

“Pryce” Meats and Princes: The Feast as Proving Ground
in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight*

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The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are generally acknowledged as two of the greatest works of what is called the fourteenth-century Alliterative Revival. The feasts that open the two poems are similar in that both celebrate the new year at Arthur's court and both are interrupted by unexpected intruders—the Green Knight in *Gawain* and the Roman emissaries in the *Alliterative Morte*. The New Year's celebration emphasizes the importance of each occasion: the holiday begins the calendar year as the feast begins the poem. *Gawain* then runs from new year to new year, the cyclical passage of the seasons underlying both its tone and any possible interpretation. In contrast, the *Alliterative Morte* describes the events of several years, but, as Matthews has pointed out, each festival and season is mentioned only once in the poem, creating the overall reflection of a single year (102-03). A New Year's feast thus begins each poem and then contributes directly to organizing the ensuing action.

Any two feasts so similar on the surface must be worth comparing in detail. The initial difficulty in making such a comparison is the fact that feasts are extremely common in romance, especially Arthurian romance: Chretien's *Yvain, Erec and Enide*, and *Lancelot*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and the *Mort Artu* are only a few of the many Arthurian works with important feasts.¹ Even more disconcerting, the traditional feast of romance is also traditionally interrupted: poems as widely disparate as the French prose *Queste del Saint Graal*, the English metrical romance of *King Horn*, and the alliterative English *Seige of Jerusalem* contain interruptions during feasts. Hence the similarities between the feasts in the *Alliterative Morte* and *Gawain* might with some justice be dismissed as purely conventional. Perhaps partly for this reason, the differences between the two poems seem to have drawn the most critical attention.² These differences, however, do not negate the use of similar literary conventions in each poem. Larry Benson's

discussion of literary convention and characterization in *Gawain* seems both specifically and generally apropos in this context. As he argues:

A knowledge of the conventions that the poet used to create the characters of Gawain and the Green Knight will not solve all of the problems these figures pose, for the hero and his challenger are more complex than the conventions on which they are built. Yet even their complexity depends on our recognition of those conventions, which the poet could assume his audience knew and which he invoked to define his characters. (58)

In other words, if we forget the power of the convention, we are in danger of misreading the poem, and we also risk misunderstanding the significance of any variations in the use of that convention. This is particularly true with a convention so intricate and multi-layered as that of the feast.

The most subtle difference between the two feasts is a matter of tone. Camelot in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a place of sheer, playful exuberance. The knights are the most noble on earth; the ladies are the "louelokkest" ["loveliest"]; and Arthur himself is "þe comlokest kyng, þat þe court haldes" ["the comeliest king, who holds court"] (52-53).³ Meanwhile, at Carlisle in the *Alliterative Morte*, the occasion is equally merry but the atmosphere is more serious. Leading up to the feast, the poet describes the series of battles which Arthur has had to win in order to achieve his celebration.⁴ The feast is the final act of a long war as well as the opening ceremony of a new reign, and the poet never allows the trials of the past to be obscured by the pleasures of the present. Even his superlatives remind us of the real world waiting for the feasters: "Whas neuer syche noblay in no manys tym / Mad in mydwinter in þa weste marchys" ["Was never such magnificence in no man's time / made in midwinter in the west marches"] (76-77).⁵ If this feast is joyous and remarkable, the cold of winter still threatens outside.

The consequences of the intrusions are also different. In *Gawain*, Arthur waits for a wonder before beginning his own meal, as he often does in romance. The challenger who enters is a wonder, a magical and unnerving presence which does not have any immediate political implications for the future of the court as a whole. In the *Alliterative Morte*, however, the intruders are very

human and physically ordinary. The emissaries from Rome are politically motivated: they have come on behalf of the Emperor Lucius, carrying a demand for tribute from their monarch to a potential rival. Arthur responds to their challenge by gathering a council and considering the rights and wrongs of involving the entire kingdom in war. While Gawain alone answers the Green Knight's challenge and faces the consequences, Arthur's response changes the lives of everyone who follows him for years to come; the seriousness of the situation is made clear by the stern message he sends the Emperor in lines 419-66. Though preceded by a recounting of the emissaries' return to Rome, Arthur's next actions are his preparations for war (625-78). It would be difficult to imagine an outcome more unlike that in *Gawain*, where the Green Knight rides out of Camelot with his talking head tucked under his arm and—one assumes—a sardonic expression on his face.

Beyond these points, there is also a difference in the narrative structure of the two feasts. The *Gawain* poet focuses on incident and action throughout the feast: the courtiers and diners are constantly moving and speaking prior to the Green Knight's arrival, so that their immobile silence after his entrance enhances the drama of the situation. In the *Alliterative Morte*, on the other hand, the poet deliberately halts the narrative in line 176 and presents a forty-four-line description of the feast, including a precise and detailed menu which is unusual in medieval romance.⁶ The poet thus varies from the norm by insisting on his list of dishes. The question is, why? The answer, I believe, is contained in the idea of the feast itself. In medieval literature, the feast may be seen as a kind of a proving ground where feasters display their character, ability, and courtesy in a setting which is in its own way as public and as ordered as the tourney field. An examination of the different festive "passages at arms" in *Gawain* and the *Alliterative Morte* illuminates the intentions of the two poets and the meaning of their respective poems.

Arthur's feast in the *Alliterative Morte* is lavish, as the menu makes clear. There are twenty-one dishes served, and seven kinds of wine. The food is elegant as well as abundant; relatively standard dishes such as venison in frumenty (180) mix with more decorative and exotic ones, such as "Pygges of porke-de-spyne þat pasturedede neuer" ["Porcupine piglets that had never been pastured"] (183) and "Tartes of Turkey" ["Tarts of Turkey"] (186).⁷ Embossed silver dishes and gold spigots flowing with wine add to the impression of wealth (200-05). The seneschal or steward, Sir Kay, is

specifically described as courteous (209), and all the servers are well-trained and royally dressed for the occasion (178-79). The feast is thus both a rich meal and a splendid spectacle, comparing well to actual contemporary practice. For example, Henry V served more than thirty dishes at his coronation, including three subtleties (Napier 4-8), while the coronation feast of Henry IV had over fifty dishes and faucets of precious metal for wine (Austin 57-58; Froissart 208). Arthur is a king, “demyde þe doughtyeste þat duellyde in erthe” [“judged the most valiant that dwelt on earth”] (219); this is a great day in his realm and a major holiday in the calendar. As Henry Harder has argued, the feast is specifically “designed to make Arthur’s reputation for magnificence visible and believable to a contemporary audience” (51).⁸ Seen in this light, Arthur’s New Year’s feast establishes the king’s power and represents his stature as a ruler. For this reason the detailed menu is an effective narrative element.

The feast’s interruption adds to that narrative effectiveness. At what ought to be the peak of Arthur’s power, intruders offer a military challenge. The threat to the king’s authority is profound: his very fitness to rule is called into question by the content and delivery of this message. Nonetheless, he acts properly; he does not allow the insult and his angry pride to overwhelm him. Instead, he graciously welcomes the Romans to court, and specifically commands Sir Kay “To styghtyll þa steryn men as theire statte askys” [“To lodge the bold men as their rank requires”] (157), and in lines 170-75 the chief senator is placed at the equivalent of a king’s mess. To share food with someone implies trust: friends dine together as part of the social contract in an orderly society.⁹ This occasion, however, is more than a simple dinner in temporary community. Arthur approaches the feast as if it were a military action, promising to reward Kay for seeing to it that the Romans are entertained according to the royal “wyrchipe” or honor (156-65). This incident reflects the guidelines in medieval books of nurture, which specify that a lord or ruler’s honor is supported by a well-organized feast, one at which foreign visitors are treated nobly. As Harder points out, “the maintaining of a king’s ‘worship’ is the responsibility of the king’s followers as well as of the king himself,” and that worship is established “at the banquet as well as on the battlefield” (50-51). The implication is that the feast is a kind of battle, and should be treated as such.

If we read the feast as a battle, the menu becomes a weapon. Donna Lynne Rondolone specifically describes the feast in the *Al-*

literative Morte as a “phalanx of food which he [Arthur] uses as an extension of his own heroic stature” (220). Arthur’s ability to impress the Romans while obeying the rules of courteous behavior demonstrates that he is a great king; he does not act rashly, and, though angry, he remains in control of the situation. The chief senator’s initial reaction illustrates the effectiveness of the strategy:

“Sir” sais þe senatour “so Criste motte me helpe,
There ryngnede neuer syche realtee within Rome
walles!

There ne es prelatte ne pape ne prynce of þis erthe
That he ne myghte be wele payede of þees pryce
metes.”

[“Sir,” said the senator, “so Christ may me help,
There ruled never such royal state within Rome’s
walles!

There is no prelate or pope or prince of this earth
Who might not be well satisfied with these choice
meats.”] (*Alliterative Morte* 227-30)

The council which follows the feast codifies the senator’s response. The king’s strength is tied to the richness of his table, so that the feast becomes the first victory of the new war—a victory that intimidates the enemy even before any actual fighting has begun. If Arthur had not given such a magnificent feast, he would have marked himself as a poor or a weak king; by giving the feast, he successfully demonstrates his authority. Though the poem begins with a victory for Arthur, that victory is not inevitable.

Nor is the victory immutable, of course. William Matthews’ concept of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as a tragedy of fortune is particularly useful here; he defines the genre as moving “from success or happiness into ruin or misery,” and identifies its basic structure as “a fall, often provided with contrast in a description of the happy or successful condition that preceded it” (105-06). In the *Alliterative Morte*, that “happy or successful condition” is first invoked at the feast. The feast provides both a peak of happiness and a chance for Arthur to display his initial worthiness as the poem begins, making his ultimate fall both affecting and inexorable.¹⁰ The poem’s status as a tragedy requires the fall of a hero; no one laments the destruction of a villain. We do not want to criticize Arthur as we read of his splendid feast and kingly “wyrchipe” at

Carlisle, or even to think ahead to his undoing; but Fortune's wheel will turn, whatever the cause, and the story will end in destruction.¹¹

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the situation is very different. Instead of a military company returning from a long, hard-fought campaign, we have courtiers relaxing at a party. There is no threat of war in the offing, no emissaries from any emperor. Rather than a political demand, the puzzling figure of the Green Knight rides into the hall with a challenge disguised as a game (283-84). An armed knight riding into a feast is by no means unknown in romance or in actual medieval practice, for that matter,¹² but this intruder is nonetheless startling, and he enters a court which seems to be ill-prepared for him. Arthur, the poet says, "wolde not ete til al were serued" ["would not eat until all were served"] (85), being "so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered" ["so happy in his youth, and somewhat boyish"] (86).¹³ Arthur's customary vow not to eat until he has seen a wonder is discussed in lines 90-99, but his refusal is initially attributed to youthful high spirits: "His lif liked hym lyzt; he louied þe lasse / Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte, / So bisied him his zonge blod and his brayn / wylde." ["His life he liked active; he loved less / Either to lie long in bed or to sit long, / So stirred him his young blood and his wild brain"] (87-89). Arthur's waiting for a wonder is, of course, also a common occurrence in romance; it assures us that Arthur will not need to be particularly patient, since the genre of the poem insists that he does not have long to wait.¹⁴ However, that the poet describes Arthur's "zonge blod" and "brayn wylde" before mentioning the more traditional oath strikes me as both deliberate and significant. The king does not eat, initially, because he is restless and unwilling to sit still, and only secondarily because of his oath.

Arthur's youthful hyperactivity has been interpreted by some critics as rashness, part of a moral commentary on the hidden weakness of Camelot that foreshadows Gawain's own later error.¹⁵ The books of nurture support this interpretation. The entire arrangement of a medieval feast revolves around the ranking lord or king; according to "Ffor to Serve a Lord," the sovereign takes his seat first, followed by those who will dine with him (Furnivall, Part 1, 369). Moreover, precedence is figured from the lord's mess downward, and his position influences everything from the seating to the location of furniture (*Collection of Ordinances*, 116).¹⁶ In *Gawain*, normal precedence is observed at the Round Table; immediately following the description of Arthur, the poet carefully

positions the knights at the high table (lines 109-15).¹⁷ Each man is in his proper place—except for the king. According to the rules of medieval manners, no one should begin to eat before the ranking lord. In fact, Hugh Rhodes's "Boke of Nurture" specifically instructs the novice courtier to observe precedence: "And if your soueraygne call you / wyth him to dyne or sup, / Give him prehemynence to begin, / of meate and eake of Cup" ["And if your sovereign call you / with him to dine or sup, / Give him prior right to begin, / of meat and also of Cup"] (Furnivall, Part 1, 74). By refusing to sit down, Arthur forces his courtiers to deny him his "prehemynence to begin," and in so doing almost commands them to behave discourteously. When the courtiers fall silent before the Green Knight in lines 241-45, the poet notes that not all of them were silent "for doute" ["for fear"] (246): "Bot sum for cortaysye— / Bot let hym [Arthur] þat all shulde loute / Cast vnto þat wyȝe." ["But some due to courtesy— / Only let him to whom all should bow / Speak unto that man"] (247-49).¹⁸ They wait for Arthur to deal with this strange intruder, which Arthur eventually does by seizing the ax in line 329. However, the king's response to the Green Knight's taunting may also be read as discourteous: Benson refers to Arthur's "churlish haste" and "failure of manners" (218), while Puhvel calls his behavior "purely impulsive, spring[ing] from wrath born of pride" (58). Gawain, by his exquisite manners and deference, manages to restore Arthur to the leadership position at Camelot, but it is hard not to see Arthur's discourteous response as a result of his original refusal to sit down. Although Arthur later demonstrates that he is capable of leading by his flawless handling of the Green Knight's departure in lines 468-84, up until that point he has simply not been a position to lead—through his own faulty choice.¹⁹ To the medieval mind a courteous diner was most likely to be perceived as a virtuous man. When manners make the man, discourtesy speaks of possible treachery and deceit.²⁰

Arthur's error, therefore, appears to be even more serious on close examination than it does at first glance. The excellence of Gawain's behavior does not solve the problem of his king's childishness—particularly since Gawain himself will later fall into error. However, I believe that to read the poem as censorious implies that the *Gawain* poet in particular and the Middle Ages in general did not distinguish between greater and lesser sins. Gawain's sin is committed in fear of his life and so is more understandable and even forgivable than sins of the spirit; it is perhaps the smallest sin he could commit and still be said to sin at all.²¹ Arthur's discour-

tesy in *Gawain* may be a sign of moral weakness, as Gawain's own eventual slip may indicate a fundamental flaw in the chivalry of the Round Table, but the poem ends in such a laughing affirmation of life that to focus on sinful, overshadowing darkness is to squeeze all the joy out of it.

The opposition of the two poems offers, I believe, one possible solution to this emotional dissonance. If the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is a tragedy, then *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, arguably, a comedy, in that it acknowledges and accepts human weakness as a part of life. Walter Kerr's definition of comedy in terms of human limitation is entirely suited to the character of Gawain: "That a creature capable of transcending himself should at the same time be incapable of controlling himself is hilarious" (144). The very nature of Gawain's error supports this identification. As Robert Kindrick has commented, "Gawain's failing is in many ways a small one—indeed, that is what helps to keep the poem at the level of comedy instead of tragedy" (32). In contrast, the *Alliterative Morte* begins at a peak of affirmation from which it eventually descends. Arthur's feast in that poem may be defined as an "official feast," in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, because it reinforces the existing pattern of things and supports the hierarchy of power currently in place; it is "the triumph of a truth already established" (9). Such an occasion is entirely suited to tragedy, since the hierarchy of power must be solidly based before it can be said to fall. The opposite of the official feast is carnival, which marks "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). While I do not wish to argue that *Gawain* is Rabelaisian, even by Bakhtin's definition of carnival, it is possible to distinguish several elements of the carnivalesque in the poem.²²

And it is Arthur's New Year's feast that begins the catalogue of the carnivalesque. Though as much a royal celebration as that in the *Alliterative Morte*, the feast in *Gawain* also exhibits from the first one of the major elements of carnival, in a narrative detail which, as we have seen, must otherwise be read as a sign of error: the authoritative head of the hierarchy is not in his accustomed place.²³ He has not been supplanted by a boy bishop or a mock king, but he has temporarily abdicated his throne, and his absence vitiates any support that the feast might provide to the existing order of things. Arthur's absence from the table would be an act of appallingly bad manners at a purely official feast, but it is a requirement of carnival. Rather than criticizing Arthur for neglecting his responsibilities, the poet may be indicating even in his initial

description of the king that this celebration is carnivalesque in nature.²⁴ Carnival's implicit presence at Camelot does not condemn the court; rather, it validates the entry of the Green Knight. The misrule of Arthur's cheerful abdication establishes carnival as a licit, if potentially disruptive, force in the society of the poem.²⁵

The Green Knight is himself the most explicit embodiment of carnival in the poem. He is almost a purely grotesque figure. For one thing, he is a "half-etayn" ["half-giant"] (140), and giants are common monstrosities in carnival.²⁶ For another, carnival celebrates the "material bodily principle" (Bakhtin 18-20), and the Green Knight is an overpowering physical presence, acknowledged as at least half-human because he has an admirably well-proportioned body: "For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne, / Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale" ["For although of back and of breast was his body huge, / Both his belly and his waist were becomingly small"] (143-44). Carnival is also a "festival of spring" (Bakhtin 41), and of death and life combined in one image (Bakhtin 24-27). The color green can be associated with death (Benson 91-92), but the green of the Green Knight also reminds us of spring vegetation. His is a vibrant, exploding "enker grene" ["pure green"] (150) which speaks of spring and rebirth even in the depths of winter. His color recalls both death and new life, a union of opposites that his headless state—the literal embodiment of life and death in one—reiterates. In addition, his over-spreading cape of hair, great beard, and monstrous ax connect him to the Wild Man or Green Man of medieval folklore, often seen as a representative of wilderness and natural fecundity.²⁷ Bertilak's abrupt speech and manner at Hautdesert occasionally seem less appropriate to a noble lord than to a *vilain* or churl, the social class most common for a carnival reveler (Benson 86-88).²⁸ At Camelot and at Hautdesert, he initiates and defines the interlocking games in the poem, and game and play are the essence of carnival (Bakhtin 235-39). Even the name which he finally offers Gawain may be to some degree carnivalesque. As Besserman points out, "Bert-" means "bright," and "-lak" may be derived from "lacking" or playing, so that Bertilak, the most commonly accepted form of the name, can be read as "bright play" (226).

Carnival is also a festival of masks (Bakhtin 39-40), and in this, too, the Green Knight excels. His dual nature is so carefully drawn by the poet that it is difficult to tell which half is the real person and which is the mask. Is Bertilak the noble lord turned green by magic for this adventure, or does the supernatural green

man play at being a knight on holidays? We are never really told. In fact, the poet seems to want to leave the question of identity open. On the one hand, if Bertilak is the real person, acting the wild man only for Camelot's sake, then the figure of the guide must be lying, deceived, or stupid when he declares that the Knight of the Green Chapel has "wonyd here ful 3ore" ["dwelt here for a long time"] (2114); on the other hand, if the Green Knight is the primary identity, then the real act is at Hautdesert, where Bertilak does demonstrate some of the characteristics of the boisterous *vilain*.²⁹ Even at the end of the poem, we cannot be certain: the Green Knight's declaration that "Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in þæs londe" ["Bertilak of Hautdesert I am called in this land"] (2445) is balanced by his original announcement at Camelot that as "Ðe Knyzht of þe Grene Chapel men knowen me mony" ["The Knight of the Green Chapel many men know me"] (454). The poet's final reference to the character is as "þe knyzt in þe enker grene" ["the knight in the pure green"] who goes, not back to Hautdesert, but "Whiderwarde-soever he wolde" ["Whithersoever he wished"] (2477-78). The balance between identities is too artful, too perfect, to be accidental. By its very perfection, it calls attention to the constants in both guises of the character, and those cheerful, larger-than-life constants speak most loudly of his carnivalesque nature.

The dominant impression left by the Green Knight (aside from his greenness) is in fact one of mocking amusement—he is condescending, perhaps, but not unkindly. To place his amusement in perspective, it is worth remembering that Gawain's error occurs at the intersection of two games: the Green Knight's Christmas game at Camelot and the exchange of winnings game at Hautdesert. This does not mean that the error may be dismissed as frivolous. Victoria Weiss notes that any refusal "to fulfill one's 'play promises' means incurring disgrace" (414). Gawain is disgraced, both personally and publicly, by his failure to play the game; but rather than beheading him for his transgression, as for a criminal act, the Green Knight laughs. The ridicule seems altogether appropriate to the event. As Benson writes in a perceptive passage:

The most trying of all Gawain's humiliations at the Green Chapel is the fact that the Green Knight refuses to take him seriously. . . . As the laughter of the Green Knight and of the court shows, what Gawain really learns from this adventure is that chivalry takes itself a bit too seriously,

that men become ridiculous and foolish when they attempt to live up to so superhuman an ideal. (240-41)

At the Green Chapel, the mask of the perfect knight lifts to reveal not a demon, but a flawed mortal man. Perhaps the point of Bertilak's dual and carnivalesque identity is just that: to demonstrate that Gawain, too, is wearing a mask. Disguise allows one to release forces which are not normally acknowledged in ordinary time, but we have to remember that the disguise doesn't cover an emptiness. There is real power in the Green Knight, as there is real power in Gawain's chivalry. The lesson that the *Gawain* poet offers, finally, is not that the chivalric ideal, or any ideal, is impossible to attain, but that the ideal must be embodied in this all-too-physical reality. We become ridiculous not when we wear masks that enable us to reach for the stars, but when we forget that—beneath the masks—we are human.

In the end, therefore, the significance of the feasts in their respective poems comes down to each poem's character as comedy or tragedy. The tragic nature of the *Alliterative Morte* is first revealed by its official feast, one that tests its participants even while celebrating and supporting the hierarchy of society. On the other hand, the feast in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* at least hints at the deliberate but temporary reversal of order called carnival, demonstrating the anti-hierarchical chaos of human passions and the disruption of the best laid plans of knights and kings that is caused by human nature. It too is a test, but of the individual behavior as much as of the order of society. Mortal frailty is punished but not utterly condemned in *Gawain*; rather, it is exposed, delineated, and accepted, so that it might be lived with—as Gawain and Camelot will live with the reminder of the Green Baldrick. The carnivalesque feast explores a very different societal structure from that of the official feast, though both demonstrate the worthiness of their participants; the same convention operates to very different ends.

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Notes

¹ For an extensive list of feasts in English romances, see Phyllis Leonardi, *An Analysis of the Feast Scene in the English Metrical Romances*. Leonardi examines feasts in a total of seventy-two romances, commenting that the feast “is part of what is expected from the genre, along with chivalrous knights, courtly ladies, and jousts, tournaments and the occasional giant” (1).

² For example, the *Alliterative Morte* is often approached as an heroic poem, closer to the Old English model than *Gawain*, while *Gawain* is frequently compared to French Arthurian romance. See Dorothy Everett, who writes, “the *Morte Arthure* is, in subject and treatment, a thoroughly masculine poem. Its heroic theme resembles those beloved by the Old English poets” (61). Later in the same essay, she refers to *Gawain* as the “only alliterative poem which has caught the spirit of Arthurian romance as the French understood it” (68).

³ All quotations from and references to *Gawain* use the edition of the poem in Andrew and Waldron’s *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*.

⁴ The feast itself is patterned on Arthur’s coronation feast in Geoffrey of Monmouth; see the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, eds. Griscom and Jones, 451-58.

⁵ All quotations from and references to the *Alliterative Morte* use Mary Hamel’s edition of the poem.

⁶ This menu has no parallel in any of the poem’s possible direct sources. In fact, either the modesty topos or the inexpressibility topos would be a more common method of describing a great feast. For example, the *Gawain* poet uses a version of the inexpressibility topos in lines 130-31 (“Now wyl I of hor seruise say yow no more, / For vch wy3e may wel wit no wont þat þer were” [“Now will I say no more to you of their service / For each man may know well that there was no lack”]); his most specific description of the actual meal is in lines 128-29, when he declares that every pair of diners “had disches twelue, / Good ber and bryzt wyn boþe” [“had twelve dishes, / Good beer and bright wine both”]. Curtius discusses both modesty and inexpressibility as topoi in *European Lit-*

erature and the Latin Middle Ages 83-85 and 159-62.

⁷ Mary Hamel specifies that the unpastured porcupine-piglets are not baby porcupines; they are “urchins,” or “pigs’ maws with spiced pork stuffing, studded with slivered almonds to look like hedgehogs” (260). Hamel also comments that “Tartes of Turkey” is a sufficiently exotic dish as to be difficult for modern scholars to identify (261). I suspect that the “Tartes” may be related to the “Test de Turt” or “head of a Turk tart” (a basic tart made festive by being painted with a face on the top of it), various recipes for which Constance B. Heatt and Sharon Butler list in *Curry on Inglysch*, their edition of English culinary manuscripts. In addition, Arthur’s feast offers birds which the *Northumberland Household Book* (190-92) specifies are to be purchased only for special occasions, i.e. cranes, bitterns, pheasants, curlews, and peacocks. Such fare would be quite appropriate to a New Year’s feast, as would other dishes mentioned. In any case, the food at Arthur’s feast is clearly both sumptuous and entertaining to look at.

⁸ Harder also finds Henry IV’s coronation feast particularly significant as a contemporary parallel for that in the *Alliterative Morte*, in part because of the wine-fountains at it (51-53); Hamel concurs that Henry IV’s coronation may have been a model for Arthur’s feast (260), but notes that wine-fountains are not unknown in other contexts (261-62).

⁹ Jonathan Nicholls comments in his discussion of medieval courtesy manuals and books of nurture: “In bringing the community members together for the needs of bodily nutrition, more needs are being satisfied than merely partaking in the provided food. To be banned from the table is still a punishment that exists in many households, and (at a deep level), represents temporary exclusion from society” (18).

¹⁰ This is not to say that Arthur’s behavior throughout the poem is impeccable, merely that his behavior at the feast is appropriate. For example, Matthew’s reading of the poem in terms of sin and penitence (despite the role played by Fortune) argues that the king is flawed, being both proud and cruel, but Matthews focuses most of his attention not on Arthur’s feast but on the later military campaigns. He does see Arthur’s anger in line 116 at Lucius’ insulting message to be “somewhat less than justifiable” (Arthur changes

color and bites his lip like a lion; 127), but I do not believe that the king's reaction is excessive. George Keiser compares the incident to others, including one involving the Black Prince as described by Froissart, and concludes that "Arthur's behavior in the messenger scene is exactly what we should expect from a king or a prince in his circumstances in the fourteenth century, at least in a fictional representation" (136).

¹¹ It is possible to criticize Arthur's feast as well, of course. In his reassessment of the poem, Karl Heinz Göller attacks the feast as "highly immoderate and even illegal" (20). Göller's argument rests on two points: that Edward III had prohibited lavish banquets in a Statute roughly contemporary to the poem; and that in the medieval debate poem *Wynnere and Wastoure*, the glutton Waster is said by the parsimonious Winner to serve a similar meal (20-21). I cannot accept that Arthur's feast is any more than technically illegal: whatever Edward III had in mind with his Statute, kings and lords continued to give feasts, and continued to be praised for them (in the *Liber Niger* of Edward IV, Lud, Cassibelan, Hardecnut, and Henry I are all specifically praised as great feasters; *Collection of Ordinances* 17-18). In addition, comparing Waster's feast to Arthur's is generally difficult. Winner's primary complaint is that Waster does not have the rank or retinue to justify such a feast (lines 327-28; see Stephanie Trigg's edition of the poem), but we may acquit Arthur of a matching presumption. Furthermore, where Göller sees Arthur's feast as an ironic criticism of the king, due in part to its similarity to Waster's, Nicholas Jacobs reads Waster's banquet as subtly less negative because of its similarity to Arthur's, commenting that the rhetoric used to describe Waster's banquet is the same as that "which in passages such as *Morte Arthure* 176-207 is used in commendation" (491-92). It seems to me that the poems are simply too dissimilar in tone and context for the comparison to have much value in either direction, though a discussion of contrasts might be useful.

¹² In the *Stanzaic Morte*, for example, Lancelot announces his intention to defend the queen against Sir Mador's charges by "rydand ryght into the halle" (line 1555; see the edition by P.F. Hissiger). Similarly, at Henry IV's coronation feast a mounted knight caparisoned in red rode through the hall, offering a chal-

lenge on Henry's behalf to all comers (see Froissart 208-09).

¹³ Andrew and Waldron gloss "childgered" as "boyish," as does the Tolkien and Gordon edition of the poem (rev. Davis), but the word may also connote childishness; for a discussion of the critical response to "childgered," see Patricia Moody, 174-75 and 178-79.

¹⁴ As Lawrence Besserman points out, even the Green Knight's entrance can be seen as "sufficiently motivated by the poet's chosen genre—because Arthur waits for a marvel, and Sir Gawain is a romance, a marvel will come" (230).

¹⁵ For example, Hans Schnyder refers to Arthur's court as "full of corruption, made primarily possible by the King's deviation from the path of a responsible ruler" (294). In his analysis of the concepts of "trawthe" and treason in the poem, Barron mentions the "intemperance of the king" and interprets lines 680-83 as implying that "Camelot . . . has, under test, fallen short of the high repute which brought the test upon it" (5-6). Martin Puhvel describes Arthur as "a restless young man," so impatient and full of energy that "one can hardly help thinking of a boy demanding to be told a fairy-tale before dinner," and reads the poem as "a parable on pride, the pride of King Arthur and Sir Gawain, the preeminent hero of his court, and its fallacy, graphically demonstrated by the events precipitated by the green intruder's challenge, chiefly and climactically the moral lapse or 'fall' of the hero of the poem" (57).

¹⁶ This reference is to the Articles Ordained by King Henry VII, but the instructions presumably reflect earlier practices as well.

¹⁷ Benson sees this use of precedence as indicating the idealistic youth of Camelot, so that "courtesy and ceremony are the most important concerns, and even the democratic Round Table survives only as a name for a brotherhood of knights who take their places at the feast with due attention to degree" (99). However, it is also true that Arthur's refusal to take his proper place is, if anything, emphasized by the references to precedence which follow it.

¹⁸ In their gloss on line 248, Andrew and Waldron note that the word "let" in this line might also be read as an imperative addressed

to the audience. In either sense, the idea that Arthur should speak first remains.

¹⁹ Nicholls sees Camelot as losing “its focal point of order when the king steps off the dais” to take the ax (120). I would say, rather, that Arthur, already out of place, risks making a bad situation worse with his reaction to the Green Knight’s challenge.

²⁰ The *Vrbanitatis* specifically states that “in halle, in chambur, ore where þou gon, / Nurtur & good Maners makeþ man” [“in hall, in chamber, or wherever you go, / Courtesy and good Manners make the man”] (Furnivall, Part 1, 14), while “The Lytylle Childrenes Lytil Boke, or Edyllys be” says firmly, “alle virtues arne closide yn curtesye” [“all virtues are closed in courtesy”] (Furnivall, Part 1, 16), and Hugh Rhodes declares that “he that good manners seemes to lack, / no wyse man doth set by” [“he who seems to lack good manners, / no wise man does esteem”] (Furnivall, Part 1, 72).

²¹ Martin Stevens (responding to Burrow, who believes that Gawain’s error in accepting and concealing the green girdle is “a grave one”; 106) argues that the sin “is clearly a venial one,” according to the teachings of Chaucer’s Parson (77). The situation is complicated by Gawain’s confession in lines 1876-84; see Barron, 85-87, for a review of critical discussion.

²² Robert Levine analyzes the poem in terms of several of “the techniques of grotesque realism described by Bakhtin” (67), while Arthur Lindley maintains that “elements of literal carnival are, of course, everywhere in the text” of the poem (68). Lindley’s interpretation is particularly worth noting, because he identifies Bertilak and Hautdesert as representatives of carnival, while suggesting that Gawain and Camelot embody Bakhtin’s official feast (75). However, I cannot agree that Arthur’s New Year’s feast at Camelot is completely official.

²³ Nicholls reads Arthur’s refusal to sit as both courteous and particularly appropriate to Christmas: “A presiding Lord at a banquet would normally expect to be served first; Arthur inverts these normal rules of precedence, but does not act discourteously. Everything [at Camelot] is still effected with the utmost attention to the requirements of manners, and the deliberate reversal of ranks

(here only in the order of serving, not in the position of the guests) has been a feature of Christmas celebrations since at least the Roman Saturnalia when slaves ate with masters and all marks of rank were discarded. It found a counterpart in the Middle Ages with the celebrations such as the Feast of the Boy Bishop. . . . To follow such customs is a kind of game, the taking of delight in a brief reversal of the normal course of events" (116-17). If Arthur's inversion of the order of service is a game, it is also carnivalesque, in that the grotesque realism of carnival tends to degrade courtly ideals (Bakhtin 18-21; Levine 66-67).

²⁴ Even the phrase "sumquat childgered" might be further clarified by this approach, since it is at least possible to argue that Arthur is unconsciously acting as his own "boy king" in refusing to take his place at table. However, the general stress on youth in this section of the poem makes such an argument problematic ("For al watz pis fayre folk in hir first age" ["For all this fair folk were in their first age"]; line 54); as Clare Kinney has commented, both the king and his court are presented as immature throughout the opening section of the poem, to the extent of being dismissed by the Green Knight as "berdlez chylder" ["beardless children"] in line 280 (48).

²⁵ Lindley reads the carnivalesque elements in *Gawain* as subverting societal structure: "The order of the world, which Gawain might once have seen as natural and given, he may now see as constructed, though the need to believe in that order requires him to assert it as given" (86). I would like to stress that, as Lindley acknowledges, Gawain acts as an individual representative of his "interpretive community" (74-75).

²⁶ For a consideration of the popularity of grotesque giants in carnival, see Bakhtin 341-43. I am not arguing that the Green Knight is a purely grotesque figure, but that, as Benson demonstrates in his analysis of lines 136-220, the poet's description of him contains grotesque elements and so he might fairly be called carnivalesque (58-62).

²⁷ Speirs associates the Green Knight directly with "the Green Man—the Jack in the Green or Wild Man of village festivals of England and Europe. . . . Who is the Green Man? He is a descendent of the Vegetation or Nature god of almost universal and im-

memorial tradition (whatever his local name) whose death and resurrection are the myth-and-ritual counterpart of the annual death and rebirth of nature" (219). Benson's later separation of the Green Man and the Wild Man into differing literary conventions (though he recognizes that they are interchangeable in folk ritual) is also worth noting: "Spring and greenery are the natural phenomena associated with the green man; he develops from the pleasant aspects of nature, and in literature he becomes an attractive, youthful figure. The wild man seems to have developed from the sterner side of nature. Winter is the more suitable season for him, and, in folklore, he delights in storms and rides with the Wild Hunt. He is old rather than youthful, grotesque rather than beautiful, and he is usually a hostile figure, the enemy of the knight and the opponent of the values represented by the romance courts" (75). It is Benson's contention that the Gawain poet has united these two figures in the character of the Green Knight (92-93); if so, then in the combination of the two conventions we may also have yet another instance of the Green Knight as the image of both life and death (in this case, youth and old age, spring and winter).

²⁸ Susan Farrier points out in another context that "Bakhtin's description of the comically 'grotesque' carnivalesque figure actually fits rather well with the stereotyped *vilain* or lower class person of romance and *chanson de geste*" (146). In the *Alliterative Morte*, the cannibal giant of Mount Saint Michael—clearly a grotesque figure—is repeatedly referred to as a "carle" (in lines 1063, 1107, and 1165).

²⁹ Benson points out that the "frenzied energy" of Bertilak at Hautdesert seems particularly *vilain*-like when contrasted to Gawain's decorum, as does Bertilak's fondness for hunting and early rising (86-88).

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