between life and death is crossed as well as crossing class boundaries. He is still, in this sense, a liminal figure being brought into an (albeit non-traditional) social élite by association with Amadace. However, the role and bearing of the White Knight are that of an associate and business partner, as a fellow knight who advises Amadace. Unlike many of the ghosts in moralistic tales, as described by Nancy Caciola, the White Knight does not act as a portent of doom or warning to behave in a morally more suitable manner, unlike the ghost of Guinevere's Mother. Furthermore, Amadace also undergoes a physical transformation in order to (re)join the nobility and be recognised as a member of their social class. Amadace, too, physically transforms to reassert his membership of a social in-group when he dresses himself in the golden armour Through reinventing his outer appearance to match his knightly status, Amadace has re-affirmed his position in society As with Dame Ragnelle, the gentilesse is always inside him, but his physical appearance needs to be adjusted before this can be understood by others. In this sense, the relationship between the dead merchant and Amadace

is once again one of kinship in a variety of different forms, showing that mutually beneficial relationships can exist across a vast range of social classes.

Meanwhile, the White Knight in *Sir Amadace* is a more unique example of a posthumous physical transformation, namely that of a merchant into an (albeit ghostly) knight. The figure of 40 pounds once again makes a return here, as it could be seen as a reflection of distraint. This was a practice by which landowners paid a set sum to gain a knighthood, set at the time of *Sir Amadace*'s authorship at around 40 pounds. In this way, Amadace's payment of the distraint fee, in the form of his settling of the merchant's debts with this same amount, paves the way for the merchant to become a knight. It is also another way to emphasise the unity between Amadace and the merchant. They are, ultimately, both shown to be both generous, both going into debt to provide for others. The kinship between knight and merchant goes beyond merely helping one another financially, but shows a kinship of conduct and behaviour. The merchant becomes the White Knight posthumously by acting out the generosity expected of the nobility, and in this sense, this reinvention once again confirms the merchant's noble nature by physically transforming him and granting him the "contient of a knichte" (*Amadace* ll. 441), the bearing of a knight. Both characters, in this sense, transform, ascending or reclaiming their 'rightful' positions in society through that moment of transformation.

Guinevere's Mother

The other ghost in the *Gawain*-corpus is the figure of Guinevere's mother, whose appearance is the closest to a traditional 'monster' as described by Cohen. The warning that she offers, her elusiveness, her disappearing back into the tarn after admonishing Gawain and Guinevere on proper morals, and her lack of transformation, make her the outlier in this group. She is a moralistic presence, and remains outside the world of the court, a warning to the court about the consequences of their behaviour. *Awuntyrs*, as several critics have pointed out, is a text that feels internally conflicted, with the relationship between the two different parts being considered a point of contention among scholars. Several suggestions have been made as to the specifics of the relationship: Hanna considers, in his edition, that the story is compiled from two different texts, whereas critics such as Klausner conclude that both parts of the story amplify the central message. (Robson, *Darkness* 220) Klausner's conclusion, and Robson's nuancing of it to include the idea that none except Guinevere and Gawain are aware of the ghost's message, seem the most feasible relation for our purposes (Robson 221). However, what is most salient to consider in the light of our analysis is that its straightforward

religious instruction is given no clear follow-up. Indeed, aside from a cursory reference in one of the final stanzas that “Prestes with procession to pray were prest / with a mylion of Masses to make the mynnyng” (*Awuntyrs* ll. 705-706), its advice does not appear to be followed at all. The text’s warnings seem, even in the course of its story, to fall on deaf ears. This makes its moral message, and what it is trying to teach its audience, quite muddled indeed, and makes it stand out from the other texts in the Gawain-cycle discussed here. It does not merely offer an aspirational goal and a means to reach the goal of chivalric behaviour, but challenges the morality behind this behaviour. The first half of *Awuntyrs* brings the full weight of future events to bear as it invites the audience to “draw upon a variety of meta-textual sources of knowledge” (Haught, *Ghostly* 13), to muse on the well-known fate of Arthur and the turning of the wheel of fortune.

The connection between the two halves in this case is one of an unheeded warning, as the cast continues the same chivalric, combative behaviour that will, as the ghost’s prophetic warnings indicate, ultimately be useless as Arthur’s kingdom falls. In this way, the story proves a good capstone for the Gawain-cycle, concerned as it is on the whole with chivalric virtues and social mobility. By encouraging its audience to look honestly at their actions and making the costs of chivalry explicit, showing the negative side to an aspirational goal, the text seems to challenge the need to rise in social rank if it lands you in the company of violent aristocrats with skewed priorities. In its own way, the *Awuntyrs* undercuts the didactic and aspirational elements found throughout the Gawain-cycle by looking into the damaging effects of aristocratic behaviour, challenging the perception of knighthood, and self-consciously inserting itself into a broader Arthurian timeline. It uses this intertextuality in a fascinating way to both provide a warning to the living, and advice on the right course of action to take to secure the wellbeing of their souls. In this way, she, like Ragnelle, uses her position of liminality to criticise the behaviour of the nobility, but unlike Ragnelle, she goes unheeded and slips back into the darkness she emerged from. The unpalatability of her message, it seems, is so antithetical to the culture of the Arthurian court and the demands of its false gentillesse that it does not go fully heeded. Even if the ghost’s message is physically heard, she remains misunderstood. Unlike the rest of the liminal figures, is given no opportunity to transform or re-join courtly society. Fading away after her moral lesson has been imparted, she comes closest to the elusive and intangible nature of the monster as Cohen describes it. While her physical presence fades, her words cast a pall over the remainder of the text. Perhaps she criticises the system that allows the court to behave this way, and unlike Ragnelle’s criticism, goes deeper, questioning not only the court’s façade of gentility, but

their violent methods of problem resolution as well. She does not offer a solution or a way for the court to improve its behaviour, as Ragnelle does with her reminders of gentility, but only offers an inevitable downfall.

The most direct condemnation of this chivalry takes the form of the ghost's answer to Gawain's question of what knights can do to secure their place in the afterlife (*Awuntyrs* ll. 261). The ghost warns Gawain of their "covetous" (ll. 265) king, who may now be powerful, but whose fortunes will soon fade and result in a "light full low on the sesondes" (ll. 268)- the "wonderfull wheelwright" (ll. 271) of Fortune shall ensure that the cycle of rise and fall will hit all of Arthur's court. We can extend this also to Gawain's own self-identification of the tasks associated with knighthood, which present the Round Table as an institution with a damaging effect on the world around it. He seems to be aware of this, asking the ghost which actions can assure his moral purity; she declines to answer, instead predicting the doom of the Arthurian court. This leads to a salient question: Why would potential audiences desire to join a social group whose actions are to "defoulen the folk" (ll. 262), and whose king "riches over reymes withouten any right" (ll. 263)? Though the knights of the court "wynnen worship in werre" (ll. 264) it comes at the expense of needless damage to people and land. Furthermore, this questioning of chivalric virtue is underscored by the social and historical context the text was completed in. The 15th century was rife with political upheaval and, while the ghost encourages the court to "conform [their behaviour] to Christian precept" (Hahn, *Introduction*) many of the lived experiences of a contemporary audience would have suggested otherwise. Widespread land appropriation and the general exploitation and aristocratic violence of the Wars of the Roses would have shown how lacking chivalry was among the actual nobility. What Guinevere's mother seems to be gesturing to, and a question no other text seems to grapple with in the same way, is why one would *want* to become a member of an in-group that seems so thoroughly doomed to immoral behaviour? The standards of gentillesse and charitable behaviour are seemingly no longer being obeyed, and the figure of Arthur at the top of the hierarchy gives a bad example for all. While, in life, aspiration to gentility and inclusion in the elite in-group may be worthy aspirations and can serve to move upwards in the world, *The Awuntyrs off Arthur* warns that focusing on short-term, material gain may leave one blind to the spiritual ruin that the behaviour of the nobility brings about. The ghost, in this case, remains elusive and unable to transform physically, showing the inability for the situation of the Arthurian court to come to a positive ending.

Discussion

Cohen suggests that it is specifically the monster's liminality and position outside society that makes them capable of critiquing it, and in these medieval texts, it seems to be no different. But what remains salient here is the element of incorporation. Once their advice has been dispensed and once the critiques have been taken to heart and an alternative way to act is shown through the proper action of the protagonist, the monster transforms into a human. The human shape, recognisable and familiar, serves as a final confirmation that the lesson has been learned: the monster's threat to the stability of the court and critique of its institutions no longer needed. They are, ultimately, stripped of what makes them threatening, and cannot return back to the liminal. The monster has served its purpose, and, in a strange twist on Cohen's theses, remains within the social in-group secure in its new status. The fact that their human forms remain stable strips them of their essential monster-ness, and no comment is made on their past appearance either. The reason why Guinevere's Mother, for example, does not do this seems to be because her advice is either not followed, or cannot be acted upon; the extension of sovereignty and generosity by Gawain and Amadace in the other texts, however, show an attempt to bridge the gap and attempt to understand the liminal. On the other hand, the White Knight's immediate friendliness and kinship with Amadace shows that mutually beneficial relationships can flourish between different social classes as long as neither party exploits or fears the other. As we have been able to see from the diverse way these past monstrous characters are re-interpreted has much to do with the economic and social instability of late medieval England, and I would argue that the physical elements of transformation visible in these texts, popular among the landed gentry, show a conciliatory, aspirational and hopeful message. A message of collaboration and genuine acceptance among the social elite that they are, tenuously, a part of. These texts, among other things, show themselves as an attempt by the landed gentry to show themselves as beneficial and unthreatening, and the way these authors use familiar motifs to underline this message gives us an insight into the diverse re-working of stock characters that took place within the popular romance landscape.

Discussion and Analysis

Summary of Findings

Throughout these past chapters, different ways of engaging with and making meaning out of the liminal characters and physical transformations of our chosen corpus have been examined. Several common themes and motifs have been established, and the ways in which they are re-used and altered to suit new literary audiences have been described. We see throughout that the romance space is being used by an audience that is “clearly not courtly but is, at the same time, still *élite*” (Johnston, *Distraint* 460) to define themselves, both in opposition to the higher aristocracy and in hopeful allegiance with it. In the first chapter, the concept of *gentillesse* was introduced and elaborated on, and it was shown that the discourse surrounding *gentillesse* is a topic many of the romances in our corpus comment upon. Using Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* as a basis for examining the tension between ‘new’ forms of expressing *gentillesse* through behaviour, and ‘old’ conceptions of *gentillesse*, where respect is owed simply because of one’s blood relations. This new conception of *gentillesse* as a behavioural framework expressed in these texts becomes aspirational for many members of the landed gentry, as can be seen in the deliberate pairing of many of these romances with texts such as etiquette and hunting manuals. The broadening of the concept of *gentillesse* underpins a large shift in the way social class and consequently membership of the social elite is regulated. If the hallmarks of *gentillesse* (and by extension the ability to ‘belong’ among the courtly elite) are based on proper behaviour, even those who would otherwise not be considered applicable for membership of the social elite will have a chance to prove they belong. The discourse surrounding *gentillesse* is but one of the ways in which our corpus of texts “respond[s] to emergent ideological concerns” (Johnston, *Watered-down*, 9), to cite this line by Johnston a second time. The landed gentry negotiated, through this new conception of *gentillesse*, a space for themselves in the romance landscape, and in so doing, created a new emphasis on proper behaviour and the extension of courtesy as markers of genteel behaviour. As Chaucer’s *Loathly Lady* tells the doubtful knight, those who ‘do the gentil dedes that [they] kan’ have a greater claim to nobility than those who simply rely on their heritage or familial prestige. In this sense, we can also see Gawain’s role as exemplar of *gentillesse* and builder of bridges between different communities coming to the fore.

However, the idealised courtly behaviour must be reconciled with reality and the material concerns of many of the landed gentry audience. A new, moneyed economy was being introduced in late medieval England, and those that actively participated in it could

stand to see great profits. The landed gentry's desire to, once again, show themselves as potential participants in the social elite and to create a space for themselves in the literary landscape continue to be major themes. The second chapter, considering the material realities and displays of wealth of the romance worlds of this corpus, examines this. These texts complicate and nuance the process of ascending from one social class to another, and show that it is never simply genteel behaviour that allows one of the characters to regain their social standing or join the Arthurian court. It is more often than not a transactional act dependent on a show of wealth. Whether it be feasts, expensive clothing, or lavish weddings, the characters are only considered part of the nobility when they spend like them. Conspicuous consumption remains an important theme throughout. *The Carl of Carlisle*, for example, ends with a feast to enable the now-transformed accession to the ranks of the Arthurian court. He has already married his daughter off to Gawain, and now reinforces that martial bond with a bond of material wealth. Time and time again, in *Amadace* and *Carle*, the message seems to ring loud and clear. It is not only enough to act as a noble to be a noble, one must *spend* like a noble too. The gentillesse and proper behaviours discussed in the previous chapter must be backed up with the wealth to show one's social rank properly. This, while often complicating the more idealistic world of the romance with worries over material wealth, does show us quite clearly that the romance genre has space for these considerations. The material concerns and the ways in which money could allow social climbing were genuine considerations for the gentry audience of these texts, who would have recognised these similar situations in their daily lives. The collaboration and mutual profit between merchants and the gentry, too, is considered in *Amadace*, with the two ostensibly noble characters, the White Knight and Amadace, speaking in the commercial language of a mutually beneficial deal.

And it is specifically this type of deal-making skill that allows Amadace and the Carl to work within the system of nobility. Their canny use of their material wealth enables either, in Amadace's case, the confirmation of his nobility or, in the Carl's case, his ascension to nobility. Amadace is only recognised to be a noble once he wears a set of golden armour, thus showing the vital role material wealth has in enabling membership of the social elite. *Sir Amadace's* focus on the compatibilities between knight and merchant also show the blurring of class boundaries, and the kinship between merchant and noble. Both Amadace and the merchant are non-traditional examples of their kind. Amadace's fleeing of his lands when his debt becomes too great is a common tactic among merchants, whereas the dead Merchant's generosity is uncommon; the stereotypical merchant of medieval literature is profit-hungry and greedy. Therefore, their bond shows that, despite their differences, a common

understanding can be reached between those of different social classes, and indeed, common virtues of *gentillesse* can be found between them. Amadace and the Merchant both share the virtue of generosity, and this creates a deep tie between them.

This blurring of class boundaries and possibility of mutually beneficial arrangements also take centre stage in the final chapter. The way the nobility's anxiety over social change plays into the literary representation of the 'monsters' in the Gawain-cycle is the focus in this section. An aversion towards 'liminal creatures' and such as Ragnelle's monstrous form or the Carle's aspects of the giant, also show through in the final chapter. Centring on physical transformation and in-group membership, this chapter attempts to engage with the "permeable limits and meanings of social, political, and cultural identity" (Pollack, *Border* 22) in these late medieval romances. Gawain's extension of courtesy and sovereignty to the liminal figures is, in most cases, the way in which they are also transformed from monster into human. This reclamation of human form makes them understandable and palatable to a court that would otherwise ignore their input. For example, Ragnelle is side-lined and treated as the court's shameful secret despite her insisting on her nobility. Additionally, a character like the Carl has his own sovereignty and standards of courtesy and loyalty that Gawain participates in through the trials. Despite the court's treatment of him as they over-hunt his lands and argue for enacting violence against him, he proves a useful ally once he is accepted and turned to a human once again. Their monstrous forms are what give these characters the ability to critique the court from the outside and spur on a reformation of their behaviour to a more genteel and equitable model. Gawain, in this case, provides the link between court and creature, able to see through the threatening exterior to see the potential ally underneath. In doing so, the physical transformation marks out the moment where their critiques are applied and *gentillesse* restored, a moment of understanding. The threat has been pacified and defanged through the re-application of genteel standards, and a positive status quo is restored. The blurred and shifting class boundaries, for a moment, become a space in which to gain potential welcome allies and make mutually beneficial deals. In short, these texts can be ultimately read as an attempt to assuage the anxiety of the established higher nobility as well.

Analysis

To reiterate our original research question, this thesis attempted to explore in what ways motifs of physical transformation occur in several Middle English verse romances. Furthermore, there was an examination of how the themes of transformation and re-integration that these texts contain reflect on both the ascension of the gentry to the social élite. These observations must be considered in light of the discourse surrounding nobility in the 14th and 15th centuries as well, including the ways in which behaviour became a new tool to measure gentillesse. The answer to this research question is not *just* confirming that these motifs exist or speak to a potential audience of late medieval gentry readers. We have observed these patterns throughout the corpus and have confirmed that they form an important and consistent thematic layer across the entire *Gawain*-cycle. Now, we must consider what it means that they occur throughout as central motifs and what this can tell us about the way these texts functioned in their social and historical context.

Firstly, motifs of physical transformation occur in several different categories. Whether they are, as is the case for the *Carl and Ragnelle*, transformations from monstrous forms into human ones or posthumous transformations from human into ghost for the *White Knight*, there is a common thread that binds these diverse scenes together. All are caused by a genteel action on the part of the protagonist, and serve to underscore a bond of understanding and (quite literal) humanisation of the previously strange and threatening liminal figures. Amadace's generosity also secures him a willing ally, who directs him toward a necessary treasure. And the way *Gawain's* courtesy and extension of sovereignty towards those liminal figures brings them into the embrace of the court, and signified their acceptance within noble society. The only tale that does not include a specific transformation scene is *Awuntyrs*, whose Ghost is more of a moral warning and typifies a concern with the ethics of the social elite and the violence they perpetrate under the guise of gentillesse. As has been mentioned before, the purpose of these transformation scenes seems to be twofold. They symbolise both an active scene of accession to or reclamation of noble identity as the monster is integrated into courtly society, and render the monstrous figure's form understandable and palatable to a doubtful and disrespectful court. The re-integration of the monster is a way to assuage anxiety and make new parts of the social landscape comprehensible. The blurring of social boundaries, the rise of a new moneyed economy in the urban centres of England, and large-scale violence and political upheaval saw a need for reassurance among all levels of society, and this aspect of our textual corpus is but one representation of that need. The new

conception of gentillesse and the discourse surrounding it is, paradoxically, both a small part of the whole, and yet sets a foundation for many of the concepts explored in this thesis. By changing the way gentillesse is measured into focusing on deeds, the categorisation of gentility could de-emphasise heritage. This, in theory, allowed the landed gentry access to the social elite through the use of their wealth and proper genteel behaviour, often learned from etiquette handbooks and modelled on literary works. Within the *Gawain-cycle* and *Sir Amadace*, we see multiple characters whose gentillesse is proven through their actions. While Ragnelle and the Carl claim to be noble, this is only recognised after their transformations and the critiques they level at the court are recognised and solved by Gawain. Gawain's example is what builds the bridge and enables the gentillesse of Ragnelle and the Carl's actions to be recognised. Meanwhile, the dead Merchant's generosity sees a kinship between him and Amadace form, and the text argues that they are both equally noble in action, and thus equally deserving of nobility.

In essence, this is what these texts posit: through displaying proper, genteel behaviour, the landed gentry class can prove they deserve to be included within the social elite and carve out a space for themselves. They are, as the Carl and Ragnelle are, possessed of their own forms of courtesy and gentillesse, and wish to see this recognised. They wish to see their safety from land dispossession and violence in a turbulent time assured. The landed gentry likely saw within these texts a way to not only recognise themselves and see protagonists that share their daily struggles, but a method to advertise their own suitability as potential allies and partners. They and the authors that appealed to them used the romance space for their own ends and altered the stock motifs of the genre to suit a new purpose, creating new meanings for these typical characters. They made this part of the literary landscape work for them, and the remarkably consistent thematic links across the text corpus show that this was not simply a singular occurrence; rather it seems to be a broad concern addressed across multiple literary works, whether part of the *Gawain-cycle* of texts or no.

Methodological Reflection

This thesis owes a great amount to the work of Johnston and Cohen, and is an attempt at integrating their approaches to studying the romance corpus and its interaction with a contemporary audience. While, as mentioned, Johnston's work is primarily based in book history and uses codicological evidence, Cohen's seven theses provided a welcome set of criteria to base the analysis of the *Gawain-cycle* off of as well. While it was interesting to see

the ways in which characters such as Ragnelle or the Carl fit Cohen's theses, some of the ways in which they did not inspired the readings of the monsters becoming part of the elite in-group and being stripped of their threatening aspects; this is something that, notably, Cohen's framework does not touch on. Considering the actual method of textual analysis, a comparative approach to studying multiple literary texts is not revolutionary. However, it must be said that too often Middle English romance texts are analysed in isolation. This is understandable and not per se a disadvantage, as the relatively small number of texts and their dispersal across both geographic distance and multiple manuscripts adds a difficulty to this process. Assessing them in a truly comparative way is made difficult because these texts are inherently bound to a very local and specific context, and to analyse them side-by-side may serve to erase this specificity from the readings. However, by looking at a group of texts through a shared lens the commonalities between them may become more evident, even if their individual idiosyncrasies are diminished. As Johnston posits, his examination of a specific tradition of creation and curation, namely the miscellanies collated and created by late medieval gentry families, allows a comparative approach to work. While these texts may be stylistically and geographically very different from one another, the circumstances of their creation, the motifs they use, and the shared sense of group identity of their owners allows for this type of analysis when brought together.

In this way the methodology was suitable, and led to conclusions that closely match and reaffirm Johnston's framework of gentry participation in romance literature. However, this also means eschewing Johnston's focus on gentry miscellanies as complete products. While mention was made of the groupings of several texts together, essentially, this thesis does ignore the manuscript context of these texts in favour of adhering to Hahn's grouping, focusing on Gawain as a central character. While this allows the elements of physical transformation and the way Gawain is used as an intermediary between liminal spaces and the normative world of the Arthurian court take centre stage, it nonetheless is a trade-off. By analysing these texts relatively free from their respective manuscript contexts, this thesis largely does not discuss the way a medieval reader would have experienced these works per se; while there is a focus on the intended audience and the appeal towards a certain group of readers on a broad thematic level, there is little attention paid towards the direct experience this audience would have had. Furthermore, while mention is made of these texts existing alongside hunting manuals and etiquette books, this method of analysis dulls the overall impact of these arguments. This, however, feels unavoidable to me. The Gawain-centric grouping brought to the fore the elements this thesis, from its inception, was most concerned

with. The element that links the corpus together, tales of physical transformation, are shored up by new connections forged between unlikely texts. Including *Sir Amadace* in many of the analyses, for example, allowed the elements of critique of the aristocratic façade to be brought forward more clearly. In this sense, I consider this method of research a success, though it leads to a more arbitrary grouping than one based more solidly on manuscript context. However, this is also why my analysis did not generally extend beyond analysis of theme and the placing of texts in a social and historical context. Comparative analysis of, to give one example, poetic forms, metre, and other stylistic aspects of these texts would be difficult considering the wide variety of their rhyming schemes and poetic characteristics. Hahn also mentions this fact in his introduction to the edition of the *Gawain*-cycle texts, with the grouping being more based on shared themes and characters than any other aspects. While, for example, several romance groupings in the Thornton miscellany are grouped partly because of their common rhyme scheme, it is not always possible to consider texts from this angle. *Awuntys off Arthure*, to name one example, has a dramatically different poetic style from many of the other romances, and as such would always remain the odd one out in any grouping. In contrast, by actively considering it a part of the main group, it was able to provide a valuable undercurrent of behavioural and ethical critique that otherwise would have gone less noticed in the other texts as well. Had I considered other texts as the object of study beyond the *Gawain*-cycle and its thematic cousins, there would perhaps have been more of a struggle to come to relevant points of comparison within the analysis, so I recognise the limits and flaws inherent in this methodology.

Avenues for Further Research

While this thesis covers a relatively broad subject, there are by necessity aspects of the text corpus that received fewer attention during the main chapters. The didactic elements of the *Gawain*-texts, for example, do remain sadly under-discussed in this thesis. Considering this topic's obvious tie-in with the main themes of this thesis, it is likely a fruitful direction for further research. Considering how many of these texts contain a moral message and centre Gawain's behaviour as positive and exemplary, while deriding that of the rest of the court, it is easy to imagine turning our attention these using this same corpus. Also, as mentioned, there was little attention paid to the stylistic and codicological aspects of these texts; a more thorough observation of these elements may yield further insights. One group of texts that echoes parallel concerns to many of the *Gawain*-cycle romance works are what Johnston calls the 'gentry romances', typified as well by their common appeal to a landed gentry audience.

Johnston's focus in several chapters is on what he names as 'gentry romances', of which *Sir Amadace* is one, but *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Degrevant* also feature, to name two examples. They are, as for example *Awuntyrs off Arthure* or *The Carl of Carlisle* are, concerned with the arbitrary injustices visited upon gentry landholders by land appropriation and misuse. One avenue of future research may be to apply comparative thematic analysis to these texts as well, searching for discourses surrounding gentillesse and in-group membership in these works. However, as they generally do not contain physical transformations through magical means, this element would have to be relegated to the background, and as such, I rarely referenced them throughout this thesis. Focusing on grouping of texts by the context of their creation and shared intended audience, though often difficult to determine, may uncover similarities that tie a group of texts more closely together or allow a more nuanced view of how these texts appeal to their audience, the way this research did. As has hopefully been shown, the space of Middle English romance has still more to tell. Relatively less-studied 'popular' romances such as these, whose sometimes lacking poetic qualities have caused them to be consistently undervalued until recent decades, have worth to academics. If one is willing to look at them not merely as stylistically deficient, but as indicators to the concerns of their readers, they can show us quite a bit more than has been presumed.

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