

The Characterization of Monstrous Femininity in the *Testament of Cresseid* and the
Awnytrs off Arthure

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

July, 2009

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Abstract

This dissertation uses psychoanalytic theory to examine the similar portrayals of monstrous femininity in two Middle English poems, Robert Henryson's the *Testament of Cresseid* and the *Awntyrs off Arthure*. In the *Testament*, Cresseid's leprosy is interpreted through Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, suggesting that Cresseid experiences the abject to create a new identity as a leper. Rather than view Cresseid's dream as an assembly of very real divinities who pass judgment over her sleeping body, I interpret the dream in a strictly physiological sense, arguing that Cresseid not only creates the judgment from her own conflicted psychology, but actively shapes her own destiny. Cresseid's disease does not annihilate her identity, but gives her a significant position in society, because her status as a leper facilitates the economy of salvation. I continue with Kristeva's theory to understand the characterization of the grotesque corpse of Gaynour's mother in the *Awntyrs off Arthure*. Her rotting body is doubly abject, both as a corpse and a mother. While abjection provides a useful opening for discussing the portraits of Gaynour and her mother, Kristeva's theory does not consider all women in the text, and only confirms misogynist stereotypes. To supplement Kristeva, I use Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Jacques Lacan's theory of desire to illuminate the text as a whole, and explain the role of the corpse in shaping the narrative.

Acknowledgments

I am much obliged to my MA supervisor, Professor Scott-Morgan Straker, for directing me to such wonderfully weird texts. His meticulous guidance throughout the year and process of my many drafts is very much appreciated.

I would also like to thank my parents for their continued support and accepting all of my long distance, late night phone calls. Without their encouragement and kind words, this graduate experience would have been far less pleasant and rewarding.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Robert Henryson's middle Scots poem, *Testament of Cresseid*, and the *Awntyrs off Arthure* present common characteristics in their portrayals of women, namely in the extensive and grotesque depictions of their bodies. Where Henryson writes of the leprous body of Cresseid, *Awntyrs* describes a strange encounter between Gaynour and the horrific corpse of her once royal mother. Existing interpretations that attempt to explain these portraits of monstrous femininity complicate their portrayals by confining themselves to the moralistic framework of the poems. Such interpretations only confirm the general conclusion put forward by Maureen Fries, that "analysis of the characterization of women in medieval literature has generally suffered from a misleading oversimplification" (Fries 26). Though the heavily spiritual and moral content of both poems warrants an examination through those avenues, accepting many of these conclusions about femininity only from those standards oversimplifies their representation; to explain the circumstances of Cresseid's disease and the tormented corpse of Gaynour's mother on the basis of morality alone only serves to classify each of them under the same generic archetypes. Rather than rely on the religious, exemplary, and penitential models that have occupied so much of past criticism, I ask if these female characters function beyond these stereotypical roles, and whether or not there is a positive dimension to their grotesque representations. For this purpose, I turn to psychoanalysis in my research as an effective alternative for generating new ideas about these characterizations.

In the *Testament of Cresseid*, I return to Cresseid's descent into leprosy through Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, to reconsider the causes of her condition. Cresseid's

leprosy has drawn a great deal of critical attention, and her disease is typically interpreted as a form of divine punishment for her promiscuity, based on the judgment and sentence of the gods in her dream. By occupying a moral position that views leprosy as a judgment, rather than a physiological infection, this critical assumption problematizes Cresseid's character in various ways. Such exclusively moral readings suggest that Cresseid must passively accept her fate from a very real and powerful assembly of gods. While other scholars assume that the dream expresses how others come to see Cresseid, I suggest instead that the dream is crucial to understanding how Cresseid comes to see herself. This reading then invites a consideration of Cresseid's dream as a strictly physiological experience, which suggests that the gods are not real divinities, but figures created by her own subconscious. In this respect, psychoanalysis encourages us to understand both her psychological experience and physical transformation. With regards to the abject, the only scholar thus far to analyse the poem through this theory has been Felicity Riddy. Though I find several inconsistencies in her arguments, the theory itself is exceptionally useful for understanding Cresseid's experience and psychology. While Riddy uses Kristeva to demonstrate how the poem engages with the abject to establish masculinity, I will show that what is actually at stake is the formation of Cresseid's own identity as a leper; abjection allows us to see Cresseid's role in determining her own fate and fashioning her diseased, but socially vital, identity. Through her disease, Cresseid is able to reintegrate herself into the community as a leper, which also places her in a spiritually closer relationship with God. As a channel for divinity, Cresseid's social function is now to aid healthy individuals in fulfilling the sacrament of penance.

Like the *Testament of Cresseid*, the *Awntyrs off Arthure* presents another version of monstrous femininity, this time in the corpse of Gaynour's mother. This decomposing

body, circled with serpents and toads, appears to Gaynour and Sir Gawain at the Tarn Wathelan to warn of the dangers of illicit sexuality and aggressive imperialism. Its grotesque deformity is the consequence of transgressions in former life, and so stands as a figure to inspire penance and morality. The same theory of the abject provides a useful opening for discussing this figure, primarily as Gaynour's mother's body can represent the abject in a double sense. If the abject is, according to Kristeva, that which you cast out of yourself as other in order to achieve a functional identity, Gaynour's mother is abject not only because she is a corpse, but also as a mother. In our personal archaeology, the maternal body is the first object individuals must expel to create their unique subjectivity; as an object of fascination and desire, the maternal figure is also feared because of her continual threat to one's identity. Though Kristeva's theory can help present a reading of femininity that has not yet been explored, identifying woman as abject, threatening, and monstrous only perpetuates those same misogynous stereotypes and generalizations about the female gender that I endeavour to avoid. Rather than relying only on Kristeva, I will read *Awntyrs* through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of desire, as this theoretical model will produce a more thorough analysis of each characterization. Previous criticism has also generated a great deal of debate on the unity of the poem's two central episodes. A Lacanian approach provides insight into the text as a whole, whereas Kristevan theory can only address its first part, ignoring any consideration of its imperialist strand and the relationship between all three female characters. The theory of desire not only will promote the argument for the poem's unity, but Žižek's interpretation will also help to explain the role of the corpse in determining the narrative trajectory.

For both the *Testament of Cresseid* and the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, I hope to show how these monstrous women, in all their fleshly, excessively disgusting glory, become powerful representations of femininity through the complexity of their characters, and the importance of their functions in their respective narratives.

Chapter Two:

Abjection in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*

In her influential article, "'Abject Odious': Feminine and Masculine in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," Felicity Riddy re-examines Robert Henryson's middle Scots poem from a Kristevan standpoint, offering a feminist reading of the work as a construction of male gender identity. She introduces a late fifteenth-century painting called *Les Amants trepasses* to draw connections to Henryson's text, namely with regards to their shared depictions of human bodies that are loathsome, disgusting, and vividly grotesque—bodies that are, especially in Henryson's text, explicitly coded feminine.

Riddy's reading of the *Testament of Cresseid* rests on viewing Cresseid as a figure who is both abjected and expelled from society, and may be considered as *the* abject according to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. In relation to Troilus' "clean and proper body," Riddy asserts that Cresseid's body, "first defiled by promiscuity and then disfigured by leprosy, is abjected" (Riddy 286). In order to further establish this, she engages with critical passages emphasizing Cresseid's expulsion and filth, especially after she becomes a leper. By focusing on Cresseid's physical deformity and defilement, by extension, presenting all femininity in similar terms, as "Cresseid is meant to bear the symbolic weight of the feminine" (286), Riddy is able to assert her view that masculine identity is constituted through the expulsion of the feminine. In other words, Cresseid is the abject, literally abjected by Troilus and the Greeks to solidify the identity of Troilus and thus masculine identity in general. However, the crux of Riddy's argument rests on her belief that only if we read Cresseid as a *voice* in her three main speeches, rather than taking the "liberal-humanist position" (287) and viewing her as a character, can we see the truth of the text: "what the *Testament of Cresseid* shows is the struggle to constitute a

stable masculine identity . . . [and] what is obscurely at stake in the story of the much-loved woman who is cast out is the very making of masculinity” (290-91).

Kristeva’s concept is concerned with everything that is opposed to *I*, that is, the improper and unclean, “loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung” (Kristeva 2). The openness and difficulty of her theory naturally allows for several interpretations of how we understand the abject both as some *thing* that is loathsome and repulsive, and abjection as the *process* of constituting subjectivity through the rejection of those things that are other to *I*, or to the self. The fluidity of these meanings will be encountered as we observe Cresseid’s experience more closely; as the *Testament* progresses, Cresseid will be both abjected by her community, and she will experience abjection, through expelling her femininity and beauty. Nonetheless, Kristeva describes her encounter with the abject as the process where “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself* . . . I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit” (3). The abject is unlike Freud’s theory of the unconscious, which “presupposes a repression of contents . . . that, thereby, do not have access to consciousness but effect within the subject modifications” (7); although these repressed contents or denied desires may resurface, hence the phrase “return of the repressed,” the general understanding of Freud’s concept is that “so long as [repression] doesn’t return, it is well out of sight” (McAfee 48). The abject, on the other hand, constantly threatens to subvert this process of forming subjectivity and collapsing those very borders that create our identity. Even “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (Kristeva 2). The abject always “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire” (1), hovering over the periphery of our identity as that

which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4).

Considering her reliance on the Kristevan abject, I find that there are several inconsistencies in Riddy’s argument. Perhaps the main issue in Riddy’s work is the discrepancy between abjection and constituting a stable identity of any kind, irrespective of gender; the identity that is constituted by the abject is anything but stable. As Kristeva notes, and Riddy mentions, the abject “is above all, ambiguity. Because while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from that what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (Kristeva 9). Existing as “a vortex of summons and repulsion” (1), we take joy in it and fear it at the same time, because it always threatens our borders and identities. While we must experience the abject in order to constitute identity, any borders we establish to create ourselves are ultimately tenuous; therefore, the attempt to constitute a “stable masculine identity” by “‘pushing aside’ Cresseid” (Riddy 285) can never be wholly successful. Riddy acknowledges that the formation of masculine identity is not as obvious a theme as the “fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troylus”¹ (Henryson 546) binary seems to suggest, because it depends entirely on actively writing femininity as foul and grotesque (Riddy 284, 85-86). However, coding Cresseid as monstrous need not code *all* of femininity in the same manner; Riddy has ignored the place of Henryson’s “worthie wemen” (Henryson 610) in this scenario and, as a result, she fails to consider how they relate to the Kristevan model, or potentially confuse masculine identity.

¹ All quotations in this essay refer by line number to Robert Henryson, *Testament of Cresseid*, ed. Robert L. Kindrick (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

Riddy further undermines her argument by dismissing Douglas Gray's account of the *Testament*, on the basis of his liberal humanist view of Cresseid as a real character "with a psychology . . . capable of moral understanding, choice, and development" (Riddy 287). Since the Renaissance, humanism has emphasised the importance and centrality of the individual in the world, where the human being becomes the core object of study. More specifically, the assumed subject of liberal humanism is always male, hence privileging the formation of the male subject. Riddy claims to reject a humanist reading of the text; however, by focusing on Troilus' development of masculine identity, she appears to be making the humanist argument she so readily dismisses, while ignoring the effect of Cresseid's abjection on her femininity. Though it is moot whether Troilus achieves the "spiritual change of some kind" (287) that Gray claims for Cresseid, Troilus' character does undergo a development. The Troilus depicted in the beginning of the poem, who "neir out of wit abraid / And weipit soir with visage pail of hew" (Henryson 45-46), is a very different character from the Troilus who declares at the end, "I can no moir; / Scho was untrew and wo is me thairfoir" (601-2), suggesting his psychological acceptance both of Cresseid's actions and the present circumstances. Though Henryson's focus is on Cresseid, the stress Riddy places in her reading is on Troilus' own individuality; emphasising Troilus' own moral development and formation of masculine identity, actually supports the humanist reading that Riddy claims to reject.

If the *Testament* is open to interpreting Troilus as a character with a psychology, as Riddy has demonstrated, then this same possibility should also be open to Cresseid. Riddy, however, resists such a reading and raises the question of how Cresseid is to be interpreted, as a voice or a character. Riddy treats Cresseid as if she were created through rhetoric alone, standing as a series of voices representing different genres and subject

positions. The problem with this approach is that Cresseid's disgusting physicality is clearly important to the poem. In fact, the emphasis Riddy places on Cresseid's physical filth and defilement to establish her as abject actually confirms the argument that Cresseid must be treated as a figure whose corporeality is emphatically represented. This notion must overturn any suggestion that Cresseid is without form and not a complete, unified individual in relation to Troilus and thus masculinity. Since a voice cannot be considered abject, Riddy problematizes Kristeva's theory by considering Cresseid as a series of voices and abject. The abject is what one violently rejects, expels, or spits out; it is a corpse, the skin on the surface of milk, or even animals (in terms of primal repression) (Kristeva 2-3, 12). It is something concrete, rather than an abstraction. A voice, on the other hand, is no *thing* and thus cannot be treated in either of those ways. This is precisely why Cresseid cannot be treated as a voice—completely formless and physically indefinable—and abject. The abject and a voice seem incompatible in light of Kristeva's description of the abject. Despite the fact that the abject does not have a “definable *object*” (Kristeva 1), it is nonetheless, “a ‘*something*’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (2, my emphasis).

While the focus of this recent criticism has been to determine how the abject functions to establish masculine identity, I will revisit the theoretical basis of Cresseid's feminine transformation through the same Kristevan theory of abjection cited in Riddy's article. It is important to realize that Troilus' abjection of Cresseid is not the only form of abjection in the poem. Cresseid also experiences abjection, arguably in a much more powerful and intimate way. I will use Kristeva to explore the process of how Cresseid's own subjectivity is constituted, and how this process affects her femininity, illuminating what Riddy has ignored. As we encounter the abject to establish our own identities, it is

appropriate for Cresseid to experience abjection, both socially and physically, in order paradoxically to re-create her identity; although she loses her status in society in the beginning of the poem, she is able to re-create it again through abjection. As abjection establishes how individuals come to see themselves as separate beings with their own borders, Cresseid must be treated not as a collection of disjointed voices, but as a unified individual who creates herself through this experience.

The process whereby Cresseid experiences the abject begins with the realization of her social expulsion in the beginning of the poem, which then transforms into a physical abjection of her femininity as the result of her dream; this is an internal and meditative process. As David J. Parkinson points out, “without warning or explanation, the protagonist is ejected into painful and disgraceful exile,” and the poem’s emphasis is on “debasement and expulsion” (Parkinson 355). So the narrative of the “wofull end of this lustie Creisseid” (Henryson 69) opens with Cresseid’s expulsion by Diomedes:

Quhen Diomeid had all his appetyte,
And mair, fulfillit of this fair ladie,
Upon ane uther he set his haill delyte,
And send to hir ane lybell of repudie
And hir excludit fra his companie.
Than desolait scho walkit up and down,
And sum men sayis into the court commoun. (71-77)

Given this bill of divorce, the poem begins with Cresseid’s loss of her social status and identity as Diomedes’s wife. Her exclusion from his company becomes not only the source of her aimless wandering in the community and whoredom, as the narrator remarks that she goes “among the Greikis are and lait, / Sa giglotlike takand [her] foull plesance” (82-83), but motivates her desire to disguise herself as she passes out of town to her father Calchas’ mansion. Through Cresseid’s expulsion, and her desire to keep her current social status hidden, we are meant to understand the disparity between her past and present

social identities: she was “the once cherished mistress of a royal prince rejected by another lover and reduced to promiscuity in a setting calculated to recall her former position of honour” (Godman 292). Interestingly, it is not her known promiscuity but her exclusion from Diomedes’s company that primarily forms the basis of her shame, emphasising the importance of the social identity and status that accompany medieval marriage, especially a prominent marriage like Cresseid’s to Diomedes. Accordingly, Cresseid continues to hide the news of her separation when she enters Calchas’ home. Rather than publicly participating in the custom of her father’s temple, she chooses to hide herself in a secret chapel to avoid “giving of the pepill ony deming / Of hir expuls fra Diomeid the king” (Henryson 118-19).

Cresseid’s rejection by Diomedes’s is not the sole form of exclusion she encounters throughout the poem. Calchas’ first speech to Cresseid offers another indication of her altered status. Though he welcomes Cresseid, referring to her as “douchter” (103), the final term he uses to describe her presents an interesting challenge: “thow art full deir ane gest” (105). It is precisely this term, “gest,” which creates a problem for Cresseid, as it implies both transience and strangeness, and it indicates Calchas’ expectation that her stay will be temporary. Cresseid’s attempt to reassume her status as daughter to Calchas, which she held prior to becoming a wife to Diomedes, is a failure. This point is crucial because her identity in terms of her placement in society is also contingent upon her relationship with men. This is precisely what prompts her lament:

Now am I maid ane unworthie outwaill,
And all in cair translatit is my joy.
Quha sall me gyde? Quha sall me now convoy,
Sen I fra Diomeid and nobill Troylus
Am clene excludit, as abject odious? (129-33)

No longer able to define her place in society as a wife to Diomedes, a lover to Troilus, or even a daughter to her father, Cresseid's social identity is lost; the uncertainty from not having a male to "gyde" and protect her also relates to uncertainty of her own social identity. Catherine S. Cox makes a similar point, observing that "Cresseid belongs nowhere and has no place properly of her own . . . for by becoming the property of everyone she has become the property of no one" (Cox 59). It is her loss of a definite social identity that triggers Cresseid's descent into nothingness.

As a result, Cresseid begins to experience the abject through her inability to construct a social identity from her relation to male figures. However, it should be mentioned that while the passage cited above uses the term "abject," it is certainly not in the theoretical Kristevan sense of abjection; in fact, as Denton Fox points out in his notes to the poem, the term is a noun meaning "outcast," which appropriately reinforces the theme of exile, and was first recorded in English in 1534 (Fox 348). The term "abject" reinforces the loss of social identity. This loss of identity is central to relating Cresseid's experience to Kristeva's theory, as "the one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing" (Kristeva 8). The *deject* is one whose space is marked by uncertainty, as the "fluid confines [of his universe] . . . constantly question his solidity" (8). As Cresseid is thrust from spaces of stability, which are clearly masculine, she is devoid of a certain social identity. The space she inhabits within her community is one that is now obscure. As the theory allows for several interpretations of how we understand the abject and abjection, taking these views into consideration, I understand Cresseid here as abject from the perspective of her own society; however, she is not yet consciously aware of her own physical transformation at

this point in the poem, and will only realize it after her dream. At this point, male figures of authority, like Diomedes, are actively thrusting Cresseid from society; they are interpreted as the Kristevan stray as they situate and separate themselves from the abject (Cresseid). Wandering through the Greek court and countryside, divided from the men who give her a meaningful place in society, Cresseid is clearly representative of the abject in relation to Kristeva's model of the stray.

As a result of her outcast social position, Cresseid soon undergoes her unfortunate physical transformation, wherein she experiences physical abjection in the most literal and graphic sense. Blaspheming Cupid and Venus for her pitiful condition, Cresseid falls into a dream, where she envisions an assembly of planetary gods descending from their spheres to inflict the penalty of leprosy on her. It is important to grasp relevant criticism pertaining to both the status of the planetary gods and of her dream not only to understand how to approach Cresseid's experience with the abject, but also because both components of the poem have long been points of critical debate. As to the potential causes of Cresseid's leprosy, Fox has provided three possibilities based on medieval medical theory: a result of a physical cause (venereal disease), of astrological factors and of the influence of planets, or of God, as a direct punishment for sin (Fox pp. 1xxxvii-iii). To a large extent, scholarship on the *Testament* has accepted a view of the planetary deities as actual divinities, or as powerful cosmic or natural forces, both necessary and inalterable; this view requires a reading of the dream as anything but a dream in the sense of an experience that occurs only inside Cresseid's consciousness. This kind of interpretation rests on viewing the gods as figures that restore the moral order of the universe by descending and judging Cresseid; thus, they affect Cresseid in a very real way by condemning her with leprosy as punishment for her blasphemy. Given this view of the

gods, Cresseid is a passive recipient of her destiny. Jill Mann follows this idea, and writes that Henryson “uses the planetary gods as a poetic means of representing man’s need to recognize his place in a universe whose laws are enacted through him and yet are irrespective of him” (Mann 96). Similarly, Jana Matthews emphasises the legal position of the gods, suggesting that “the boundaries of Cresseid’s body / land are tightly secured within the narrative and legal jurisdiction of the planetary deities,” and so her “failure to adhere to her contract enables the gods to assume control over her body, thereby consigning her to the role of a legal subject” (Matthews 49). Even if divine providence does not exist in the poem, the alternative view supposes that Cresseid is judged by natural laws of time and change. In this respect, John MacQueen articulates a symbolic view of the gods: the planets “are to be regarded as embodiments of the general principles which govern most aspects of human and earthly affairs,” and represent “the physical law of the universe . . . time and change, growth and decay” (MacQueen 62, 70).

Conversely, a literal approach to Cresseid’s dream allows Cresseid’s abjection of the femininity and beauty from her body to be seen as a result of her own actions. From this perspective, Cresseid is not a mere thing or object expelled from and by society, but actively creates her own subjectivity which, until this point in the poem, she has certainly lost. In examining the dream, Ralph Hanna III acknowledges the critical divide between assuming that “Cresseid’s dream is scarcely a dream in any literal sense,” and reading “the dream as less than literal truth, but . . . because the actions of the dream seem to impinge on living reality the dream must be prophetic” (Hanna, “Cresseid’s Dream” 289). He then categorizes Cresseid’s dream according to medieval dream theory, noting that it combines *insomnium* (a nightmare brought about because of her heightened emotions, which are mirrored in her dream), and *oraculum* or *visio* (where the appearance of the

gods and the discovery of her leprosy suggests that the prophecy is true) (294). Two passages in the *Testament* support a literal reading of the dream. After Cresseid curses Venus and Cupid, Henryson writes,

. . . doun in ane extasie,
Ravischit in spreit, intill ane dreame scho fell,
And be apperance hard, quhair scho did ly,
Cupide the king ringand ane silver bell,
Quhilk men micht heir fra hevin unto hell (Henryson 141-45)

Likewise, when the dream sequence concludes, the narrator remarks,

This doolie dreame, this uglye visioun
Brocht to ane end, Cresseid fra it awoik,
And all that court and convocatioun
Vanischit away . . . (344-47)

The repeated references to “dreame” at the beginning and end of the sequence, as well as “visioun,” and the descriptions of falling, lying, and awakening all reinforce the idea that what Cresseid experiences is a dream in the most literal sense; in other words, Cresseid strictly experiences visions and imaginary sense-impressions during sleep that should not be interpreted as prophetic or influenced by divine beings. The lexical set—“extasie,” “ravischit,” “spreit,” and “aperance”—also functions to support this reading through the relation each term bears to a particular bodily or mental state. Specifically, with regards to “extasie” and “ravischit,” Hanna notes “their primary reference here is almost surely physical . . . [they suggest] a collapse brought on by heightened emotional confusion” (Hanna, “Cresseid’s Dream” 290). While few other critics have analysed the issue, both MacQueen and A. C. Spearing have suggested viewing the sequence as a “poetic dream” (Spearing, “*The Testament of Cresseid*” 220), or a dream vision in the form of “a traditional dream-allegory,” which “allegorizes Cresseid’s behaviour from her desertion of Troilus to the full physical realization of the ultimate consequences” (MacQueen 65,

81). While Spearing and MacQueen approach the dream only as a literary device, Hanna's argument takes the logical step of treating the dream as simply unconscious mental activity during sleep, with its contents influenced by intense emotions.

If the entire assembly of planetary gods is, in fact, part of a lengthy dream sequence, the gods can then be interpreted, not as actual deities, but as figments of Cresseid's imagination, figures that represent her own conflicted psychology. This interpretation presents a further way of understanding her transformation and her relation to the abject: the judgement Cresseid dreams to be the work of the gods is actually her own. Cresseid's psychological conflict or trauma is the direct result of her outcast social position; her descent into nothingness, and the social instability she feels in her separation from male figures is reflected in the mutable nature of the gods in her dream. The issue for Cresseid here is change, and as much of the poem's emphasis is on this very theme, the gods are themselves clearly representative of change. The hybridity of the gods, seen in their combination of mythological and astrological elements, is a medieval commonplace. Marshall W. Stearns argues, "Chaucer had pioneered and made poetic capital of the astrological magic in which his age had come to believe" (Stearns, "The Planet Portraits" 911). A. J. Minnis also acknowledges "Christians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were fascinated by classical lore of every kind," and states that "the importance of the link between the gods and the planets was sustained by the commonplace medieval belief that heavenly bodies had real power over human lives" (Minnis 1, 33). Not only does the dual nature of each individual god suggest volatility, but they also continue to form binaries among themselves or, as Mann writes, "a pattern of opposition" (Mann 97). The icy portrait of Saturn is juxtaposed with the radiant vigour of Jupiter, the wrath and cruelty of Mars with the fair and nurturing Phoebus, and the

rhetorical eloquence of red-hooded Mercury with the barren colourlessness of Cynthia. A more detailed account of each planetary portrait can be found in both Stearns' and Mann's work; the vital point is that each of these contrasting pairs—hot/cold, youth/age, and growth/decay—reinforces the themes of time and change in a human experience.

Though Venus is the only planetary deity who stands independently and without contrast, she contains within herself an entire range of oppositions in her celebrated portrait:

Bot in hir face semit greit variance,
Quhyles perfyte treuth and quhyles inconstance.

Under smyling scho was dissimulait,
Provocative with blenkis amorous,
And suddanely changit and alterait,
Angrie as ony serpent vennemous,
Richt pungitive with wordis odious;
Thus variant scho was, quha list tak keip:
With ane eye lauch, and with the uther weip,

In taikning that all fleschelic paramour,
Quhilk Venus hes in reull and governance,
Is sum tyme sweit, sum tyme bitter and sour,
Richt unstabill and full of variance,
Mingit with cairfull joy and fals plesance,
Now hait, now cauld, now blyith, now full of wo,
Now grene as leif, now widderit and ago. (Henryson 223-38)

While Stearns notes that “this portrait of Venus owes little to astrology . . . [as] the emphasis has been thrown on her ‘greit variance’” (Stearns, “The Planet Portraits” 921), the dramatic stress on her inconsistency is entirely appropriate. Cresseid, too, has been “Angrie as ony serpent vennemous, / Richt pungitive with wordis odious” in her recent curse to the gods. Just prior to her dream, “Upon Venus and Cupide angerly / Scho cryit out, and said on this same wyse, / ‘Allace, that ever I maid yow sacrifice!’” (124-26). Later in the poem, she will recognize her “greit untabilnes” (568), “greit unfaithfulnes”

(570) and inconstancy (571) as the result of her demise. Cresseid's own changing social, emotional, and physical conditions are reflected in the portrait of Venus, the planetary goddess traditionally responsible for both changing fortune and the mutability of love.

Moreover, it should be noted that the two gods responsible for passing judgement on Cresseid—Saturn and Cynthia—represent time and change on an astrological level; “Saturn (by virtue of his Greek name Kronos) represents Time, and the moon, Change” (Mann 93). However, both planets also exhibit physical attributes connected with leprosy and, consequently, bestow upon Cresseid physical conditions similar to their own. This suggestion is widely accepted in criticism and best understood by examining their individual portraits and the judgment each passes on the sleeping Cresseid. Saturn's portrait, appearing first in the sequence, emphasises age and sterility, a kind of living death:

His face fronsit, his lyre was lyke the leid,
His teith chatterit and cheverit with the chin,
His ene drowpit, how sonkin in his heid,
Out of his nois the meldrop fast can rin,
With lippis bla and cheikis leine and thin;
The ice schoklis that fra his hair doun hang
Was wonder greit, and as ane speir als lang. (Henryson 155-61)

Just as icicles hang from Saturn's body, Cresseid envisions a punishment wherein she is not only literally excluded or abjected permanently from her own feminine beauty, but is also deprived of all bodily heat and moisture (318-22). Saturn is generally understood as “cold and dry, or melancholic, the qualities conferred upon Cresseid by the verdict of the planets . . . [and] one of the diseases under the jurisdiction of Saturn is leprosy” (Stearns, “Henryson and the Leper Cresseid” 268-69). The “living death” that characterizes Saturn is synonymous with medieval attitudes towards lepers, as I will show later in this chapter. While Stearns views Cynthia's as “the shortest and the least original of the planet

portraits” (Stearns, “The Planet Portraits” 925), to ignore her role in the dream sequence is to miss similarities to Saturn’s features, primarily in her blackened, spotted body:

Of colour blak, buskit with hornis twa,
And in the nicht scho listis best appeir;
Haw as the leid, of colour nathing cleir,

...

Hir gyse was gray and full of spottis blak. (Henryson 255-60)

Cynthia’s judgement is like Saturn’s, not only depriving Cresseid of bodily heat, but also imparting similar physical impurity and blackness (334-43). Comparing both Saturn’s and Cynthia’s individual planetary portraits with the judgments they pass on Cresseid reveals that the kind of physical punishment each bestows corresponds entirely to their own physical characteristics. At the beginning of their judgements, both deities physically afflict her in ways that correlate with and imply medieval conceptions of leprosy, and both close by condemning her to a life of poverty and beggary (e.g., 334).

As metaphorical figures representing the concepts of time and change, each planetary deity is also a reflection of the mental and emotional imbalance that arises from Cresseid’s newly altered social position. As such, what occurs in this section of the poem is a confusion or blurring of the external and internal, as Cresseid’s external world manifests a direct influence on her subconscious. While the judgement she envisions is perhaps influenced by her emotional anguish, since dreams are internal and meditative processes, Cresseid is nonetheless solely responsible for actively punishing herself; the judgement she imagines she receives is thus her own. It is plausible that Cresseid has begun to experience the physical effects of leprosy even prior to the dream, as in examining the metaphor she uses—“Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane” (Henryson 139)—MacQueen suggests that there is already “physical change in her beauty. The whole narrative at this point implies that to herself Cresseid is already altered

and disfigured” (MacQueen 61). In light of this reading, then, what the gods individually reflect is a kind of physical change that Cresseid has already begun to experience. The similarities between the gods’ and Cresseid’s portraits can thus be explained if we understand the gods as projections of her incipient leprosy; Cresseid, unconsciously entering into this new state, projects the physical characteristics of leprosy onto the figures in her dream. The gods, then, do not appear leprous in her dream because they will cause her new condition, as criticism has thus far accepted, but because Cresseid has unknowingly willed them to appear so. Cresseid’s psychological trauma, arising from her loss of social identity, coupled with the progressive leprosy that she is unaware of until after her dream, is what causes Cresseid to create the gods, these symbolic entities made available by her culture. While critics can debate whether or not MacQueen’s reference proves that Cresseid is aware of her changing physical condition before the dream, it is vital to recognize that her gradual awakening to this physical change and her new social condition occurs within and, more consciously, after her dream.

Steven Kruger’s work on dreams in the Middle Ages suggests that dreams can be viewed as self-reflexive through “the pervasive medieval association between dreams and that premier instrument of self-examination, the mirror” (Kruger 136). The act of looking in the mirror is often as a means to gain self-knowledge, so “Cresseid’s fall into leprosy . . . is announced in a dream and confirmed by a mirror” (136). Though Kruger here views the dream as “revelations of divine will” (137), the more pertinent issue, especially with regards to the abject, is his suggestion that dreams also function as “reflections of psychology” (137). The dream is central to the abject because it “is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible

constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject” (Kristeva 5). So Cresseid’s internal dream not only influences her external perception of her physical progression towards leprosy, but Cresseid also takes control of her self here. While she will later acknowledge her own faults and cease blaming external forces, it must be realized that Cresseid is not the passive recipient of her destiny, as some critics believe, but through the process of abjection that occurs within her dream, she actively creates her own borders and identity. This idea also supports Hanna’s argument that “dreams that come true do so because of human deeds, not because of some external predestination” (Hanna, “Cresseid’s Dream” 295).

As a result of experiencing abjection, the process whereby individuals establish boundaries between self and other by expelling or rejecting what they considered other to the self, Cresseid paradoxically recreates her own identity as a leper. This development occurs, as I have argued, within her dream. After Calchas “luikit on hir uglye lipper face” (Henryson 372), evidence that Cresseid begins to associate with this new identity can be found in her request to change living environments. Based on her new position as a leper, Cresseid recognizes the need to leave her father’s home and live segregated from the community. She asks to be taken “To yone hospitall at the tounis end” (382), and “Delyverit . . . at the spittaill hous (391). In turn, Calchas quickly “Convoyit hir, that na man suld espy, / Unto ane village half ane myle thairby” (389-90), to a house designated only for those afflicted with leprosy. Even with regards to clothing, Cresseid exchanges the “gay garmentis with mony gudely gown” (422) that once defined her, to be in “ane mantill and ane bawer hat, / With cop and clapper” (386-87). Though clothing and especially items such as the “cop and clapper” are used to demarcate those who are leprous from healthy individuals, the leper woman that later speaks to Cresseid indicates

that there are even laws particular to those who share their condition. The leper woman states, “Go leir to clap thy clapper to and fro, / And leif efter the law of lipper leid” (479-80). These passages suggest that lepers had designated spaces in society, specific clothing and items to distinctly mark them, and even laws or social codes to abide by; their identity is perhaps even more vital and pronounced in terms of the spiritual function they perform for society.

Medieval notions of leprosy must be addressed more fully to better explain why I am suggesting that creating an identity as a leper is paradoxical. In the Middle Ages, leprosy was often difficult to classify accurately, as there was no “clear distinction between venereal diseases and the scourge of scourges—leprosy” (Jacquart and Thomasset 183). The medieval physician—as well as clergy, bodies of citizens, and even other lepers, who were also considered qualified to identify leprosy—“had little available to him in the way of training, textbooks, or sound medical tradition” (Brody 33) to give a proper diagnosis. As a result, medieval practitioners were commonly unable to distinguish among a plethora of diseases. Brody also notes that theory often confounded accuracy, as did a physician’s reliance on traditional writings, which perpetuated both erroneous medical information and stereotypes. Physicians often classified leprosy according to the humoral theory, which presupposes that the four elements that consist of the world—earth, air, fire, and water—are “linked with one of the four principal body fluids (the cardinal humors), and each of the fluids thereby assumes certain qualities of the elements” (36). As such, leprosy was organized according to “the four types of lepra: elephantia, which has to be produced from black bile infecting blood; leonina, from bile corrupting blood; tyriana from phlegm infecting the blood; alopecia from corrupt blood” (37). Though Stearns has suggested that Cresseid’s leprosy be classed as elephantiasis,

based on Sir J. Y. Simpson's examination of Cresseid's symptoms (Stearns, "Robert Henryson" 267), and though other scholars have even suggested syphilis (Rawcliffe 88-89), Cresseid is generally thought to suffer from a straightforward and common case of leprosy. Fox mentions, "of the symptoms which she is stated or implied to have, the discoloration of the skin (339, 396), the dark facial lumps (340, 395) . . . are all standard symptoms of leprosy, according to both medieval and modern thought" (Fox pp. 1xxxv).

Once diagnosed with leprosy, the individual usually had all legal rights and privileges revoked, was effectively excluded from society, and "in 1179, the Third Lateran Council issued a decree which urged that the segregation of lepers from society be accompanied by appropriate ceremony . . . the *separatio leprosorum*" (Brody 64), which only slightly differed from the ceremony one would give for the dead. The leper's exclusion from society was prompted by a fear of contamination and marked "by means of the grim ritual which forced him to stand in a grave while mass was said over him. Declared dead to the world, he might be banished to a leper house or simply banished" (105). While Brody notes that the thoroughness with which these procedures were followed greatly varied throughout Europe, this process of being pronounced dead to the world is what prompts most scholars to define lepers as nothing, and the punishment of leprosy as a kind of descent into nothingness. Mathews associates leprosy with "nothingness" (Mathews 57), stating, "the symbolic burial of the leper parallels the actual disposal of legal rights and identity . . . [as] without a discernable self—a body that society identifies as being endowed with human qualities—the leper ceases to legally exist" (58). She concludes that the process of exclusion aims as its ultimate goal "to dehumanize the leper in every way possible and emphasize that the diseased body is not the 'other' but 'another,' something that is decidedly devoid of human attributes" (62). In

the most basic sense, scholars understand leprosy as the disease that completely “annihilates person and identity” (Mann 99).

Though the basis for claiming nothingness in a legal context is indisputable, I cannot wholly agree with the notion that leprosy means a complete and utter annihilation of identity. It is true that leprosy was not only considered a disease that afflicted the body, but also a moral disease and a form of divine punishment as a result of which doctors “viewed one leper as not very different from another, either physically or morally” (Brody 25); however, leprosy is still an identity in and of itself and, especially in a spiritual context, it placed individuals afflicted with the disease in an especially singular position in society. Though singled out for sin and impurity, lepers were also commonly viewed as closest to God: “when lepers were cast out from human society, then, they entered into a specially close relation with God, as the term *pauperes Christi*, would suggest” (Fox pp. 1xxxix). This view was disseminated primarily by the Church, and substantiated by several biblical references. Above all, “Christ was believed to have been *quasi leprosus*” (Rawcliffe 43), through his own physical suffering and, frequently depicted, torment body. Carole Rawcliffe states that the association “between Christ and the leper made prominent by figures such as Queen Matilda . . . and Hugh of Lincoln . . . prompted a fashion for conspicuous acts of self abasement” (6); such acts ranged from kissing their faces and washing their feet (6). In addition to Christ’s association with the disease “in numerous sermons” (Brody 104), Lazarus is commonly held as “the model of the chosen leper” (102), and Job was recognized as afflicted with leprosy. The “sense that God had deliberately chosen the leper emerges clearly from the many comparisons made between him and the Old Testament icon of righteous suffering, Job” (Rawcliffe 56). Since “a life of pain and rejection could, moreover, bring one closer to God” (43), the

leper was considered as “not merely the elect of God; he *was* God, or at least an earthly reminder” (60). These commonplace associations in the Middle Ages prompt Rawcliffe to argue that leprosy “was regarded as a mark of election, akin to a religious calling, and did not automatically lead to segregation or vilification” (43).

As early as the fourth century, both Gregory of Nazianus and Gregory of Nyssa, in their three sermons traditionally called “On the Love of the Poor,” “invite the audience to come into physical contact with the suffering, sacred leper in order to effect spiritual healing for those who are physically well” (Holman 285). In each sermon physical contact with the diseased is encouraged to “fulfill the moral mandate of a *philanthropia* that, in turn, may open one to receive spiritual healing” (295). Using the metaphor of contagion, Gregory of Nyssa specifically urges “redemptive almsgiving” (303), and “argue[s] for spiritual healing based on a type of ‘reverse contagion’ . . . that goodness and salvation are also contagious. This contagion of holiness may be ‘caught’ through direct contact with lepers, those channels of divine sanctity” (303). As channels for holiness and divinity, the leper’s existence enabled healthy individuals to bring their own souls into a state of atonement and a closer relationship to God through performing acts of charity or almsgiving. As a result, Rawcliffe states “right across the social spectrum, from royalty, to humble shopkeepers, from bishops to . . . criminals, men and women supported the *leprosaria* as they supported other religious institutions, in the hope of redemption” (Rawcliffe 150). While associating the disease with sanctity and the divine promise of salvation may have been offered as a source of comfort for the excluded leper, he ultimately held a fundamental role in facilitating and fulfilling the sacrament of penance. The leper played a “crucial role in the economy of salvation,” as “through [his]

Job-like suffering, he accumulated enough spiritual credit purchase the release of others beside himself” (Rawcliffe 103). Thus the physical leper heals the spiritual one.

In the *Testament*, this exchange is entirely present. When Troilus returns to Troy victorious, and “Throw jeopardie of weir had strikken down / Knichtis of Grece in number marvellous” (Henryson 486-87), he responds directly to the lepers’ unified cry, ““To us lipper part of your almous deid!”” (494):

For knichtlie pietie and memoriall
Of fair Cresseid, ane gyrdill can he tak,
Ane purs of gold, and mony gay jowall,
And in the skirt of Cresseid doun can swak. (519-21)

It is possible to conclude that what inspires Troilus to give alms to Cresseid arises solely out of both his knightly pity and fair memory of her, but these are not the only motivations that the text suggests. In fact, another reason is offered in Cresseid’s question: “Quhat lord is yone,” quod scho, “have ye na feill, / Hes done to us so greit humanitie?” (533-34). It is this final term, “humanitie,” that suggests another reason, as the word connotes “kindness [or] mercy” (*MED*). As Cresseid suggests, the act of giving alms illustrates Troilus’ kindness; however, his actions also imply a demonstration of charity, one of the three Cardinal Virtues. Thus, giving alms serves a twofold purpose—it literally offers the lepers some form of relief (in this case monetary), and also grants Troilus and his troops the opportunity to uphold their virtue and fulfil the sacrament of penance. Even when we recall Cresseid’s conversation with her father just after his discovery of her leprosy, Cresseid reinforces the notion of charity. To Calchas, she makes an earnest request: “let me gang / To yone hospitall at the tounis end, / And thidder sum meit for cheritie me send” (Henryson 381-83). Granting her request, Calchas “Delyverit hir in at the spittail hous, / And daylie sent hir part of his almous” (391-92). Both

examples are clearly demonstrative of the two most elementary forms of alms giving—food and money. While these instances highlight exchanges that occur between Cresseid and male figures, in no way should Cresseid’s identity as a leper solely confirm masculinity identity, as Riddy has previously suggested. Though rejected from the community, Cresseid lives among the “lipper folk” (526)—male and female lepers—and together, they perform a *social* role by allowing men and woman alike to engage in charitable acts. Moreover, by portraying Cresseid’s interactions with other lepers, Henryson offers insight into the leper community they form. In this respect, the *Testament* confirms this very notion that lepers held a vital role and identity in society, enabling healthy individuals to perform acts of penance and charity.

Since lepers helped to trigger almsgiving, it is necessary to realize that the one who gives the most in this poem is Cresseid; she embodies the very virtue of charity that her status as a leper attempts to stir in others. Just prior to her death, Cresseid writes her final testament:

‘Heir I beteiche my corps and carioun
With wormis and with taidis to be rent;
My cop and clapper, and myne ornament,
And all my gold the lipper folk sall have,
Quhen I am deid, to burie me in grave.

‘This royall ring, set with this rubie reid,
Quhilk Troylus in drowrie to me send,
To him agane I leif it quhen I am deid,
To mak my cairfull deid unto him kend.
Thus I conclude schortlie and mak ane end:
My spreit I leif to Diane, quhair scho dwellis,
To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis.

‘O Diomeid, thou hes baith broche and belt
Quhilk Troylus gave me in takning
Of his trew lufe.’ (577-91)

In an utterly selfless act that evokes deep pathos, Cresseid bequeaths not only the few material possessions she has left, but also the entirety of her body and soul. Her testament stands, above all, as the ultimate demonstration of charity.

I have previously suggested that Cresseid paradoxically re-creates her identity as a leper through abjection, and it is precisely in this sense that she does so. By assuming a social position that is commonly regarded as “nothing,” especially in a legal context, and belonging to the realm of the dead, rather than to that of the living, Cresseid actually re-creates another identity. From her initial position in the poem, when she is progressively excluded by every male that had once given her a social position, through the process of abjection, which she experiences in her dream, Cresseid is able to realize a new identity as a leper. This reading, I think, presents a unique approach to understanding Cresseid’s character and her treatment in Henryson’s work. Cresseid cannot be considered a merely passive recipient of her fate, if we recognize that Cresseid experiences the abject. It is by this experience alone that Cresseid becomes fully responsible for shaping her own destiny. Cresseid ceases blaming external forces for her own physical transformation, and finally acknowledges “Nane but my self as now I will accuse” (574); by internalizing blame, she forms her subjectivity, and recognizes the total control she has over what her life has become. What we witness in the *Testament* through abjection is an extraordinarily powerful creation of selfhood and identity.

Chapter Three:

Femininity and Desire in the *Awntyrs off Arthure*

Over the past few decades, scholarly interest in the early fifteenth-century alliterative poem the *Awntyrs off Arthure* has been devoted, for the most part, to determining whether its two substantial parts function together as a single coherent narrative. While both main episodes in the *Awntyrs* include Gawain and foreign figures that intrude to critique Arthurian society, many critics have insisted that the text is “a disreputable work of art because it violates all canons of artistic unity” (Hanna, “An Interpretation” 277). As a result, *Awntyrs* has received little attention in comparison to other texts belonging to the “Alliterative Revival” of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, namely *Piers Plowman*, and the works of the Pearl poet.

The poem’s first episode features a ghost from beyond the grave, Gaynour’s mother, who speaks to Gawain and Gaynour of the past, present, and future sins of the aristocratic Arthurian world. She urges Gaynour to learn from her example and give up her worldly vices—namely pride and illicit sexuality—in favour of the Christian virtues of charity and chastity. Before her departure, the ghost prophesies the eventual destruction of the Round Table. Just as quickly as she enters and leaves the murky Tarn Wathelan, the narrative shifts its focus to Arthurian imperialism, as Gawain battles Galeron, who has interrupted a seemingly peaceful dinner scene at Rondoles Hall, claiming that Arthur has wrongfully given his territory to Gawain.

Since there is little reference to the first episode in the second, apart from the final stanza, where Gaynour commands thirty trentals to be sung for her mother’s soul, the predominant conclusion has been to regard them as two entirely separate and unrelated narratives, following Hermann Lubke’s early assumption in the late nineteenth century

that the text “is actually comprised of two separate poems” (Twu 106). Specifically, Lubke’s argument suggests that there was originally only one poem, the first episode with the ghost, and that at some later point, another poet added the second adventure, Gawain and Galeron’s battle. He also believed that a third figure was involved as a compiler to piece the two parts together (Hanna, *The Awntyrs off Arthure* 63). Lubke’s reading has since had a considerable influence on the direction of the poem’s criticism, “encouraging scholars to consider it a poorly conjoined, bipartite text” (Twu 106). Ralph Hanna III has been most notably influenced by Lubke’s interpretation (Hanna, *The Awntyrs off Arthure* 63-64),² treating “the poem as if it were two works: *Awntyrs A* (lines 1-338, 703-15) and *Awntyrs B* (lines 339-702)” (Hanna, “An Interpretation” 277), with the final stanza of the poem belonging to the first part. More recently, Helen Phillips has complicated previous compositional assumptions by suggesting that the *Awntyrs* be read as a tripartite narrative, based on the three fittes of the Ireland manuscript (Phillips, “Structure and Meaning” 71).³

A. C. Spearing has taken a somewhat similar position to Phillips on the centrality of Arthur and the significance of his appearance at the midpoint of the text. He follows a method of numerological analysis proposed by Alastair Fowler that “points to the importance of the central position in much Renaissance pageantry, architecture, and

² For scholars who are influenced by Hanna’s bipartite reading, see David N. Klausner, “Exempla and *The Awntyrs off Arthure*” (*Mediaeval Studies*, 1972) 309; Takami Matsuda, “*The Awntyrs off Arthure* and the Arthurian History” (*Poetica*, 1983) 48-49; and Margaret Robson, “From Beyond the Grave: Darkness at Noon in *the Awntyrs off Arthure*” (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) 222.

³ According to the three fitt structure, the first fitt contains the opening twenty stanzas, the exchange between the ghost and Gaynour, and the third comprises the last sixteen stanzas, the battle between Gawain and Galeron. The second fitt depicts Arthur seated at the Round Table at the height of his sovereignty, and addresses themes of territorial lordship (Phillips, “Structure and Meaning” 73).

literature” (Spearing, “Central and Displaced Sovereignty” 247). This is known as the “sovereign midpoint,” which suits the text as “Arthur is also enthroned at the exact centre of the poem . . . [the] central stanza, the twenty-eighth” (251). Furthermore, the midpoint of that stanza also “emphatically enthrone[s] Arthur in his sovereignty: ‘He was the soueraynest sir sitting in sete’” (252). Despite this similarity, Spearing’s views on the structure of the poem are vastly different from both Phillips’ tripartite and Hanna’s bipartite models. The general consensus on the poem’s structure has taken a substantial turn following his 1981 article, which presents a case for single authorship of the poem, proposing that the text be viewed as a pictorial diptych (Spearing, “*The Awntyrs*” 184, 186). He suggests that the two episodes, “like the two leaves of a diptych, are indeed separate and self-contained, but there are numerous links between them, and when put together they incite the reader to participate in the creation of meaning” (“Central and Displaced Sovereignty” 249). The diptych, a common form found in several medieval texts, reveals unity through juxtaposition and parallels between two seemingly unrelated parts.

While structure is undeniably central to shaping an approach to the poem, Krista Sue-Lo Twu correctly points out “the debate on the structure has so far postponed extensive literary analysis of the text on its own merits and in relation to the Arthurian canon” (Twu 107). In response to Twu’s suggestion, I propose to refrain from contributing to the structural debate. More specifically, I offer a detailed analysis of how feminine bodies are portrayed, not only to explore their relation to Arthurian society and masculine bodies, but also to remedy what criticism has so far failed seriously to approach. To this day, a strongly theoretical approach has yet to be applied to the text and, on the topic of femininity, Rosamund Allen has only hinted that the poem “concerns

the role of women in upper-class society” (Allen 6). Julia Kristeva’s work will inform my reading of *Awntyrs*, as her own theories of the abject provide an entry point for examining the portrayal of the female body. Her theory allows us to see how Gaynour’s mother is doubly abject—she is both a corpse and a mother. She threatens the primal boundary that all subjectivity is founded upon. Identity is predicated upon loss, division, and separation (the creation of borders to form our own unique identity), and the ghost’s body, as a corpse, is abject and thus threatens identity. As I will show, corpses can be seen as virtually borderless; the ghost therefore poses a threat to all subjectivity, which necessarily relies on upholding the boundaries that separate us from each other. Likewise, as a maternal figure she threatens the initial loss at the very core of our being—our separation from the mother, which establishes each child’s identity as distinct from hers. The threat she poses to Gaynour is the intimation that they share the same vice and, in turn, will share the same gruesome fate. While Kristeva’s theory will certainly illuminate a reading of the female figures, abjection will ultimately prove limiting, in the sense that it can only offer a reading of femininity that is threatening and negative; this is confirmed by the body of the ghost, who not only represents courtly femininity as a whole, as some critics have suggested, but also associates the female body with essentialist ideologies that regard it as inherently disgusting and subordinate. As this chapter progresses, I will argue that Lacanian psychoanalysis and Slavoj Žižek’s rendering of Jacques Lacan’s concept of the *objet petit a* offers a more valuable theoretical resource for understanding the complexity of the female characters. The ghost’s position in the poem, in relation to the two other women, Gaynour and Galeron’s lady, affects the structuring of desire. Importantly, through understanding her body as the *objet petit a*, masculine desires can continue to exist.

For Kristeva, abjection is the process of constituting one's identity through the course of expelling or rejecting what is considered other to one's own self. When an infant comes into being, it is born without borders and lives in an imaginary realm of plenitude—the *chora* (Kristeva 14). Only by means of loss and division can it form borders to create its identity, however tenuous this may be. Kristeva suggests that the abject has everything to do with what is considered improper and unclean; this rejection is marked with violence—retching, gagging, and expelling (2-3)—and Kristeva's examples are quite explicit. Whether it is waste or refuse, her first case describes an uncomfortable experience with milk:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk . . . I experience a gagging sensation . . . 'I' expel it. But since food is not an 'other' for 'me,' . . . I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*. (3)

So it is during the course of this painful experience that “I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit” (3). Through abjection subjects come to understand themselves as separate beings.

According to Kristeva's theory, the most graphic and recognizable example of the abject is a corpse, literally “death infecting life” (4). It encroaches on the very borders of being and poses a threat to our identity. The corpse is “cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it” (3). While dung, vomit, open wounds, and other bodily wastes mark “the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything” (3). The cadaver is the most revolting example of the abject because it is virtually borderless:

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the

breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. (4)

A corpse exemplifies the dissolution of borders between subject and object, and threatens our identity because identity depends on their maintenance. These ideas help to explain why “it is not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). When faced with a cadaver, we are confronted with what is problematic to demarcate; it interrupts the total understanding of our being and, at the same time, heightens our awareness of the fragility of our own very existence—the certainty of our own death is made transparently real.

Kristeva’s theory is well suited to *Awntyrs*, as the first episode features the ghost⁴ of Gaynour’s mother emerging from the Tarn Wathelan, “lowe one the loughe – in londe is not to layne - / In the lyknes of Lucyfere, laytheeste in Helle”⁵ (*Awntyrs* 83-84). Gliding towards Sir Gawain (85, 118) in a manner that surely resonates with Gaynour’s movement at the opening of the hunting scene (“gaili she glides” 26), the ghost’s body speaks volumes when her voice appears to fail, initially only “Yauland and yomerand, with many loude yelle” (86). Almost instantly, we are given lengthy descriptions of her body: “Bare was the body and blak to the bone, / Al biclagged in clay uncomly cladde” (105-6). While much of the description recalls stock *memento mori* images, it becomes

⁴ While I have just referred to Gaynour’s mother as a ghost, critics have quite interchangeably called her a ghost or a corpse. Though she can be described solely as an apparition that presents itself to Gaynour and Gawain (“goost,” “sprete” 100, 101), the emphasis on her body (“bere” 126) suggests that she must also be treated as a figure with a very real corporeal presence.

⁵ All quotations refer by line number to Thomas Hahn’s edition of the *Awntyrs off Arthure* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

apparent as the poem progresses that her body is a complete inversion of ideal courtly femininity. She is

Umbeclipped in a cloude of clethyng unclere,
Serkeled with serpentes all aboute the sides -
To tell the todes theron my tonge wer full tere. (119-21)

Even “On the chef of the cholle, / A pade pikes on the polle,” (114-15). Moreover, Gaynour’s mother is continually tormented by “the baleful bestes” (211), remarking that “the wilde wormes . . . worche me wrake” (216). In sum, the ghost is a body plus objects. The ghost’s body is the exact opposite of Gaynour and Galeron’s lady, whose bodies also display objects, in their case precious gems and other trappings of material wealth (15-26, 365-77). This point is quite clearly expressed in the toads and serpents that hang from her body, or bite into it, like unnatural ornamentations on a body that violate the living human norm.

This parody of courtly femininity is significant to Kristeva’s ideas of the abject, because the corpse, “a world that has erased its borders” (Kristeva 3), is a direct infringement on life itself. A corpse is abject because, symbolically, it has no bounds, which most definitely applies to the description of Gaynour’s mother’s body. These horrific accessories—“appurtenances” (*Awntyrs* 239)—are a direct parody of those precious objects displayed by Gaynour and Galeron’s lady. To visually display her body as excessively physical is also to acknowledge a disregard of those very borders social beings draw between their selves and the other—in this case, death. The crucial point to recognize about the ghost’s appearance is that Gaynour and Galeron’s lady, although outwardly presented as different, are internally like her. The ghost’s accessories are outward manifestations of inner states, which create a link between her and the Gaynour. In light of Kristeva’s theory, the ghost’s condition as a corpse marks her as dangerous to

individual subjectivity through both bodily excess and a figurative lack of borders. I must reiterate that, here, lacking borders refers strictly in the symbolic Kristevan sense and, as I will continue to discuss, the ghost's body also quite literally fails to contain itself through maintaining the borders between its interior and exterior.

While critics have not yet explored the quality of excess in *Awntyrs*, this theme is inextricably linked with medieval conceptions of femininity which, as I have suggested view women's bodies as uncontrollable, inferior, and dangerous. According to Aristotelian ideas of female physiology, which had considerable impact even in the late twelfth century, female bodies are viewed as "matter" in relation to male bodies. In his *De Generatione Animalium*, Aristotle "reduced the role of woman in procreation to that of 'prime matter' awaiting the 'forming' or 'moving' agency of the man's semen" (Blamires 39). He defines the characteristics of each sex according to the same matter-form division: "the female always provides the material, the male provides that which fashions the material into shape; this . . . is the specific characteristic of each of the sexes" (40). Reducing the female body to "matter," "body," and therefore "thing," Aristotle "did substantiate an unflattering equation . . . which found an echo in commonplace etymology" (39). The impact of Aristotle's theory is reflected by Isidore of Seville, who wrote in the late sixth or early seventh century that not only are "females [*feminas*] more lustful than males" (43), but "mother [*mater*] is as it were 'matter' [*material*], while the father is the cause" (44). Likewise, Thomas Aquinas writes in *Summa Theologiae* that "the mother provides the matter of the body, which, however, is still unformed, and receives its form only by means of the power which is contained in the father's seed" (47). With regards to the representation of femininity in *Awntyrs*, the body of the ghost quite clearly relates to the age-old association of femininity with matter. Her body, now

culturally uncontained, is only matter. What becomes clear through the associations of the Kristevan corpse and Aristotelian gender ideology is that the female body itself is inherently uncontrollable. Because this body is a corpse, the female gender that it represents is something threatening to be feared and avoided, something that is abject, or at least potentially abject.

Although Gaynour's mother's body can be understood as both an inversion of courtly ideals and symbolic of excess because of the various fiends attached to it, one should not be too quick to dismiss the emphasis on its exposure, its utter bareness and decay. It is for this very reason that Gaynour is shocked by the condition of her mother's body: "If thou be my moder, grete mervaille hit is / That al thi burly body is broughte to be so bare!" (*Awntyrs* 202-3). The ghost is described repeatedly as "the bodi bare" (104); "bare was the body and blak to the bone" (105); "but on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde" (108); and "Naxte and nedefull, naked on night" (185). "Bare" can have the same meaning as naked, but it also means "not covered with tissue or flesh" (*MED*), thereby presenting an image of the ghost's body in which her insides are virtually exposed. This exposed, decomposing body immediately connects with Kristeva's theory of the abject:

The body's inside, in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up to reassure a subject that it is lacking in its 'own clean and proper self'. (Kristeva 53)

The fact that Gaynour's mother's body is bare, without skin, and reveals her insides and blackened skeleton, not only emphasizes her own lack of borders and uncleanness, consequences of the fleshly sins she admits to, but also Gaynour's. For Gaynour to

confront the abject in the form of her mother's corpse is to remember her own tragic mortality, as well as her own lack of bodily cleanliness, and her implied adultery.

Since this parallel between Gaynour and her mother has led criticism to link the corpse with more obvious penitential or exemplary models, I would like at this point to clarify the connection between them, and to explain why I have suggested that the ghost represents all of courtly femininity. Stating that "mother and daughter are both intimately implicated in the text's account of the end of a kingdom," Margaret Robson also suggests that "the two female characters are, to many intents and purposes, identical" (Robson 231). The most noticeable connection between the two is that both are strongly associated with illicit sexuality. We quickly learn the reason for the ghost's grisly appearance and continual torment: earthly "luf paramour, listes and delites / That has me light and laft logh in a lake. / Al the welth of the world, that away witis" (*Awntyrs* 213-15). Takami Matsuda suggests that there is "an implied criticism of Guinevere whose illicit relationships with the knights of the Round Table precipitate the destruction of the kingdom" (Matsuda 51). Hanna makes a similar observation when comparing Gaynour with her mother, stating that while "involvement in adulterous love . . . [has] sent Guinevere's mother to Hell . . . this warning must be an implied judgement upon the famous love of the queen for Lancelot, a love which leads to the weakening and dismemberment of the chivalric community" ("An Interpretation" 290).

Both David Klausner and Margaret Robson use this episode to associate the *Awntyrs* with the "Adulterous Mother" trope. As Robson writes, these kinds of narratives "are essentially about the holiness of male children and the fleshly, evil nature of their mothers (and perhaps, by implication, of the whole female sex)" (Robson 230). Though "the tale of the adulterous woman who appears after death to her son is not unique to the

Trentalle Sancti Gregorii,” Klausner suggests that “there is sufficient similarity in detail between the *Trentalle Sancti Gregorii* A and the ghost’s appearance in *Awntyrs* to imply the derivation of one from the other” (Klausner 309). The theme of the “Adulterous Mother” relates the accounts of the ghost’s former and Gaynour’s present lives; this theme significantly implicates femininity as being physically tainted by the sexual transgressions of the maternal figure. Though their physical transgressions are similar, the glaring contrast between their physical beings has led Robson to suggest that they depict a “‘Woman’ under two guises, or two ages; not uncommonly, the women are revealed to be one and the same” (Robson 231). The ghost’s initial speech supports this point, resembling what Matsuda calls the “lament of a noble lady”:

Quene was I somwile, . . .
 Now am I caught oute of kide to cares so colde;
 Into care am I caught and couched in clay.

I was radder of rode then rose in the ron,
 My ler as the lelé lonched on hight.
 Now am I a graceles gost, and grisly I gron;
 With Lucyfer in a lake logh am I light. (*Awntyrs* 144-52, 161-64)

Even more than the simple “lament of a noble lady,” the ghost’s intense nostalgia for her former life calls to mind the *ubi sunt* motif found in several other medieval texts, perhaps one of the more fitting being the *Testament of Cresseid*. Phillips notes that “the contrasts between both queens’ pleasures in life and the former queen’s *cace* . . . are certainly a horrific warning” (Phillips, “The Ghost’s Baptism” 58), as is the stark contrast between their physical appearances. All of these issues contribute to Robson’s conclusion: “Guinevere and the ghastly figure identified as her mother are conflated by the text: Guinevere is faced with one (possible? inevitable?) version of her future self, the image of her fate should she continue along the path of adultery” (Robson 231).

Despite Phillips' caution that "we should not see [the ghost] as exclusively representing women, or moral issues of special interest to women" (Phillips, "Structure and Meaning" 75), we cannot dismiss the significance of their situation for all female bodies. Although critics have generally agreed with Robson's previous assertion that Gaynour is presented with a mirror image of her future—reinforced by the ghost's plea to "Muse on my mirrour" (*Awntyrs* 167)—they have not yet considered the possible implications that this unique mother-daughter relationship holds for femininity in general. As opposed to Phillips, I would suggest that the sort of physical and spiritual transgressions that Gaynour and her mother represent do, in fact, offer a larger comment on the female gender. In his discussion of this mother/daughter relationship, Klausner only briefly remarks that "sin begets sin" (Klausner 316), an idea of extreme significance if we reflect on its universal nature. The ghost's role as a maternal figure is what broadens her encounter with Gaynour to encompass all of femininity.

"I ban the body me bare!" (*Awntyrs* 89). These are the first words spoken by the corpse of Queen Gaynour's mother, and their implication has been entirely overlooked by critics who attempt to connect Gaynour and her mother or, for that matter, the ghost's relationship to her own. This brief utterance, a direct curse on the maternal body, draws our attention to the potentially harmful influence of the maternal figure on the child. Specifically, the ghost does not curse the abstract conception of femininity, but the actual, physical body of her mother. While the corpse is one of the more familiar examples of the abject, the maternal body is, in fact, the very first object that is expelled by an individual in his or her personal archaeology. Kristeva explains that "the abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language" (Kristeva 13). As previously mentioned, infants

come into being without borders, in an imaginary union with the mother and, in order to construct a separate identity, they must reject her as an object other to their being. As a result, the mother's body is the first object to be abjected. In order to begin the process of establishing subjectivity, the child must draw the imaginary line between self and (m)other. As Noelle McAfee writes, "the child is in a double-bind: a longing for narcissistic union with its first love and a need to renounce this union in order to become a subject" (McAfee 48). This separation "is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (Kristeva 13). According to Kristeva's theory, the abject will always hover on the periphery, constantly threatening to collapse the very borders that maintain our individual identity. Such is the case with maternal abjection: "this state is a constant companion of consciousness, a longing to fall back into the maternal *chora* as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity" (McAfee 49). Moreover, "the difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm . . . is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. The child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication" (Kristeva 13). The child must struggle to break free from her body in order to construct its own identity but, at the same time, the mother is reluctant to release her hold because the child is the "token of her own authentication."

The theory of maternal abjection, and the threat posed by the maternal body, bears direct relation to the representation of female figures in *Awntyrs*. The physical transgressions of Gaynour and her mother are related to their lustful nature and propensity for sexual overindulgence, and this appears, as the text demonstrates, as a taint specific to the female bodies. As the corpse curses her own mother, we can imagine Arthur's bride

uttering similar words in the near future, based on prior knowledge of the Arthurian tradition. As Spearing has stated regarding Gaynour's sexuality, "it is up to us to decide whether the poet is referring to her notorious affair with Lancelot, to her seduction by Mordred . . . [or] her predilection for being surrounded with glamorous knights" (Spearing, "*The Awntyrs*" 193). Furthermore, Gaynour's mother's curse suggests that, in Arthur's court, sexual sin is transgenerational, passed from mother to daughter, so that all of femininity appears tainted by this sin.

Establishing a unique subjectivity for the female child, separate from the mother's identity, is not entirely successful; Gaynour's identity appears bound to her mother's just as the ghost's identity is bound to her own. The flesh binds them to their sins and to one another, as the ghost demonstrates, and death will externalize their sins on their bodies.

Awntyrs specifically identifies sin with the body in the ghost's warning:

‘But thei be salved of that sare,
Er they hethen fare,
They mon weten of care,
Waynour, ywys.’ (*Awntyrs* 244-47)

That "sare," metaphorically speaking, is sin; specifically, the ghost refers to those who are guilty of pride, which "beres bowes bitter" and "makes burnes so boune to breke his bidding" (241-42). The image associates sin with the body by directly identifying it as a wound—an abject symbol, unclean, and incriminating. Spiritual transgression becomes manifest on the body as that "token" (207). In response to Gaynour's disbelief that this disgusting form could be her mother, the ghost responds:

‘I bare the of my body; what bote is hit I layn?
I brak a solempne avowe,
And no man wist hit but thowe;
By that token thou trowe,
That sothely I sayn.’ (204-8)

Hanna suggests that “the ghost’s rather mysterious use of ‘that token’ to refer to her relationship with her daughter may be intended to suggest that Guinevere is the product of an illicit love . . . living proof of the ghost’s sin” (Hanna, “An Interpretation” 291). That “token” or that evidence is the body, and the ghost’s ambiguous response may bear other meanings. On the one hand, if the term implies shared knowledge, then this further collapses the distinction between Gaynour and her mother’s identities. Hanna focuses only on Gaynour’s body as proof of her mother’s sexuality, but her body, as a token of her own identification in Kristevan terms, also serves as an extension of her mother’s. In the same manner, the ghost’s own body may be interpreted as “that token,” as it quite graphically displays her own sins. In any case, the emphasis is on the externalization of sin: the ghost’s body (consumed by fiends) and possibly Gaynour’s literal existence serve as evidence of past sins.

Awntyrs demonstrates through three aristocratic generations the power of the hold of the maternal figure over the child. Just as we understand how Gaynour is destined to follow in her mother’s footsteps, the curse that her mother speaks to her own mother suggests that, within their own mother-daughter relationship, there was a similarly shared fate. Forbidden sexuality is thus proposed as a sort of universal condition of courtly females, inherited through the flesh. While this psychoanalytical approach helps to illuminate a previously unexplored reading of femininity in *Awntyrs*, Kristeva’s theory only explains the female body as a site of abjection. Where Aristotle once understood women’s bodies as threatening matter, entirely subordinate in value to masculinity, in Kristevan terms, the female body is abject. The differences between the two are in terminology only, as they both construct women as threatening and prone to overspill boundaries. In this sense, applying theories of the abject to the poem only reinforces the

traditional, antifeminist ideology of the poet's time.⁶ In light of this conclusion, an alternative reading to Kristeva is necessary because we should not dismiss the poem as strictly misogynistic. Kristevan psychoanalysis is limiting in the sense that it cannot be applied effectively throughout the poem; it can only consider the first episode in the text, which essentially promotes Lubke's and Hanna's bipartite model for the poem. By only focusing on the individual and the creation of subjectivity, Kristeva's theory does not concern itself with the whole poem, and fails to consider the poem's imperialist strand and its portrayal of Galeron's lady. As a supplement, I propose examining the function of desire in *Awntyrs* through Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis. A Lacanian method will, in turn, not only offer a new approach to the portrayal of femininity, but also make possible a discussion of the text as a whole, rather than a fragment.

The three women in the poem, in one form or another, symbolically represent desire. While the first two, Gaynour and Galeron's lady, expose masculine desires that are respectively sexual and imperialistic, the ghost of Gaynour's mother presents an obstacle to these desires, as her body—grotesque, violent, and in constant transition—resists containment. She can also be understood through Žižek's rendering of Jacques Lacan's concept, the *objet petit a*. As a result, my theoretical approach to *Awntyrs* will focus on the way in which the ghost's position in the poem, relative to the two other women, affects the structuring of desire. The ghost's body is the *objet petit a* that allows masculine desires to continue to exist.

⁶ If we turn to theological discourse, we find a similar theory: "to all women were ascribed the sins of Eve: women as a class represented, as she did, the Flesh" (Fries 29).

Before examining the function of the ghost's body as the *objet petit a*, it is necessary to consider the bodies of Gaynour and Galeron's lady, in order to contextualize desire and illustrate their functions in coordinating and reflecting masculine desires. I have suggested that, like the ghost's body, Gaynour and Galeron's lady are also described as bodies plus objects—in their case, bodies that display precious fabrics, gems, and other accoutrements of material wealth. Their rich descriptions immediately associate them with this form of desire. The description of Gaynour at the very beginning of the poem is perhaps one of the most striking in the text, as it is devoted entirely to the details of her dress:

In a gleterand gide that glemed full gay -
With riche ribaynes reversset, ho so right redes,
Rayled with rybees of riall array;
Her hode of a hawe huwe, ho that here hede hedes,
Of pillour, of palwerk, of perré to pay;
Schurde in a short cloke that the rayne shedes,
Set over with saffres sothely to say,
With saffres and seladynes set by the sides;
Here sadel sette of that ilke,
Saude with sambutes of silke;
On a mule as the mylke,
Gaili she glides. (*Awntyrs* 15-26)

Her body is quite literally framed by and, consequently, defined by the material objects that adorn it, precious stones—rubies, sapphires, and chalcedonies—and exotic materials, like rich cloths and fur, down to the silk saddle she rides on. Fabrics are coloured with expensive dyes, like aquamarine, and each is woven, twisted, and reversed to display its rich colours. The luxurious nature of the fabrics, along with the careful intricacy of each detail, links femininity with material desire. If “the well-garbed Gaynor epitomizes the center, the courtly establishment” (Jost 134), what her body relates through her colourful appearance is the height of Arthurian power. Femininity is thus associated with desire

from the very beginning of the poem, specifically with the masculine fantasies of wealth, temporal power, and luxury that are projected onto the female body. The result of this projection actually eclipses our understanding of Gaynour's and Galeron's lady's body; we know less about how their bodies look than the accessories they wear. Courtly female bodies are in both cases virtually invisible, but assume shape and meaning through external objects.⁷

Early in the second episode, as in the first, we are given a description of Galeron's lady in details that match or even rival the description of Gaynour:

Ho was the worthiest wight that eny wy welde wolde;
Here gide was glorious and gay, of a gresse grene.
Here belle was of bluncket, with birdes ful bolde,
Brauded with brende gold, and bokeled ful bene.
Here fax in fyne perré was fretted in folde,
Contrefelet and kelle coloured full clene,
With a crowne craftly al of clene golde.
Here kercheves were curiouse with many proude prene,
Her perré was prayseed with prise men of might. (*Awntyrs* 365-73)

Though rich descriptions of courtly luxury are often a part of the formulaic nature of alliterative poetry, parallels between Gaynour and Galeron's lady become perfectly clear when we compare their extensive descriptions. Galeron's lady's hair is likewise adorned with jewels, with a headdress so intricately woven and embroidered with gold that it is surely meant to equal Gaynour's rich hood. The suggestion that she is the worthiest "that eny wy welde wolde" objectifies her being to the same status as her precious jewels.

Desire is aroused in every aspect, as the worth of her body and selfhood is equivalent to

⁷ The invisibility of the courtly female body also relates to Žižek's explanation of Lacan's fascination with the paradoxes of courtly love: "the lady is such a paradoxical object which curves the space of desire, i.e., which offers us as the way to attain it only endless detours and ordeals—more precisely, the lady is in herself nothing at all, a pure semblance which just materializes the curvature of the space of desire" (49).

the value of her exterior accessories. Curiosity (372) and fascination are provoked by her appearance, and the notion of satisfaction through her possession is offered by the term “fretted” (*MED*); describing her body in imperialistic terms is naturally well suited to this particular episode in the text. Though Jost describes Galeron’s lady as a marginalized figure, or “Outsider” (Jost 141)—which to her credit she is, because of her position outside the Arthurian court (*Awntyrs* 418-20)—the manner of her physical description suggests a strong similarity to the courtly milieu that provides the poem’s context. Also like the ghost, Galeron’s lady is an outsider who is inside, and thus overflows boundaries. Since there is almost no difference between the two ladies’ lavish descriptions, it is reasonable to suggest the exterior form and presentation of Galeron’s lady appears to be a replica of Gaynour’s; the initial ideals, desires, and fantasies aroused by the first depiction of femininity in the text are duplicated in Galeron’s lady.

As the poem progresses, Gaynour and Galeron’s lady come to represent forms of desire more specific to their personhood. Gaynour’s body, perhaps obviously, offers a context for coordinating sexual desire, both through the ambiguity of her initial departure and sojourn with Gawayne under the “lorre” (32), and her encounter with her mother. The extended commentary on Gaynour’s relation to her mother, coupled with the conclusions drawn from Kristeva’s theory, make Gaynour’s association with sexuality quite plain, so I will move to demonstrate how Galeron’s lady is associated with imperialistic desire. To the sweet melody of a cymbal player, Galeron’s lady appears “lufsom of lote ledand a knight” (344) to announce Galeron’s entrance to Arthur: ““Here commes an errant knight. / Do him reson and right / For thi manhede”” (349-51). Galeron’s lady not only serves the simple narrative purpose of introducing her errant knight, Galeron, she also becomes the physical manifestation of his power, wealth, and renown. It is her exquisite appearance

that “provides reason ‘ynoghe’ for the women to accept her into their fold, and hence to surmise that Galeron is as ‘hende’ a ‘knight’ as he is ‘comli’” (Twu 112). Because Galeron “enjoys the same trappings of wealth and authority as any knight of Arthur’s court, including a lady . . . the court accepts the strange knight and lady based on her appearance and comportment as one of the trappings of his nobility” (112). Just as her body literally precedes Galeron’s, all of his honour, power, and knighthood precede him into Arthur’s court, symbolically inscribed on his lady’s body; she signifies class and status, but not the overt sexuality that Gaynour signifies. Though Galeron’s lady is described as “the worthiest wight” (365), a “burde bright” (357), and “wlonkest” (696), which may also link her with sexual desire, in no way is this as prominent as in the case of Gaynour, whose sexuality literally causes the collapse of the Round Table. Since she functions “as Galeron’s representative, she reminds the court that her country has been usurped by the very Arthur who foolishly sits in front of her gazing in star-struck admiration” (Jost 138). Galeron accuses Arthur of wrongful land claims: “Thou has wonen hem in werre with a wrange wile / And geven hem to Sir Gawayn - that my hert grylles” (*Awntyrs* 421-22). Galeron’s lady’s body is made to bear the weight of this symbolic message as well. According to Jost, “the now silent maid is the foil to Gaynor’s gregarious mother . . . as a parallel moral agent seeking recalcitrance and repentance” (Jost 139). As the visual representation of power and sovereignty that precedes the verbal declaration of those qualities, Galeron’s lady, as his objectified extension, serves to reflect the masculine desire that is particular to the imperialist strand of the latter half of the text.

The bodies of these two women represent different inflections of desire, but should not be treated as objects of desire per se. Both women arouse masculine fantasies

of luxury and wealth through their exterior appearances, thus representing material desire, but they inflect sexual and imperialistic desires respectively. Briefly, in Lacanian terms, desire is always described in relation to lack, as “the manifestation of something that is lacking in the subject and the Other” (Homer 72). It is different from need, because need can be satisfied, whereas desire cannot; desire is understood as the constant feeling that there is something missing in our lives. Unconscious desires are made apparent within the space of fantasy, which “functions as an empty surface, as a kind of screen for the projection of desires” (86). As such, fantasy involves, not actual objects of desire, nor the *objet petit a*, but the environment that stages desire, where the subject can envision fulfilment, and maintain an illusion of oneness with the Other.

While the psychic apparatus attempts to follow and achieve desire, it is governed by the “pleasure principle,” which requires that we always seek pleasure and avoid pain, and “cares nothing for the limitations imposed by reality . . . [E]ven if the psychic apparatus is entirely left to itself, it will not attain the balance for which the ‘pleasure principle’ strives, but will continue to circulate around a traumatic intruder in its interior” (47-48). To designate this foreign body, or “intruder,” Lacan coins the term, *objet petit a*. Even though one continually seeks pleasure, the “*objet a* is the reef, the obstacle which interrupts the closed circuit of the ‘pleasure principle’” (48). While the *objet petit a* makes it impossible fully to achieve our desires, Žižek writes that we feel a “sort of perverse pleasure *in this displeasure itself*” (48); this is *jouissance* (pleasure in pain), or the satisfaction we feel from not achieving the goal. Consequently, the importance of the *objet a* is that by impeding the full achievement of desire, it allows desire to continue. As Homer explains, “while desire of the Other always exceeds or escapes the subject, there nevertheless remains something that the subject can recover and thus sustain ‘him or

herself . . . as a *being of desire*” (73). The *objet a* also forces us to look at the world by serving “as support to reality: access to what we call ‘reality’ is open to the subject via the rift in the closed circuit of the pleasure principle” (Žižek 49).⁸ The relationship between the *objet a*, reality and the real is such that the *objet a* is “both the void, the gap, and whatever object momentarily comes to fill that gap in our symbolic reality” (Homer 88) and, at the same time, it is “the left-over of the real; it is that which escapes symbolization” (88). This is why Žižek states that “the place of ‘reality’ . . . is that of ‘excess,’ of a surplus which disturbs and blocks” (Žižek 49); the *objet a*, like the real, is characterized by the same quality of excess and surplus.⁹

In terms of this theory, the ghost functions as the Lacanian *objet petit a*, literally as the intruder in the mist who interrupts the Arthurian pursuit of pleasure and desire in the first half of the poem. As we are introduced to one form of desire in the body of Gaynour, the ghost, as the *objet a*, disrupts that desire by her physical presence. By intruding on Gaynour and Gawain, the ghost breaks the closed circuit of pleasure and offers access to reality; accordingly, her body is representative of excess. The physical excess and grotesque accessories that I have already noted in the discussion of Kristevan theory also relate to Lacanian desire; through excess, the ghost violates all that is considered physically desirable. Even the sins that torment her body now include the

⁸ Homer explains the difference between reality and the real in Lacanian psychoanalysis: reality consists of symbols and process of signification, so that that it is associated with the symbolic order and social reality, whereas the real resists signification and is something unknown that supports social reality and also undermines it (81). Žižek maintains Lacan’s interpretation of the real as “the traumatic kernel at the core of subjectivity” (94).

⁹ Žižek also states that the *objet a* functions as the internal “excess” which impedes *from within* (much like the Real), where reality always appears as an *external* limit (Žižek 49).

overindulgence in both sexual and imperialistic desires, the same desires signified by Gaynour and Galeron's lady. In terms of wealth and land possession, the ghost claims to have been

Of al gamen or gle that on grounde growes
Gretter then Dame Gaynour, of garson and golde,
Of palaies, of parkes, of pondes, of plowes,
Of townes, of toures, of tresour untolde,
Of castelles, of contreyes, of craggess, of clowes. (*Awntyrs* 146-50)

The excess of her sexual pleasures is made apparent through the "Adulterous Mother" trope mentioned previously, and is reinforced by both the "toads and serpents [that] symbolize illicit kisses and illegitimate children" (Phillips, "The Ghost's Baptism" 51), and the overt admission of her sexuality. Even in the ghost's answer to the question of what angered God most, she reiterates the notion of excess: "'Pride with the *appurtenaunce*'" (239, my emphasis). She represents the same desires that frame Gaynour and Galeron's lady, but in marked excess. Her body is the surplus of those desires; as Žižek states, she is physically what disturbs and blocks, becoming an intrusive object and therefore no longer desirable.

Consequently, as the *objet a*, the ghost creates a rift in this pleasure-seeking Arthurian world, offering a glimpse of a different kind of reality through her grisly body—the reality of death, and the grim consequence of indulging desire too much. Constantly devoured by toads and serpents, she is in a state of continuous physical torment, reinforcing the theme of transience and mutability. This theme is further extended through her invocation of Fortune, "that wonderfull wheelwryght" (271), symbolic of inconstancy and variance who will ultimately "make lordes to light" (272). Like the ghost, Fortune acts in both personal and social registers. The ghost literally embodies the reality of change and the certainty of death, as confirmed by her warning:

For al thi fressh foroure,
Muse on my mirroure;
For, king and emperour,
Thus dight shul ye be. (166-69)

As the *objet petit a*, the object of excess that also opens up a space for reality, the ghost's warning is the traumatic kernel that threatens subjectivity by forcing the Arthurian world to acknowledge the materiality of its own existence and its finite extent. The social reality of imperialism, power, and difference, which has become the foundation for the courtly world, becomes threatened by the presence or, better put, the irruption of the real.

Masculine fantasies are thus unexpectedly shattered by the ultimate admonition of death and horror: "Thus dight shul ye be." The ghost's position in the narrative is extremely important, especially in relation to this theme of change. The ghost impedes desire in the first half of the text, through her encounter with Gaynour and Gawain; sexual desire, framed and coordinated through Gaynour, is obstructed by her presence. By creating a rift in the circuit of desire, the ghost functions to allow desire to continue. Paradoxically, while the ghost endeavours to curb both pride and covetousness, warning her daughter about the dangers of sexuality and aggressive imperialism, her position as the *objet a* actually requires that desire to persist, albeit only in a modified form. The enjoyment (*jouissance*) of failing to achieve desire is what drives its continual pursuit.

Rather than viewing desire as an abstraction, the poem also opens up the possibility of interpreting desire as Gawain's. After all, it is his desire for Gaynour that is obstructed by the presence of the ghost. Just prior to the ghost's appearance, the poet is careful to state that Gaynour and Gawayne are completely alone, separated from Arthur's hunting party. This point is reiterated when "the King blowe rechas" (62) to reassemble his hunting party, as "with solas thei semble, / . . . Al but Sir Gawayn, gayest of all, /

Beleves with Dame Gaynour in greves so grene” (68-69). Klausner writes that “the implications of this emphasis are uncertain, but it is very possible that we are intended to infer that the story will be concerned with another of Guinevere’s intrigues” (317). If Gawain’s desire for Gaynour is interrupted by the ghost, then his desire continues, symbolically, for Galeron’s lady. In the second half of the poem, Gawain and Galeron not only battle over lands—Galwey, Connok, Conyngham, Kyle, Lomond, Losex, and Loyan (*Awntyrs* 418-20)—but also for the same identity. As I have previously suggested, Galeron’s lady can serve as an extension of Galeron himself; she represents his class, status and, more importantly, his possessions. Since the possession of lands and women often symbolize one another, for Gawain and Galeron to duel over lands is also to duel over Galeron’s lady. In this light, the ghost’s position as the *objet petite a* continues Gawain’s desire in the narrative, as he battles Galeron in an attempt to achieve fulfilment.

If we look past the structural debate surrounding the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, Lacan’s theory allows us to recognize the roles played by the characters themselves, especially the women, in determining the narrative trajectory. This sort of thinking leads to new ideas of femininity, away from the negative stereotypes that represent the female body as inferior matter in relation to male bodies, or as corrupted, lustful flesh. Applying Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject can only help to understand one of the text’s three ladies, and demonstrates that the female body—namely the ghost—is emphatically a symbol of the abject; as mother and as a corpse, Gaynour’s mother’s body is visibly abject, and so recognized as other. Moreover, her relation to Gaynour, as well as the curse she utters against her own mother, suggest the possibility that sin is the universal condition of courtly females that appears as a taint on the body. If we can accept the ghost as something more than a mere penitential figure to spur morality and penance, as so many

critics have done in the past, and view her instead as the *objet a*, we can then begin to explain the sharp narrative shift between the two episodes in the text. Although I have refrained from joining the debate on the structure of *Awntyrs*, understanding the ghost in relation to this theoretical concept might provide new insight into its structure. As an object that interrupts the circuit of pleasure, denying the full achievement of desire, the ghost essentially stops the course of desire in the first half of the poem, in order to continue desire in the second half. Encompassing themes of both mutability and of transience, the ghost's body is ultimately a catalyst to spark the narrative change that has for too long led scholars to read the poem as two unrelated and disjointed narratives.

Rather than considering Cresseid and the ghost merely as grotesque exemplary figures, and their bodies as physical evidence of divine punishment for sexuality, psychoanalysis allows us to understand their positive characterizations and functions in each poem. Through abjection, Cresseid's physical deformities do not arise solely as the result of punishment from an assembly of gods, but from her own choice to establish a new identity and place in the society that once cherished her beauty. Lacanian theories of desire reveal the ghost's role in structuring the two episodes in *Awntyrs* as far more central than previously imagined. Each monstrous characterization presents a far more complex discussion and portrayal of femininity that surpasses these initial exemplary readings. As a result, the loathly lady, along with other bizarre, terrifying, and fascinating bodies, will continue to be an area of interest in my future research.

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