ELMES, MELISSA RIDLEY, PhD. Negotiating Violence at the Feast in Medieval British Texts. (2016)
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The medieval period has been viewed historically as a time of excessive and senseless violence. This project participates in the ongoing field reassessment of violence in medieval literature as being culturally meaningful, rather than senseless and excessive, by advocating for greater attention to the ways in which medieval writers critiqued violence in their narratives and, by extension, their communities. While scholars readily read the tournaments and battles in medieval texts for such critique, I argue that feast scenes actually provide a clearer view of the ways in which violence is used narratively as a productive interventional force, particularly when latent conflicts that have been obscured by adherence to rigid social systems threaten to destabilize a community. Medieval chivalric and etiquette codes suggest that violence stems from those living outside of their jurisdiction; but the violence in feast halls, ungovernable by those codes, shows that conflict from within the community offers the greatest threat to its stability and must be redressed by meaningful action rather than through a prescribed ritualistic response.

Making use of theoretical underpinnings from anthropology and history that characterize the feast as a culturally essential event and medieval violence as a rational and strategically-employed tool of constraint, coercion, and manipulation, I convert the essentially historical question of the cultural importance of feasts into a literary one by close reading feasting scenes and their aftermath in order to consider how the writers in

medieval England used the motif of violence at or following the feast to illuminate, critique, and offer correction to social, political, and religious issues tied to the specific concerns of justice, loyalty, and treason within a community. Looking at texts ranging from the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, the Welsh *Mabinogion,* and Latin *Historia Regum Britanniae* to chronicle-based works by Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower, the Middle English Arthurian romances *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the Old Norse *Clari's Saga*, and outlaw tales of Robin Hood, Gamelyn, and Hereward the Wake, I demonstrate through a comparative approach centered on interpretation and analysis supported with contextual historical evidence that violence associated with the feast is typically presented according to genre expectations and mirrors cultural anxieties that are specific to the community in which and for which a given text was produced.

The use of the feast for such a purpose is possible precisely because of its essential quality in a given culture; everyone reading the text knows what the feast is supposed to be, and this common understanding of what a feast is permits the disruptions and violent altercations, rather than the event, to become the narrative focus when they occur. Because medieval society viewed it as a tool to be used, rather than simply a passionate outburst, when violence erupts unexpectedly during or after a feast it is being intentionally performed; since the codes of conduct and etiquette that govern the feast make no accommodation for dealing with that violence, there is no communal sense of how to address it; and so, instances of violence at the feast must be handled in the

immediate sense on an individual level. This unscripted response to the violence forces a community in its wake to consider what led to the violence, who was involved, how it was handled, and what to do in its aftermath to try to rectify the issues that led to the violent altercation and determine how to avoid or address further potentially violent conflicts.

Ultimately, I argue that while all of the instances of violence at the feast examined in this study are differentiated by genre expectations and culturally specific anxieties, together they reveal a continuous preoccupation on the part of writers in medieval England with the limitations of behavioral standards like the chivalric and conduct codes to control violence effectively. I challenge the idea that simply upholding the standards of conduct set forth by prescriptive manuals is enough to stave off social unrest by demonstrating that in fact, social unrest comes not from misbehavior but from the limitations of codes of behavior to account for interpersonal strife. Since the codes of conduct that prescribe how to behave at events like the feast do not address how to deal with latent conflict, when violence does erupt it can become a productive force for meaningful change, because it reveals interpersonal issues that the codes seek to repress and forces the community to deal with them.

NEGOTIATING VIOLENCE AT THE FEAST IN MEDIEVAL BRITISH TEXTS

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Long trestle tables draped in fresh linen cloths and lavishly covered with delicacies and decorations designed to tempt all of the senses; well-dressed guests seated according to social status and attended to by servants carefully trained to follow prescriptive codes of conduct in preparing and serving a great meal; music from the troubadours wandering among the guests, all located within a Great Hall designed specifically to host such events: these are the trappings the modern reader expects of the feast in medieval literature. But is that all—or should that be all—that readers see when reading feast scenes? If nothing of particular note happens and the feast ends uneventfully, then perhaps so. But when a feast goes awry, this fissure in the carefully-orchestrated event exposes the presence of an antagonistic force that has not been addressed, yet threatens the community. Such moments offer an unparalleled opportunity for literary critics to locate and examine the otherwise often well-camouflaged conflicts within a given community.

It is tempting to take the feast scenes in medieval literature at face value as festive occasions of often-carnivalesque excess; but to do so is to ignore that, although removed from the world within a hall and thus, seemingly a pause in the action, the literary feast does not exist within a vacuum. In any narrative, everything that has occurred prior to, and everything that occurs after, is related to some or all of those characters who are

present at the feast. The medieval literary feast is a continuation of narrative action, so that, for instance, when there is violence present throughout a text, for readers to expect this violence simply to pause while we feast our eyes upon a lavish meal is folly. Further, the feasts in medieval literature are not stock narrative elements, but rather serve specific functions within a given narrative, functions often related to genre expectations. For example, epics are texts that preserve cultural memory. Therefore, Anglo-Saxon epic feasts like those in *Beowulf* feature the *comitatus* gathered in a Hall that functions like a cultural reliquary in containing and preserving its contents as a repository for the memory of communities long lost to history. Each time a community gathers within that hall, the ghosts of past feasts, and the traditions of those who came before, are also present at the event, as the *scops* remind us in their stories. In chronicles like Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, feasts commemorate important events, like victories and coronations, or important figures, like the birth or wedding of a ruler. In the romances of medieval England, feasts mark important calendar days, like the feast days of saints, as well as serving as catalysts for the next adventure—as when King Arthur refuses to eat until he has beheld some miracle or marvel—and occasions of the revelation of some great mystery, as when we learn Galahad's identity as the occupant of the Perilous Seat and thus, the Knight of the Grail. Even feasts with no particular occasion to mark or person to celebrate often provide the eponymous characters of medieval outlaw narratives with textual sites at which to test and either support or transgress against visitors in their efforts to exact justice in a society that often appears not to provide other means of doing so. Because they serve such different narrative purposes dependent upon the genre in

which they are found, reading medieval literary feasts in a general sense as minor scenes depicting culinary and sartorial excess that are sandwiched between the more important major adventure scenes flattens their importance as narrative episodes and ignores the ways in which they serve both to extend and to disrupt the action of medieval texts.

One of the most essential functions of the feast in medieval literature is to bring all of the members of a community together at a single event. That event is supposed to be one of unity and usually, of celebration. However, while feasts are readily legible as moments of celebration and unity, and as broadly communal events that include people from every walk of society, from the noble host to the basest servant, they also provide a focal point for considering a textual community's various socio-political and cultural anxieties. The particular socio-political and cultural anxieties addressed during and following medieval literary feasts in all genres are, I argue, based in the heretofore-unexamined role of the feast in fostering, occluding, perpetuating, and erupting into violence, which is the primary focus of this study. As I will show, all acts of violence conducted at a feast can be read as desperate acts, but we must be careful not to mischaracterize them as senseless or uncontrolled—as what the modern world calls, "crimes of passion"—solely because they are committed out of desperation. These acts are desperate because they are performed as a last possible means of getting the attention of those for whom the violence is intended. The role of the feast as a spectacle itself ensures that any violent deed performed at the feast is calculated to draw attention—that is, to serve as a counter-spectacle to the feast—and this is an intentional choice on the part of the perpetrator of violence. The feast is chosen as the scene for the violent deed

because it is the surest place at which the most witnesses possible will be present, in addition to being a convenient gathering space for the perpetrator and his or her victims. Far from being senseless and uncontrolled crimes of passion, these violent altercations are calculated to have maximum, spectacular effect. They are done to be witnessed, in support of their doers' goals of drawing attention to, and somehow resolving, a particular issue or conflict in which they are directly implicated and which is nearly always tied to a slight of personal honor or to a greater instance of actual of perceived injustice that has not been, and perhaps cannot be, satisfactorily redressed by any other means. When the governing systems by which a society operates are not sufficient to address the personal concerns and conflicts of its members—when, for instance, there is no legal means by which one might achieve a sense of justice—the individual will take any opportunity presented to achieve some measure of justice for him or herself. As this study illustrates, medieval writers understood the feast to be a highly ordered, carefully orchestrated event following prescribed rules of etiquette, and therefore the literary feast, like its historical counterpart, which I discuss in this introduction, serves as an ideal scene for locating unexpected violent outbursts that draw our attention to various unaddressed issues that we then must examine, understand, and critique.

Feasts are not a common subject for medievalist literary criticism, and when they are examined it is generally not for their own merits as a concrete event. Literary analysis traditionally considers food and the feast to be "metaphor, a vehicle for morality and values, and a discourse on its own, distanced from history and from everyday life" and

focusing mainly on the themes of the dangers of pleasure and disapproval of excess.[1] Anthropologists, however, have, at least since Marcel Mauss's 1966 *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, recognized the feast as a "total social phenomenon" (76-77) that can be studied for all of a society's various elements: legal, religious, economic, and aesthetic, for example.[2] Because it comprises all aspects of a given society, Mauss theorizes the feast as a near-perfect event for analysis, description, and comparison of a given culture. Essential to this theory is, as O'Connor points out, the concept of "holism," the "study of all aspects of a society and their interrelations" (3). The importance of such a holistic approach to the study of various cultures is that, as Mauss explains, "the study of the concrete, which is the study of the whole […] furnishes more explanations […] than the study of the abstract" (78). This anthropological stance of feasts as culturally essential occasions serves as the theoretical underpinning of my argument that, like their historical counterparts, literary feasts can be read beyond their

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[1] Kaori O'Connor *The Neverending Feast: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Feasting* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pg. 3.

[2] Traditionally, medieval literary scholars have steered clear of interdisciplinary approaches to literature, including the use of anthropological studies and theories, preferring to focus almost exclusively on literary approaches like philology and textual criticism. I know of no substantive study of Middle English literature that makes use of Mauss *et al* to discuss feast scenes. There are, however, notable exceptions in particular among those working in material culture and especially among Anglo-Saxon literary scholars working on feasts and feasting and hall culture, who have long recognized the need to contextualize Old English literature with archaeological and anthropological evidence, given its nature as being so far removed from modern understanding, and who have recently eagerly made use of such aids to contextualize their studies. Some important recent scholarship that makes use in particular of Marcel Mauss's ideas of the gift and gift-giving includes Peter Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence in* Beowulf (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013); Christine Lee, *Feasting the Dead: Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon Burial Rituals* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007); and Alban Gautier, *Le Feste dans l'Angleterre Anglo-Saxonne (v-xie siècles)*, (Rennes: Publications Universitaires Rennes, 2006). Middle English scholars have by comparison been less eager to embrace anthropological approaches, although the idea of the gift and gift-exchange is seen, for instance, in studies of the outlaws, as in Walter Wadiak's "'What Shall These Bowes Do?': The Gift and Its Violence in *A Geste of Robin Hood*," *Exemplaria* 24.3 (2012): 238-259. The current study adds to the voices of medieval literary scholars who find theories gleaned from anthropology and sociology to be helpful in the contextualization of literary historical arguments.

physical description into the socio-political questions they raise, engage in, and interrogate. Medieval writers do not just include feast scenes in their texts as moments of lavish description of noble living, but employ them in a variety of modes of representation in which cultural anxieties are encoded; anxieties which can be excavated through close reading, interpretation, and analysis, contextualized with historical fact. This possibility is particularly true of those feasts which erupt into violence born of unaddressed conflict, as this study will show.

Like feasts, violence is a near-constant topic of historical considerations of what humans do with, to, and for one another, and therefore, like feasts, violence is a frequent topic of anthropological study. Unlike the anthropological view of feasting as culturally essential and therefore a holistic tool useful in the study of various communities, which has thus far gained little traction among literary scholars, anthropological views on violence have been used to great effect in recent discussions of medieval textual violence.[3] The use of anthropologically-based descriptions and theories of violence has

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[3] For example, in "Violence and the Making of Wiglaf," John H. Hill uses a number of anthropological studies, including Jeffrey Fadiman's *An Oral History of Tribal Warfare: The Meru of Mount Kenya* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), 75-122; Ariane Deluz's and Suzette Heald's edited collection of essays *Anthropology and Psychoanalysis: An Encounter through Culture* (London; New York: 1994); Georges Dumézil, Gods of the Ancient Northmen, trans. Einar Haugen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge and Sons, 1922, rept. 1961); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972) and Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems With Women and Problems With Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988) to contextualize his argument of Wiglaf's kinship with Beowulf being an act of mutually supportive, gift-giving violence. In the same volume, Eve Salisbury reads John Gower's response to the 1381 Peasant's Revolt against René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) to make a case for reading Gower's chronicling of the event as an effort at "shaping a social conscience where it is conspicuously absent in the institutions around him" (93) in "London, Gower, and the Rising of 1381." Although Girard is generally viewed as a historian and literary critic, his work more properly belongs to the field of anthropological philosophy and thus can be viewed as essentially anthropological in nature. M.C.

led to important discoveries concerning medieval violence; chief among these findings that it was not senseless and excessive, as suggested in Johan Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919; trans. English in 1924) and reiterated by Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* (1939; trans. English 1968-1982), but in fact was perceived as a normative aspect of society and systematically used as a tool of restraint, coercion, and manipulation. As Mark Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, and Oren Falk note, "violence was not an expression of the irrationality and extreme emotions of medieval people but a product of their rationality, a behavior well-understood and strategically employed."[4] Because of this recent characterization of medieval violence as being strategic rather than irrational, which is supported by anthropological evidence, scholars like Meyerson *et al* have shown that instances of medieval literary violence, like their historical counterparts, require re-reading and reconsideration not as excessive and senseless but rather deployed for some real function or purpose within a given narrative. The current study draws on this recent work of reclassifying medieval violence to make the argument that when violence occurs at the feast in a medieval text it is not merely deployed for sensational purpose, but performs the important and specific cultural work of providing a means of redress for wrongs done to someone, or to a group of people, who cannot rely on more formal modes of obtaining justice.

Bodden also makes use of Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* in her reading of the *Envoy* of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* as exposing and critiquing violence against women in hagiographic texts ("Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*: Interrogating 'Virtue' Through Violence"). These three essays appear in '*A Great Effusion of Blood'? Interpreting Medieval Violence*, eds. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, and Oren Falk (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004).

[4] Myerson, Thiery, and Falk, "Introduction," *A Great Effusion of Blood*, pg. 6.

Making use of these theoretical underpinnings of the feast as culturally essential and medieval violence as a rational and strategic tool, in this study I convert the essentially historical question of the cultural importance of feasts into a literary one by close reading feasting scenes and their aftermath in order to consider how the writers in medieval England used the occasion of the feast—specifically, violence at or following the feast— to illuminate, critique, and offer correction to various social, political, and religious conflicts tied to the twinned issues of personal honor and justice in medieval society. I demonstrate through a comparative approach grounded in interpretation and analysis supported with contextual historical evidence that violence associated with the feast is typically presented according to genre expectations and mirrors cultural anxieties that are specific to the community in which and for which a given text was produced. The use of the feast for such a purpose is possible precisely because of its essential quality in a given culture; everyone reading the text knows what the feast is supposed to be, and this common understanding of what a feast is permits the disruptions and violent altercations, rather than the event, to become the narrative focus when they occur. The expectation that everyone knows and will abide by the social mores which in the later medieval period were codified and written down in conduct manuals for consultation leads to an artificial sense of safety and security; whereas the warrior and chivalric codes provided a script for how to handle violent altercations appropriately in battle or tournament situations, there is no such mandate in the feasting hall. Therefore, with the understanding that medieval society viewed it as a strategically-employed tool, it is clear that when violence erupts unexpectedly during or after a feast it is being intentionally

performed, and because there is no communal sense of how to handle it laid out in the conduct codes, it must be handled in the immediate sense on an individual level. This necessarily individual approach to the conflict in turn forces a community in its wake to consider what led to the violence, who was involved, how it was handled, and what to do in its aftermath. Although there are often similarities in terms of how feasts are presented in medieval texts, and even in terms of how violence is presented at those medieval literary feasts, it is in the differences that we can locate and compare the various cultural conversations on how to address conflict when there are no official means by which to do so. Generally, such conflict falls along the lines of personal honor, and an inability whether real or perceived to obtain jutice for some wrong that has caused someone physical or emotional harm. Discovering through close reading and analysis how each literary community handles such moments is an important step towards developing a better understanding of the nature of medieval violence.

Ultimately, I argue that, while each of the instances of violence at the feast examined in this study is presented differently according to genre expectations and explores a set of cultural issues particular to a given community, together they reveal a continuous preoccupation on the part of writers in medieval England with the limitations of behavioral standards like the chivalric and conduct codes to control violence effectively. This revelation challenges the idea that simply upholding the standards of conduct set forth by prescriptive manuals is enough to stave off social unrest by demonstrating that in fact, social unrest comes not from misbehavior but from the limitations of codes of behavior to account for interpersonal strife. Since the codes of

conduct that prescribe how to behave at events like the feast do not address how to deal with latent conflict, however, when violence does erupt it can become a productive force for meaningful change, because it reveals the conflicts and issues that the codes seek to repress and diminish and forces the members of the community to deal with them. This is specifically true of violence at the feast, in comparison to the violence of jousts and battlefields, precisely because those are antagonistic events at which violence is not only expected, but demanded, of the participants; so much so that the legal codes often reinforced the chivalric codes that governed how that violence should be employed. There is no provision in the conduct manuals that govern feasts for the implementation of violence, which is therefore a disruption at such events, something to actively avoid. It is when violence becomes unavoidable at the feast that we see most clearly the conflicts that in those moments cease to be hidden under the veneer of etiquette and social mores. Violence at the feast in medieval literature is a means of calling attention to conflicts of personal honor and justice that the governing codes of a given society fail to address. It is a means of taking justice into one's own hands when there appears to be no other recourse available. It therefore demands first, a consideration of the limitations of those governing codes (political, social, or religious) in effect at any given feast and second, a redistribution of power following the violence which in turn makes future similar issues more manageable in some tangible way. To make this argument, in what remains of this Introduction I turn first to a consideration of representative instances of violence at feasts recorded in medieval and early modern chronicles, which will contextualize my literary study with examples rooted in historical evidence of the many ways that writers of

medieval texts used such events. This historical contextualization is followed by a discussion of the critical tradition first of feasts, and then of violence, in medieval studies, providing the critical framework within which I am situating my contribution to these areas of study. I close the Introduction with a description of the scope and organization of my project, and an explanation of the methodology I have used to arrive at my conclusions.

Feasting Violence in Medieval Culture: Evidence From the Chronicles

Chronicles—the written historical (and often contemporary, as well) accounts of human events and deeds in the temporal world—were one of the major medieval literary genres and continued to be important through the early modern period. The focus of most chroniclers was on developing a narrative that provided a historical framework in which to situate a current society, and that historical framework nearly always included a didactic function as well—chronicles were meant to impart some "universal truth" to their readers.[5] Because most chroniclers were preoccupied with the development of a "truthful" account of history in support of a particular agenda, even chronicles purporting to set forth the whole world's history exhibit bias to greater or lesser degree; they most often comprise those events and individuals who support or contribute to the chronicler's purpose in writing, and those events and individuals are described in terms not merely of facts, but of significance (Given-Wilson, 2-3). In other words, medieval chronicles focus

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[5] Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London; New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), pg. 2.

on what historical events and figures can teach the reader, and the events and figures on which a focus is brought are therefore those the chronicler considers most didactically useful. Further, chronicles tend to serve as genealogical and institutional histories, and to record the deeds in battle of important figures.[6] The emphasis in these instances is on words and deeds that serve as the historical record of why things are the way they are, and why things are done the way they are done—the historical and contemporary acts that legitimize a current ruler, for example. Medieval chroniclers, then, gave little space in their texts to events and occasions that they did not find to be didactically useful or historically important in the construction of their grand narratives. As a result of this practice of elaborating only on occasions that seemed particularly significant, most medieval chronicles devote a great deal of space to battles and other political activities, coronations, and other similarly important historical moments in a patriarchal society, while other events, like feasts, if they are noted at all, often appear in passing, perhaps appended with a brief description of where or when they occurred, who was present, and how long they lasted.[7] Because feasts are relatively rarely included and not typically elaborated on in chronicles, when they are described in greater detail the reader should

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[6] See Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, chapters 4 and 5.

[7] For instance, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, one of the focal texts of this study, no mention of feasts occurs in Part One; in Part Two, Geoffrey describes Lud as a "warrior-king, lavish in arranging feasts" (106) but does not note the feasts, themselves; and in Part Three, he discusses in detail the ritual sacrifices the British leaders make to the gods on the occasion of their second victory against Caesar, concluding with the brief observation that "When they had done honor to the gods, they feasted on the viands left over, as the custom was on sacrificial occasions" (113); but then, in Part Seven, King Arthur's plenary court and feast are described in high detail for the space of twelve pages, calling attention to the relative importance of the feast in association with the more physically violent deeds and events that characterize the reigns of other figures throughout the chronicle. For fuller discussion of the importance of the Feast of Whitsun, see chapter two of this study. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

take note of it, because such effort on the part of the writer to record them suggests they hold particular significance in the unfolding narrative. Like their fictional counterparts, then, historical feasts as recorded in the chronicles represent more than the events, themselves and therefore, require greater critical attention than is usually afforded them.

A number of the feasts that are described with unusual detail in medieval and early modern chronicles are feasts at which or from which violent altercations ensue. These occasions underscore Myerson *et al*'s contention that violence was used as a tool of constraint, coercion, or manipulation in the medieval period and thus, lend historical context to my argument that instances of violence at the feast in medieval texts should be understood as bearing significance beyond their sensational effect; specifically, that they showcase for critique the limitations of conduct codes to account for interpersonal conflict by highlighting the productive nature of such violence in providing a degree of justice where it otherwise fails to appear, most often for the disenfranchised members of a community. Including every description of a violent feast preserved in the chronicles from this historical period is well beyond the scope and purpose of the present study, but the following selection from chronicle sources ranging from the eighth through the sixteenth century and hailing from a variety of Northern European cultures provides the historical context that serves to illustrate the critical potential of such scenes in aiding us to understand the cultural anxieties encoded within them. Those anxieties include, for example, the postcolonial concerns of the conquered peoples following the unification of societies in post-conquest situations, concern over the stability of inter-familial alliances and who holds the power and privilege following weddings, and concern over a new

ruler's ability to achieve or maintain peace following a coronation, treaty, or similar event. In every instance, the anxiety revealed by the violent act is tied intimately to questions of authority, power, and control, which in turn are nominally based in the laws and codes of a given society and therefore reveal the limits of those codes to govern effectively in the face of interpersonal strife. Each act of violence as described is intended to constrain, coerce, or manipulate, and therefore represents the effort of the perpetrator of violence to negotiate power and agency for him- or herself when the currently legitimate power structures fail to meet his or her needs or threaten his or her sense of security. Such scenes call attention to the power structures of the depicted community, and while violent feast scenes may not be the only place in a text where this happens, because feasts rely on upholding the existing power structures to succeed as peaceful events, when those governing systems are overturned it is all the more visible and startling to the reader. In turn, the reader of such scenes must determine whether to approve or condemn the violence, and, by association, whether to support or criticize the current power structure being described. When writers of medieval chronicles incorporate scenes of violence at the feast into their narratives, those scenes become focal points for an ongoing discussion of historical and contemporary questions of power and authority—who wields it, who wants it, how it is gained, and how it is lost—by calling attention to the limitations of existing power structures to restrain that violence. As each of the following instances illustrates, violence in these cases is rendered productive because it records for its readers the conflict that led to the violent altercation, and contemplation of

that record can suggest ways to avoid future violence by addressing similar conflicts before they erupt into violence.

The historical feasts I have chosen to survey here as exemplars either provide the historical counterpart to, or closely resemble, the literary feasts examined throughout this study. The first feast I will consider here in support of these claims is Albion's victorious feast in Paul the Deacon's (720-799) eighth-century *Historia Langobardorum*, which serves as the basis for John Gower's "Albinus and Rosamund," one of the texts I examine in chapter two of this study. As recounted by Paul the Deacon, this victory feast leads directly to the victor's death:

> After [King Albion] had ruled in Italy three years and six months, he was slain by the treachery of his wife, and the cause of his murder was this: While he sat in merriment at a banquet in Verona longer than was proper, with the cup which he had made of the head of his father-in-law, Cunimund, he ordered it to be given to the queen to drink wine, and he invited her to drink merrily with her father. Lest this should seem impossible to anyone, I speak the truth in Christ. [...] Then [Queen] Rosemund when she heard this thing conceived in her heart deep anguish she could not restrain, and straight away she burned to avenge the death of her father by the murder of her husband, and she formed a plan with Helmechis who was the king's squire--that is, his armor-bearer--and his foster brother, to kill the king [...] unfortunately alas! This most warlike and very brave man being helpless against his enemy, was slain as if he was one of no account, and he who was most famous in war through the overthrow of so many enemies, perished by the scheme of one little woman.[8]

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[8] Paul the Deacon (c. 720-799), *Historia Langobardorum*, trans. Ludwig Konrad Bethmann (Hannoverae Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1878). *University of Toronto Digitized Library Archive*. 15 June 2015. Web. III.30. The story is repeated in the 1185 *Pantheon* or *Universitalis libri qui chronici appellantur* of Godfrey of Viterbo (c. 1120-1196), and Robert Yeager believes that it is this later recension of the tale which served as the inspiration for John Gower's version of it in Book One of the *Confessio Amantis*. See Robert F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), pg. 145. For discussion of Gower's version of this story, see chapter three.

Held by a warlord to celebrate his victories and to ratify his control over others, the feast should be governed solely by Albion's will as its host, with all attendees following his lead and command regarding their behavior. However, that understood governing custom of recognizing the host's authority to conduct the feast as he pleases falls utterly short of meeting the needs of the guests should the host abuse his power, as Albion does here, resulting in pain, suffering, or other injuries to the human psyche that require redress. Such instances in which the tension between the governing code and its limitations leave an individual with no recourse to address wrongs are precisely those moments when violence is most likely to erupt at a feast. The violence that this feast pepetrates upon its host stems from a desire on the part of his wife, Queen Rosemund, to retaliate against him for forcing her to drink from the skull of her father, whose death in turn was the act of violence that led to the feast's being held. This feast, then, is both product and propagator of the narrative violence that characterizes Albion's reign, and indeed forcing his wife to drink from her father's skull is another violent act, so that the feast is not a pause, but a continuation, of that violence. Albion, as King and conqueror, is characterized as a figure with the authority to make such a demand on his wife; indeed, Paul the Deacon seems almost to make excuses for him by suggesting that he might be inebriated and thus not acting in his full capacity ("[…] he sat in merriment at a banquet in Verona longer than was proper, with the cup which he had made of the head of his father-in-law, Cunimund"). Likewise, Rosemund is upon an initial reading characterized as the villain of the scene; Albion "was slain *by the treachery of his wife*" and the deed is labeled murder (emphasis mine). Albion, "most warlike and very brave," is "helpless

against his enemy" and dies "by the scheme of one little woman." Paul the Deacon appears condemnatory and dismissive of Rosemund as a "little woman" scheming to murder her husband; however, that he acknowledges that the reason behind her action was "anguish she could not restrain" suggests that the scene not be read in such straightforward fashion. This anguish, Rosemund's initial emotional response to the situation, transforms into a burning desire to avenge her father, and that anger and desire for vengeance, in turn, converts into a plan to kill the king. Rosemund therefore does not act from her initial anguish, which would be a "senseless and excessive" violent deed, but from a plan devised and thought-through with her aid in its implementation, Helmechis, which is, rather, an intentional and rational deployment of violence to constrain (by killing) her husband's violence. Although Paul does not elaborate on why Rosemund makes the choice to handle the situation as she does, an audience contemporary to the *Historia Langobardorum* would be well aware of the relative lack of power wielded by women in that time and place, and that there was no legal recourse for her to protest Albion's actions. This feast therefore supports the view of medieval violence as a tool to be used in order to obtain justice when all other possibilities fail to provide it. As I show later in my discussion of John Gower's adaptation of this story for the *Confessio Amantis*, Albion's conquering and killing of Rosemund's father also points to cultural anxieties tied to postcolonial violence, and to the stability of alliances by marriage in postcolonial societies, so that Rosemund's historical act of vengeance is converted into a literary argument on behalf of those who are oppressed by a governing system that fails to deliver justice to them even when it is warranted.

By contrast, Book Fourteen of Saxo Grammaticus's (c. 1150-c. 1220) twelfth-century *Gesta Danorum* preserves a detailed, three-page description of the Bloodfeast at Roskilde of 1157, an event billed as a symbolic feast to celebrate a newly-declared peace truce between King Canute V of Denmark and Sweyn Grathe (later, Sweyn III), his rival for the throne. While I will not reproduce the full three pages here, I will summarize the main events: Sweyn invited Canute to his home for the feast. After the meal, Canute and his men were killed by Sweyn in another violent murder immediately preceded by a feast, this time politically motivated rather than retributive in nature. [9] Like that held by Albion, this feast also supports the view of medieval violence as a tool of constraint, coercion, and manipulation and, in fact, is an excellent example of all three acts simultaneously: Sweyn manipulates Canute into coming to the feast by offering a truce, and constrains Canute and his men by killing them immediately after the feast while they are still drunk, to coerce the Danes into accepting his rule. For a society wherein hosts and guests at a feast are expected to enforce a strict hospitality code, this event represents a shocking violation of conduct. Embedded within it are the anxieties tied to peace treaties between warring nations, particularly the concern over the strength of such a treaty to ensure the personal safety of its enactors. When one of those individuals involved determines that the treaty is not in his best interest and makes the choice to break it, the only available

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[9] Saxo Grammaticus. *Danorum regum heroumque historia books X-XVI : the text of the first edition with translation and commentary in three volumes, volume 2*. Ed. and trans. Erik Christiansen. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981. Print. Pp. 405-409.

means of doing so is through violent action. The reader of such a scene is confronted with the question: how might this episode have been avoided? The violence in this case is a productive opportunity to think about how to create stronger, more stable peace treaties and alliances, whether it is possible and how to avoid violence at the hands of a disgruntled participant in such treaties, and even whether or not such treaties should be entertained at all. In this, it permits the feast to function as a social and political gauge for determining how well a community is doing as regards handling conflict.

In the mid-fourteenth century, Nicholas Trevet's (c. 1257-c.1334) Anglo-Norman *Croniques* presented a European audience with the earliest extant written version of a common story from the Byzantine tradition.[10] This "Tale of the Noble Lady Constance," the source text for Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* which I examine in chapter three, features at its heart a conversion story gone awry, in which a wedding feast plays a spectacularly gruesome role:

> It happened that the Sultan's mother, who was still living—Alas! It was the will of God—seeing that her religion was already on the point of being destroyed by Christians, who were in the Saracen land, plotted evil and treason […] after she made a secret alliance by covenant with seven hundred Saracens […] she begged her son, the Sultan, that he would grant her the first feast before the wedding, and thanking her, he consented. Then the maiden and the Christians were received by the Sultan and his mother with great honor and great splendor.
>
> And on the first day of her arrival the feast was provided in the palace of the Sultaness; and the banquet was so arranged that all the Christian and Saracen males should eat in the hall of the Sultan, and at the feast in the hall of the Sultaness there should be only women, except for the seven hundred hired

[10] For discussion of the text's Byzantine origins, see Robert M. Correale, "The Man of Law's Prologue and Tale" pp. 279-288, especially 279, in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales II*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005); also, A.H. Krappe, "The Offa-Constance Legend" in *Anglia* 61 (1937), pp. 361-369.

> Saracens, who were assigned to serve at both feasts.[11] And when the feast was most joyful, these seven hundred hirelings, with another large multitude of their retainers, came armed upon those eating. And according to the order of the Sultaness, they killed all the Christian men and women, except only the maiden, and they killed the Sultan and the emir and the other converts to the Christian faith. And everywhere in the court they put to death whomever they found among the common Christian people. But when they first heard the commotion, three young Christian men escaped and came to Rome and reported to the Emperor the mischief and treason, and the death, as they supposed, of his daughter Constance. At this news the Emperor and all of the clergy and the Senate were dismayed, and great grief was displayed throughout Rome.[12]

In this text, which serves as the source for multiple similar narratives throughout the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the feast scene presents the massacre of Christians at the order of a Saracen woman determined not to allow her religion to be defiled through intermarriage and conversion.[13] This violence, yet again deployed systematically in pursuit of a specific goal—here, that of halting the enforced conversion of the Saracen community—clearly addresses the anxieties over religion and conversion stemming from the ongoing crusading activity of Western Europeans against Saracen nations. It also reflects an ambivalence concerning the ability of a wedding to form a stable new

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[11] This appears to be written explicitly to appeal to the Anglo-Norman audience on the part of Trivet; the seating of men and women in separate halls has been well-documented as an Anglo-Norman practice. See Judith Weiss, "Power and Weakness of Women in Anglo-Norman Romance," in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 7-23, especially pg. 11.

[12] Nicholas Trevet, "Of the Noble Lady Constance" from *Croniques*, translated by Robert M. Correale in *Sources and Analogues* II, pg. 300.

[13] The Constance theme was developed after Trevet's *Croniques* in texts including Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (fourteenth-century), the Breton *Lai* of *Emaré* (fifteenth-century) and (according to Lillian Hornstein) the fourteenth-century Breton lai *Erle of Toulous* (120); Hornstein also finds affiliations between Trevet's story and the *King of Tars* (before 1330). The Constance theme is also linked to the broader Calumniated queens tradition in medieval literature, discussed in Margaret Schlaugh, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* (New York, Gordian Press, 1969) and more recently in Nancy B. Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003). See Lillian Hornstein, "Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda Legends" in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500* Volume I: Romance, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) pp. 120-132 and *Sources and Analogues* pp. 279-288.

community when that community comprises families of such disparate background, and intergenerational concerns over such intermarriage and intermingling of cultures. The violence is productive in allowing the reader to think through questions of how far one should go to protect one's family and defend one's faith, whether or not the Sultan was dutiful to his mother and country in deciding to marry the Christian princess, and, again, how one might go about avoiding a similar tragic outcome in the event that such a marriage becomes necessary or desirable.[14]

My fourth and final historical example of violence at the feast is two-fold: the murders at the feast committed during the reign of King James II of Scotland and in his presence, which both occur in order to secure James's precarious rule. The first of these, the Black Dinner of 1440, is perhaps best-known to modern audiences as the source for George R.R. Martin's Red Wedding ("The Rains of Castlemere" episode in the HBO drama adapted from Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series).[15] The historical event, which

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[14] Although I do not think it is necessarily Chaucer's primary goal, it also calls forth the question of women stepping beyond their prescribed roles and seeking greater agency and political control than is typically afforded them, a theme Gower intentionally develops in his adaptation of the story, the focus of part of chapter two of this dissertation.

[15] Martin discusses his historical references for this episode in an interview with James Hibbard for *Entertainment Weekly*: "The Red Wedding is based on a couple real events from Scottish history. One was a case called The Black Dinner. The king of Scotland was fighting the Black Douglas clan. He reached out to make peace. He offered the young Earl of Douglas safe passage. He came to Edinburgh Castle and had a great feast. Then at the end of the feast, [the king's men] started pounding on a single drum. They brought out a covered plate and put it in front of the Earl and revealed it was the head of a black boar — the symbol of death. And as soon as he saw it, he knew what it meant. They dragged them out and put them to death in the courtyard. The larger instance was the Glencoe Massacre. Clan MacDonald stayed with the Campbell clan overnight and the laws of hospitality supposedly applied. But the Campbells arose and started butchering every MacDonald they could get their hands on. No matter how much I make up, there's stuff in history that's just as bad, or worse." "'Game of Thrones' Author George R.R. Martin: Why He Wrote The Red Wedding—EXCLUSIVE," *Entertainment Weekly*, June 2, 2013. Accessed 16 January 2016. Web. The version of the story Martin relates here is that found in Hume; historians believe it and the boar's head story to be specious—legend, more than fact—but like Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Arthur for the English, it is legend that has become immured in Scotland's cultural history.

took place at Edinburgh Castle, was planned by Sir William Crichton, Lord Chancellor to James II. Believing the Douglas clan to hold too much power, Crichton arranged for 16-year old William, Sixth Earl of Douglas and his younger brother David to dine with James II, then ten years old, himself. After the dinner, the Douglas brothers were taken out to Castle Hill and beheaded. Although there is scant evidence of the feast from medieval chronicle sources, a rhyme recorded in David Hume's (1558-1629) *History of the Houses of Douglas and Angus* (printed posthumously in 1644),[16] and described as "ancient" (*i.e*. more or less contemporary to the events it describes) by historian Patrick Fraser Tytler (1791-1849) in his *History of Scotland*, Volume IV, preserves the essential condemnatory tenor of the response of Douglas supporters to the event:

> Edinburgh castle, toun, and tower,
> God grant ye sink for sin;
> And that even for the black-dinner,
> Earl Douglas gat therin. (Hume 155)

In the Auchinleck chronicle contemporary to the actual events, only the deadly outcome of the feast is noted: "Item, m. cccc. xl eril William of Douglas Archebaldis son, beand than xvm yens of age, and his brother David boughs, was put to deid at Edinburgh. And Malcome Flemyng of Beggar was put to deid in that famyn place within thre days eften."[17] [Item, 1440. Earl William of Douglas Archibald's son, being then sixteen years of age, and his brother David Boughs was put to death at Edinburgh. And Malcolm

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[16] The full account of the dinner appears on pp. 148-156; the rhyme, on page 155.

[17] *The Auchinleck Chronicle: Ane Schort Memoriale of the Scottis Corniklis for Addicioun to Which is Addkd a Short Chronicle of the Reign of James the Second Kind of Scots M.CCCC.XXXVL-M.CCCC.LX-L.* Printed from the Asloan Manuscript. Edinburgh: Printed by Thomas Thomson for private circulation, 1819. Pp. 34-35. *Google Book Search*. 16 January 2016. Web.

Fleming of Beggar was put to death in that same place within three years after.][18] Taken together, the rhyme and the chronicle seem to confirm that the event occurred at a dinner hosted at the castle (whether it unfolded as Hume records it or not) and therefore the deaths of the boys are explicitly linked to that meal. This feast, like the others discussed above, illustrates the deployment of violence to constrain and manipulate, Crichton constraining the Douglas clan's power after manipulating the boys into their vulnerable position as guests at the king's table. The betrayal of hospitality evinced at this feast reveals anxieties surrounding whether or not members of the powerful Scottish clans can trust their safety in the presence of the young king, and asks readers first, to determine whether or not the betrayal was warranted in order to protect the king's interests, and second, whether or not the violence was necessary in order to accomplish that goal. In the second violent feast recorded in the chronicles during James II's reign, it is James himself who does the killing. He invites the Eighth Earl of Douglas to a feast at Stirling Castle on February 22, 1452 in order to persuade him to break off an alliance he holds with other dissatisfied nobles. This feast is also recorded in the Asloan manuscript, in significantly more detail than the earlier one: "Than the king said fals tratour sen [if] yow will nocht [i.e. not break your bond] I sall and stert sodanly till him with ane knyf and straik him in at the colere [collar] and down in the body and thai sayd that patrik gray straik him nixt the king with ane poll ax on the hed and strak out his harnes [brains] and syne the gentillis [nobles] that war' with the king gaf thaim ilkane a straik or twa with

[18] Translation mine.

knyffis."[19] [Then the king said false traitor if you will not break your bond I shall and suddenly started at him with a knife and struck him in at the collar and down in the body and they say that Patrick Gray struck him next [after] the king with a pole axe on the head and struck out his brains and soon the nobles that were with the king gave them also a strike or two with knives]. While initially, this violent act seems borne of an impassioned and senseless response to Douglas's refusal to agree to James's demands, in fact, the feast was arranged as a means of coercing Douglas to break his alliance with the other nobles against James; as such, the question of what to do should that coercion fail must have come up in plans for the event. That James is accompanied by other men who also partake in Douglas's murder suggests that this is, in fact, yet another occasion on which violence is being deployed intentionally in pursuit of a goal; in this case, the constraint of the other nobles through the example made of Douglas. The inclusion of both of these violent feasts in the historical record of his reign characterizes James II as a figure who raised deep anxieties among the Scottish nobles affiliated with the Douglas clan concerning their safety and agency in situations in which they disagreed with royal actions and mandates; so much so that after Douglas's death, they subsequently raised a civil war between 1452 and 1455, seeking to circumvent James's rule and regain a degree

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[19] The manuscript page upon which this portion of the chronicle is found, together with a description of the event and a transcription of the passage, is found on the National Library of Scotland's webpages at http://digital.nls.uk/scotlandspages/timeline/15132.html.

of their suspended power.[20] Readers of the chronicle must determine whether the king was justified in killing Douglas, given both the clear breach of hospitality and the subsequent events that suggest that civil war may have been imminent whether he lived or not; whether the nobles were correct in their uprising against the king for this act; and yet again, whether and how this violence might have been avoided.

Although depicted similarly as spaces where the governing codes of a given community are overturned through an act of what might be deemed "renegade justice," each of these historical instances of violence at the feast records a different set of conflicts at play, negating our tendency to want to read feasts generally as community building, unifying, and festive occasions and demonstrating the necessity rather of reading each feast on its own terms, as part of the narrative in which it occurs and (to the degree possible) within the context of the community for which the chronicle was written. While modern readers can read Saxo Grammaticus's chronicle and view the Bloodfeast at Roskilde with horror for the clear breach of hospitality, for his contemporary Danish audience it is not only a record of the massacre of Canute and his men, but a warning that hospitality alone is not enough to ensure one's safety in a time of inter-society conflict. Likewise, while modern readers might read Nicholas Trevet's chronicle version of the Constance story with a focus on what it reveals about anti-Saracen sentiment in the Anglo-Norman community, the contemporary readers of the

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[20] For a good history of the Douglas family's strained relationship with the Scottish Crown, see Michael Brown, *The Black Douglases: War and Lordship in Late Medieval Scotland, 1300-1455* (Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press, Ltd, 1998).

chronicle are confronted in this story with the anxieties caused by miscegenation and the ultimate demands placed upon members of a faith community to uphold that faith. In every instance, the chronicle feast that ends in a violent altercation provides its reader with a means of thinking through how to handle such situations in future in order to avoid further or similar violence. This view of violence in feasts in chronicle texts as both specific to a particular time and place, and aimed at a specific audience with a specific set of anxieties, is in keeping with their understood role as didactic narratives that set forth a particular world view in support of a particular agenda. Whether they record such historical and contemporary instances of violence at the feast to warn an audience of the possibility of future violence, to legitimize one side or the other in a historical or ongoing conflict, or to persuade an audience to consider alternate ways of handling such events, chroniclers clearly record them for more than their sensational presence. The only common denominator in these feasts is that they result in violence between the hosting and guest communities, and so they must be read individually on their own terms. When we are reading such moments in the chronicles, then, we should do so for what they can tell us not simply about what happened; they also open a dialogue on the context of violence and possibilities for its avoidance in future. I argue that this approach is even more important when we are reading fictional tales that incorporate scenes of violence at the feast, because while it might be necessary to record such moments as a matter of historical record in a chronicle, there is no such mandate in an epic, romance, or similar fictional genre. When writers choose to include scenes of violence at the feast, it is a significant textual event and should be read as such.

Feasts in Medieval Literary Criticism

The subject of feasts and feasting in the premodern period has long been of interest to scholars such as historians of coronation and celebratory events (cf. Hammond, 2005), archaeologists of feasting halls (cf. Pollington, 2003), and anthropologists interested in such communal events (cf. Jones, 2007); however, more often than not, feasts have been overlooked by literary scholars. While the more general subjects of food and drink in the Middle Ages have enjoyed widespread academic interest (cf. Henisch, 1976 & 2009; Hieatt, Hosington, and Butler, 1996; Redon, Sabban, and Serventi, 1998; Brears, 2012), until very recently the only full-length literary studies of medieval feasts and feasting were the unpublished dissertations of Mary Frances Zambreno (1988) and Aaron Hostetter (2011). Allen Frantzen's *Food, Eating, and Identity in Early Medieval England* (Boydell, 2014) takes for Anglo-Saxon culture specifically the kind of interdisciplinary approach to the subject that I am interested in, albeit with a far greater attention to archaeology over textual instances of feasting than I use in this study. Besides these few longer studies, there have been a handful of edited collections of essays on bmedieval feasts including studies of literary instances of feasting (Altenberg and Steinhoff, 1991; Tuckett, 2009) and a handful of articles on literary feasts in various medieval texts (Harder, 1980; Lawler, 1995; Gruenler, 2010; Massey, 2012; Raine, 2012; Byrne, 2011 & 2013). None of these studies explicitly addresses the presence and significance of violent altercations at the feast as its focus, rendering mine the first extended scholarly work to focus specifically on this subject.

Violence in Medieval Literary Studies

As previously mentioned, the subject of violence in medieval culture has enjoyed widespread attention in a variety of fields, including anthropology, history, and literary and cultural studies. Because there is such a large body of literature devoted to the subject of medieval violence it is impossible and, indeed, not desirable for me to include every title; I have, rather, chosen to provide here a broad sampling of the available scholarship to indicate the range of approaches taken to this topic.

Studies of medieval literary violence have been particularly influenced by a number of historical approaches. Chapter one of Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*[21] set the stage in the early twentieth century for an understanding of the era as being a particularly violent one in comparison to modern society. However, even by the publication of *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (1978), Barbara Tuchman's popular offering on the subject, studies of medieval violence were moving away from a monolithic idea of one-size-fits-all, senseless and excessive brutality to a more nuanced approach grounded in rigorous attention to the available data.[22] This

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[21] Discussed also on page 4 of this Introduction.

[22] Tuchman's book was criticized, as were the works of Elias (see discussion p. 4) and Huizinga, as being more concerned with contemporary violence than medieval, using the earlier period to shine a lens on modern concerns rather than focusing on the historical data and seeking to extrapolate a more objective view of the Middle Ages (See, for instance, Charles Wood's review in *Speculum* 54.2 (1979): pp. 430-435 and Thomas Ohlgren's in *Fifteenth Century Studies 4* (1981), pp. 207-221). This trend of reading medieval violence against violent altercations in our own time continues in, for example, the introductory remarks made by Albrecht Classen in *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature: A Casebook* : "Literary scholarship focused on the Middle Ages proves to be in an ideal position to explore the phenomena of violence, hatred, aggression, and also love, and to draw consequences for our present society," (New York and London: Routledge, 2004): pp. 1-36: 25) and those by Edelgard DuBuck and Yael Evan in their preface to *Fifteenth Century Studies*, Volume 27(2002), *A Special Issue on Violence in Fifteenth-Century Text and Image*: " The diverse and multiple ways in which various societies handle violence, today as in the past, make us

movement towards a more historically responsible approach to the subject of violence in the Middle Ages was led in the latter part of the twentieth century by historians of chivalry (Keen, 1988; Kaeuper, 1999); of political activities such as persecution (R.I. Moore, 1987; Niremberg, 1996); and of the ethnography of violence in specific societies (Halsall *et al*, 1998), among others. In the first part of the twenty-first century, this work of reassessing medieval violence from a historical standpoint has been taken on by scholars like Brown (2011), Saul (2011), and Skoda (2013).

Literary scholars have drawn on the work of these and other historians to contextualize their discussions of violence in medieval texts. Some of the most essential new works focused entirely on violence in medieval literature include Classen's collection mentioned above, which focuses mainly on German and French texts (2004), Clark's study of gender and violence in the Old Norse eddas and sagas (2012), and Baker's study of the violence in *Beowulf* (2013). There is an enormous body of work available on violence against women in medieval literature, of which essential representative titles include Gravdal (1991) and Roberts (1998). Recent and important article-length literary studies focused on specific topics range from the metaphor of violence as a financial transaction in heroic literature (Frotscher, 2013); the violence of

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aware of the internal and external problems of men and women living with foreigners and one another. We notice that at the dawn of the twenty-first century we are not as civilized as we may envision ourselves as being […] It is no wonder, then, that the last two congresses on Fifteenth-Century Studies had multiple sessions on "Violence in Fifteenth Century Text and Image," (Woodbridge: Camden House, pp. vii-xv: vii). However, while these more modern studies continue to make the comparison between modern forms of violence and those of the medieval period—a comparison worth making, I think, as a means of showing how historical violence informs contemporary understandings of violence and of reminding the modern audience that we are not so far removed from our medieval counterparts as we might like to think as regards the presence of violence among us—they generally place far more emphasis on responsible uses of the historical evidence than Tuchman was accused of having done.

rape in chivalric texts (Vines, 2014); and violence and transgression in Chrétien de Troyes's Yvain (Ovens 2015). Most recently as well, book-length monographs and essay collections have tended to take an interdisciplinary turn, combining anthropological, historical, and literary approaches in an effort to cross disciplinary and field lines in order to more fully understand the phenomenon of medieval violence; such titles include Meyerson *et al*'s *Interpreting Medieval Violence* (2004); Cowell, *The Medieval Warrior Society: Gifts, Violence, Performance, and the Sacred* (2007); and Larissa Tracy's recent topical series on particular forms of violence in medieval literature and culture (*Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature*, 2012; *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* (with Jeff Massey, 2012); *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, 2013; and *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture* (with Kelly Devries, 2016).[23] It is this recent turn towards a more specific and interdisciplinary approach to medieval violence in literary studies that most influences my own approach to the subject.

Scope, Methodology, and Organization

As the first full-length study on the subject, mine cannot pretend to be a comprehensive, final word on violence at the feast in medieval literature, nor would I wish it to be so; rather, I hope that it serves as the beginning of a long and robust scholarly discussion. I have chosen to begin this discussion through a transhistorical and

[23] Two further volumes in this series are currently in production; one on flaying, and one on murder.

comparative approach that focuses on texts penned for Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, Welsh, and Middle English communities, in order to demonstrate the broad use made of violence at the feast in medieval literary works while still retaining a manageable data set restricted to Northern European cultures. I have made the deliberate choice to look at texts through a cultural, rather than a chronological, lens in order to contribute to ongoing efforts in the field to reconsider periodization. To show that the genre influences the ways in which violence is deployed at or following the feast, I have included texts ranging from the Old English epic, to the chronicle and the Middle English romance. All of these texts feature scenes of feasting that are disrupted by violent altercations, and each of those altercations has at its center a figure utilizing violence as a tool to constrain, to coerce, or to manipulate either another individual, or an entire community, in pursuit of redress or justice for some perceived or actual wrong. They are, then, all tied explicitly in some way to questions of social and political justice for the individual. Some of these texts, like *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, include scenes of feasting violence that are so well-known that to omit them from this study would be irresponsible at best. Others, like Geoffrey Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" and John Gower's "Albinus and Rosamund" appear in what many scholars consider to be among the most important Middle English texts—the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis*, respectively—and thus, I believe should be considered if at all possible in a study purporting to bring a new lens to bear upon medieval British literature, as this one does. Furthermore, these texts correspond directly to the chronicle texts examined in this Introduction, permitting a literary view of those historical events

for comparative purposes. Alongside these canonical works, I include a set of lesser-known texts that also feature scenes of violence at or resulting from the feast, to show how a thematic approach such as this one can bring understudied texts into conversation with their better-known counterparts towards a new understanding of medieval literature that does not rely on "the canon" for validation of a work's potential for critical importance. Through this transhistorical and comparative approach focused on a variety of cultures and texts. rather than time periods and the canon, I foreground the idea that medieval violence is culturally meaningful and productive, rather than senseless and excessive, as suggested by the specific uses that medieval writers make of violence at the feast to critique various injustices and questions of personal honor (on which, more below). This idea is presented through a series of close readings of the feast scenes in each text that are contextualized with historical evidence and interpreted through a variety of critical lenses including postcolonial and ecocritical theory, hospitality theory, gender, and philology.

I begin in chapter one with an analysis of the wedding feast in the Welsh *Second Branch of the Mabinogion* as a shaping and driving force in the narrative, showing how a passing slight at this event leads to an exchange of violent, retributive acts that bring about the fall of a king and nearly destroy a country. Here, the exchange of women that played a central role in the unification of early medieval Germanic tribes is exposed as an ineffectual means of achieving peace. The ritualized wedding feast intended to unify these countries fails to perform this function because it is overshadowed by the cultural importance of maintaining

one’s individual honor at any cost, an importance which ultimately leads to a series of retributive acts seeking redress for increasingly insulting behaviors on both sides: an exchange of efforts at obtaining some form of justice beyond that originally agreed-upon in the marriage contract and subsequent political alliance. I then look beyond marriage unions into the greater warrior community, using close and comparative readings of the feasts in the Old English *Beowulf* and *Fight at Finnsburg* to show how the Anglo-Saxon individual constructs his honor not in spite of, but on behalf of, the community in the face of violence, in stark contrast to the Welsh writer’s presentation of the individual’s honor as being worth any degree of violence to uphold and avenge. Exposing the limitations of ritual and the essential nature of individual agency in questions of community stability, the violence at these feasts serves the explicit dual function of both destructive and productive force for change even in early medieval British texts by first, highlighting the ways that personal vendettas undertaken for honor’s sake undermine a community, and then showing how that community’s realization of its limitations in terms of accommodating individual honor leads to a shift in how similar issues are addressed in later instances.

Chapter two examines a selection of violent feasting scenes derived from medieval Latin and Anglo-Norman chronicles to consider further the ways in which chroniclers present various forms of violence as stemming from and encoded within the postcolonial anxieties of conquered peoples which was briefly discussed in this Introduction as regards Paul the Deacon’s telling of the story of Albion and Rosemund. I

provide two very different readings of that violence in order to showcase the wide-ranging critical potential of such moments. My postcolonial and ecocritical reading of Arthur's coronation feast in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *Historia Regum Britanniae* sheds light on the cultural violence required to assimilate the various tribes of a post-Conquest society not possessed of a universally-accepted and supported single governing code. In my consideration of John Gower's retelling of "Albius and Rosemund" the intersection of postcolonialism, gender, and violence provides a vibrant new reading of this familiar story that is, likewise, grounded in the limitations of existing power structures to allow for justice for those who do not wield that power.

Chapter three uses Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and the Old Norse *Clari's Saga* as representative texts that show how gender and violence intersect in problematic, but ultimately productive, ways at medieval literary feasts. Both of these texts present a community and the individuals within it negotiating violence intentionally performed at a feast by the woman responsible for hosting it. Although the women's actions occur well outside of established codes of conduct and prescribed female gender roles to destabilize the community they are responsible for upholding, the violence that ensues is productive because it sheds light on the underlying social and political issues that prevent the community from moving forward as a stable unit. Instead of seeking social justice for people who have no voice, or a means for acquiring justice when the major codes of conduct have failed society, here the violent feast provides the opportunity to right wrongs, seeking a form of cultural justice in the face of a systemic lack thereof on the part of the religious and political codes currently in place. While in

both texts the original community dissolves, the one taking its place promises a more stable social base to build from, so that violence, initially terrible, becomes a necessary step toward a less-violent future.

Chapter four examines violence at the feast in Middle English Arthurian romances to show how it is employed to showcase the limitations of Arthur's court to handle itself in instances in which the expected codes of conduct no longer apply. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the initial feast is used to criticize Arthur's arrogance as a ruler and begin a sustained narrative consideration of how the tension between personal choices and community pressures is bound up in the threat, the performance, and the aftermath of violence whether in support or contradiction of prescribed codes of conduct. Rather than focusing on getting justice for disenfranchised members of a community, here the feast offers an opportunity and a space for a similar evaluation of the cultural and social structures that lead to the violence it begets. In comparison to its earlier French and Stanzaic versions, the poisoning scene in the "Lancelot and Guinevere" section of Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* characterizes Guinevere as a source of violence not of her own making. Malory's description of the aftermath of this feast presents a powerful critique of late-medieval English justice by offering a sustained examination of the role of treason in the community's downfall. These texts expose the limitations of the chivalric and courtly codes that govern Camelot, and reveal points of intervention in which the fall of Arthur's kingdom might be prevented through a more authentic approach to conflict, opening a dialogue on how to negotiate violence for effective change.

Chapter five charts the development of violence and its aftermath within the feasting scenes in three popular outlaw narratives—the *Geste of Robin Hood*, *The Tale of Gamelyn* and *Hereward the Wake*—examining how each tale's seemingly isolated feasting scene serves as an anchoring textual space for the presentation of Anglo-Saxon versus Anglo-Norman violence as a form of identity testing through the subversion of Anglo-Norman governing codes by the relative "justice" of the Anglo-Saxon outlaws' actions, which reveal the limitations of Anglo-Norman rule in meeting the needs of all members of a post-Conquest society. Outlaw tales—often read as subversive "anti-romances" whose protagonists exist outside of the prescribed codes of conduct associated with correct living—prove rather to be a different branch of the same ongoing literary debate about what it means to be English found in the chronicles and romances and often presented in terms of the negotiation of violence along cultural lines. This chapter therefore brings the often-marginalized outlaw tales into alignment with their canonical counterparts, arguing for reassessment of their critical value.

This project participates in the ongoing field reassessment of violence in medieval literature as culturally meaningful, rather than senseless and excessive by advocating for greater attention to the ways in which medieval writers negotiated and critiqued the presence of violence in their narratives and, by extension, their communities. While scholars readily read the tournaments and battles in medieval texts for such critique, I argue that in depicting the community within a space in which everyone must participate correctly according to established rituals to avoid conflict, feast scenes actually provide a

clearer view of the ways in which violence is deployed intentionally and used narratively as a productive interventional force for negotiating justice beyond the traditionally understood modes by which it is obtained, such as through the legal and chivalric codes. As an outlet for people seeking justice, violence that occurs at the feast also forces those in power to acknowledge and deal with the conflicts that led to that violence. Medieval chivalric and etiquette codes suggest that violence stems from those living outside of their jurisdiction; but the violence in feast halls, ungovernable by those codes, shows that the violence from within the community offers the greatest threat to its stability and must be redressed by real and meaningful action rather than through a prescribed ritualistic response. An understanding that the negotiation of violence at the feast serves as the catalyst for changes that either destroy or fortify a community reveals that by exposing the weaknesses in a community that must be dealt with, the violence that is often considered gratuitous or excessive in fact plays a productive role by forcing us to consider not just the function of violence, but how its very presence at the feast critiques and demands reassessment of personal and communal justice in medieval texts.

CHAPTER II

VIOLENCE AT EARLY MEDIEVAL FEASTS: THE TENUOUS TIES THAT BIND

In Paul the Deacon's chronicle, which I discussed in my Introduction and which Donald Bullough views as roughly contemporary to the work of the *Beowulf*-poet, what began as a feast commemorating his military triumphs ended in the violent retributive death of Albion at his queen's request: a stark reminder that marriage vows and warrior loyalties are not foolproof safeguards against retributive violence—one subject of this chapter[24]. Similarly, Saxo Grammaticus's blood feast at Roskilde reminds the reader of the importance of remaining on guard against the breaking of peace treaties through violent means. Likewise, in early medieval literary texts like the Welsh *Mabinogion* and the Old English *Beowulf* and *Fight at Finnsburg,* violence in the feast-hall and violence at, following, or otherwise associated with a feast can be read not merely as destructive behavior or a chance for the hero to prevail and earn glory and honor, but importantly also as a productive way of getting to the heart of issues the community either has not or cannot address by the usual channels, such as through legal codes or the dictates of hospitality. By exposing the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of a community, the violence that occurs at and as a result of feasts demands that the community in question address those concerns rather than ignoring them, which, in turn, permits the community to move

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[24] Donald Bullough, *Friends, Neighbours, and Fellow-Drinkers: Aspects of Community and Conflict in the Early Medieval West*, H.M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures 1 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, 1990. Print. Pg.17.

forward stronger and more unified—or, to disintegrate and then form different communities that promise to be stronger and more unified.

Because of the importance of the early medieval feast as an event of community-building and a binding contract of safety and protection between its attendees according to the laws of hospitality governing such occasions, historical instances of deadly feasts like those at Verona and Roskilde are glaring reminders of the tenuous nature of such ties. Equally, because at these historical feasts the deadly violent acts were premeditated—not accidental, but planned instances of death and by consequence community destabilization and dissolution—when violence occurs in a literary feast, it draws particular attention to itself. The author is not necessarily using the feast in its traditional function as a scene of merriment and celebration, but rather, in some cases, intentionally to destabilize the scene and showcase the breakdown of a community. When a feast turns violent, or leads to later violent ramifications, the irrevocable shifts that occur in the community as a result speak to greater issues of power, control, authority, and identity which until that point have largely gone unremarked. Considering the second branch of the Welsh *Mabinogion*, the Old English *Beowulf*, and the Old English *Fight at Finnsburg*, this chapter explores how the feast—which should be a moment of alliance and peace-weaving—can also serve as a space in which a community is tested and found wanting in it ability to address conflicts without resorting to violence. In these texts, the literary feast seduces the reader into a false sense of security, ultimately revealing itself to be not the expected moment of safe and joyful celebration of alliance, but a space of aggression and destruction on the part of individual and community, alike. In doing so,

these feasts and their aftermath present us with a heretofore largely-unexamined textual space through which to consider culturally specific iterations of violence, aggression, and brutality. Through the destabilization and dissolution of the community that gathers within them, paradoxically these feasts signal the inception of a new order and therefore become understandable as instances of identity formation. Ultimately, violence at and following the feast in early medieval texts can be recognized as a catalyst for the demonstration of loyalty and honor, or the revelation of their absence, on the part of affiliated parties, forcing a re-examination of the community and the individuals who comprise it following the violent altercation.

***The Second Branch of the Mabinogion*:**
Weddings, Coronations, and Personal Honor in Welsh Texts

Originating in twelfth- or thirteenth-century Wales, the stories that comprise the *Mabinogion* vie with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* as the earliest prose works in medieval Britain.[25] The original tales are most recently given a possible *terminus a quo* of 1060 and a *terminus ad quem* of 1200;[26] they are preserved in fragmentary form in manuscripts dating to the thirteenth century, and as complete collections in two manuscripts: the c. 1350 *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* [White Book of

[25] This point of contention has proven significant in terms of efforts to establish the origins of the Arthurian legend. Although this is an ongoing scholarly debate well beyond the scope of the current study, it is also important in considering the preservation of early British (in this case, Welsh) cultural mores and beliefs, including those surrounding the function of feasts and violence with which this chapter is concerned.
[26] Sims-Williams, Patrick. "The Submission of Irish Kings in Fact and Fiction: Henry II, Bendigeidfran, and the dating of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*", *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 22 (Winter 1991): 31–61.

Rhydderch, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, M.S. Peniarth 4-5] and the c.1382-1410 *Llyfr Goch Hergest* [Red Book of Hergest, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Jesus College 111].[27] This information is important to the current discussion because it determines the general historical point in which the cultural understandings of feasts and of violence that have been preserved and handed down in Welsh communities are comparable to the texts of the *Mabinogion*, and may perhaps be encoded within them to greater or lesser degree through a process of acculturation. That is to say, historical evidence gleaned from between 1060 and 1200 is the material against which I read the *Second Branch of the Mabinogion* or "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr" as it is also called.[28] Reading the text against this evidence reveals a significant cultural ambivalence concerning the role of feasts as community-building events. The evidence suggests that for its medieval Welsh audience, and perhaps also the audience of the earlier Irish material that influenced it, the story of "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr" was a cautionary tale promoting strongly marked distinctions between different cultural groups rather than the cultural intermingling generally associated with the early medieval British feast—that is, it highlights community instability, rather than community building. This instability becomes most clearly focused in the scenes of feasting found throughout this branch of the narrative. The feasts in the *Second Branch of the Mabinogion* are presented as a cause-and-effect series of events that ultimately lead not to stability, but to a change in

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[27] Davies, Sioned, "Introduction," *The Mabinogion, A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. ix. All quotes from the text will come from this edition unless otherwise noted.
[28] This is the title given to the story in Jeffrey Gantz's translation of *The Mabinogion*, for instance (New York: Dorset Press, 1976).

the community that is articulated as inevitable, because it is tied to that most unstable thing—the construct of human honor. While personal honor is an important concept in almost any medieval tale dealing with human interactions, for the Welsh audience it seems to be the most essential element of the story, so that whether real or perceived, the violation of honor and its ramifications become the shaping and driving narrative force in the *Second Branch of the Mabinogion.* Analysis of the feasts in this tale shows how the author uses them to highlight the tenuous nature of bonds forged through ritualistic acts such as weddings and coronations, acts which in medieval texts always occur in association with a feast, so that the feast becomes the most logical common point from which to trace the development of violence surrounding such occasions. In each case, the desire to seek justice for slights of personal honor is shown to trump the unions and alliances the feasts are intended to forge, so that each feast is tied in to the greater narrative of the centrality of the individual, and the feasts are shown to be limited in their capacity to prevent individuals from acting on their own ideas of honor regardless of established protocol.

In "Branwen of Llyr," Matholwch, King of Ireland arrives at Harlech in Ardudwy[29], where Bendigeidfran, son of Llyr and King of Britain, is holding court. The stated purpose of the Irish contingent's arrival is to ask for the hand of Bendigeidfran's sister, Branwen and thus, to "join together the Island of the Mighty and Ireland so that they might be stronger" (Davies 23). After meeting with his counselors, Bendigeidfran

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[29] Identified by Davies as "High Rock at Ardudwy, "a commot [early Welsh territorial administrative unit, or community] on the north-eastern shore of Cardigan Bay, extending from the Ffesiniog valley to the Mawddach estuary [on the western coast of Wales]. Pg. 232, n. 22.

agrees to this union, and holds a feast in Aberffraw[30] to mark the occasion. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon tradition, in which the common space of the feast-hall is of tantamount importance, in this narrative the feast space is not important; that is, because of his great size, there is no hall large enough to contain Bendigeidfran, so they hold the feast in tents. The absence of the feast-hall does not hold any particular significance in this case, since for the Welsh the feast-hall does not hold the same cultural importance as it does in the Anglo-Saxon tradition; what is most important is not where the feast is held, but by whom, for whom, and why.[31] For this same reason, while the feast itself is not described, careful attention is given to where each of the main figures is seated during the feast. This attention to placement at table demonstrates an emphasis on following protocol concerning who sits where, and thus, in comparing one's rank to another, which is in keeping with the great importance placed on personal honor throughout this narrative. In the text, "This is how they sat: the king of the Island of the Mighty with Manawydan son of Llyr on one side and Matholwch on the other, with Branwen daughter of Llyr next to him" (Davies 23). There is a clear sense of hierarchy involved in this seating arrangement: the two kings sit side-by-side, but the King of Britain, as the more prestigious figure, is accompanied by a high-ranked member of his own family—perhaps as a symbol of the family's unified stance in the arrangement of the marriage, but also

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[30] The chief court of the fifth century princes of Gwynedd, located in Anglesey [*Ynys Mon*, an island off the northwest coast of Wales], Davies, pg. 233 n. 23. For a history of the princes of Gwynedd, see John Davies, *The Celts* (London: Cassell and Company, 2000); *A History of Wales,* Revised Edition (London: Penguin Books, 2007); and *The Making of Wales*, Second Edition (Gloucestershire:The History Press, 2009).

[31] The essential nature of the feast hall in Anglo-Saxon culture is noted in a number of important studies, including those of Magennis (1996) and Pollington (2005), both discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

almost certainly as a precaution against any potential threat or harm to the king's person, seated as they are at a feast with the Irish in tents and not behind a fortified wall or within a fortified hall. Branwen is seated on the other side of Matholwych, symbolically representing her separation from her own family and impending union with the Irish king. With only the four figures present at the table, this should not be read as a moment of demotion for Branwen, but rather of re-association. She is still the sister of the princes of Llyr, and still royal in her own right; but now her physical placement at the side of Matholwych is a visual marker of her role as the unifying member of both families. Her placement to Matholwych's other side binds him physically into the Llyr family while also indicating her new position in both families.[32] This placement of the newly-allied family members is a representation of the ideal work of the wedding feast, which is supposed to result in a clear union between two people that in turn forges an alliance between their communities. Branwen's clear continued importance as a subject member of the Llyr family as well as a symbolic figure unifying them with the Irish royal family becomes the central point around which my argument concerning the next, violent feast in the story develops because, as I will show, this ideal union is not always the reality,

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[32] This position of the married woman as a bridge between two families with ties to each is discussed by many scholars, including Morfydd E. Owen, who writes in his essay on the legal aspects of women's shame and honour that: "her [the woman's] links were dual. They lay both with the kin into which she was born and with the kin with which she was associated through her husband after marriage. Despite, or because of, this her role in society was an important and delicately balanced one, governed by subtle conventions of behavior, for she was the genetrice in whose person lay the future of her husband's kin, and her own kin was well aware of this role and conscious of the need to preserve her honour. She served also as a unifying force between kin." (40) Michael Enright provides a socio-historical look at this same phenomenon in the Celto-germanic warbands in his monograph, *Lady With a Mead Cup* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996).

and even when it is achieved, it can prove fragile enough to be dismantled by the actions of a single individual who disapproves of the union and whose disapproval is not registered and dealt with before the wedding takes place. When there is no possibility for redress of concerns over the wedding prior to or at the wedding feast, the outcome can be violent; while that violence is initially destructive, it can also be productive in exposing the latent conflicts in a given community and forcing its members to deal with them, resulting in a more stable society moving forward.

The seating of the main figures is the primary focus of this first feast scene; after we are told where they are sitting, the writer adds that that "they began the celebration and continued to carouse and converse" until "when they thought it was better to sleep than to continue carousing, they went to sleep," with Matholwych "taking Branwen into his bed" (Davies, 23). The lack of details concerning what was or was not served at the feast, or who else was present, is a common feature of feasts throughout the *Mabinogion* and indeed, in the feast scenes found in much of the medieval Celtic material; for these cultures the literary feast is a marker of significant events—such as marriages and victory celebrations—and a point of affiliation or conflict between tribes, rather than a central event worthy of description in its own right.[33] Because this is the feast that precipitates the violent incidents that comprise the rest of the narrative, and in the absence of greater

[33] The formulaic presentation of feast-scenes in which the placement of the main figures takes precedence over any other aspect of the event echoes throughout the *Mabinogion*: in "Pwyll, Lord of Dyved" we are told of the first feast: "The hall was prepared, and they went to the tables. This is how they sat: Hyfaidd Hen on one side of Pwyll , and Rhiannon on the other; after that each according to his rank. They ate and caroused and conversed." (Davies, 11) Then, in the second feast, "the hall was prepared for Pwyll and his company, and for the men of the court as well. They went to sit down at the tables, and just as they had sat the year before, each one sat that night. They ate and caroused, and time came to go to sleep." (Davies 15)

description of any of the other feasts that follow, all of the subsequent feasts point to the centrality of this one to the text, turning it into a clear focal point in the narrative without which nothing that transpires afterward would have occurred.

Upon learning of Bendigeidfran's agreement to marry Branwen to Matholwych, one of Branwen's other brothers, the quarrelsome Efnysien, disapproves of the match and is insulted at not having been consulted in the matter: "Is that what they have done with such a fine maiden, and my sister at that, given her away without my permission? They could not have insulted me more" (Davies 24). Efnysien considers the alliance of his sister to Matholwych, and by association of Britain to Ireland, to be an inferior alliance, but perhaps more important here is that he takes the matter as a personal affront; not having been consulted, he realizes that his own authority and agency as a member of the royal house has been compromised. What ties this perceived slight to the feast and thus, into the idea that the feast is a locus of community that can either herald acts of peace or precipitate acts of violence, is that unlike his brothers, Bendigeidfran and Manawydan, Efnysien was not sitting at the high table during the feast and, indeed, to judge from his response to the news of his sister's betrothal, the writer of this tale did not intend for him to be read as being present at the feast at all. His exclusion from the feast marks Efnysien's relative insignificance in the eyes of his brother the high king of Britain, and also precludes him from knowledge of, or the opportunity to weigh in on, the issue of his sister's betrothal. Although the writer reveals from the beginning that Efnysien is a man

who “would cause two loving brothers to fight”[34] his violent nature alone is not enough to account for his actions in the tale; he has to be provoked into acting against someone. That provocation occurs when he is excluded from the betrothal feast of Matholwych and Branwen, which in turn excludes him both on a familial and a political level from the decision to marry his sister to the Irish king. Efnysien’s actions following his exclusion from the feast reveal the deep importance of honor, and of avenging one’s honor when it is compromised, that the medieval Welsh legal system and poetry of praise show to be a central hallmark of Welsh culture.[35] This revelation comes about because of Efnysien’s exclusion from the feast, because it is disclosed in his response to the news revealed at that feast.

Characterization is remarkably consistent in the Welsh Mabinogion, and so predictably, having been drawn as a man inclined to violence, Efnysien’s response to the

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[34] Davies, pg. 22. It is tempting to read this as an implicit explanation for Efnysien’s exclusion from the feast; to consider, perhaps, that Bendigeidfran, aware of his brother’s bellicose nature, thought it best not to include him in a peaceful feast with the Irish, but to do so may be to read too much of our own modern desire for narrative coherence into the tale than to remain faithful to the Welsh text. Narrative unity was not as important as the overall story and especially, the political and personal relationships affected by the story’s actions. Additionally, it is always important to remember that all of these early medieval tales originated in an oral culture and were passed along through the medium of storytelling, written down only much later; it is possible that such details were left out over time, although again this can only be speculated, not proved.

[35] Morfydd Owen notes that this concept of honor , shame, and reparation appears in multiple sources in medieval Welsh literature: “Celtic society shows in its tradition of praise poetry a strong awareness of the importance of the public acclamation of repute which is honour, it also shows an awareness of honour and shame in that the laws of both Ireland and Wales equate these concepts with a material price which reflects the value of individuals according to their status in the hierarchical society, and which is paid in compensation when insult is inflicted on them.” “Shame and Reparation: Women’s Place in the Kin,” in *The Welsh Law of Women: Studies Presented to Professor Daniel A. Binchy On His Eightieth Birthday*, eds. Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), pp. 40-68: 45. In this case, although a full legal discussion of the situation falls beyond the scope of this study, it is important to understand that Efnysien acts outside of the legal system and takes reparation for his slighted honour out physically on the Irish horses in an act that seeks not reparation in the legal sense, but rather to shame the Irish as Efnysien feels he has been shamed. The flaying of the Irish horses, then, does not constitute a legal response but an act of aggression, as Matholwych correctly reads it when the deed is discovered.

slight upon his honor is a violent one; he brutally flays the horses of the Irish contingent so that they cannot be ridden: "Then he went for the horses, and cut their lips to the teeth, and their ears down to their heads, and their tails to their backs; and where he could get a grip on the eyelids, he cut them to the bone. And in that way he maimed the horses, so that they were no good for anything."[36] While initially the choice to maim the horses rather than to confront the Irish directly seems strange, in fact it makes sense in context: the horse was the most valuable commodity the Irish possessed and the Irish were known for their love of horses.[37] Efnysien specifically maims the horses by targeting the areas upon which the riding tack—bridle and saddle—would need to be placed. His act of brutality in fact can be read as an act of aggression, since it effectively "maims" the Irish by disabling them from riding, which in turn affects the sense of power and authority which their riding skill conveyed to them. Thus, this moment represents a symbolic castration of the Irish politically; Efnysien has avenged his slighted honor by disabling the primary locus of Irish agency and movement. Without their horses, the Irish cannot ride nobly, but must go on foot like ordinary humans; and on foot like ordinary humans, they are rendered vulnerable. This violent action effectively puts Matholwych and his company in their place, symbolically rendering them no longer equal but inferior to their

[36] Davies, pg. 24. The flaying of a horse as retaliation for a personal slight is not a textual element isolated to the *Mabinogion*; in the fourteenth century Icelandic *Grettir's Saga*, Grettir flays his father's horse, Kengala, because he is tired of watching her in the fields in thecold and finds her wandering tiresome (Fox and Palsson, 26). A study of Efnysien's flaying of the horses and its cultural and literary significance, while beyond the scope of this dissertation, would make an interesting follow-up project.

[37] As Nancy Edwards notes, "Amongst the upper echelons of society it is clear that horses were mainly used for riding and were highly valued. Indeed, horses may have been bred specially for hunting, racing, or warfare, and in some instances they may even have been imported from Britain […] some wealth was lavished on horse equipment, such as enameled bridles, at least among the higher ranks, and this is borne out by the archaeological evidence." *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pg. 59.

British counterparts, in direct counteraction against the unification of the two tribes at the feast.

After this act of violence, the Irish king, Matholwych is understandably confused by the mixed messages he is receiving at the hands of the British. When he is informed of the actions taken upon the horses—and the language here is significant; the messenger tells him "well, lord […] *you have been insulted*, and it was done deliberately" [emphasis mine]—he replies, "God knows, but I find it strange, if they wanted to insult me, that they should first have given me such a fine maiden, of such high rank, so beloved by her family" (Davies 24). With these words, Matholwych recalls the seating arrangement at the high table, at which Branwen was honored as a member of the royal family and Matholwych was included among them through the choice to seat her at his other side, binding him to the family in symbolic terms. He also implicitly reminds us that Branwen was given to him to take to bed after the feast, thus physically and ritualistically consummating the union both of Matholwych and Branwen, and through them, of the British and Irish. It is wholly appropriate for Matholwych to be confused by this sudden run of events, because the feast, a ritual of union, conveyed a very different message from the flaying of the horses, a deliberate provocation to violence. Matholwych must now negotiate the tensions between the nations which appear to have been covered by Efnysien's initial exclusion from the feast and now have been exacerbated by his retributive action in seeking justice for the perceived slight on his honor. Efnysien's actions, the result of his being deliberately excluded, convert the wedding feast that was

meant to bring about an alliance into a divisive occasion by challenging the right of his brother and Matholwych to ally in peac without his approbation.

Importantly, Efnysien's insult is not distinguished by the Irish as an act performed by a single individual, but rather as an insult from the entire British ruling family. Both insulted and hamstrung politically by the damage done to their horses, the Irish determine that it is in their best interests to leave immediately and make for their ships, but Bendigeidfran, insulted by their breach of protocol in "leaving the court without asking, without permission" sends messengers to determine why they have chosen to leave (Davies 24). Matholwych informs the messengers of his understanding of the situation: "I was given Branwen, daughter of Llyr, one of the Three Chief Maidens of this Island, and daughter to a king of the Island of the Mighty, and I slept with her, but after that I was insulted. And I find it strange that the insult was not done before so fine a maiden was given to me" (Davies 24). Matholwych's words present his clear expectations regarding what the symbolic union of their families at the feast and the physical consummation of that union with Branwen afterward should mean; the insult is incomprehensible to him because their ritualized union should have precluded his experiencing any harm while in the company of the British with whom he has performed it. His words indicate that had Branwen been offered to him as a peace offering *following* an insult, he would be able to understand the situation, but that the insult occurring after their union does not make sense. Efnysien's actions, then, are not simply insulting, but constitute a recognizable breach of the hospitality code in which the alliance should be operating.

Matholwych's understanding of the matter as being inconceivable is corroborated by the response of the messengers, who assure him that he has misread the situation: "God knows, lord, that insult was not done to you with the approval of the one who rules the court […] nor any one of his council. And although you consider it a disgrace, this insult and deception is worse for Bendigeidfran than it is for you" (Davies 24). This speech is a telling one for several reasons. It corroborates Matholwych's feelings of insult and betrayal, while also assuring him that this insult and betrayal did not occur with the approval of Bendigeidrfran *nor any one of his council*. This statement reassures Matholwych that he and his company are not in immediate danger and also, that the union the leaders have performed through this marriage has not been deliberately broken. From the perspective of the British as conveyed by these messengers, the feast's function as a unifying event has not been violated in an official capacity. Further, this message corroborates the reader's understanding that Efnysien was not welcome at the feast and is not a member of the king his brother's council, because the messenger explicitly states that no one on that council authorized the insult. Finally, the statement that the insult and deception are worse for Bendigeidfran underscores the significance of the feast for him as well—as the host and the facilitator of the union, Bendigeidfran is responsible for Matholwych's safety in his kingdom, because Matholwych is now both a political and a familial ally. The attack on Matholwych is a disgrace and an insult to Bendigeidfran as well; it points to a political instability within his kingdom that must be addressed, because he did not authorize it, and therefore it was carried out by someone who is not in agreement with his decision to go forward with the union—it constitutes a direct

challenge to his authority as the high king. This political instability in the form of his brother's response to his disenfranchisement from major decisions should have been dealt with at or before the feast, and the attempt to avoid it by excluding Efnysien from that event has failed, leaving Bendigeidfran and Matholwych in a politically delicate situation that threatens to sever the carefully-crafted ties wrought by the marriage between their families and, by association, their country. Taken together, these observations show the limits of the feast in performing its intended unifying function: if everyone involved is not in accord, the union remains at best a fragile one until remaining conflicts are satisfactorily resolved, and this is true whether those involved are present at or excluded from the feast. It is impossible for the feast to overcome a conflict born of the unaddressed need to acknowledge and respect individual honor because, as Efnysien's actions attest, the slighted individual will take whatever opportunity presents itself to redress the issue if it is not addressed through ordinary means, such as debate or diplomacy.

Bendigeidfran's response to the news is exactly what it should be both personally and as a king; upon hearing that Matholwych remains dissatisfied with the explanation of the insult, he declares that "it is no good if he goes away angry, and we cannot allow it" (Davies 25). This declaration has the effect of unifying his court in a single purpose—to bring Matholwych back and make amends—and also demonstrates Bendigeidfran's keen understanding of the situation on both a personal level—*it is no good if he goes way angry and we cannot allow it*, because he is now a member of our family through this union—and also, politically: *it is no good if he goes away angry and we cannot allow it*,

because the Irish may find it necessary to retaliate for the insult and thus, to enact violence upon the British people in return. Bendigeidfran's words have the effect of conveying to the text's audience the already deeply-intertwined relationship between these two rulers and men that has been brought about by Matholwych's and Branwen's wedding. For Bendigeidfran the rituals enacted at the feast and the resulting union are sacrosanct, and must be recalled and protected through his actions now. He sends two individuals as ambassadors to the Irish contingent; significantly, one of these is Manawydan, son of Llyr, the other noble figure seated at the high table of the feast when Matholwych and Branwen were joined in marriage and thus, one of the figures central in that union. Because he was present at the high table as one of the figures binding their families together, Manawydan's presence among the messengers sends a clear message that Bendigeidfran stands behind the union of their houses and genuinely wishes to set things right.

In counsel with his men, Matholwych determines to agree to the terms of settlement set forth by Bendigeidfran, who binds the settlement, as he did the union of their houses, with a second, ritualistic meal, at which again Matholwych is placed at the high table between the family members in a show of unity: "And as they had sat at the beginning of the feast, so they sat now" (Davies 25). However, Bendigeidfran notes that Matholwych seems downhearted, and determines that it must be because he does not find the settlement entirely just: "[…] your conversation is not as good as it was the other night. And if it's because you feel your compensation is too little, I shall add to it as you wish, and tomorrow your horses shall be given to you" (Davies 25). When Matholwych

expresses gratitude for this gesture, Bendigeidfran presses his claim by offering to increase his compensation still more: "I shall give you a cauldron, and the property of the cauldron is that if you throw into it one of your men who is killed today, then by tomorrow he will be as good as ever except that he will not be able to speak" (Davies 25). Matholwych gladly receives both the cauldron and the settlement of horses in replacement of those he has lost. In medieval Irish culture, both cauldron and horse are powerful symbols of wealth and power, and these gifts—particularly the gift of the cauldron, with its magical properties—are the best that could be offered to an Irish king, demonstrating a strong cultural understanding of his Irish ally on the part of Bendigeidfran.[38]

A third feast for the Irish, held the evening before their departure from the Island, provides the opportunity for Bendigeidfran to divulge contextual information that proves important for understanding the violence that occurs throughout the second half of the narrative. Bendigeidfran tells Matholwych how the cauldron came to be in his possession, and this story is significant because it foreshadows the violence at the feast which lies at the center and climax of this branch of the *Mabinogion*. It also has great rhetorical and

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[38] John Koch notes the cauldron's importance in medieval Celtic traditions: "Judging from the surviving archaeological and textual evidence, metal cauldrons were widely used for cooking, storing and serving food as well as for ceremonial and ritual purposes, in Continental and insular Celtic society from the Late Bronze Age to early medieval times. Archaeological finds indicate, and literary references confirm, that the cauldron was a status symbol whose possession and use was probably restricted to the more privileged members of society and, perhaps, formal festive occasions at which it was used for cooking meat (Waddell, Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland, 230-3) […] The numerous literary references highlight the cauldron's importance in Celtic culture, especially as asymbol of inexhaustible plenty." *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volume One (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2006), pp. 358-359.

cultural significance for the overall narrative. Rhetorically, it does the same work as do the scops' stories in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*: it provides a foreshadowing of future violence in the hall, and a warning about the tenuous nature of unions between different tribes of people. Culturally, it points to a larger tradition preserved in Irish texts of such scenes of the killing or attempted killing of guests at a banquet, which as I show in the introductory historical material at the beginning of this dissertation and review again at the beginning of this chapter was not isolated to literary instances of violence at the feast, but appears to have been based at least in part on historical situations as well.[39]

According to Bendigeidfran, the cauldron was gifted to him by a "huge, monstrous man […] with an evil, ugly look about him" who sought his protection, as his wife ("twice his size") was pregnant and shortly expecting a child who would be "a fully armed warrior" (Davies, 26). Bendigeidfran relates that he took them in for a year, and "during that year no one objected to them" but that shortly after that year had passed, the British people began to resent them, because they "were causing people to hate and loathe them throughout the land, insulting, harassing, and tormenting noble men and women" (Davies 26). The conflict rose to the brink of civil war: "From then on my people rose against me to ask me to get rid of them, and gave me a choice, either my

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[39] The motif of enemies being invited to a meal and then killed occurs again, for instance, in the various iterations of the Irish *Mesca Ulad*, or "Intoxication of the Ulstermen" from the Ulster Cycle, preserved in the *Lebor na Huidre* ("Book of the Dun Cow," Royal Irish Academy MS 23 E 25, c. 1106); the *Lebor Laignech* or "Book of Leinster," Trinity College MS H 2.18, c. 1160; the *Leabhar Buidhe Leacáin* ("Yellow Book of Lacan," Trinity College MS 1318, c. early 15th century); and the National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 72.1.40, a 15th or 16th century Gaelic miscellany. See Davies n. 27 pg. 234; I also second her recommendation of Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llyr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958).

kingdom or these people" (Davies 26). Bendigeidfran, realizing that he was in a precarious situation, "left it to the council of my country to decide what to do with them" and the council ordered a chamber to be built completely of iron and filled with charcoal (Davies 26). When this was accomplished, "the woman and her husband and children were served with plenty of food and drink. And when it was clear they were drunk, the smiths began to set fire to the charcoal around the chamber" (Davies 27). The family, realizing their dire predicament, "took counsel in the middle of the chamber" and, when the walls grew white-hot, the husband "charged at the wall with his shoulder and broke out through it with his wife following. And only he and his wife escaped" (Davies 27). When Matholwych asks what Bendigeidfran did with them then, he tells him, "I dispersed them throughout the land, and they are numerous, and prosper everywhere, and strengthen whatever place they happen to be in with the best men and weapons anyone has seen" (Davies 27). The individuals who managed to survive the genocide thus were permitted at last to take their place within the society that sought to destroy them, and in so doing became assimilated as outstanding contributors to that society's safety and well-being, through Bendigeidfran's mercy and without the knowledge of those who would see them killed. Bendigeidfran's ability to negotiate such conflicts without incurring further ill intentions from those on either side of the conflict sets him apart as a great king, and also assures Matholwych of his ability to negotiate the current tensions between their countries caused by Efnysien's deed.

Following this story, which takes the space of one and a half pages of the text, the rest of the feast is summed up in three, short sentences: "That night they continued to talk

and sing and carouse as long as it pleased them. When they realized it was better to sleep than to sit up longer, they went to sleep. And so they enjoyed the feast" (Davies 27). The writer of *Branwen, Daughter of Llyr* includes this feast solely as a means of conveying the story of the cauldron's origin both to Matholwych and to the audience for this narrative, and once the story is told, the feast is summarily concluded and the action of the tale continues. However, it would be a mistake for the audience to assume that a lack of description of the feast renders it less textually significant than more elaborately described scenes, because the story at its center is so carefully told. Bendigeidfran's story provides important signposts for the audience of the second branch of the *Mabinogion*. As a moment of warning concerning what happens when members of one tribe insult those of another, it looks ahead to the events to follow in a recognizable literary strategy of foreshadowing through textual and historical precedent. Perhaps more importantly, an understanding that Bendigeidfran's narration of the cauldron's origin and its violent aftermath is not an isolated story being told within another story, but can be located within a larger textual tradition of violent feasts that mirrors historical events, exposes some of the ambivalence that was felt surrounding the union of families and tribes through ritualistic activities such as the feast. More importantly, it is a violent aftermath that is productive in nature, because the survivors go elsewhere and strengthen any community they join.

The author wastes no time in developing the action of the main narrative around this warning tale; within the space of the next paragraph Branwen is brought to Ireland, where "they received great welcome" and "Not one man of rank or noblewoman in

Ireland came to visit Branwen to whom she did not give either a brooch or a ring or a treasured royal jewel" (Davies 27). Branwen performs her duties as queen with aplomb, so that "she gained renown that year, and flourished with honor and companions" (Davies 27). Finally, she "became pregnant [and]… gave birth to a boy" (Davies 27). By giving gifts, cultivating relationships, and giving birth to an heir, Branwen spends the first year of her reign engaged in precisely the behaviors that signal good queenship; further, she becomes beloved in her own right through her understanding and deployment of protocol. She engages in all of the ritualistic behaviors that are expected to follow a wedding feast, and the union seems successful. At this point, the wedding feast appears to have performed its intended function of binding the two nations in alliance, because Branwen has been able successfully to follow through with her role as Ireland's queen, winning the people over and strengthening her claim to that role through proper adherence to protocol; this success in turn is the means by which her family's claim to alliance with Ireland is also to be secured. However, the narrative then takes a darker turn:

> Then in the second year [of their reign], there was a murmur of dissatisfaction in Ireland because of the insult that Matholwych had received in Wales, and the disgrace he had suffered regarding his horses. His foster-brothers and the men closest to him taunted him with it quite openly. And there was such an uproar in Ireland that there was no peace for Matholwych until he avenged the insult (Davies 27).

Like Bendigeidfran before him, Matholwych finds himself at the center of a moment of civil conflict tied to his relationship with people whom he has accepted into the community, but who have transgressed in the opinion of his own people. Where Matholwych may have been content with the reparations made by Bendigeidfran and

willing to uphold the union of their nations grounded in ritualized feasts, his own people are not satisfied and demand that he avenge the insult. The text does not explicitly state it, but an either/or outcome is clearly indicated: either Matholwych satisfies his people's desire that he exact revenge for the insult, or there will be civil unrest and a challenge to his kingship. The people of Ireland do not recognize the feast's unifying power, but see only the insults as evidence that their king, and by extension they as a nation, have been dishonored. Placing their honor above the strength of the marriage bond forged at the feast, the people of Ireland respond to the reports of Bendigeidfran's insult by clamoring for immediate nullification of the union between their countries. And despite Branwen's irreproachable activity as queen, because she is also a member of the house that purportedly insulted Matholwych and thus a symbol of that house's union with Ireland, the people call for the dissolution of their marriage as well; further, she is harshly treated—not summarily executed, like her fictional counterparts in Bendigeidfran's story, but stripped of her honor and dignity, beaten, and forced to cook for the court. While on the surface this could be read simply as Branwen's being reduced to the status of a regular woman, reading the scene against the medieval Welsh laws of women reveals that in fact, she is being treated as harshly as the law permits a queen to be treated. The triad[40] discussing the insult of a queen reads as follows:

[40] The Welsh triads (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein*) are a collection of texts consisting of three lines each which preserve Welsh folkloric and mythological materials as well as mention of historical figures and events. They are considered a rhetorical strategy of organizing information for the preservation and transmission of oral history. The earliest extant collection of the Triads is National Library of Wales ms. Peniarth 16, dating to the third quarter of the thirteenth century. There are also triads embedded within the Welsh Arthurian tale *Culwych and Olwen*, and triads are found in NLW ms. Peniarth 45, the *White Book of*

O teyr ford e serheyr e urenhynes; o torry e naud, neu o'y tharau, neu o grybdeyllau peth o'y llau.

[In three ways the queen is insulted, namely by breaking her protection, or by striking her or by snatching something from her hand.] (Owen 46)

Owen also points out that "In the case of the king the greatest disgrace that could come to him was the misuse of his wife" (47), and so, this scene becomes one in which the royal family of Ireland has suffered a near-total breakdown of power and stability thanks to the Irish people's response to Efnysien's insult, itself a response to the perceived slight upon Efnysien's honor at his exclusion from the feast that initially unified these peoples. I find it particularly significant that Branwen's shaming is conducted not along the lines of Irish law, but of Welsh law—the law of the culture in which this story was developed and eventually written down. Although this may simply have been a reflexive choice on the part of the (almost certainly) Welsh author, it might equally have been a deliberate one that permitted a Welsh audience of the story to understand the full degree of shame to which Branwen has been subjected and, because of this shaming of his wife, the depths of shame to which Matholwych has fallen in the eyes of his people.

This moment in which Branwen is punished by the people of Ireland for her kinsman's insult highlights the limitations of kingship, of queenship, and of the power of the ritual of feasting as union: in this literary representation of Welsh culture, it can all be endangered by a single insult, because no one is considered blameless in the giving and

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Rhydderch and the *Red Book of Hergest*. Rachel Bromwich's edition and translation of the Peniarth triads (Cardiff, Third Edition, 2006) is the most comprehensive.

receiving of an insult. To gauge from both Bendigeidfran's tale and Matholwych's and Branwen's experience, the more noble the individuals involved, the more impact an insult has. Ireland's honor, and not merely Matholwych's, is now at stake. Further, the bonds forged between people at the feast do not appear to extend to those not present or deliberately excluded, and therefore they may choose either to uphold or seek to dissolve the union forged at a wedding feast according to their own interpretation of cultural mores, in this case, viewing it from a perspective of honor. The Irish response to their exclusion from the feast and the insults that followed it seems to mirror that of Efnysien, in that they choose to see the insult as a thing that must be redressed, rather than the marriage as a thing that must be upheld. The Irish people do not find Matholwych's response sufficient, and therefore even though he is king, Matholwych's individual agency in this situation is limited because he did not act in timely and forceful enough fashion; now he can only stand by and watch while his people act to mitigate the damage done to their collective honor by the insult their king suffered while in Wales. In addition to stripping Branwen of her honored position as queen, they call for "an embargo on the ships, and the rowing-boats and the coracles, so that no one may go to Wales, and whoever comes from Wales, imprison them and do not let them return" (Davies 28). The insult enacted upon the Irish by Efnysien as a result of his exclusion from the wedding feast on Matholwych and Branwen—an insult that also implicates Bendigeidfran, as the one who excluded Efnysien from the feast—has resulted in the symbolic dissolution of the nations' union through Branwen's humiliation, and a three-year embargo physically marking the political breakdown by shutting down communication entirely between

Ireland and Wales. The personal insult to Efnysien's honor caused by his exclusion from the wedding feast is now an international conflict escalating in scale and scope with each newly perceived slight: first, the flaying of the Irish horses; now, the humiliation of Branwen, daughter of Llyr and an extended embargo upon international relations between the countries. Although it seems that each action is more excessive than the last, in fact this violence follows a recognizable trajectory of efforts to limit oppositional power. Efnysien strips the Irish of their agency and status by rendering them horseless; Branwen is then stripped of her agency and status in return for this insult; and the embargo is an attempt to retaliate by stripping the British equally of power. The wedding feast—that seemingly brief and innocuous narrative episode--proves itself the catalyst for a catastrophic series of events. Because it was not a fully inclusive event ensuring that everyone on both sides was aware of and approved the match, the feast serves as a source not of union but of dissolution. What becomes evident throughout this series of events is how crucial it is to ensure that the feast initiating a union between countries be as diplomatic, transparent, and correctly-handled as it can be—including the invitation of all interested parties regardless of their personal prejudices and potential for enacting mischief at the event. Although Efnysien’s presence might have caused problems at the feast, those problems could have been mitigated by others of the guests, whether through diplomatic or violent means, and within view of Matholwych and the Irish, thus ensuring that the union continued unimpeded and unchallenged by either leader. A greater sense of unity can arise when the leaders present a unified front against a challenge to the pact; but in this case, as we have seen, the fact that each leader was forced to confront Efnysien’s

insult alone and on his own terms, with no true sense of closure, has led to great misunderstandings and, ultimately, to a violent end. The lack of inclusiveness in the initial feast has led to a fracturing of the newly-minted alliance. Thus, those involved must deal with the violence and its perpetrator individually, rather than together, leading to further divisiveness. The author of this narrative seems to be making a case for the idea that feasts need to make a space for conflict to be acknowledged and addressed; otherwise, any conflict that ensues has catastrophic consequences.

The seating at the original wedding feast is both a sign of hope for success—that is to say, if things go according to plan, then the symbolic seating at the feast becomes the reality—but also a form of protection for Branwen—if things go awry and the union is dissolved, she is still a member in her own right of the larger family into which Matholwych has been assimilated, a status that as we can see here is of tantamount importance when there is a breakdown in the union because it means that she can still turn to her own family for assistance. When Branwen smuggles a message to her brother detailing her current state in Ireland, Bendigeidfran, having learned his lesson concerning taking an important political action without the full knowledge and consent of his people, takes immediate action. He "had the full levy of one hundred and fifty-four districts come to him, and he complained personally to them of his sister's punishment. Then he took counsel. They agreed to set out for Ireland…." (Davies 28). Although the Irish try to prevent the invasion, in the end they are forced to offer hospitality to Bendigeidfran's army. An Irish contingent informs Bendigeidfran that Matholwych has decided to give the kingship of Ireland to "Gwern son of Matholwych, your nephew, your sister's son,

and will invest him in your presence, to make up or the injustice and injury that was done to Branwen" (Davies 30). Bendigeidfran agrees to this plan, ignorant of the fact that at this point, neither he nor Matholwych is aware of what is really going on; like Efnysien before them, the Irish, insulted at the invasion of their land without their consent, have taken matters into their own hands. They convince Matholwych that in order to facilitate peace between the nations he must:

> Build a house in his [Bendigeidfran's] honour, so that there is room for him and the men of the Island of the Mighty in one half of the house, and for you and your troops in the other. And place your kingship at his disposal, and pay homage to him. And because of the honour in building the house for he has never had one into which he could fit) he will make peace with you (Davies 30).

What they are calling for here is the construction of a feast-hall, the recognized physical representation of a human community. By building a hall capable of seating Bendigeidfran, the Irish will outdo their British counterparts. Bendigeidfran, himself, does not have a hall large enough to accommodate his great size, but held his sister's marriage feast in tents. Creating a permanent architectural space capable of housing all of them is a symbolic gesture of rapprochement that doubles as a one-upmanship moment that can restore honor and a sense of accomplishment among the Irish.

Despite her prolonged humiliation at the hands of the Irish, Branwen convinces Bendigeidfran to accept the offer, again acting correctly in her role as a peace-weaver between the nations. It is reasonable to wonder why she would go to such lengths to protect the Irish from an attack intended to defend her honor, when we have already seen how important that sense of honor is to these cultures. We are told that she does so

because she is afraid that "the country would be laid waste" (Davies 30). With her husband's imminent abdication of the throne in favor of their son, who in turn is Bendigeidfran's nephew by blood, Branwen realizes that it is in her best interests and the best interests of her family—here, Gwern, the future King of Ireland, and Bendigeidfran, his High King—that peace and reconciliation occur, rather than further conflict, because Gwern is to inherit Ireland. The inheritance will be more beneficial to both Gwern and Bendigeidfran if the island remains physically undamaged by the ongoing conflict between the two peoples. To achieve this unity, a meeting and re-establishment of the unification is required, which means that the British must be invited to Ireland and met with honor and signs of peace. The building of a feast-hall suggests this ritual will take place during a feast held in honor of the British visitors and intended to stave off further acts of violence visited upon the Irish and their land. Despite the failure of the wedding feast to secure the alliance between the nations, the feast is still the occasion turned to as the most recognizable symbol of unity, suggesting that the feast retains its cultural and symbolic importance in spite of its evident limitations in establishing accord.

In this moment, Branwen's role becomes not only that of peace-weaver between the peoples of these nations, but protector of the land as well. This new aspect of her character highlights how large in scale the conflict has become: she is now tasked not simply with trying to achieve a state of peace between the warring nations, but also with protecting the land, itself from further acts of violence. Branwen is not necessarily setting aside her personal honor in fulfillment of her marital obligations as Matholwych's wife, so much as she is seeking to mitigate the damage done in the conflict in order to

maximize the potential payoff of Matholwych's impending abdication for Gwern and Bendigeidfran—that is, to uphold her blood-family's honor.

We can see here another way of looking at the significance of the seating at the original wedding feast: although the seating arrangements and other rituals are intended to bind Matholwych into the family, and her being seated next to him is intended as a sign of their union as a couple, with Branwen seated on one end and her blood-kin on the other end of the table she is symbolically represented first and foremost as a daughter of Llyr, and when the relations between these nations break down, it is to that side of the union that she reverts. Were she not still able to call on her own family for protection, Branwen's fortunes, and those of her son, would be at the mercy of Matholwych and the Irishfolk, and the likelihood in that case of a positive outcome for her given the current situation is very slim. This observation is borne out in the scene immediately following, when Efnysien's actions showcase what happens with the utter breakdown of a family and a community.

When the hall has been built, Efnysien enters it prior to the arrival of Bendigeidfran, and grows suspicious at the bags hung on hooks around the walls. There is no sense that he is acting on any but his own volition; that is, he does not seem to be acting on behalf of Bendigeidfran in a protective capacity, such as for instance surveillance for possible dangers to the king's person; yet, this is precisely what he uncovers, revealing that this feast is intended to serve as the scene of the massacre of the British guests. In a particularly gruesome scene, he walks around the room asking the Irishmen 'what is in this bag?'" (Davies 31) When the Irish respond, "Flour, friend,"

Efnysien "prodded the bag until he found the man's head, and he squeezed the head until he could feel his fingers sinking into the brain through the bone" (Davies 31). The Irish have set up this feast as a premeditated feast of death like the historical ones mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, but Efnysien has thwarted their efforts and revealed the violence intended for him and his brother by killing the men hiding in sacks around the room. Initiated nominally as a moment of reconciliation and peace, this feast is irremediably corrupted from its inception because the intention was never reconciliation in the first place, but continuation of the pattern of insult-injury-retaliation, so that the feast becomes a site of retributive violence rather than union. This scene therefore highlights even more clearly the limitations of the feast as a moment of alliance by showing how the actions of a single individual in pursuit of a personal vendetta are enough to wreck the event. Paradoxically, by killing the Irishmen hanging in bags around the hall, Efnysien renders it a safe place for the reconciliation feast.

Rendering the hall safe for the British contingent seems like a strange move for a character who has already proven himself against the union between Branwen and Matholwych and thus, ostensibly, against the reconciliation of that union. However, that this is not an act of reconciliation on his part but rather a framing of the scene for other, premeditated actions becomes chillingly clear. The feast begins according to plan: "…the troops entered the house. The men of the Island of Ireland entered the house on the one side, and the men of the Island of the Mighty on the other. As soon as they sat down they were reconciled, and the boy was invested with the kingship" (Davies 31). This feast, then, not only is a long-overdue moment of reconciliation between the nations, but in fact

is the coronation feast for the new Irish king, Gwern. This is not necessarily an occasion of alliance, then, so much as one of dominion. With the Irish dead hanging in bags on the walls, Efnysien still seeking vengeance for the initial slight to his honor, Bendigeidfran still seeking to uphold the alliance between nations, Branwen attempting to bring about concord, and Gwern stepping into his role as the new king of Ireland, the feast is being asked to perform too many functions and becomes an illegible site in which alliances are unclear and each individual must proceed on his- or her- own terms.

Gwern, as the son of Matholwych and Branwen, is the physical manifestation of their now-crumbling union. That both parties have agreed to uphold his right to the throne and are in attendance at this coronation feast should bring a degree of stability to the situation, and indeed this seems to be the case; we are told that "when peace had been made, Bendigeidfran called the boy to him. The boy went from Bendigeidfran to Manawydan, and everyone who saw him loved him. From Manawydan, Nisien son of Euroswold called the boy to him. The boy went to him graciously" (Davies 31). Gwern's acts of hospitality in acknowledging each of the individuals from his own family who have come to see him invested with the kingship and who have sat to table in his hall are wholly appropriate: like his mother before him, he wins the hearts of the people with his correct observance of ritualistic behavior on this occasion.

However, as before, we find Efnysien in the position of feeling slighted, this time by Gwern: "Why does my nephew, my sister's son, not come to me? … Even if he were not king of Ireland, I would still like to make friends with the boy" (Davies 31). Although he couches his request in seemingly harmless terms, Efnysien's next actions betray his

true purpose in calling the boy to him as a violent one. "'I confess to God,' said Efnysien to himself, 'the outrage I shall now commit is one the household will never expect.' And he gets up, and takes the boy by the feet, and immediately, before anyone in the house can lay a hand on him, he hurls the boy head-first into the fire" (Davies, 31-32). No motivation is given for this sudden act of regicide. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, this act must therefore be read either as a random act of cruelty in association with Efnysien's characterization as a violent being, or as an act intended to follow up his other efforts to seek retaliation for the initial insult of not being consulted on the union of Matholwych and Branwen or invited to the wedding feast. Because Efnysien's words betray his intent ("*the outrage I will now commit*") we cannot read his deed as a random act of cruelty, but rather must view it as an intentional deployment of violence, performed here as a spectacle to be witnessed by everyone present. By destroying the fruits of the initial union between these people and, in so doing, also destroying the foundation of the newly reconciled union between their nations, Efnysien' violence suggests that this narrative is particularly concerned with the tenuous nature of unions forged through ritualistic acts such as the feast. The focus of Efnysien's aggression is on avenging his own personal honor at any cost. Having been excluded from the initial feast, he feels no obligation to uphold the alliance forged ritualistically on that occasion and symbolized by the marriage of Matholwych and Branwen. Therefore, he likewise feels no obligation to uphold Gwern's right to rule as the product of that union. Neither the wedding feast, nor the coronation feast, is sufficient to guarantee safety and stability within the community, unless all members of that community are both included and in accord with the feast's

function. If Efnysien had not killed the Irishmen in the sacks, then the outcome of this coronation feast was still destined to be a bloody one. The hall was erected for the purpose not of building or reiterating a community, but of permanently destroying one.

No community is ever the same after a feast marking an event such as a wedding or a coronation. As we have seen, a wedding alters a community by enlarging it through the union of two people and their kin, while a coronation alters a community by re-affirming that community's commitment and solidarity through the approbation of its chosen leader, a strengthening of purpose and resolve to uphold the community moving forward. Both of these types of feasts are intended to promote newfound stability within the community. But in the instance of a feast gone awry, particularly in the case of a feast deliberately held with an aim to violent end, the alteration of the community often becomes a scene of spectacular destruction. Gwern's death by regicide is followed in short order by the re-animation of the Irish corpses using Bendigeidfran's cauldron, Bendigeidfran's own death and Branwen's death of a broken heart; finally, Efnysien is thrown into the cauldron, where he "stretches himself out … so that the cauldron breaks into four pieces, and his own heart breaks too" (Davies 32). The narrator is careful to underscore the catastrophic outcome of this failed coronation feast: "There was no real victory except that seven men escaped, and Bendigeidfran was wounded in the foot with a poisoned spear" (Davies 32). This statement demonstrates an awareness of the impermanence and instability of human community by highlighting the futile nature of attempts at controlling or otherwise stabilizing a community gone so far awry. Later, we learn that the seven men return to the Island of the Mighty with Bendigeidfran's head (at

his instruction), only to learn that those left behind and charged with the island's keeping have been overrun and there is a new king. The narrative continues with a new community rising from the ashes of these failed earlier ones. The wedding feast that brought such promise of a union between these nations, and the coronation feast that promised to halt the escalating violence and change, have both failed, leaving behind the only certain aspect of any union: change. Those originally in power are now dead; those who believed they had control have watched it wrested from them; those who were supposed to have authority find themselves without it entirely in the face of violent opposition; and ultimately, the identity of both nations, and of the inhabitants of those nations, must now undergo a profound shift moving forward.

The feasts in the *Second Branch of the Mabinogion* therefore showcase the power that literary feasts have to provide hope and support towards building a stable community, but also how just as easily they can serve as scenes of community destabilization and destruction when not everyone involved in a given community agrees with the feast's purpose and outcome. Perhaps more chillingly, this narrative suggests that in medieval Welsh culture, no number of feasts is enough to compensate for one man's slighted honor. The feasts and their aftermath in the *Mabinogion* show that in the Welsh imaginary, when the fate of a community depends primarily upon the ever-changeable honor of its individual members, that community is inherently unstable and, ultimately, unsustainable: any change in one's state of honor will result in a correspondent change in the community, and sometimes catastrophe ensues.

Beowulf and *The Fight at Finnsburg*:

Ritual, Memory, and Feasting in Anglo-Saxon Texts

In the Welsh tradition, then, honor and its preservation are at the heart of the narrative, and reading the feast scenes through this lens demonstrates how the slight of an individual's honor can lead to the instability of one or more communities, revealing a culture preoccupied with personal honor above all else. While honor is undeniably important in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, however, we see in Old English texts like *Beowulf* and the *Fight at Finnsburg* a reversed preoccupation not with the notion of personal honor, but with the instability of mortal life, so that the emphasis lies on the importance not of seeking to uphold one's own honor and thereby upholding the community, but rather of upholding the community and in so doing, establishing one's honor. Although it is slight, as I will show, this distinction in focus creates a very different cultural valence in the Anglo-Saxon texts.

Written down between 975-1025 CE but featuring events that occurred several hundred years earlier than that, the Old English poem *Beowulf* has been prized by literary and cultural historians for its preservation of various aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture, and for its poetics ever since J.R.R. Tolkien's influential 1936 essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics"[41] persuaded literary critics and historians of the poem's merit as a text to

[41] While turn-of-the-century scholars like Frederick Furnivall admired the poem for its cultural importance, Tolkien is credited as having with this essay given it a critical boost that brought it into the foreground of Old English literary studies. Tolkien's essay originally appeared in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936): pp. 245-295; it is republished in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R.D. Fulk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): pp. 14-44.

be studied in its own right as a work of literature.[42] More recently, scholars like Stephen Pollington and Lori Ann Garner discuss the importance of the Mead-Hall in Anglo-Saxon culture generally, and in *Beowulf* specifically.[43] Unlike the Welsh culture, which as the *Second Branch of the Mabinogion* shows us did not place as much emphasis on the location of a feast as on its function, for the Anglo-Saxons, the Mead-Hall was the central symbol of community.[44] Like the writer of the *Second Branch of the Mabinogion*, however, the *Beowulf*-poet demonstrates a keen awareness of the impermanence of human structures both real and metaphorical in nature. The very description of Heorot's construction harbors its ultimate destruction as well:

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[42] The dating of the actual text of *Beowulf*, rather than Cotton Nero A.x, the manuscript which contains it (which could have important implications for reading the poem as a repository of Anglo-Saxon culture) is a continued source of contention for Old English scholars. For a comprehensive yet succinct overview of the various approaches undertaken in this vein and their implications for the study of the poem, see Roy Michael Liuzza, "On the Dating of Beowulf," in *Beowulf: Basic Readings, Volume One*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995): pp. 281-302. A number of the studies and scholars cited by Liuzza in this essay appear in Colin Chase, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf* (University of Toronto Press, 1997). For the purposes of this study, I am considering the poem in its position as a tenth- or eleventh-century manuscript containing material from an earlier time and datable anywhere from approximately the eighth through the eleventh century.

[43] In *The Mead Hall: Feasting in Anglo-Saxon England* (Norfolk: Anglo Saxon Books, 2003), Stephen Pollington notes that "the central theme in hall-life in Old English verse (as also in its Norse counterpart) is that of the 'feast' […] There are certain ideas repeatedly emphasized in these passages and many others of similar sort: togetherness, friendship, hospitality, fellowship, brightness, and warmth. They represent the 'indoor' aspects of men's lives, the world of shelter and comradeship, contrasted with the 'outdoor' world of toil and danger, warfare and exile[…] The values of the community as a 'coming together', an aggregate of many individuals, are celebrated; equally, the individual community defines itself through separation and distinction from all others." (pp. 32-33). In *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), Lori Ann Garner discusses the importance to a community of the associative meanings of architectural description in Old English poetics, arguing that the poet focuses on those aspects of the hall—its "height, elevated location, curved and arched structures, and prominent gables"—whose narrative contexts "shows a close correspondence between this combination of architectural traits and the cluster of ideals associated with the Germanic comitatus." (pg. 42)

[44] Hugh Magennis offers an important study of Anglo-Saxon community, including extensive discussion of images of communal life in the Anglo-Saxon hall, in his 1996 monograph *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

……… Sele hlīfade
Hēah ond horngēap; heaðowylma bād,
Lāðan līges…[45]

[…The hall towered/ high and horn-gabled—it awaited hostile fires/ the surges of war…]

The poet's choice of words here connotes a fatalism that is in keeping with a world view that stresses the impermanence of mortal life, such as that of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Despite the hall's importance as a protective and communal space, its very presence simultaneously signals both the stability and instability of human existence within the world; it towers over the landscape as a signal of human ingenuity and community, yet its destruction through some catastrophe of human origin such as fire or war is anticipated in its very presence. This paradoxical quality of human existence—at once seeking permanent hold in the world even while navigating an impermanent life span—is mirrored in the most important events that occur in the Mead-Hall: the feasts. Each of the four feasting scenes embedded within the narrative presents both an attempt at community-building and a clear understanding of the instability and impermanence of that community, so that the feast scenes in *Beowulf* become focused points of narrative tension that echo and underscore the overall poem's effort to describe the transitory nature of human being within the world, where the only certainty is that change is inevitable. Because each of the feasts is so carefully embedded within the narrative to

[45] *Beowulf, Second Edition*, trans. & ed. Roy Liuzza (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2013), ll. 81-83. All Beowulf citations hereafter are taken from this edition unless otherwise noted and cited parenthetically by line numbers with the accompanying modern English translation provided by Liuzza.

create textual unity, and because each reveals a specific type of violence that responds to or results from the preceding feast, analyzing the feasts of *Beowulf* in order provides the best understanding of how violence at the feast is being used in this poem.

The first feast sets up the poem's paradoxical trajectory of seeming permanence versus instability by introducing the first deadly act of violence in the poem, at an occasion that might be termed Grendel's "anti-feast." Following their meal, the "Hring-Denes" (Ring-Danes, ln. 116 b) have bedded down ("gebūn hæfdon", ln. 117 b). They have been drinking ("aefter bēorþege", ln.117 a) and are now asleep after the feast ("swefan æter symble", ln. 119 a). The poet establishes a sense of physical safety in the hall by pointing out that in their sleep, these nobles "knew no sorrow or human misery" ("sorge ne cūðon, / wonsceaft wera," ll. 119 b-120 a). Yet, within the space of a few lines, that sense of safety in hall following the symbolic unification of the community through a feast involving communal drinking is destroyed by the actions of Grendel, who steals into the space and makes off with thirty men:

> ………….   Wiht unhǣlo,
> Grim ond grǣdig, gearo sōna wǣs,
> Rēoc ond rēþe,   ond on rǣste genam
> Þrītig þegna…..   (ll. 120 b-123 a)
>
> [The unholy creature, / grim and ravenous, was ready at once / ruthless and cruel, and took from their rest/ thirty thanes…]

By invading the space and stealing away with thirty members of the community, Grendel destabilizes the safety of the hall that only a few hours earlier was the locus in which this community was built and ratified through the ritual of communal drinking that lies at the

heart of the Anglo-Saxon literary feast and does not occur elsewhere in the narrative, an occasion which scholars like Hugh Magennis and Michael Enright have shown to be most essential of all activities to the sense of the *comitatus* as an established and stable unit.[46] He then makes this destabilization of the communal space a permanent one by slaughtering the stolen men:

> ……………. Þanon eft gewāt
> Hūðe hrēmig tō hām faran,
> Mid þǣre wǣlfylle wīca nēosan. (ll. 123 b-125)
>
> […thence he went/ rejoicing in his booty, back to his home,/ to seek out his abode with his fill of slaughter.]

Upon learning of Grendel's actions, the Heorot contingent classifies them as an act of warfare, and the poet contrasts the earlier scene of peace and prosperity with the resultant scene of mourning, explicitly referencing this as a mourning that is occurring after a feast in order to highlight the transgression committed upon this community—where they had been made a unified group through the ritual of feasting, now they are the victims of an attack that negates the results of that feast and plunges the community into instability:

> Grendles gūðcrǣft gumum undyrne;
> Þa wǣs ǣfter wiste wōp ūp āhafen,
> Micel morgenswēg …. (ll. 127-129 a)

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[46] Cf. Magennis, *Images of Community*, esp. chapters three and five and Enright, *Lady With a Mead Cup*, esp. chapters one and three.

> [Grendel's warfare was made known to me,/ then lamentation was lifted up after the feasting,/ a great mourning-sound.]

The poet's juxtaposition of the safety and prosperity encoded within the ritualized feast in the mead-hall with Grendel's brutal attack and the mourning of those who survive it creates a narrative focal point for considering the impermanent nature of physical safety for mortal beings. This is important because it establishes the protective limits of the hall and the rituals which take place in it. Even in a space that has been consecrated and designated safe, lives are constantly at risk through the influence of outside forces beyond human control. Unlike the Welsh tradition reflected by the *Mabinogion*, here even when a community has acted in full accordance with custom and ritual, that community can still be threatened and destabilized against its collective will and without warning. It is a grim reminder of the need for constant vigilance and re-affirmation of the oaths of support and protection between human beings that serve as the foundation for the Germanic *comitatus* depicted in *Beowulf*. Beyond this moment's function as a reminder of the fragility of human life, Grendel's attack is a parody of the feast, an anti-feast. The Ring-Danes have just participated in the ritualized act of re-dedicating themselves as a unified community in arms against their enemy through their feast, and now their enemy Grendel feasts upon them, breaking their community apart and reconstructing the space as a violent one. The feast which Grendel perceives to be a violence conducted against him[47] is answered through the violent feast conducted by Grendel, himself.[48]

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[47] Lines 86-114 in the poem present Grendel as a figure living in miserable exile who finds himself reflected in the *scop*'s tales of Paradise and God's creation as its foil: the descendant of Cain who murdered

By the second feast—that at which Beowulf and his company are welcomed into the community at Heorot—the instability of the hall has become the everyday condition in which its inhabitants exist, a fact that is disclosed by Hrothgar in a speech given just prior to the feast, in which he warns the younger warrior of the dangers of joining this particular community:

> Ful oft gebēotedon bēore druncne
> Ofer ealowæge ōretmecgas,
> Þæt hīe in bēorsele bīdan wolden
> Grendles gūþe mid gryrum ecga.
> Donne wǣs þeos medoheal on morgentīd,
> Drihtsele drēorfāh, þonne dǣg līxte,
> Eal bencþelu blōde bestӯmed,
> Heal heorudrēore; āhte ic holdra þӯ lǣs,
> Dēorre duguðe, þē þā dēað fornam. (ll. 480-488)

> [Often men have boasted, drunk with beer,/ officers over their cups of ale,/ that they would abide in the beer hall/ Grendel's attack with a rush of sword-terror./ Then in the morning this mead-hall,/ lordly dwelling, was drenched with blood,/ when daylight gleamed, the benches gory,/ the hall spattered and befouled; I had fewer/ dear warriors when death took them away.]

Considering the first feast, which set the tone for the narrative by showcasing the danger that is faced by those who enter this space, these words are not simply a reiteration of the story for the benefit of the poem's audience, but a specific and targeted warning of what

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Abel and subsequently was exiled from God's land. Because of this, Grendel can be read as receiving the feast in Heorot as one unifying the community against Cain's descendants who do not share God's grace—that is, as a feast being held against Grendel and thus, an antagonistic or violent act performed against him.

[48] In a paper presented at the fiftieth International Congress on Medieval Studies entitled "Grendel's Eucharist: An Outlaw's Last Supper," Eric Carlson underscored this idea of the feast as a parody rendered in response to the Danes' feast, and classified it as also being a parody by Grendel of the Eucharist and Last Supper motifs.

to expect if Beowulf chooses to honor his oath to uphold his father's friendship with Hrothgar. Hrothgar's next words—"Site nū tō symle ond on sǣl meoto, / sigehrēð secgum, swā þīn sefa hwette" [Now sit down at my feast, drink mead in my hall,/ the reward of victory, as your mood urges] (ll. 489-3490)—are not an invitation in its truest sense, but rather a challenge. Hrothgar is not inviting Beowulf to feast as a courteous host, but goading him into joining the hall, now that he knows what the outcome might be. Reading it this way—not as a true invitation but as a challenge to rise to—infuses this scene with the appropriate tension between stability and instability that we can understand as a structural thematic tension in the poem. Hrothgar seems at once to want Beowulf to join the hall and, perhaps, defeat Grendel, but also to want Beowulf to decline his offer and leave the hall in order not to suffer the same fate as the earlier warriors who have tried and failed to bring stability back to this space. Hrothgar's wavering attitude suggests going into this feast and its inevitable gory aftermath that he harbors little hope of Beowulf's chances, even as he has no recourse other than to accept Beowulf's offer of help. The significance of this is that Hrothgar's challenge to him shows that upholding Beowulf's honor is not at the heart of this story; it is the constant instability of mortal living and the ever-present threat of violence which shapes the Anglo-Saxon narrative.

Reading this moment not as a simple invitation to the feast but rather as one veiled in a threat which Hrothgar can neither issue outright nor protect Beowulf from should it come to pass sets up the passage that follows, in which Unferth brings up Beowulf's past exploits on the North Sea, as a continuation of the theme of human striving against an unstable world. Unferth, characterized as being jealous of Beowulf's

reputation (“hē ne ūþe þæt ǣnig ōðer man / […]gehēdde under heofenum þonne hē sylfa” [he wished no other man […] glory under heaven [more] than himself[49]] ll. 503-505) initiates a flyting exchange with Beowulf from his seat at the feet of Hrothgar[50]:

Eart þū sē Bēowulf, sē þe wið Brecan wunne,
on sīdne sǣ ymb sund flite,
ðǣr git for wlence wada cunnedon
ond for dolgilpe on dēop wæter
aldrum nēþdon? […]
þær git ēagorstrēam earmum þehton,
mæton merestrǣta, mundum brugdon,
glidon ofer gārsecg; geofon ȳþum wēol,
wintrys wylm[e]. Git on wæteres ǣht
seofon niht swuncon; hē þē ǣt sunde oferflāt,
[….] Đonne wēne ic tō þē wyrsan geþingea,
[……..] gif þū BGrendles dearst
Nihtlongne fyrst nean bīdan. (ll. 506-528)

[Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca / in a swimming contest on the open sea, / where in your pride you tried the waves / and for a foolish boast risked your life / in the deep water? […] the water roiled, / wintry surges. In the keeping of the water / you toiled for seven nights, and he outswam you / So I expect a worse outcome from you-- / […] if for Grendel you dare to lie in wait the whole night long.]

By reinforcing the foolhardy, headstrong nature of Beowulf’s and Breca’s decision to compete in an open-sea swimming contest, Unferth in fact underscores how dangerous the natural world is for humans—the open sea, like Heorot under Grendel’s threat, is a place where boasts of human glory ring empty against the reality of human experience,

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[49] Translation mine.

[50] The “flyting,” or stylized, rhetorical exchange of boasts or insults, is an important narrative element in Norse and other germanic narratives. For more on this particular flyting episode, see Carol Clover, “The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode” in *Speculum* 55:3 (1980): pp. 444-468.

setting the stage for the feast not primarily as a moment of unification, but a test of the community's strength. The focus in this speech on Beowulf's boasts echoes the emphasis in Hrothgar's earlier speech on the boasts of men in the meadhall. Unferth's words compare the sober yet headstrong young Beowulf—who, in Unferth's version of events, loses against Breca and the open sea—to a Beowulf who has been drinking in the hall and then awaits Grendel, pointing out that since he understands Beowulf to have lost the earlier struggle, he now believes Beowulf to be in danger of losing his life should he go forward with his plan to confront Grendel. Under threat of attack from Grendel this hall, Unferth seems to be saying, is no safer than the open sea and, in fact, may prove more deadly. This entry point into the second feast scene, then, serves narratively not simply to provide an opportunity for Beowulf to confront Unferth, accuse him of being drunk, and go on to re-tell the story, recasting himself as the hero after all. It also provides the reader with a constant sub-narrative of threat and instability both within and without the hall that contributes to the patterns of tension in the overall poem.

Beowulf's response to Unferth suggests further that the poet is intentionally juxtaposing Hrothgar's and Unferth's speeches to create a sub-narrative line of dramatic tension, because through an unlikely use of feasting imagery his words so specifically negate Unferth's suggestion that this meadhall—the scene of the feast they are about to begin—might ultimately lead to Beowulf's death. Correcting Unferth's version of the story, Beowulf contends that the reason Breca beat him in the race was because he was pulled to the ocean floor by a watery fiend ("Me tō grunde tēah / fāh fēondscaða, fæste hæfde grim on grape" [Down to the ocean floor / a grisly foe dragged me, gripped me fast

/ in his grim grasp] ll. 552a-555a); however, he did not drown but managed to kill that foe: “hwæþre mē gyfeþe wearð / þæt ic āglǣcan orde gerǣhte, / hildebille, heaþorǣs fornam / mihtig merēdeor þurh mine hand” (ll. 555b-558) [Yet it was given to me. To stab that monster with the point of my sword,/ my war-blade; the storm of battle took away / that mighty sea-beast, through my own hand.] His next words call forth a monstrous feast from which Beowulf emerges triumphant:

> [….] Ic him þēnode
> dēoran sweorde, swā hit gedēfe wæs.
> Næs hīe ðære fylle gefēn hæfdon,
> Mānfordǣdlan, þæt hīe mē þēgon,
> Symbel ymbsǣton sǣgrunde nēah;
> Ac on mergenne mecum wunde
> Be yōlāfe uppe lǣgon
> Sweo[r]dum āswefede […] (ll. 560b-567 b)

> [I served them well / with my dear sword, as they deserved. / They got no joy from their gluttony, / those wicked maneaters, when they tasted me,/ sat down to their feast on the ocean floor---/ but in the morning, wounded by my blade/ they were washed ashore by the ocean waves,/ dazed by sword-blows […]

By intentionally characterizing his interaction with the sea creatures as a “symbel”—a *feast*—at which he was attacked and emerged victorious, Beowulf both acknowledges the threat of Grendel’s attack upon Heorot and dismisses Unferth’s insults concerning his ability to emerge victorious from a deadly feast-hall interaction. Characterizing the ocean floor as the scene of a feast at which he was meant to be the meal, Beowulf emerges victoriously alive from that feast-hall, not only thwarting his would-be killers but turning the tables and leaving them dead.

His use of feasting imagery in this case is not simply coincidental; Beowulf is explicitly making a point about his ability to overcome the challenges of an unstable feasting hall, and implicitly claiming that he will not be a meal for Grendel as so many of Hrothgar's men have been. He goes on to berate Unferth's own inability to create stability at hall, referencing an earlier instance of fratricide attributed to Unferth ("ðū þīnum brōðrum tō banan wurde, / hēafodmǣgum" (ll. 587-588) [you became your brother's killer, / your next of kin]) as evidence that Unferth is a de-stabilizing force rather than a unifying one. He then continues to develop the comparison by pointing out that if Unferth were as effective a warrior as Beowulf himself, then Grendel would not constitute a continued threat to Heorot; but that instead, "hē hafað onfunden, þæt hē þā fǣðe ne þearf,/ atole ecgþræce ēower lēode / swīðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga" (ll. 595-597) [he [Grendel] has found that he need fear no feud, no storm of swords from the Victory-Shieldings]). Neither Unferth, nor any of the other men of Heorot, has thus far been able to bring stability to this hall; but Beowulf, having successfully navigated a previous monstrous feast, "him Geata sceal / eofoð ond ellen ungeāra nū / guþe gebēodan" (ll. 601 b-603 a) [will show him soon enough the strength and courage of the Geats in war]. When he has done so, the sun will shine once again upon a mead-hall housing a stable community of men who are not afraid: "Gǣþ eft sē þe mot / tō medo mōdig, siþþan morgenlēoht, / ofer ylda bearn ōþres dōgores, / sunne sweglwered sūþan scīneō!" (ll. 603 a-606) [Afterwards, let him who will / go bravely to mead, when the morning light / of a new day, the sun clothed in glory, / shines from the south on the sons of men!] When we read this flyting scene in the context not simply of boasts and jealousy

between Beowulf and Unferth, but of the poet's conscious creation of narrative tension through the juxtaposition of images of feasts gone awry and human response to them, we can see more clearly the craft of this poem, its underlying thematic structure one of humans seeking a sense of peace and stability, all while acting upon and being acted upon by the outside forces of a constantly-threatening world.

In keeping with such a reading, with Unferth's and Beowulf's flyting and thus, the instability it threatens in the form of a possible physical altercation between the two safely over, the poet next crafts a beautifully stable feast scene, in which everyone plays his and her part correctly—in fact, the poet makes certain to alert the reader of this feast scene to how utterly correct the behavior of figures like Wealtheow is: "Eode Wealhþēow forð, / cwēn Hrōðgāres cynna gemyndig" (ll. 612 b – 613) [Wealtheow went forth, Hrothgar's queen, mindful of customs]. She ritualistically serves the mead cup to each guest in accord with his position within the community, beginning with Hrothgar, the king, and ending with Beowulf, the honored guest. Beowulf then performs his role in this bonding ritual, promising to protect the hall from Grendel or die in the effort: "Ic gefremman sceal / eorlīc ellen, oþðe endedæg / on þsse meoduhalle mine gebīdan!" (ll. 636 b – 638) [I shall perform a deed of manly courage, or in this mead-hall I will await the end of my days!] Michael Enright notes the way in which this feast scene serves as a cultural repository of an earlier Germanic period for the Beowulf audience:

> […] it must be emphasized that the Beowulf poet is here using all of his powers to describe the idealized archetypal image of aristocratic Germanic life—a way of thinking and doing which, by the late eighth or ninth century when the poem (arguably) may have been first declaimed, was already fading into the primordial

past but which still maintained a powerful hold on the emotions of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy […][51]

This feast therefore serves both a literary function—providing an opportunity for the poet to develop and emphasize the underlying tensions of stability and instability woven throughout the poem in order to highlight the precarious nature of human life and human community within the world—and as a cultural artifact, a scene that can be read as an idealized reconstruction of an important ritualistic tradition that has already begun to fade from use by the time of its writing down. It is significant not because of a physical altercation or other exciting event carried out by the protagonist, but because the very absence of altercation marks a culturally essential instance of community-building without which Grendel's attack would not have the narrative thrust that the poet is able to achieve through the juxtaposition of this feast scene with what follows.

The combined efforts of this peace-weaving queen and her honored guest result in the desired outcome: a hall unified once more by a sense of stability, however temporary that stability might be: "þā wæs eft swā ǣr inne on healle / þrȳðword sprecen, ðēod on sǣlum" (ll. 642-643) [Then, as before, there in that hall were / strong words spoken, the people happy.] At this point, with the community stabilized through a carefully orchestrated, ritualistic feast, the poet sends the characters to their beds, Hrothgar

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[51] Enright, *Lady With a Mead Cup,* pp. 4-5. The full first chapter of Enright's monograph is an excellent introduction to the Germanic comitatus tradition and *Beowulf*'s role as a textual repository of the mead-hall ritual and its importance, although his focus is on the role of Wealtheow within this tradition rather than the feast-scene more generally.

granting Beowulf control of the mead-hall because he has proven himself to be a stabilizing force for the community:

> Nǣfre ic ǣngum men ǣr ālȳfde
> Siþðan ic hond ond rond hebban mihte,
> Ðrȳþærn Dena būton þē nūðā.
> Hafa nū ond geheald […] waca wið wrāþum! (ll. 655-660 b)

> [I have never entrusted to any man,/ ever since I could hold and hoist a shield, / the great hall of the Danes—except to you now. / Have it and hold it / […] Watch for your enemies!]

Of course, what follows is Grendel's night attack on the hall. As with the sea-monsters seeking to devour Beowulf, Grendel's attack is presented in the imagery of a feast that, like the historical feasts which begin this chapter, is intended from its outset to end in violence and destruction:

> mynte þæt hē gedælde, ǣr þon dæg cwōme,
> atol āglǣca ānra gehwylces
> līf wið lice, þā im ālumpen wæs
> wistfylle wēn. (ll. 731-734a)

> [he meant to divide, before day came,/ this loathsome creature, the life of each man / from his body, when there befell him/ the hope of a feast.]

With this re-introduction of Grendel into the narrative space, the poet instantly destabilizes the peaceful hall he has built in the preceding lines, continuing the pattern of mortal uncertainty that serves as the underlying thematic structure of the poem. As Grendel and Beowulf grapple with one another, the poet reinforces the potential destruction of Heorot, even while reinforcing as well the architecture of the hall:

þā wæs wundor micel,þæt se wīnsele
Wiðhæfde heaþodēorum, þæt hē on hrūsan nefēol,
Fǣger foldbold; ac hē þǣs fǣste wǣs
Innan ond ūtan īrenbendum
Searoþoncum besmiþod. (ll. 771-775a)

[the hall echoed./ It was a great wonder that the wine-hall / withstood their fighting and did not fall to the ground, / that fair building –but it was fastened / inside and out with iron bands, / forged with skill.]

He further enhances this scene of potential destruction of the hall by commenting on the damage wrought to its contents by the struggle: "þær fram sylle ābēag / medubenc monig mine gefrǣge / golde geregnad þǣr þāgraman wunnon" (ll. 775b-777) [From the floor there flew / many a mead-bench, as men have told me, / gold-adorned, where those grim foes fought.] Although the mead-hall itself remains as an architectural space, then—a space considered only destructible through fire (ll. 778-782)—the interior is considerably damaged as Grendel and Beowulf engage one another in hand-to-hand combat, a fact reiterated by the poet in his description of the preparations for the third feast in the narrative, that following Beowulf's triumph over Grendel:

ðā wæs hāten hreþe Heort innanweard
Folmum gefrætwod; fela þǣra wæs,
Wera ond wīfa, þē þæt wīnreced,
Gestcele gyredon. Goldflāg scinon
Web æfter wāgum, wundorsīona fela
Secga gehwylcum þāra þe on swyle starað.
Wæs þæt beorhte bold tōbrocen swiðe
Eal inneweard irenbedum fæst,
Heorras tōhlindene; hrōf āna genæs
Ealles ansund… (ll. 991-1000b)

> [Then it was quickly commanded that Heorot/ be adorned by hands. There were many / men and women who prepared that wine-hall, / the guest-house; gold-dyed tapestries / shone on the walls, many a wonderful sight / to any man who might look on them. That shining building was nearly shattered / inside, entirely, fast in its iron bands / its hinges sprung; the roof alone survived / unharmed…]

Here is an important scene that can easily be overlooked as a lull between Beowulf's battle with Grendel and the feast celebrating its victory, but that in fact shows the community rebuilding itself, a necessary precursor to a feast. The conveys the importance of rebuilding the hall prior to re-consecrating it as a safe space for the ritualized unification ceremony of the feast to follow. By focusing specifically on the men and women—the community—and their actions in preparing the hall, hanging the scarred walls with tapestries that conceal the damage done to the space, so that the hall becomes again a wonderful space to look upon, rather than a scene of destruction and death, the poet brings the narrative line back to a consideration of the duality, the stability and instability, of mortal life. The reminder that this same space was nearly destroyed a few lines earlier further reminds us that beneath these tapestries lurks the memory of Grendel: all feast halls house not only the current event, but also the memory of all former events that have taken place within the space.

The memory of Grendel, then, is inscribed into the very walls by the damage he has wrought to them, despite Beowulf's victory. While the damage from that prior event can be concealed and covered by the golden tapestries, and while that prior event can be overshadowed by the present feast, it is never fully gone from the space: its memory, and therefore its ongoing threat, will last as long as the walls that preserve the marks that serve as a reminder. This is a poignant rhetorical decision on the part of the poet, because

it forces the audience to recall that even the safest spaces in their world have the capacity to become locations of catastrophe. In the Anglo-Saxon understanding of this architectural space that is presented within the narrative of Beowulf all halls wrought by mortal hands, then, are a locus both of stability and instability, dependent upon who is found within them, and constant vigilance is necessary to prevent the destruction of a hall and of its community.

Therefore the security of Heorot in the wake of Grendel's death is a false security, because in the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the world recorded in *Beowulf* all such secure moments are ephemeral. This victory feast is a hollow one, because while the present moment is one of glory and peace among the Shieldings, as the poet, himself is quick to point out, this peace will not last: "Heorot innan wæs / frēondum āfylled; nalles fācenstafas / þēod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon" [Heorot within was / filled with friends--no false treacheries/ did the people of the Scyldings plot *at that time*] (ll. 1017-1019, emphasis mine). As Liuzza points out in a note to this line, "implicit in this statement is the idea that, at some later time, the people of the Scyldings did plot false treacheries."[52] Yet again, we see the Beowulf-poet deliberately undermining the stability he has created in order to underscore the fleeting nature of any such peace.

The poet takes great pains again to describe the rituals of the feast; how Beowulf and his men are, in turn, presented with great wealth from Hrothgar in his capacity as the "hordweard hæleþa," or "hord-guard of warriors" (ln. 1047); how the mead-cup is

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[52] Liuzza, pg. 115 n. 1.

passed; how the harp is played. And then, yet again, he undermines his own efforts at establishing a sense of peace and prosperity in the hall by having the *scop* tell not a victorious story, such as that told earlier of Sigurd the dragon-slayer, but instead the story of the *Fight at Finnsburg*, a tale of treachery in the hall ending in a bloodbath and the destruction of a community.[53] It is almost as though the poet is afraid to allow either himself or his audience to grow too complacent with the notion of peace in the hall, so that even when there is a respite from the constant struggle to create and sustain a sense of stability, the threat of community collapse remains, inscribed in the battle-scarred walls of Heorot; embedded within the battle-thick stories of the *scop*. Even as Wealtheow performs the duties of peace-weaving, offering the cup and speaking to each of the men, she remains acutely and poignantly aware of the instability of *comitatus* relations, begging Hrothgar to consider her own kinsman rather than Beowulf as a successor and guardian for their sons. The poet juxtaposes Wealtheow's understanding of the world, which focuses on blood relationships, with that of Hrothgar, which focuses on the relationship of warrior to thane, and appears to be making the case for the latter as the more stable of the two. In the question of which is more important in a period in which blood and prowess both hold great meaning—the family you are born into or the family you create for yourself by choice, necessity, or a combination of both—the Beowulf-poet calls attention to the limitations of the first while stressing the potential value of the second, in direct contradiction to Wealtheow's reversed position on the subject. Beowulf,

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[53] ll. 1071-1158.

having proven himself a champion for Heorot in battle against Grendel--a victory that neither Hrothgar's own men, nor Wealtheow's kinsmen, has been able to achieve--has also proven himself able to retain stability in the hall where there has been none. In a political sense, Hrothgar's choosing Beowulf as his successor as chief of this community is the best option for the community's continued well-being, but in a social sense, Wealtheow clearly fears the ramifications of bringing unknown warriors permanently into the hall and wishes instead to impose a familial dynasty into the rulership, in support of her own sons' future.[54]

Here, a brief discussion of the *scop*'s version of the *Fight at Finnsburg* in *Beowulf* versus the fragment preserved in George Hickes's 1705 *Thesaurus* provides a useful lens for considering Wealtheow's position at this feast.[55] In the only extant stand-alone version of the story, a fragment of approximately fifty lines, the Danish prince Hnaef and sixty of his retainers are besieged for five days by unspecified attackers in Finn's hall. The audience for this version of the story was clearly expected to know how Hnaef and his men happened to be in Finn's hall and who their attackers were, neither of which is stated in the fragment.[56] This fragment consists primarily of a description of the fire of the attackers' torches and praise for Hnaef and his thegns in the battle; the poet writes:

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[54] Wealtheow harbors such fears for good reason; in addition to the many stories like those of Hildeburh and Thryth scattered throughout *Beowulf* which serve as examples of her fears brought to life, for discussion of the issues that arise and lead to violence in a community taken over by new leadership, see chapter two of the current study.
[55] The fragment transcribed by Hicke is the text edited by Frederick Klaeber and included in *Klaeber's Beowulf*, pp. 283-285; it is translated by Roy Liuzza in *Beowulf*, Second Edition, pp. 258-259.
[56] In a series of lectures later posthumously published as *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and The Episode* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983) J.R.R. Tolkien examined the extant versions of the Finnsburg story

Ne gefrægn ic nǣfre wurþlicor æt wera hilde
Sixtig sigebeorna sēl gebǣran,
Nē nēfre swānas hwītne medo sēl forgyldan,
Đonne Hnæfe guldan his hægstealdas. (Klaeber, ll. 37-40)

[I have never heard of sixty more worthy warriors / bearing themselves better in the clash of foes; / nor ever was the sweet mead better repaid / than those young companions paid to Hnaef. (Liuzza, ll. 37-40)]

The fragment implicitly shows that these men have participated in the past in meadhall feasts featuring the same ritualistic sharing of the mead cup which occurs in Heorot, and they are now being called upon to uphold the oaths of loyalty which they pledged during that ritual in a life-or-death battle located in the very feast hall where those oaths were taken. Inscribed into this version of the story are Anglo-Saxon anxieties concerning safety in the hall—it comes both from the sturdiness of the hall's walls, and also from the strength and resolve of its inhabitants, and their loyalty to one another when they are faced with an enemy to the community. In this fragment, that loyalty is not questioned; however, the *Beowulf* scop's version of the story brings into play the same dynamics of marriage versus blood-kin that we see Wealtheow negotiating in her feast-scene.

In an expanded version of the Finnsburg fragment, the episode as it appears in *Beowulf* begins not with the image of the fires of the attackers' torches, but with Queen Hildeburh in mourning for the death of her sons and brothers at the hands of a contingent of the Frisians. The focus is instantly placed on the blood-feud between the Danish and

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and ultimately concluded that it was a historical one grounded in the oral history of the Danes and Frisians and the figure of Hengest in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. This would support the idea that the fragment was part of a historical record with which audiences would have been familiar.

Frisian tribes and its effect on the woman whose marriage was intended to serve as the bond between them.[57] Fleshing out the story, the poet reveals that the Hnaef figure mentioned in the fragment is Hildeburh's brother, and that he came with his retainers to visit with her and her husband, Finn, the king of the Frisians. Hnaef is killed in ambush, and Hengest becomes the leader of the Danes. Hengest, unable to return home over the sea during the winter ("þēah þe hē [ne] meahte on mere drīfan / hringedstefnan—holm storme wēol" [though on the frozen sea he could not steer / his ring-prowed ship—the ocean raged with storms (ll. 1130-1131) enters into a truce with Finn. Finn promises the Danes safety in hall and honorable treatment during the winter:

…hīe him ōðer flet eal gerȳmdon,
Healle ond hēahsetl, þæt hīe healfre geweald
Wið Eotena bearn āgan mōston,
Ond æt feohgyftum Folcwaldan sunu
Dōgra gehwylce Dene weorþode,
Hengestes heap hringum wenede
Efne swā swīðe sincgestrēonum
Fǣttan goldes, swā hē Frēsena cyn
On bēorsele byldan wolde. (ll. 1086-1094)

[57] The focus on the woman's emotional plight in this scene is similar to the focus on the female figure's emotional response to the loss of her loved ones and her subsequent exile in the Old English poem "The Wife's Lament" found in the Exeter Book (c. 960s-970s). In particular, I am struck by the similar vocabulary used to articulate each woman's emotional condition; as one example of this, the Wife figure in the Lament opens with the statement, "Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful *geomorre*" [I relate this sad riddle about myself] (line 11, emphasis mine) while Hildeburgh is characterized as "*geomoru* ides" [she was a sad lady] (line 1075, emphasis mine). I do not suggest that these texts hold any great similarity to one another overall, particularly as *Beowulf* is a much later composition, but I do find this focus on the woman's affect following a violent altercation and subsequent exile in both poems striking and, perhaps, meriting further consideration at a later time. "The Wife's Lament," in *An Anthology of Old and Middle English Literature c. 890-c. 1400*, second edition, ed. Elaine Treharne (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 76-78.

> [They would clear out another hall for them, / a house and high-seat, of which they should have / half the control with the sons of the Jutes / and Folcwalda's son[58], with feasting and with gifts, / should honor the Danes each and every day / gladden the troops of Hengest with gold rings / and ancient treasures, ornamented gold / just as often as he would encourage / the hosts of the Frisians in the beer-hall.]

The pledge of safety from Danish-born Queen Hildeburh's husband, should be a binding one, because the tribes are united through their marriage. However, the poet seems to be using this story to ask: *how binding can those marriage ties be*? Occurring as it does while he is visiting the Frisians, Hnaef's death shows that those ties are tenuous, and that tribal leaders should be careful about how much they trust those bonds to safeguard their communities. The peace between the tribes in this tale is one that has been artificially crafted through the marriage of Hildeburh to Finn, and continues to be artificially preserved through the combined feasting rituals of sharing the mead-cup and gift-giving in the hall which are intended to promote a sense of communal loyalty and stave off individual greed. Neither the kinship created through his marriage to Hildeburh nor the political clout wielded by Finn as the Frisian king is a foolproof safeguard against violence in the community. The promised feasts provide only temporary staying power against that violence. As winter ends, the resentment the Danes feel for the loss of their thane is uncontrollable, and they perform a violently retributive act, killing Finn, looting the hall, and returning home with Hildeburh:

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[58] Finn, King of the Frisians and husband of Hildeburh, wife of the slain Hnaef whom Hengest succeeds as leader of the Danes.

[…….]   Ða wæs heal [r]oden
Fēonda ēorum,   swilce Fin slægen,
Cyning on corþre,   ond sēo cwēn numen.
Scēotend Scyldinga   tō scypon feredon
Eal ingesteald   eorðcyninges
Swylce hīe æt Finnes hām   findan meahton
Sigla searogimma.   Hīe on sǣlāde
Drihtlīce wīf   tō Denum feredon,
Lǣddon tō lēodum.   (ll. 1151-1158)

> [The hall was stained / with the lifeblood of foes, and Finn was slain, / the king among his host; the queen was seized. / The Scylding bowmen carried to their ships / all the house property of that earth-king, / whatever they could find in Finn's homestead, / brooches and bright gems. On their sea journey / they bore that noble queen back to the Danes / and led her to her people.]

In the end, then, with the peace-weaving efforts of her marriage lying in ruins and her husband and sons dead, Hildeburh is *led to her people*—a clear point being made as to where her true kinship is found. She may have been married to Finn in an effort to promote peace between these tribes; but in this story, as in the case of Branwen in the Welsh *Mabinogion,* it is the blood-ties that matter the most. This story of a failed marriage and its bloody aftermath gives a clear indication for Wealtheow's ambivalence concerning the safety of her sons in the presence of strangers to the hall. She prefers kinship to the *comitatus* because stories like this promote the woman's blood-ties as her sole means of safety should her peace-weaving efforts fail. This occasion reveals an affinity between the Welsh and Anglo-Saxon cultures as regards the importance of kinship for women.

For the Beowulf poet, however, Wealtheow's preference for kinship over the ties of a warrior to his thane is a misguided one; he continuously makes reference to the

future instability of the hall as a result of familial infighting: first, with the *scop*'s telling of the *Fight at Finnsburg*—where the tension between blood and marriage kinship is played out--and then with rhetorical statements such as,

> .... þā cwōm Wealhþēo forð
> gān under gyldnum bēage þær þā godan twēgen
> sæton suhtergefæderan; þā gyt wæs hiera sib ætgædere,
> æghwylc ōðrum trywe. (ll. 1162 b - 1165 a)
>
> [Wealtheow came forth / in her golden crown to where the good two / sat, nephew and uncle; their peace was still whole then, / each true to the other.]

In pointing out that at this time, the peace between the nephew and uncle is still whole, the poet draws greater attention to the fact that this peace does not last; the second half of the statement indicates that a betrayal occurs and the poet does not agree with Wealtheow's estimation of the importance of kinship to community stability.

Further evidence that Wealtheow overestimates the security of the hall comes as she tells Beowulf that he is joining a community of loyal thanes:

> .... Bēo þū suna mīnum
> dædum gedēfe, drēamhealdende!
> Hēr is æghwylc eorl ōþrum getrywe,
> mōdes milde, mandrihtne hol[d],
> þegnas syndon geþwære, þēod ealgearo,
> druncne dryhtguman dōð swā ic bidde! (ll. 1226 b -1231)
>
> [Be to my sons / kind in your deeds, keeping them in joys! / Here each earl is true to the other, / mild in his heart, loyal to his liege-lord, / the thanes united, the nation alert, / the troop, having drunk at my table, will do as I bid!]

Wealtheow's words concerning the loyalty and stability of the Heorot *comitatus* seem to ring hollow in the wake of Grendel's attacks. Whether or not the thanes are loyal to her and will do her bidding is irrelevant when the hall is in jeopardy; her authority over them does nothing to quell the danger to which the community is subjected within these walls when invaded by figures such as Grendel. Wealtheow, however, is well aware of the limitations of her authority and of her thanes' ability to protect the hall. She knows that Beowulf's triumph over Grendel positions him as the most likely successor to Hrothgar; his ability to vanquish the hall's enemy promotes community stability, if he is willing to join that community as a full member and not to remain an outsider. Therefore, Wealtheow does not state that the community is inviolable, but rather asks Beowulf to join it as a loyal member who will support her sons when the time comes and warns him of the price he stands to pay if his loyalties should falter. Her words, spoken aloud before the entire community, serve the dual purpose of charging Beowulf with the protection of the hall and its treasures, and charging the *comitatus* with the protection of the community that dwells within that hall: Beowulf should ensure their safety, and they should in turn ensure his loyalty through the threat of swift action should he turn upon them. Following her speech, Wealtheow returns to her seat and we are told, "þǣr wæs symbla cyst" [The best of feasts it was] (ln. 1232b). The ritualistic actions required for the community's sense of well-being have concluded successfully, and the cultural importance of such rituals is attested in the poet's careful attention to them over all other aspects of the feast—the food served, where people are seated, what other people are saying to one another. For the intended audience of *Beowulf*, what matters most is that

the unification of the community has been achieved through the expected rituals, performed correctly by the hall's royal family and their honored guest.

However, these stabilizing efforts are immediately tested to their limits by the poet, who warns that "Wyrd ne cuþon/ geōsceaft grim[m]e, swā hit āgangen wearð" [They did not know wyrd, / the cruel fate which would come to pass] (ll. 1233b-1234) and then brings Grendel's mother into the hall in the middle of the night to perform her act of revenge upon the community that has slain her son. Continuing the pattern of stabilizing ritual-destabilizing external force that this analysis of its feasts shows to be employed continuously throughout the *Beowulf* narrative, Grendel's mother, unexpected by the rejoicing *comitatus* (despite the poet's assuring us that "Wæs þeaw hyra, / þæ hie oft wǣron an wīg gearwe, / gē æt hām gē on herge" [It was their custom / always to be ready, armed for battle / at home or in the field] ll. 1246b-1247) instantly plunges the community back into destabilized chaos; like her son earlier, she answers the feast in the hall with a feast of her own upon members of that hall in retaliatory fashion. We are warned of her late-night assault that:

> …… wæs se gryre lǣssa
> Efne swā micle, swā bið mægþa cræft,
> Wīggryre wīfes be wæþnedmen,
> Þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþ[rū]en,
> Sweord swāte fāh swīn ofer helme
> Ecgum dyhtig andweard scireð. (ll. 1282b-1287)

> [The horror was less / by as much as a maiden's strength, / a woman's warfare, is less than an armed man's / when a bloodstained blade, its edges strong, / hammer-forged sword, slices through the boar-image on a helmet opposite.]

Working quickly, Grendel's mother attacks late at night, seizing a single thane, Aeschere, and her son's confiscated arm, and the poet laments that "cearu wæs genīwod, / geworden in wīcun" [Care was renewed, / come again to the dwellings] (ll. 1303b-1304a). Hrothgar, mourning Aeschere's loss, bitterly remarks that "wearð him on Heorote tō handbanan / wælgǣst wǣfre" [In Heorot he was slain by the hand of a restless death-spirit] (ll. 1330-1331a) and mournfully concludes "ic ne wāt hwæþer / atoll ǣse wlanc eftsiðas tēah / fylle ge[f]ægnod" [I do not know / where that ghoul went, gloating with its carcass, / rejoicing in its feast.] (ll. 1331b-1333a). I find it striking that Liuzza's (not singular) translation of the phrase "fylle ge[f]ægnod" is "rejoicing in the feast," a choice which deliberately aligns it with the destabilizing imagery of the human acts of feasts and feasting that I have sought to establish as a pattern intentionally employed by the Beowulf-poet;[59] in this case, we seem to see "a feast for a feast"—the celebration of

[59] Whether or not Grendel's mother has eaten the corpse remains a contested point anchored in the problematic linguistic history of the phrase "fylle ge[f]aegnod" (in the manuscript, gefraegnod); for a history of this linguistic argument see Alfred Bammesberger, "On Old English gefraegnod in Beowulf 1333a" in *Linguistics Across Historical and Geographical Boundaries In Honor Of Jacek Fisiak, Volume One: Linguistic Theory and Historical Linguistics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), pp. 193-198; this same history appears in summary in R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, Fourth Edition (Toronto UP, 2008), pg. 199. In the absence of evidence against it beyond the older linguistic studies described in these publications, I agree with modern editorial practices of taking "fylle" for "fill, plenty, feast, glut" (194). In determining this phrase as comprising an instance of feasting, Liuzza follows the editorial and translation choices of scholars including Stanley Greenfield (1982): "I do not know whether the monstrous carrion-eater made off with full feast"; John MacNamara (2005): "I know not where she went from here, exulting in the horrid carcass, reveling in her feast"; and R.D. Fulk (2010): "I do not know where the monster exulting in carrion went on her return. Emboldened by that feast." The first instance of this practice of deeming it a feast or banquet that I have been able to locate is the 1876 translation by Thomas Arnold ("I know not whether the pest exulting in its prey has returned again, braced by its banquet.") Alternately, the phrase is most often translated as an instance of Grendels' mother glutting, or having her fill, but not specifically claimed as a feast or banquet; this other tradition begins with the first English translation by John Mitchell Kemble (1837): "I know not whether the foul one exulting in carrion has renewed his journey, rejoicing in the glut" and is supported by the translations of J.R.R. Tolkien (c. 1926; 2014): "I know not whither she has turned her backward steps, as dreadfully she gloats over her prey, exulting in her belly's fill"; Ruth P. M. Lehmann (1988): "Where that dire glutton / dragged home his corpse to indulge her greed / is known to me"; Seamus Heaney (2002): "Where she is hiding, glutting on

Grendel's death feasted, and then Aeschere feasted upon in return. While the choice to more specifically align this image of glutting or eating one's fill with the idea of feasting may have been made as an act of translation that seemed to fit in with the poetry of the text, or as a symmetrical shaping of the narrative, it also can be viewed as an intuitive response to the cultural ambivalence about the outcome of feasts and feasting that is evinced throughout this text. For the Anglo-Saxons, feasting is both an act of unity and community, and also one of destruction and destabilization.

The description of the final feast held in Heorot prior to the Geats' return home upholds my reading of the feasts in this poem as spaces in which the community is reminded of its transitory nature even as it enacts rituals intended to create a sense of stability. The description is sparsely handled—"þa wæs eft swā ǣr ellenrōfum, / fletsittendum fægere gereorded / nīowan stefne" (Then again as before, a feast was prepared for the brave ones who occupied the hall on this new occasion ll. 1787-1789). The specificity of the phrasing here—that the feast is being prepared *for the brave ones who occupy the hall on this new occasion*—shows that the hall can be read as a space where the events held within it, commemorative and stabilizing though they might be

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the corpse and glorying in her escape, I cannot tell"; Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy (2004): "No one knows where she will wander now, / glad of the gory trophy she takes, / her fine fodder." I feel that the choice to deem it an act of feasting renders Grendel's mother more human-like and subversive of human traditions in feasting alone, while the choice to deem it an act of glutting or having her plenty dehumanizes her, aligning her with monstrosity and beastliness. While this second reading does not change my reading of the poem as a succession of instances of stability and destabilization of the community anchored by the feast scenes, it does complicate the idea of this as a scene intentionally rendered symmetrical to create an ironic instance of "feast for a feast." I choose therefore to follow the interpretation of "fylle" as "feast" as set forth by Liuzza *et al*. in order to support my overall interpretation of the poem as one structured around feasts as acts of stabilization and destabilization, as well as to retain the reading of Grendel's mother as monstrous, yes, but also descended of or having dwelled with the descendants of Cain, and therefore more humanlike than beastlike in nature.

meant to be, are in fact ephemeral, that this is a new occasion, in a series of occasions, to which the hall has born witness and which are encoded within the hall's memory, inscribed within the scratches on the wall from the battles and the scratches on the floor from the scraping benches as the feasts are set up and taken back down again. This is a new community, taking the place of the one that last met in this feasting space—even though many of the same people are present, we are reminded of the absences now marked within the feast, of those who are no longer present for this new occasion. The poet tells us immediately after this description of the feast that "Nithelm geswearc / deorc ofer dryhtgumum" (The dark helm of night / overshadowed the troop ll. 1789b-1790 a). The juxtaposition of the new community, the new occasion in the hall, with the darkness overshadowing it and bringing the event and the day to a close, reminds us as readers yet again that this community is in a constant state of flux. While the rituals of the feast impart a sense of community and stability, the very nature of time, of day and night, and of human mortality and the need to sleep ensures that the new occasion ends. While the rituals and events that led to the feast have imparted within the participants a sense of community, that sense of community has to be continuously renewed in order for it to remain stable—and yet, it cannot be continuously renewed because it must end with the coming of night and of exhaustion.

As we have been reminded throughout the poem with each fresh attack upon the hall, there is no guarantee that everyone involved in this feast will still be here in the morning, and I think the *Beowulf*-poet's choices show a desire to really underscore that point, especially when he makes it a point to focus on the dawn that follows this night:

“þæt hrefn blaca heofones wynne / blīðheort bodode. Ðā cōm beorht [lēoma] / [ofer sceadwa] scacan” (the black raven, blithe-hearted, announced / the joy of heaven. Then light came hurrying / bright over shadows ll. 1801-1803a). Yet again however, the poet uses the feast as a focal point for the transitory nature of the community that participates in it. Directly following this exultant and peaceful daybreak in which the shadows over the hall are chased away by the light of a day opening to no carnage, we are told that having accomplished their goal in bringing stability to the hall, the Geats are now eager to return home to their families (“wǣron æþelingas eft tō lēodum / fuse tō faren[n]e” (ll. 1804-1805a). That is, having successfully created a peaceful community in which no violence has been done upon its members, the Geats now want to leave, which will still result in a rupture of the community. The reader is momentarily seduced into a sense of security by the peaceful dawning of a day with no monstrous attacks in it, but the community is still experiencing a form of violence in the departure of a large number of its members. The short-term stability afforded by Beowulf’s success persuades us that all is well; yet at the same time, with the departure of the Geats we cannot be sure that this is so. Even if they were to stay, we could not be assured of a stable community because, as we have been shown throughout the poem in the songs of the *scops*, violence can happen within, as well as without, the safety of the hall and the community that has formed within it. The poet has reminded us, over and over again, that we can only be assured of what we are experiencing now, and therefore that peace and stability in a community should not be taken for granted because we cannot know if, or when, or how, or why they will end—only that we are assured that by some means they will, in fact, come to an end.

The battle-scarred walls of Heorot can therefore be read as a reliquary, housing the violent scars of the constant battle between external and internal forces acting upon the community to destroy it. This space of memory and ritual is simultaneously a preserver and a site of rupture of the communities that have sought stability within its walls. Further, even Heorot as a space of ritual and memory is not a permanent solution to the problem of community rupture and loss, because we have also been reminded that this hall, like all human constructions, will ultimately fall. It is a spatial reminder of the ephemeral reality of human being—the only certainty is that nothing in this world is certain.

CHAPTER III

PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL: THE VIOLENT AFTERMATHS OF POSTCOLONIAL VICTORY FEASTS IN GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH'S *HISTORIA REGUM BRITANNIAE* AND JOHN GOWER'S *ALBINUS AND ROSEMUND*

Throughout the medieval period in England chronicle and fictional narratives, alike, address the myriad problems of postcolonial societies in association with the conquests that serve as a framework for early medieval British history. Writers used their texts to explore the societal and political anxieties that arose with each new ruling regime and its corresponding influence on British culture, and often returned to historical events in support of these efforts. While we are accustomed to reading the battle scenes in such texts with an eye, for instance, to how they develop and promote questions of legitimate and illegitimate violence, and how they show the effects of violence on society, the feasting scenes are most often read as lulls in the action, moments of accord in otherwise brutal and violent narratives. However, in fact the feasting scenes continue the narrative work of the battles by bringing ongoing and newly-formed socio-political issues into the feast-hall; the event is billed as a scene of community-building under the new ruler, but the fledgling new community is ever-threatened with new violence born of old and as-yet unresolved conflict which is brought to light during the feast.

This chapter begins with a consideration of the postcolonial issues heralded in Arthur's Whitsun feast in Geoffrey of Monmouth's mid twelfth-century chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae*, arguing that while the feast itself is not violent, we can see inscribed within its description the cultural anxieties that lead to the later violence of Arthur's reign and, ultimately, the dissolution of Arthur's Britain following his death—anxieties which, I argue, mirror those experienced by the post-Conquest, Anglo-Norman rulership which comprised Geoffrey's primary audience for this text. Examining this violence allows us to understand better the dynamic impact of the figure of Arthur within Geoffrey's chronicle by showcasing how willingly his subjects embrace his rule and, in so doing, relinquishing their own longstanding cultural mores. In a chronicle marked by a series of violent reigns characterized by battles, wars, and treacherous murders, Arthur's is all the more remarkable for the non-physical form that violence takes once he has conquered his enemies. As recorded by Geoffrey, Arthur's reign marks a true change in English history and culture, one wrought not solely or even primarily by the sword, but by the conflation of cultures. The coronation feast at which this achievement is highlighted forces us to consider the many strategic ways in which violence is deployed. Arthur's non-physical and non-bloody violence against native cultures seems peaceful; yet, it is still the herald of changes that ultimately lead to later, bloodier violence when he is no longer present to mediate and serve as a symbolic figurehead for the tenuous new empire.

The second half of the chapter focuses on John Gower's retelling in Book One of the *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390) of the story of Albinus and Rosamond which appears in

the Introduction to this study; here, an event which occurs at a victory feast hosted by Albinus becomes the catalyst for a deadly series of retaliatory behaviors culminating in the end of his regime. Whereas Arthur's feast is characterized by his attention to cultural assimilation, Albinus's actions are antagonistic and highlight his position as the seemingly untouchable conqueror whose people must do as he demands, providing context for Rosemund's vengeful attack upon him in search of some form of justice for his deeds. In this Middle English dream vision derived from chronicle sources, Gower's handling of postcolonial feasting violence provides a sustained reflection of the limitations of human governing codes to account for, prevent, or respond appropriately or effectively to the human failings and sins which lie at the heart of acts of violence.

Read together, these postcolonial feasts and their aftermaths show that while during the feasting event the pomp and festivity appear to herald a new world order, in fact each new regime is a short-lived entity. Geoffrey of Monmouth and John Gower use the feasts in their respective narratives to underscore the anxieties brought about by violent conquests. The seeming stability of the feasting scene, juxtaposed against the immediate dissolution of the newly-formed community through acts of violence, points to a desire for true stability that appears impossible to attain, and opens a dialogue on the fragile nature of human authority, interaction, and justice in a postcolonial society.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the Problems of Postcolonial Feasting

Penned in Anglo-Norman Britain nearly a hundred years after William the Conqueror took the British throne, the Welsh cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (hereafter, *HRB*) is identifiable as a work of imperialism, promoting a nascent sense of England and its environs as a unified nation.[60] J.S.P. Tatlock writes that "the imperialism of the *Historia* is unprecedented in any of the earlier or contemporary histories Geoffrey might have read and [indicates] a conscious attempt on Geoffrey's part […] to establish sound historical precedent for the imperialistic practices and ambitions of William the Conqueror and his successors."[61] James Noble concurs:

> Geoffrey was inviting his twelfth-century audience to see in Arthur at least the essence of those qualities that had put the Normans on the English throne in 1066 and that […] had made William the Conqueror, William Rufus and Henry I of England powerful forces to be reckoned with in the turbulent political arena of […] western Europe in general.[62]

And Michelle Warren further contends that "Geoffrey of Monmouth's *HRB* presents a particularly cogent example of the fantasy of empire and the ambivalence of colonial desire because it portrays the forgotten empire of a marginalized people in reaction to an

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[60] Portions of this section of the chapter have been adapted from chapter one of my master's thesis, "King of the Who? The Collective Unconscious and the Crafting of National Identity in the Medieval Arthurian Tradition" (Longwood University, 2009).

[61] Tatlock, J.S.P. *The Legendary History of the Kings of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Brittaniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950): p. 308. Print.

[62] Noble, James. "Patronage, Politics and the Figure of Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Laʒamon." *The Arthurian Yearbook II.* Keith Busby, Ed. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992. Pp. 159-178: 162. Print.

urgently present colonial dynamic"[63] and that "through postcolonial perspectives the *HRB* represents a history of colonial experience fraught with postcolonial anxieties."[64] In other words, this chronicle reflects not so much the postcolonial anxieties experienced by William and his retainers as those experienced by the peoples living in England and attempting to forge a cooperative identity in the wake of the Conquest. While Geoffrey does appear to admire the sophisticated nature of court life under Anglo-Norman rule as evidenced by his handling of Arthur's court at Caerleon, then, his primary purpose was not to applaud the positive qualities of Anglo-Norman rule, but to demonstrate the importance of a unified view of British culture and identity, one grounded in a pre-Norman and pre-Saxon past and which could through associations of both groups with the history of the island and with one another strengthen the tenuous ties being forged by Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon leaders in the present, post-Conquest fledgling nation. This desire to strengthen the associations between the two major political groups in post-Conquest England is grounded in a desire to ward off the threat of violence that is always inherently present within a postcolonial community.

Geoffrey's attempt to create a bridge between the nascent British nation's pre- and post-Conquest populations becomes most evident in the text during Arthur's coronation feast, a scene in which both Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman postcolonial concerns are inscribed within the description of events. Arthur's coronation feast in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* betrays both Geoffrey's wish to unify his audience through a

[63] Michelle R. Warren, "Making Contact: Postcolonial Perspectives Through Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Historia regum Brittanie,'" in *Arthuriana* 8.4 (1998): pp. 115-134: 116. JSTOR. 2 July 2015. Web.
[64] Michelle R. Warren, "Making Contact,"pg, 131.

carefully-constructed, shared British past embodied in the figure of Arthur, and his anxiety over the rising tensions between the reigning Anglo-Norman monarchs and the pre-Conquest populations of England now subordinate to their unfamiliar ways of ruling. Held in the wake of Arthur's triumphant, violent besting of the many native groups—among them the Saxons, Picts, Scots, and Irish—and as a celebration of his achievements against them, featuring an uneasy blend of Saxon and Briton customs obtained through conquest and assimilation, and interrupted by the envoy from the Roman emperor Lucius demanding Arthur pay tribute to Rome, this feast both creates unity among those present to enjoy it and points to those excluded as continuous threats to this newly-formed community. Lucius's demands on behalf of Rome suggest that further violence will be necessary in order to preserve Arthur's nascent empire.

In Geoffrey's hands, Arthur's coronation feast may be intended as a unifying celebratory event, but just under its surface and represented at the feast, itself lurk many violent possibilities—possibilities that come to be swiftly realized in the aftermath of Arthur's death, when the overall narrative slides into chaos in the wake of his reign. All of the promises signified by this coronation feast concerning postcolonial peace and prosperity fall short without Arthur's presence as its figurehead; as I will show, this reality, far from being sudden and unexpected, in fact is signposted throughout this scene. Geoffrey's audience, comprised of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman nobles in a court undergoing its own turbulent shift in rulership, can hardly have failed to notice and be concerned about the ultimately violent subtext of this otherwise-splendid moment in Arthur's reign, because it reflected their own reality in many ways, particularly as regards

the merging of their often strikingly different court customs. In turn, audiences for later adaptations of the *HRB* are treated to updated versions of this subtext, with each new generation facing slightly different but no less concerning possible and actual crises as the shifting socio-political groups for which the Arthurian texts served important propagandist functions struggled towards nationhood throughout the medieval period. Close reading the feast of Whitsun passage through a postcolonial lens offers us a better understanding of the violence and uncertainty of a nascent postcolonial nation which the Arthurian portion of the chronicle was meant to examine—and, perhaps, to stave off by serving as a warning to astute readers.[65] Although it is not true of all chroniclers, the great attention he gives to the pitfalls of cultural assimilation in the Arthurian section of the *HRB* suggests that Geoffrey was especially preoccupied with calling attention to them in order to encourage their prevention in his own time.

Geoffrey opens the scene by describing how Arthur, pleased with his victory against the Normans who were his last surviving enemies in what is now known as

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[65] Although as Simon Gaunt points out in his 2009 literature review, “Can the Middle Ages Be Postcolonial?” the application of a theory intended to refer to “historical circumstances and cultures that emerged only after the disintegration of the global empires that were formed in the modern period by European powers such as England, France and Spain” (160) has proved controversial throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, in the twenty-first century we are seeing more wide-ranging application of postcolonial theory to medieval studies, and more acceptance for this practice. *Comparative Literature* 61.2 (2009), pp. 160-176. For the purposes of this study, work by scholars like Michelle Warren (“Making Contact”; see n. 55 above) and Michael Wenthe,“Beyond British Boundaries in the *Historium Regum Britanniae*,” in *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 95-155 has proven that postcolonial approaches to Geoffrey’s chronicle are not only a viable approach, but in fact at times an essential one, for understanding how the text might have interacted with the culture(s) that produced it.

Northern Europe, determines to hold a feast to celebrate the achievement and solidify his position over the conquered kings and nobles:

> Cum igitur sollempnitas Pentecostes aduenire inciperet, post tantum triumphum maxima laeticia fluctuans Arturus affectauit curiam ilico tenere regnique diadema capiti suo imponere, reges etiam et duces sibi subditos ad ipsam festiuitatem conuocare, ut et illam uenerabiliter celebraret et inter procures suos firmissimam pacem renouaret. (156. 306-310)[66]

> [Now that the feast of Whitsun was imminent, Arthur, delighted at his great triumph, decided to hold court immediately, wearing the royal crown upon his head, and summoned the kings and dukes subject to him to the same ceremony, to mark it solemnly and to establish lasting peace among his nobles.]

This coronation feast differs substantially from the coronations that occurred prior to the reigns of Uther and, before him, Aurelius and Vortigern, and therefore represents an approach to crowning and celebrating the new king that is unfamiliar to the tribes that pre-date these relative newcomers to the realm. To understand how Arthur's reign differs from previous ones and therefore, how the feast at Whitsun can be read as a postcolonial snapshot of residual cultural anxieties, some discussion of the earlier reigns and the events leading up to this feast is required. Of Constantinus, the king who ruled before the newcomers, we are told that he is not crowned after defeating all of his enemies in battle, but rather offered as an option for the besieged Britons upon their supplications to Rome for assistance. He is then chosen by acclaim, arrives in Britain and helps the Britons turn

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[66] All citations from *The* History *of the Kings of Britain* come from the 2007 Boydell Press edition by Michael D. Reeve and translated by Neil Wright and appear in the original Latin with Wright's English translation following.

back the barbarians, and is elected to the position of King, approved by those over whom he will now reign:

> Exin confluxerunt undique Britones prius disperse et facta infra Silcestriam contione erexerunt Constantinum in regem regnique diadema capiti suo imposuerunt. Dederunt etiam ei coniugem ex nobili genere Romanorum ortam, quam Guithelinus aechiepiscopus educauerat. (93. 136-140)

> [Then the Britons who have been dispersed assembled from all directions to hold a meeting at Silchester, where they made Constantinus king and placed the island's crown upon his head. As a wife they gave him a woman of noble Roman descent, who had been brought up by archbishop Guithelinus.]

Constantinus, offered to and accepted by the Britons as a choice for King, is not their conqueror; he does not call for a feast to celebrate his triumphs over the island peoples and seal his rule over them, but rather celebrates with them their victory against the barbarians. He marries a woman of Roman descent who has been raised among the people of the realm, an act of goodwill and alliance, and although certainly peace cannot be said to have been achieved, given the uprisings that occur in the wake of his death, at the same time his rule does not constitute one in which his conquering of the people requires a substantial altering of native culture. His appointment to the throne, and subsequent reign, are comfortable and familiar to the people who call him king. They follow the pattern of kingship in pre-Arthurian Britain established by Geoffrey throughout the early books of the *HRB*.

This is not the case with Arthur, who comes to a throne that has been contentiously fought over through the brief and violent reigns of several kings from differing tribes, including his own father. Careful political and diplomatic work is

required on Arthur's part in order to establish his own right to rule this nation he has begun to rebuild—or, perhaps more accurately, to revise by incorporating the new lands and peoples he has acquired through conquest. He begins, as most wise conquerors do, by setting into positions of power those of his nobles whom he most trusts to hold their lands against further attack. Over the next twelve years, Arthur "inuitatis probissimis quibisque ex longe positis regnis, coepit familiam suam augmentare tantamque faceciam in domo sua habere ita up aemulationem longe manentibus populis ingereret" (154.225-227) [invited all the best men from far-off kingdoms and conducted his court with such charm that he was envied by distant nations], setting a style of rule so popular that "nobilissimus quisque incitatus nichili pendebat se nisi sese siue in induendo aiue in arma ferendo ad modum militum Arturi haberet" (154. 227-229) [all the noblest were stirred to count themselves as worthless if they were not dressed or armed in the manner of Arthur's knights]. With these actions, we can begin to understand the postcolonial nature of Arthur's rule; how through his own authority, and the authority of those he has appointed to oversee his acquired lands, he is able to influence external visual markers of identity like clothing and armor: if nobles did not dress and arm themselves like Arthurian knights, then they were viewed as lesser figures, clearly not belonging to the elite of this new society. This kind of cultural influence is crucial in the development of a postcolonial nation. The persuasion of natives to adopt the conquering group's physical appearance insofar as they are able through the pressure to conform socially in order to preserve or acquire influence becomes an act of assimilation showing their support for

the new ruler and his customs.[67] However, while Geoffrey classifies Arthur's nascent rule as a popular one and described the successful campaign to bring the conquered folk under his banner, he also points out that Arthur is making enemies right alongside new allies:

> Denique, fama largitatis atque probitatus illius per extremos mundi cardines diuulgata, reges transmarinorum regnorum nimius inuadebat timor ne inquietatione wius oppressi nations sibi subditas amitterent (154. 229-232)
>
> [As his reputation for generosity and excellence spread to the farthest corners of the world, kings of nations overseas became very frightened that he would attack and deprive them of their subjects.]

Arthur's response to the news that these kings are fortifying their lands against an attack on his part is the response of a successful conquering figure with imperial aims; he "extollens se quia cunctis timor erat, totam Europam sibi subdere effectat" (154. 234-235) [exulted at being universally feared and decided to conquer all Europe]. It is significant that he waits until his reign in the British Isles has been solidified and approved by popular emulation of the customs and manner of dress of the Britons prior to embarking upon further colonial and imperial ventures. Those people who have chosen to accept and embrace his reign can now bring his influence and authority to other lands not merely by force—although, at least at first, this is necessary to overthrow the existing

[67] In "England's First Entry into Europe," a 1966 lecture reprinted as an essay in *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 135-157, R.W. Southern maps how this phenomenon of cultural assimilation played out after William I's conquest of England. This idea of assimilation as an essential component in establishing postcolonial rule is a central concept in postcolonial studies. As Gavri Viswarthan notes, "cultural assimilation [is…] the most effective form of political action […] cultural domination works by consent and often precedes conquests by force." "Currying Favor: The Politics of British Educational and Cultural Policy in India, 1813-1854," in *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 85-104.

rulers of the other lands--but also, for example, by the influence of material culture, or through intermarriage. This is a form of cultural violence that seeks to overthrow and replace the native cultures with an overarching Arthurian one, creating a unified postcolonial nation that, ultimately, can be classified as imperial in nature, given its broad geographical margins.[68] Unlike the brute violence of battles in war, such cultural violence is unobtrusive, yet is essential to maintaining the newly-conquered lands. Without the popular assimilation of British cultural mores and social values, the constant threat that a conquered land will revert to its own customs and, ultimately, rebel and seek to re-establish its own rule once again is far greater, and Arthur knows this; it is why he chooses to host the Whitsun feast where he does, in the manner in which he does. It is also why re-examining the Whitsun feast in the Arthurian section of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* through a postcolonial lens that is focused on the cultural violence that underwrites the event uncovers both the cultural differences that are inscribed within the scene and the lurking issues that will plague Arthur's reign and, ultimately, lead to its

[68] Although many medieval scholars follow Benedict Anderson in the idea that colonialism is linked to nation and that the term nation as such cannot be applied to medieval studies, in fact, the terms "colonial," "nation," and "imperialism" in their broadest sense are the best ones to describe what Geoffrey of Monmouth shows Arthur as achieving in this section of the *HRB*. I align my own thinking on this matter with that of scholars like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen ("Midcolonial," in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*), Joshua Prawer, whose *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem: European Colonization in the Middle Ages* makes a compelling argument for medieval colonial activity which predates Anderson's *Imagined Communities* by nearly a decade but is not accounted for in Anderson's arguments against medieval nationhood, Katherine Biddick (endnote 9 in *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* and endnote 2 in "The ABC of Ptolemy: Mapping the World With the Alphabet" in *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*), Kathleen Davis, "National Writing in the Ninth Century: A Reminder for Postcolonial Thinking About the Nation" in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28:3), and perhaps most essentially, Thorlac Turville-Petre (*England, the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340*). These scholars show through their work that terms like "colonial," "nation," and "imperialism" are often too rigidly employed and can be fruitfully, if carefully, applied to medieval studies in order to contextualize the development of the pre-modern political and cultural systems that ultimately give rise to modern understandings of nation and empire.

downfall. This reading shows us clearly how the Arthurian portion of the *HRB* supports the imperialist agenda of the developing Anglo-Norman rulership by serving as a warning of the possible issues that arise in postcolonial societies.

Once Arthur determines to hold a feast at which he will host all of the kings and lords of the lands now under his reign, he seeks the advice of his counselors as to where that feast should be held. He is told to prepare the event at Caerleon, because "In Glamorgantia etenim super Oscam dluuium non longe a Sabrino mari amoeno situ locata, prae ceteris ciuitatibus diuitiarum copiis abundans tantae sollempnitati apta erat" (156. 312-314) [The superior wealth of Caerleon, admirably positioned on the river Usk not far from the mouth of the Severn in Glamorgan, made it the most suitable of all cities for such a ceremony]. It is interesting that the counselors choose Caerleon, rather than London, the seat of many another ruler's displays of authority and where, in fact, his father Uther held feast during his reign. This choice distances Arthur from historical precedent in order to associate him with an important metropolitan center that is not associated with any of the leaders before him, thus providing a fresh start and a new seat of power and prestige for a new Britain. Without the historical precedence of similar events haunting the feast, as would be the case in London, Arthur is more free to develop this occasion to meet his own vision rather than following the established feasting practices of his forebears.

The description next provided situates Caerleon not only as a metropolis worthy of a king of Arthur's stature but also and importantly as a symbolic geographical space

that ties together Britain and Rome in ways immediately apparent to visitors—the ideal location for a feast intended to bring the postcolonial communities together:

> Ex una namque parte praedictum nobile flumen iuxta eam fluebat, per quod transmarine reges et principes qui uenturi errant nauigio aduehi poterant. Ex alia uero parte pratis atque nemoribus uallata, regalibus praepollebat palaciis ita ut aureis tectorum fastigiis Romam imitaretur (156. 314-318)
>
> [On one side there flowed a noble river, on which could be brought by boat the kings and princes visiting from overseas. On the other, it was surrounded by meadows and woods, and so fine were its royal palaces that the gold that decked their roofs reminded one of Rome.]

From the perspective of the land's ability to provide sustenance for its population, Caerleon— next to a river, the source of fish, and meadows and woods, the sources of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and game—is ideally situated for preparing and offering a British feast. Whether or not the feasting ingredients come entirely, in part, or not at all from these environs the symbolic bounty of the land is apparent in its description.[69] The lush,

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[69] Although Geoffrey omits such details and the reader must infer them, it is clear that a reader contemporary to the writing of the *HRB* could be expected to make just such an inference; in fact, in his Anglo-Norman adaptation of Geoffrey's *HRB* for Eleanor of Aquitaine, Robert Wace develops this description to take account more precisely of the bounteous nature of the land surrounding Caerleon, writing:

Karliun dejuste Usche siet,
Un flum ki en Saverne chiet:
Cil ki d'altre terre veneient
Par cele eue venir poeient;
De l'une part ert la riviere,
De l'altre la forest pleniere.
Plenté I aveit de peissun
E grant plenté de veneisun;
Beles erent les praeries
E riches les guaaineries. (10211-10220)

life-supporting natural resources and man-made edifices at once imposingly new and reminiscent of Rome's Old World splendor form a heady combination of the ancient and the modern that impresses and provides assurance to visitors that Britain is a strong and wealthy nation, built on the solid foundations of both the God-given natural world and the storied Roman Empire and fully capable of sustaining itself. That visitors from overseas will arrive via boat, traveling down the river and thus viewing even more of Britain's natural landscape along the way, renders Caerleon an even more appropriate location for this feast because they are removed from their own inhabited spaces and brought to this new space, so that their literal movement serves as a symbolic gesture of the new order. When they arrive, they will join and mingle with that country's natives in Caerleon, to create a unified community surrounded on all sides by the country at the heart of the new nation. Because Caerleon has heretofore not served as the seat of such an event, this feast constitutes a new way of doing things, a new beginning for a new king's rule.

In a postcolonial reading of this occasion, beyond the potential for conflict that arises when a city used to business-as-usual must prepare for the arrival of the King and his nationally heterogenous entourage, it is important to consider the many opportunities

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[Caerleon lies on the Usk, a river flowing into the Severn; those coming from overseas could arrive on this river. On one side was the river, on the other the dense forest. *There was plenty of fish and a wealth of game; the meadows were lovely and the fields fertile*.] Judith Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut, A History of the British: Text and Translation* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1996), p. 257 (emphasis mine).

for the differences in custom of the myriad guests to cause tension that could erupt into violence at and following the feast. Arthur's guests include Caduallo Lauihr and Stater, the Kings of North and South Wales, Gillamirius, King of Ireland, Maluasius, king of Iceland, and Gerinus of Chartres, France, among many others. A brief comparison of the feasting customs of these countries provides context for the many differences in custom which, as Geoffrey shows, must be successfully negotiated in order to avoid conflict at the Whitsun feast. As we have already seen in the study of the *Second Branch of the Mabinogion* in chapter one, it was customary for men and women to dine together in medieval Welsh feasts, with everyone seated according to his and her social rank but served the same food. Evidence from the descriptions of feasting in the Irish *Book of Leinster* and *Yellow Book of Lecan* shows that particular cuts of meat were served to individuals according to their rank, necessitating inclusive dining in which nobles and lesser-ranked individuals ate together, that the lesser cuts of meat not go to waste; no mention is made as to whether women are present at the feast.[70] Icelandic feasts required all of the men attending to bring a pot of ale with them to pour in honor of the gods and the dead; men would also share a horn of ale to demonstrate their solidarity, and women were present at feasts.[71] In the French tradition, the king sat among the twelve peers of the realm and other invited guests included a judicious selection of nobles; women ate in

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[70] Finbar McCormick, "Ritual Feasting in Iron-Age Ireland," in *Relics of Old Decency: Archaeological Studies in Later Prehistory, A Feitschrift for Barry Raftery*, eds. Gabriel Cooney (Dublin: Wordwell, 2009) pp. 405-412: 405.

[71] Chapter sixteen of the *Saga of Hakon the Good* discusses the tradition of bringing ale to the feast and of drinking from the horn; *Clari's Saga* features a feast at which a woman presides (see chapter three in this study for a discussion of the feast in *Clari's Saga*.)

the same building but in the gallery, rather than the main hall.[72] The French also served each table according to its rank. At the feast at Whitsun depicted in the *HRB*, Arthur and the men go to one palace and Guinevere and the women to another, "antiquam namque consuetudinem Troaic seruantes Britones conseuerant mares cum maribus, mulieres cum mulieribus festiuos dies separatim celebrare" (157. 375-377) [for the Britons used to observe the old Trojan custom that men and women should celebrate feastdays separately]. Kauius and Beduerus [Kay and Bedivere], each aided by a thousand men, serve courses and drinks to the men, who are seated according to rank ["collocatis cunctis ut dignitas singulorum" 157.377-378]. This is another moment in which we are implicitly invited to experience the tensions at this event, since this is the first time all of these individuals have been brought together under Arthur's reign, and therefore where each was seated would determine his importance within the new hierarchy. Although it is not specified whether or not the courses are different for different ranks, we are told that the servers "in ciphis diuersorum generum multimoda pocula cum ipso distribuebant" (157.381-382) [offered various drinks of every sort in goblets]. This act is not specifically tied to rank. As this brief comparison shows, while certainly there are similarities there are also significant differences between the feasting customs of the countries, and in these differences are located the possibilities for violence to erupt; for instance, if someone adhering to one set of customs in so doing inadvertently transgresses against another's sense of pride. Multiplying this potential for conflict by the number of different regions

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[72] "Additional Ceremonies," *The Coronation Ceremony of the Kings of France: An Ancient Ritual in Continual Evolution.* Notre-Dame Cathedral of Reims. n.d. 28 June 2015. Web.

and countries represented at the feast of Whitsun, it is clear that Arthur has his work cut out for him in finding ways of bridging the cultural divides and creating a unified community. The possibilities for violence resulting from conflicting cultural understandings are a primary source of tension underpinning this scene.

To counter such potential violence by visually presenting the community as unified, Arthur turns again to sartorial convention as a means of bridging the cultural divides. As earlier, when we were told that those who wished to be considered part of Arthur's nascent British nation adopted the clothing styles of the Britons, Geoffrey tells us again here that in Britain, "quicumque uero famosus probitate miles in eadem erat unis coloris uestibus atque armis utebatur" and "facetae etiam mulieres, consimilia indumenta habentes" (157.387-389) [all its doughty knights wore clothes and armour of a single colour [and] its elegant ladies [were] similarly dressed]. There is no suggestion at this point in the narrative that any of the figures in attendance at the feast is not considered a Briton, which means that anyone present in this community is dressed similarly to the other guests, in a visual display of conformity and unity. Although at any point tensions could arise as a result of the guests' hailing from different countries, differing customs, and the concern over one's social ranking, the symbolic physical representation of affinity made through the choice to have all Britons wearing the same color clothing has the stabilizing effect of a uniform. Everyone can see him- and herself reflected sartorially by his and her comrades in the feasting hall, and therefore everyone can feel that he or she belongs to this community, regardless of the other, sometimes glaring, cultural differences implicitly present within the explicit descriptions of Arthur's guests and the

many countries from which they hail. However, it is important to remember that although this tactic pays off for Arthur, it is not a foregone conclusion that it will lead to a sense of community, and does not guarantee that the feast will remain a peaceful and celebratory space. Naming Arthur's guests and where they are from has the effect of emphasizing how many different countries Arthur has conquered, but in so doing also underscores their differences. With so many countries represented, some of them well-documented as historically antagonistic towards one another, the feast could be interrupted at any point and break into violence, so that the success of the event depends on everyone present making the choice to dress and behave as is expected at Arthur's court—that is, on everyone performing unification and community. After Arthur's death, the same nations that here are featured engaging in community become, again, mortal foes seeking sovereignty for themselves and protection from one another. This transition occurs immediately; Arthur no sooner "Constantino cognato suo et filio Cadoris ducis Cornubiae diadema Britanniae concessit" (XI. 178: 82-83) [handed over Britain's crown to his relative Constantinus, son of Cador Duke of Cornwall] than "insurrexerunt Saxones et duo filii Mordredi nec in eum praeualere quiuerunt" (XI. 179: 85-86) [the Saxons and Modred's two sons rose up against him [Constantinus] and fought many battles]. This insurrection precipitates a series of reigns characterized by civil war and the re-conquest of lands that had been unified at Arthur's Whitsun feast, including Malgo's subjection of Ireland, Iceland, Gotland, the Orkneys, Norway, and Denmark. (XI. 183: 118-121).

The feast of Whitsun in the Arthurian portion of the *HRB* is an apparent success that aids in creating a temporary sense of nationhood within its guests and, by extension,

the countries and regions they represent. Here is an important case in which violence at the feast, a challenge to Arthur's reign from within this particular newly-formed retinue, might have been productive—leading more quickly, perhaps during Arthur's lifetime, to resolutions of conflict arrived at by greater consensus which might have preserved the budding British nation. Staving off that violence through a surface-level sense of unity derived from sartorial similarities that do not necessarily achieve full cultural assimilation means that once Arthur is gone, those responsible for upholding the community represented by the feast must continue to make the choice to do so; that they do not make that choice but instead dissolve those bonds reveals the fragility of the union established at the feast and highlights its artificial nature. In the end, Britain falls to the violence hinted at throughout the text because it was never really unified to begin with—it just seemed so because of the strength of Arthur's rule and the desire to belong which he was able to instill within those he conquered, as is most clearly symbolized in the narrative by the feast of Whitsun.

John Gower's *Albinus and Rosemund*:
Pride Goeth Before a Fall—or, After "the" Fall

In Book One of his *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390), John Gower retells the story of Albinus and Rosemund that appears as one of the historical examples of violence at the feast in the Introduction to this study.[73] In Paul the Deacon's original recounting of the

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[73] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Book One, ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2000). All citations of the text will be taken from this edition.

story, the focus is on Rosemund's vengeful response to her husband's initial demand that she drink from the skull of her father at the banquet. In Gower's much expanded dream vision version of the story, the emphasis is on the actions of each person involved in the situation, and the way in which those actions become a chain of events leading to Gower's moral reflection on the price which excessive pride exacts from its practitioners. However, although Gower does not dwell overly much on it, Rosemund's gendered response as a daughter and wife to her husband's actions at the feast remains at the center of the narrative and, as with Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*,[74] this gendered dimension requires the reader to contend not only with the limitations of conduct codes at the feast, but also with the way that those limitations intersect with gender to create a problem ultimately only resolved through violent means. Whereas postcolonial issues that lead to violence in the *HRB* stem from the temporary nature of the cultural assimilation Arthur manages to achieve during his reign, Gower's postcolonial narrative focuses on treason in the marriage of the conquering king to a daughter of the conquered ruling family. [75]

In Gower's telling, Albinus and Rosemund begin with a happy marriage; "With hire he duelte, and to the beste / Thei love ech other wonder wel" (ll. 2488-2489).

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[74] See chapter three of this study for my discussion of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*.
[75] Andreea Boboc notes Gower's preoccupation with treason in the tales of "Achilles and Deidamia," "Jason and Medea," and "Prixus and Helle" found in Book V of the *Confessio Amantis*. His focus in these tales, as in "Albinus and Rosamund," is on the wife's ability to act against the king in intimate ways which circumvent the usual governing codes of conduct because of her proximity to him. According to Boboc, Gower "warns against treason that might come from inside the royal family" (136) in a time when treason was generally understood to derive from "a male perpetrator from outside the royal family" (135). Andreea Boboc, "Se-duction and Sovereign Power in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, eds. Elizabeth Hutton, John Hines, and Robert F. Yeager (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 126-138. I argue that in the case of Albinus and Rosamund, that proximity is double dangerous to the king because of its postcolonial dimension. The wife's first loyalty is to her own family.

However, Venus—Fortuna's twin in the medieval tradition, whose role it is to send lovers in and out of love according to the turn of the wheel—then turns her wheel when they are at the height of their love, ensuring its end[76]:

> But sche which kepth the blinde whel,
> Venus, whan thei be most above,
> In al the hoteste of here love,
> Hire whiel sche torneth, and thei felle
> In the manere as I schal telle. (ll. 2490-2495)

While in the original version of this story as it is related in the *Historia Langobardum* Paul the Deacon places the blame for Albinus's death squarely on Rosamund ("After [King Alboin] had ruled in Italy three years and six months, he was slain *by the treachery of his wife*"),[77] Gower seems to take great pains to ensure that his readers know that Rosamund is not entirely to blame. Indeed, she might not be responsible for her choices at all, given Venus's great power over lovers and the inexorable nature of Fortune's Wheel in medieval culture.[78] However, this change in the way that the story's

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[76] Barry Windeatt explores the literary development of Venus throughout the medieval period in "Afterlives: The Fabulous History of Venus," in *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), pp. 262-278; Gower's iteration of Venus is discussed on page 274.
[77] *Historia Langobardum*, III.30. Emphasis mine.
[78] Developing out of a longstanding Classical tradition, the earliest medieval descriptions of Fortune and her wheel are found in Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophae* (*Consolation of Philosophy)*, 523 CE. Boethius writes of Fortune as a pitiless and unpredictable force: "When Fortune turns her wheel with her proud right hand, she is as unpredictable as the flooding Euripus; at one moment she fiercely tears down mighty kings, at the next the hypocrite exalts the humble captive. She neither hears nor cares about the tears of those in misery; with a hard heart she laughs at the pain she causes. This is the way she amuses herself; this is the way she shows her power. She shows her servants the marvel of a man despairing and happy within a single hour." *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Green and ed. Douglas C. Langston (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 18. The standard discussion of the development of Fortune and her wheel as a literary *topos* is Howard Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927).

dénouement comes about does not render Rosemund's actions in Gower's version any less treacherous and, indeed, treasonous. Rather, the revision further complicates the already difficult situation between Albinus and Rosemund by adding the concept of an unavoidable fall of fortune to the factors leading to their unhappy outcome.

If, indeed, the deadly results of the turn of the wheel were unavoidable in nature, it would negate my claim that the violence in this text stems from the characters' choices concerning how to react to behavior that falls outside of the regulatory conduct codes. However, the wheel simply dictates the fall from grace; it does not dictate the circumstances of that fall; and given Gower's preoccupation with questions of morality, it might be easiest and wisest to read this moment as a fall from fortune that permits, rather than which leads to, the events that follow. Thus, the actions of Albinus and Rosemund are not preordained, but rather are intentional choices made in response to their understanding of each given situation in the series of events and, as I show below, the lack of established regulatory measures for such situations means that the couple must respond in individual fashion—in Rosemund's case, through a response tied intimately to her biological sex. It is not the turn of Fortune's Wheel that causes her violent response, but the intersection between violence and gender forged by a limited code of etiquette at the feast that provides no just means for a wife to respond to a husband and lord who oversteps the bounds of decency. This intersection of violence and female gender (or, more specifically, sex) manifests as Rosemund's desire for revenge upon her husband, and her use of her body's sexuality to exact it. That Gower uses this intersection of violence and biological sex in service of a lesson on the dangers of excessive pride shows

that he views this situation as one which could have been prevented if only one of the figures involved in this altercation had set aside the desire to "win" and instead engaged the situation through communication and negotiation. Importantly, this view suggests that female violence is not truly gendered; it stems from the pride and the desire to prevail in an antagonistic situation which characterize all occasions of human violence, although the ways in which that violence is performed are—at least in this case—intimately tied to Rosemund's sex. The choice to include Venus and Fortune's wheel, then, while initially seeming to absolve the human figures of responsibility by rendering the situation unavoidable, in fact underscores their personal responsibility for their actions, so that the story becomes an indictment of the sin of pride in everyone involved. This sin of pride is directly related to the biblical Fall, in the sense that every sin is related to the Fall. Ultimately, I suggest, the tragic end of Albinus and Rosemund is not brought about by falling out of favor with Fate, so much as by the Fall caused by Eve and manifested in the actions of Rosemund as a sinful woman who brings about the downfall of men. It is important to recognize that although Paul the Deacon's original version of the story does make explicit mention of the evil nature of Rosemund's actions, as well as her diminished status as a woman in relation to her husband the king (Albion perishes at "*the treachery* of his wife" and "*by the scheme* of *one little woman*")[79] Gower does not retain this narrative tone in the *Confessio Amantis*; rather, Rosemund's actions are

[79] *Historia Langobardum*, III.30. Emphasis mine.

presented without comment for the reader to judge.[80] In short, Rosemund's lesser and sinful role as a woman does not have to be explicitly underscored through narrative intervention on his part as it is in Paul the Deacon's version, because Gower expected his audience to automatically make that assumption. Rather, Gower focuses on how Rosemund uses her sexuality to achieve her violent revenge upon her husband.

Although most of Book Two of the *Historia Langobardorum* is devoted to descriptions of his conquests throughout Italy Gower does not include this information or go into much detail about why, after "long time in reste / With hir [Rosemund] he duelte," Albinus decides to hold a feast so his wife can meet the lords in his service (ll. 2487-2488). In the *Historia Langobardorum* which serves as the basis for the story of Albinus and Rosemund the banquet initiating the events leading to their deaths is presented without comment as part of the narrative, and seems to be held for no particular reason. However, in Gower's retelling the feast is characterized as an event held in honor of Albinus's victories, and there are similarities between Gower's description of Albinus prior to the feast and that of King Arthur prior to holding the Pentecost feast in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* which suggest that having been employed in the development of his holdings, Albinus now wishes to show them off in pomp and splendor, as Arthur did. Gower writes that:

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[80] Although clearly with the expectation that his audiences will read her as a woman whose willful and wanton actions catalyze their pride, leading to the demise of both her husband and his butler. Her actions also mirror those of the later figures like Medea and Yno whom Gower characterizes as explicitly treasonous, according to Boboc. See n. 16 above.

> This king [Albinus], which stod in al his welthe
> Of pes, of worschipe, and of helthe,
> And felte him on no side grieved,
> As he that hath his world achieved,
> Tho thoughte he wolde a feste make (2495-2499)

This description is comparable to Geoffrey of Monmouth's description of Arthur's decision to hold a feast following his own conquering and colonial activities:

> […] post tantum triumphum maxima laeticia fluctuans Arturus affectauit curiam ilico tenere regnique diadema capiti suo imponere, reges etiam et duces sibi subditos ad ipsam festiuitatem conuocare, ut et illam uenerabiliter celebraret et inter procures suos firmissimam pacem renouaret.[81]

> [[…] Arthur, delighted at his great triumph, decided to hold court immediately, wearing the royal crown upon his head, and summoned the kings and dukes subject to him to the same ceremony, to mark it solemnly and to establish lasting peace among his nobles.]

Having established peace and prosperity in his kingdom like Arthur, Albinus holds a great celebration, beginning with a joust and tournament and culminating in the feast.[82]

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[81] Reeve and Wright, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 156. 306-310.

[82] Ll. 2504-2519:

> He let ordeine, and sende anon
> Be lettres and be messagiers,
> And warned alle hise officiers
> That every thing be wel arraied:
> The grete stiedes were assaied
> For jousting and for tornement,
>
> And many a perled garnement
> Embroudred was agein the dai.
> The lords in here beste arrai
> Be comen ate time set:
> On jousteth wel, an other bet,
> And otherwile thei torneie,
> And thus thei casten care aweie

At the feast, Gower informs us, Albinus is so affected by the merriment and conversation of the other men that "of the merthe which thei made / the king himself began to glade / Withinne his herte and tok a pride"(ll. 2531-2533). This pride manifests itself in grisly fashion; he orders the cup made of his wife's father's skull to be fetched. Then,

> […] upon his word
> This skulle is fet and wyn therinne,
> Whereof he bad his wif beginne:
> 'Drink with thi fader, Dame,' he seide.
> And sche to his biddinge obeide,
> And tok the skulle, and what hire liste
> Sche drank, as sche which nothing wiste
> What cuppe it was […] (ll. 2548-2555)

Because the drinking from this cup at the feast is intended as a public display of his victory over a defeated rival and subsequent winning of his wife's hand in marriage, which is not immediately evident to anyone who does not know what the cup is made of, Albinus reveals the dark secret:

> […]   thane al oute
> The kyng in audience aboute
> Hath told it was hir fader skulle,
> So that the lords knowe schulle
> Of hid bataille a soth witnesse,
> And made avant thurgh what prouesse

> And token lustes upon honde.
> And after, thou schalt understonde,
> To mete into the kings halle
> Thei come, as thei be beden alle…

He hath his wyves love wonne,
Which of the skulle hath so begonne. (ll. 2555-2562)

Predictably, upon learning that the cup she has drunk from is made of her father's skull Rosemund falls ill, and as soon as the feast ends she goes to her chamber. Once there, she complains to her maid about her husband's actions, and her maid agrees to help her seek revenge upon him, they:

[…] Felle in covenant,
That thei acorden ate laste,
With suche wiles as thei caste
That thei wol gete of here accord
Some orped knight to sle this lorde (11. 2586-2590)

Although it is not specifically stated, Gower seems to be juxtaposing Albinus's (legitimate) masculine violence against a military and political rival with Rosemund's (illegitimate) feminine violence against her husband and king. While Albinus's actions in killing Rosemund's father and then turning his head into a drinking vessel to commemorate that victory are gruesome, they do not constitute a breach of his position: as a rival figure of authority in a time of war between their kingdoms, his violent actions, while perhaps reprehensible, are governed by the dictates of war. Rosemund, on the other hand, here is plotting with her maid to kill her husband—a breach of her position as wife and queen that is not only an immoral act, but also one that constitutes treason. Their approach to this violent plan is a gendered one; they intend to use their sexuality to manipulate and coerce another knight into slaying the king. The maid, Glodeside, has been carrying on a secret dalliance with the king's butler, Helmege; Rosemund will take

her place in her bed and trick Helmege into sleeping with her, thus trapping him into either being exposed for his treason in sleeping with the king-s wife—a death sentence—or agreeing to slay the king for her. Rosemund therefore enters into a strongly gendered transaction in order to achieve her goal, proffering a sexual act in exchange for a violent one.

One underlying reason for this approach, never stated outright but perhaps implicitly understood, is that Rosemund and her maid are women, and in the popular medieval literary tradition that included the writings of theologians like Isidore of Seville and Tertullian and of satirists like Marbod of Rennes and Jean de Meun, women use their sexuality and innate sinfulness to bring about the downfall of men.[83] However, a second implicit reason lies in the fact that under normal rules governing behavior at a feast, Rosemund has no recourse against Albinus's actions. There is no question of this being a legal issue, as Albinus has broken no laws, and so there is no possibility of redress through the justice system, even if Rosemund were allowed to bring charges against Albinus in court.[84] Further, Albinus has not violated any rules of etiquette in his offering

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[83] See, for instance, Isidore of Seville, "from *Etymologies*" (pp. 43-45); Tertullian, "From *The Appearance of Women*" (pp. 50-57); Marbod of Rennes, "The Femme Fatale" (pp. 100-102); and Jean de Meun, "From *The Romance of the Rose* (pp. 148-165), all located in Alcuin Blamires, Ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[84] Married women in medieval England were highly restricted in terms of legal rights; according to William Blackstone writing his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* in the eighteenth century, "the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least it is incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything." (442). The Latin phrase *Baron et feme erunt animae duae et carne una* [husband and wife were two spirits in one body] applied to legal situations involving married couples throughout the medieval period, so that even had Albinus's actions fallen foul of the law, Rosemund would not have been able to bring a lawsuit against him. For further discussion of medieval women and the law, see Emma Hawkes, "'[S]he will … protect and defend her rights boldly by law and reason … ': Women's Knowledge of Common Law and Equity

of the cup to his wife, so that although his actions are certainly despicable, they are not a breach of conduct. For her part, Rosemund desires revenge against her husband for what he has done to her father, but as a woman she is not permitted to behave according to the rules governing warfare, and the rules of etiquette governing behavior within the hall offer no recourse for situations in which a violence done to someone outside of the hall and within the arena of war is brought to light at a feast.[85] Further, she cannot simply ask one of her husband's loyal knights to kill him on her behalf. With no legally-sanctioned response available to her, Rosemund turns to trickery and blackmail—a solution that disregards both the governing systems of society and the normal regulations of womanly behavior. In doing so, Rosemund is systematically forced into the biblically-conceived role of the inherently sinful woman whose actions bring about men's demise by a legal and social structure that disenfranchises her and denies her the right to avenge her family.

While in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and Trevet's version of the Albinus and Rosemund story (which I discuss in chapter three) the narrator of the text makes it a point to underscore this inherently wicked nature of the woman at the center of the plot, in the case of Gower's iteration of Rosemund no such commentary occurs. Gower's intentional omission of the original commentary pointing out Rosemund's treacherous nature makes it possible to interpret the situation as being less about her inherent sinfulness as a woman, and more about the limitations of recourse at her disposal. Unlike men, who have

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Courts in Late-Medieval England," in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noël James Menuge ((Boydell and Brewer, 2000), pp. 145-161.

[85] Although, as I show in my discussion of the blood feast at Roskilde in the Introduction to this study and of the Old English *Fight at Finnsburg* in chapter one, the violence of the battlefield could be and often was brought into the feasting hall in flagrant violation of the conduct codes governing proper behavior at such an event.

the ability to enact revenge upon one another physically through violent means, as a queen she falls outside of those codes of behavior. To avenge her father, Rosemund has to operate outside of the established systems of governance, and the only tool at her disposal in such a situation is her ability to influence someone else to do her bidding—in this case, through sex and blackmail. While I do not directly argue that Gower intended for the situation to be read in this way, the fact that a woman has no other recourse open to her in such situations underscores the deeply patriarchal nature of the laws and codes governing behavior in Judeo-Christian societies, and the ways in which those traditions limit women to two roles: either the virtuous wife whose morally upright behavior supports her husband's doings and wins them both honor, or the morally depraved woman whose behavior leads to demise and ruin. Either Rosemund simply accepts her husband's right to humiliate her and her father's memory by forcing her to drink from his skull at the feast, or she transgresses against all of the accepted codes of behavior to enact revenge upon him, whereas had she been a man in the same situation, an openly violent response would have been acceptable and, indeed, almost required, in answer to the insult upon one's house.

And so, Rosemund turns to sex and blackmail, but importantly, she is not alone in her actions: her maid, Glodeside, is an equally active participant in the scheme and, in fact, its initiator. Taking advantage of Helmege's obvious desire for her, she "to make him more assote, / Hire love granteth, and be nyhte /they schape how thei togedre nyghte / abedde meete" (2596-2599). Having thus enticed him into agreeing to a tryst, she seals the deal: "and don it was this same nyht" (2599-2600). Then, "the qwene hirself the nyht

secounde / wente in her stede, and there hath founde / A chambre derk withoute liht, / And goth to bedde to this knyht" (2601-2604). The significance of Glodeside's actions in this scene is twofold. First, she sacrifices her virtue to the needs of her lady, willingly engaging in sexual intercourse in order to trap Helmege into the dalliance necessary to permit them to blackmail him into doing their bidding. In order to do this, she must determine which is the greater sin: that of Albinus in humiliating and dishonoring his wife through his actions, or that of the trickery and fornication required for Glodeside to aid Rosemund in avenging that dishonor. When she chooses the second, she also chooses a third sin: that of aiding in Rosemund's own sin of trickery and fornication. Because she is aware of the intended outcome of those sins, a fourth and even worse sin is added to the roster: aiding in Albinus's murder. Therefore, the fact that she willingly takes this second path speaks to the deep sense of loyalty Glodeside feels for Rosemund, but also and importantly to the sense of solidarity these women feel against Albinus. What he has done is deserving of punishment, and no one will enact that punishment upon him if they do not take action, themselves, to make sure it comes about. Their means of achieving revenge fall outside of the accepted legal and social structures, exposing the fissures in the patriarchal system that fails to take into account the frailty of marriage bonds in relation to those of blood kinship in a postcolonial society.

Glodeside appears to believe that the end justifies the means when it comes to her choice to aid Rosemund in the plan to blackmail Helmege. In order to believe this, she must also believe that there is no other recourse open to them to ensure that Albinus is properly repaid for Rosemund's dishonor and humiliation. This can only be the case if

the governing codes by which they live make no provision for his punishment. Glodeside's choice to aid Rosemund in blackmailing Helmege provides a concrete example of how women in such situations fall outside of the normal systems of governance and must make their own forms of justice. Her alliance with Rosemund also exposes the ways in which a man's transgression of the moral code—in this case, Albinus's indulgence in the deadly sin of excessive pride—can force a woman to respond in kind, as in Rosemund's and Glodeside's engagement in wrath and lust (both physical, and in terms of their desire for revenge). Here, we have almost a reverse instance of The Fall, in that Albinus's actions tempt Rosemund into going against God's rule; vice perpetuates vice, and "pride goeth before a fall"—or, in this case, pride goeth before *the* fall. Focused as he is on Albinus's excessive pride as the catalyst for these events, and having rewritten Rosemund's blackmailing of Helmege as a co-conspiracy with her maid and with no commentary on the evil nature of their actions, Gower almost seems to court this interpretation, which is very different from that suggested in Paul the Deacon's chronicle version. There, the emphasis is on Rosemund's treachery. By comparison, Gower's dream vision converts the more straightforward treason of the chronicle into a nuanced look at human morality.

Once she has tricked him into having sexual intercourse with her, Rosemund is swift to apprise Helmege of his plight; they are still in bed together when she announces to him:

> Helmege, I am thi qwene,
> Now schal thi love wel be sene
> Of that thou hast thi wille wrought:
> Or it schal sore ben aboght,
> Or thou schalt worche as I thee seie. (2611-2615)

I find it significant that, although she has tricked him into this situation, Rosemund offers Helmege a choice in his response to it; either he can pay for what he has done, or he can do her bidding and escape punishment for it. Beyond being merely a straightforward act of blackmail, this could be read as evidence of a more compassionate nature, or a greater sense of justice, in Rosemund than her husband possesses; having placed Helmege in a bad situation she does not abandon him to deal with it on his own, but offers him options for how it will play out. Gower appears to be pushing against traditional readings of women as inherently immoral by suggesting that moral justice in this case lies outside of masculine-dominated codes of conduct and warfare, and is located rather in the illegitimate margins of such governing codes where women must work to redress social and legal wrongs. Although she is controlling the situation, Rosemund still acknowledges Helmege's personal agency in the matter, something that Albinus failed to do when he controlled her behavior at the feast. In divulging all of the available information to Helmege, where she herself was denied full knowledge of the situation by Albion, Rosemund displays a sense of fairness and a recognition that people must be given a choice in their fate that seems not to be accounted for within the systems of governance she has chosen to bypass. However, also understanding that men act in their best interests, she adds that "if thou wolt be such a weie / Do my pleasance and holde it stille, / For evere I schal ben at thi wille, / Bothe I and al myn heritage" (2616-2619). In other

words, he has a choice; but if he makes the choice to do what she asks and keep silent about it, he will be rewarded with her devotion and all of the riches at her disposal, while doing the right thing and admitting his actions will result in certain punishment—in this case, since fornication with the queen by any man other than the king is an act of treason, certain death.

As with Glodeside's series of decisions, here again Gower, turns the situation into a series of choices with significant consequences. Helmege does not simply choose to do as Rosemund asks; rather, in the throes of passion following their lovemaking, he is incapable of refusing her: "Anon the wyld loves rage, / In which no ma him can governe, / Hath mad him that he can noght werne, / But fell al hol to hire assent" (2620-2623). Thus, Albinus's excessive pride leads to Rosemund's lust for revenge, and Rosemund's lust for revenge fuels her sexual encounter with Helmege, who becomes overwhelmed with the vice of passionate lust and agrees to commit murder. "And thus," Gower tells us, "the whiel is al miswent, / The which Fortune hath upon honde" (2624-2625). At the end of his iteration of this tale, following the king's death Helmege and Rosemund flee to Ravenna to seek asylum; but once the lord of Ravenna learns what they have done, he has them poisoned, an act which might best be construed as a symbolic representation of the way in which vice poisons us even unto death. Gower concludes this tale with a moral statement in three parts. The first third of the moral warns the tale's audience to beware of excessive pride in deeds of arms and renown:

> And al this made avant of Pride:
> Good is therefore a man to hide
> Hos oghne pris, for if he speke,
> He mai lihtiche his thonk tobreke.
> In armes lith non avantance
> To him which thenketh his name avance
> And be renomed of his dede. (2647-2653)

The second third of the moral to this tale warns to beware of excessive pride in seeking out love:

> And also who that thenketh to spede
> Of love, he mai him noght avaunte;
> For what man thilke vice haunte,
> His pourpos schal ful ofte faile. (2654-2657)

Finally, Gower concludes with a call to adhere to the morally correct attribute of humility in order to maintain one's honor in war and love:

> In armes he that wol travaile
> Or elles loves grace atteigne,
> His lose tunge he mot restreigne,
> Which berthe of his honour the keie. (2658-2661)

There is, then, a reason Pride is one of the deadly sins. Like the other deadly sins, excessive pride violates the overarching moral code at the heart of the Christian medieval society. By calling attention to one individual's better situation in relation to another's—as in the case of Albion in comparison to those he has conquered—pride rouses envy and wrath, which work together to bring about the destabilization of the community and often the demise of those at the heart of the situation. Gower has carefully developed this story to instruct its reader in the importance of avoiding unnecessary violent and deadly

outcomes like that of Albinus and Rosemund through the practice of humility. Humility, in turn, is at the heart of the major governing codes of the medieval period—the chivalric code focuses on the importance of a knight's demonstrating his prowess, but not boasting of it; likewise, the conduct codes place great emphasis on knowing and acting on the knowledge of one's place in social situations; and the moral code of the Christian faith that overarches all human activity in the western medieval world demands humility as the proper approach to worship and right living. Without humility—that is, without the willingness to act within, rather than above, these codes of human conduct in accordance with social expectations—a man, and by association his community, leaves himself open to the dangers of unchecked vice which must be purged, often by violent means, in order for stability to be re-established. For Gower, then, the moral code is the highest law, and human systems of governance are no match for what transpires when it is transgressed against. Yet, no transgression of God's law occurs with impunity, because it is inherently constructed to reward the virtuous and punish the sinner. As we see in the case of Albinus and Rosemund, sin begets sin, ultimately turning upon and destroying itself, and those who have engaged in it, in deadly fashion to purge the original infraction and restore order. Gower contrasts the limitations of a patriarchal legal system in governing a postcolonial society with the moral justice illegitimately deployed by the women. The violence that ensues from the feast in his version of the *Tale of Albinus and Rosemund* reveals that, at least for Gower, no human system of order and governance is a match for God's plan.

CHAPTER IV

WICKED WOMEN AT THE FEAST: MASSACRES AND CONSPIRACIES

Whereas when we think of violence and women in medieval literature generally what comes to mind is the violence performed upon women—rape, as in chivalric romances; execution and martyrdom, as in the women's saints' lives; and accidental death, as in times of war or during an unexpected skirmish, for instance—in feasting scenes women are rarely, if ever, the object of violence, but more often, its perpetrator.[86] As I pointed out in chapter one and the second half of chapter two, women at the medieval feast were supposed to play the important dual role of peace-weaver and patroness, ensuring that everyone is served according to rank and measure and aiding their husbands' political ambitions through gift-giving and other acts of patronage. However, like anyone else at a feast, women have the ability to step outside of their prescribed role and ritualistic performance in order to suit their own purposes, and in

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[86] The subject of women and violence in medieval literature has been covered extensively by scholarship over the past twenty years, in particular. Although by no means the first study to address the subject, the edited collection of essays in *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts*, edited by Anna Roberts (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998) signaled a new emphasis on feminist approaches to examining violence and women in medieval literature and culture. Since that point, scholars have examined among others the question of marital violence: Sarah Butler, *The Language of Abuse: Marital Violence in Late Medieval England* (Leiden, Brill, 2007) and Hannah Skoda, chapter six ("Domestic Violence") in *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France 1270-1330* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013); of the raping of women in chivalric romances: Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) and Amy N. Vines, "Invisible Women: Rape As A Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance," in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, eds. Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse and Cory Rushton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014); and women as collateral damage in chivalric activity (see my unpublished manuscript on violence against women in Arthurian romance, "Public Displays of Affliction: Women's Wounds in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*).

medieval narratives whenever a woman makes that choice, the result is nearly always a deadly altercation. The ways medieval writers present these moments, and what these moments signify for the narrative and for the reader of the narrative, serve as the subject of this chapter.

Specifically, in this chapter I examine two texts in which women are the perpetrators of violence at the feast, one canonical and one relatively obscure—Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and the Old Norse *Clarus's Saga,* respectively. Besides being relatively contemporary to one another, there are a number of affinities between these texts that recommend them for comparative study of the intersections of female gender and violence at the feast in medieval literature. Both narratives present a community and the individuals within it negotiating violence intentionally performed at a feast by the woman responsible for hosting it. Although the women's actions destabilize the community they are responsible for upholding, ultimately that destabilization and the violence that ensues is productive because it sheds light on the underlying social and political issues that prevent the community from moving forward as a stable unit; in the case both of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* (hereafter, *MOL Tale*) and *Clarus's Saga*, those issues derive from concerns over the spiritual, emotional, and political ramifications of interfaith and intercultural marriage alliances. I begin the chapter with a reading and analysis of Chaucer's better-known story of the massacre at the wedding feast of the Saracen Sultan to the Christian princess Custance, which has its origins in the chronicle of Paul the Deacon which I discussed in the Introduction to this study. In this story, the Sultan's mother conspires to have the wedding feast attendees massacred in

order to preserve her community from conversion to Christianity; however, as I show, this is also a bid to retain power in the face of her son's marriage and her inevitable displacement in authority by his wife. Custance finds herself exiled and alienated from her community and undergoes several tests of her own faith as a result of this massacre, although the end resolves happily for her and the communities she helps to build. In the lesser-known Old Norse romance *Clarus's Saga*, it is the Princess Serena who enacts the violence upon her foreign would-be suitor at the feast. However, the vengeance plot hatched to retaliate against her is masterminded by an Arabian scholar, so that although these stories are quite different as regards plot, and while Chaucer's *MOL Tale* features religious conflict prominently whereas religion hardly factors at all in *Clarus's Saga*, there is still a Northern European/ Middle Eastern tension present throughout both texts. Additionally, like Custance, following the violent feast Serena is exiled and undergoes a series of tests of her faith (in Clarus) which culminate in their happy reunion. Although in each of these texts the original community dissolves, the one taking its place promises a more stable social base to build from, so that violence, initially terrible and destructive, becomes a necessary constructive step toward a less-violent future.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*: Protecting the Status Quo

The majority of the available scholarship on Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* focuses on analysis and discussion of the figure of Custance; yet, while her nature as calumniated wife, model of exquisite piety, commodity, and by turns helpless or empowered woman are endlessly debated, Carolyn Dinshaw's 1989 argument that

Custance is a victim of the political system at play in the story comes closest to what I argue is the central issue surrounding her presentation in Chaucer's text.[87] Like the figure of Guinevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, which I discuss in chapter four, Chaucer's Custance is the cause of violence at court that is not of her own doing—that is, she is both a victim of and a catalyst for that violence. However, in the *Man of Law's Tale* that violence is on a significantly larger scale than the single death of a knight by poison, and has a far weightier purpose behind it. Whereas the poisoning of Sir Patryse in Malory's *Morte Darthur* is intended as retribution for a personal slight and constitutes a political act for personal gain, the massacre of the Christians in Chaucer's story is an effort on the part of the Sultaness to uphold her religion against all comers; to preserve the divide between Christians and Saracens, the religious status quo, at any cost, even the death of her own son. Thus, the Sultaness's behavior constitutes a religiously-motivated political act, and her violent deed might be perceived less as personal, because she is acting on behalf of and as a member of her religious community, rather than solely for the purposes of her own promotion and advancement. In fact, she can be read as seeking to protect her

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[87] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), chapter 3. Custance's role as calumniated wife is examined, for instance, in Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), pg. 296 and Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 211-212. Her role as model of female behavior and piety is discussed in Sheila Delany, "Womanliness in the Man of Law's Tale" in the *Chaucer Review*, 9.1 (1974), pp. 63-72 and in chapter eight of Priscilla Martin's *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), pp. 131-155. Her role as exchange commodity is theorized by Laurel L. Hendrix in "Pennannce Profytable: The Currency of Custance in Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale," in *Exemplaria* 6.1 (Spring 1994), pp. 141-166. She is viewed alternately as relatively powerful in Stephen Manning's "Chaucer's Constance, Pale and Passive," in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Edward Casta and Zacharias Thundy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp 13-23 and relatively helpless, in chapter seven of Margaret Halissy's *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp 13-23.

community by carrying out her own Crusade, forcibly converting what seems to be the Christians' ultimate (and unusually non-violent) victory against the Saracens into a violent, albeit local, dissolution of the Christian faith. Therefore, while Custance resembles Guinevere in her role as victim/catalyst of the violence at the feast, the scale, scope, and ultimate meaning of that violence is significantly different. The Sultaness's actions are borne from racial and religious origins, and the massacre is her final, desperate attempt to preserve the world she lives in from the encroaching threats of Christianity. Yet, paradoxically, the destructive violence she inflicts upon the community paves the way for myriad conversions on both an individual and a community level which ultimately lead to the peaceful intermingling of Christians and Saracens that the initial violent altercation was intended to prevent. Whereas in the first part of Chaucer's narrative the Christians and Saracens are separate communities, and at the wedding feast of the Sultan and Constance their fledgling unified community is destroyed, once the Sultaness is no longer in the picture Custance is able to exert her (Christian) pious and peace-loving influence on the various pagan and Saracen societies that she joins, helping to create a larger and stronger Christian community in the aftermath of the initial massacre. The Sultaness, herself, thus becomes catalyst for and victim of change borne of violence at the feast. In the *Man of Law's* tale, the Sultaness and Custance figures exemplify how female gender and violence can intersect at the feast along political and religious lines that eschew traditional representations of women in medieval texts as peace-weavers or inciters for a more complex presentation of women participating in and helping to shape the medieval community.

Women generally are not afforded much official authority in either the medieval Christian or Islamic traditions; historically, when women do wield significant influence on behalf of their religion it is primarily through indirect means, such as patronage.[88] In the *MOL Tale*, this tradition of power through patronage is ignored; the Sultaness wields power not through patronage in its traditional sense, but rather through her ability to influence the thinking of others by using her social position to prey on their fears of

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[88] The tradition of refusing entirely, or at the least limiting, women's power in the medieval Christian Church has its roots in Classical Roman and early works by Church fathers like Tertullian, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine, and has been traced by numerous scholars, most accessibly by Alcuin Blamires in the "Women Defamed" section of his 1992 anthology *Women Defamed and Women Defended* (Oxford, The Clarendon Press). Chapter two of R. Howard Bloch's *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, "Early Christianity and the Estheticization of Gender" provides a more comprehensive and specific study of the ways in which misogyny developed in the early medieval period (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 37-64. The 1988 essay collection *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalski, provides a more balanced context for considering women's roles in both public and private spheres throughout the period, and includes a number of important seminal essays on the subject of women's authority and influence, including women's religious influence, especially those by Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg ("Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500-1100") and Susan Groag Bell ("Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture"). In chapter two of *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* Joan Ferrante discusses women's influence on religious writings (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997), pp. 39-67. M.T. Clanchy remarks upon noblewomen's responsibility for directing their children in religious reading as a step towards literacy in *From Memory to Written Record* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1979 repr. 1993), pg. 112, and Rebecca Krug examines Margaret Beaufort as a case study of such activity in chapter two of *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). More recently, Erin Jordan examined monastic and secular charters to consider the power medieval noblewomen had through their acts of patronage (*Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2006). There are a number of essay collections that focus on women's roles and influence in religious women's communities; that edited by Diane Watt (Toronto, 1997) is especially strong and useful in terms of framing one's thinking concerning how women were able to wield religious authority and influence within a Christian framework that sought to limit their roles. For reading on the women's tradition of participation in and influence upon Islamic religion and culture, which is very similar to its Christian counterpart, see J.J. Smith and Y.Y. Haddad, "Eve: Islamic Image of Women" in *Women's Studies International Forum* 5 (1982): pp. 135-144; Maya Shatzmiller, "Aspects of Women's Participation in the Economic Life of Later Medieval Islam: Occupation and Mentalities" in *Arabica* 35 (1988), pp. 36-58; and the sections on "Women, Jewish" and "Women, Patrons" in Volume One of *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Joseph Meri (Routledge, 2006), pp. 861-865. *Women's Studies of the Christian and Islamic Traditions*, edited by Kari Borresen (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993) provides an essential overview of the convergences of the Christian and Islamic traditions, pointing out that they both adhere from a common Mediterranean culture.

eternal damnation. When the Sultaness is introduced into the story, it is immediately in terms of her response to her son's choice to marry Custance and convert to Christianity: "The mooder of the Sowdan, welle of vices, / Espied hath hir sones pleyn entente. / […] And right anon she for hir conseil sente" (ll. 323-326).[89] Rather than allow her son to draw them all into Christianity via conversion, she says, "oon avow to grete God I heete, / The lyf shal rather out of my body sterte / Or Makometes lawe out of myn herte" (ll. 334-336). The reason she gives for this vehement refusal to follow her son into conversion is grounded in how it will affect her people both on Earth and in the afterlife:

> What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe
> But thralldom to our bodies and penance,
> And afterward in helle to be drawe,
> For we reneyed Mahoun our creance? (ll 337-340)

In other words, the Sultaness believes that following her son into conversion to Christianity can only lead to earthly physical enslavement and otherworldly torment. To rectify the situation, she sets herself up as a figure of salvation for those who choose to heed her counsel and do her bidding: "lords, wol ye maken assurance, / As I shal seyn, assentynge to my loore, / And I shal make us sauf for everemoore" (ll. 341-343). The Sultaness here claims that she will assure their eternal safety by ensuring that they do not turn their backs on Muhammed and God.

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[89] All citations from the *Man of Law's Tale* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. Larry Benson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) and are cited parenthetically by line numbers.

To accomplish this role of savior, however, the Sultaness must abandon her earthly role as mother, as her plan will ultimately lead to the death of her own son, as well as of their Christian enemies. Through her actions, she flies in the face of tradition concerning a woman's role in religious matters. Essentially, she can be read in this moment as eschewing her role not only as mother, but also as woman, because she is performing an evangelical function that is forbidden to women in both the Christian and Islamic religious traditions. She provides a didactic treatise on the effects of conversion to Christianity upon her Islamic followers prior to offering them a means of avoiding the damnation she claims they will endure if they choose not to heed her words. Here is the first moment in the tale where the Sultaness's role develops in unexpected ways; as the Sultan's mother, she should wish to keep her son safe above all other desires according to the traditional role of a mother in a family, as a proper lady of the court she should constrain her political activity to patronage and supporting her lord's efforts to lead,[90] and on religious grounds, as a woman, she should avoid moments of what might be viewed as teaching or preaching.[91] Yet, because she disagrees fundamentally on religious grounds

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[90] See n. 7 above for resources concerning the woman's place in religious and political communities in medieval Christian and Islamic societies.

[91] This regulation has its origin in Scripture; in the New Testament "First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy" Paul writes: "(2.8) I will therefore that men pray in every place, lifting up pure hands without anger and contention. (2.9) In like manner women also in decent apparel: adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire. (2.10) But as it becometh women professing godliness with good works. (2.11) Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. (2.12) But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use any authority over the man, but to be in silence. *The Holy Bible* Douay-Rheims version, trans. fr. The Latin Vulgate, available on-line at Latin-Vulgate.com. Accessed 24 January 2016. In the Islamic tradition, Qu'ran 33, which discusses the correct behavior of the wives of the prophet including not leaving the home except in necessity and not speaking improperly to men, was interpreted by many early Islamic commentators as pertaining to all women; see for instance the writings of Al-Tabari (310) and of Al-Qurtubi (671). See "Is it allowed for women to teach mixed gatherings? At Virtualmosque.com. Accessed 24 January 2016.

with her son's choice, she would prefer to guard the souls of her people by having them killed—her son, included—rather than support his marriage to a Christian and conversion to the Christian faith, a move she views as certainly a damning one in the long run. In doing so, she must make the case for her stance, and this requires that she forego the traditional role of woman as subservient to man's rule and unworthy to teach or preach—a fact noted by the Man of Law as narrator of the tale, who calls her (among other things; see below) a "Virago," or "woman usurping man's office" (ll. 358-359).[92] Seeking to serve as a savior of her people, and not just a ruler, the Sultaness refuses to perform in the ways her earthly identity as a woman and mother ordinarily require. Instead, she constructs herself and her followers as soon-to-be apostates from the true Islamic law, in order to influence her followers to rise against this fate as the perpetrators of violence against their would-be oppressors.

The Sultaness's plan involves an act that from a Christian standpoint is heretical; from an Islamic one, apostatic: the feigning of conversion, followed by the murder of the "true" Christians. The Man of Law classifies her as the "roote of iniquitee" and "Semyrame the secounde" for her wickedness, before finally settling on likening her to

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[92] Also, Benson, n. 359 pg. 860. This idea that women were restricted in their public religious behavior was commonly understood in the medieval period according both to biblical and to Islamic commentators; see n. 5 above. The interpretation of these passages (*1 Timothy 12*, in the Bible, and Qu'ran 33, in the Islamic tradition) is, like most religious passages, dependent upon the particular concerns and social and cultural mores of a given community, society, and era; for instance, in the modern world, conservative Christian fundamentalists continue to maintain that women should not teach or preach to men, and some religious sects (notably, Catholicism) continue to refuse to allow women to serve as Church leaders, while others, like the Episcopal and Methodist churches, now include women as preachers and in other official positions. Likewise, strictly fundamentalist, conservative practitioners of Islam insist upon women's exclusion from public and religious offices, while in other arenas Muslim women have prominent socio-political positions of authority and are important religious commentators.

Satan (“O serpent under femynynytee, / Lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!” (ll. 358-361).[93] The Man of Law, then, views her act as an evil one from the Christian standpoint, whereas the Sultaness sees her plot as a means of salvation for her people which, although it requires the temporary and false rejection of Islam, is justified if it prevents them from being eternally damned within the Christian religion. The question of the Sultaness’s sex looms large in the next passage, as the Man of Law essentially summarizes the anti-woman tradition of the medieval Church fathers:

> O Sathan, envious syn thilke day
> That thou were chaced from our heritage,
> Wel knowestow to wommen the olde way!
> Thou madest Eva brynge us in servage,
> Thou wolt fordoon this Cristen marriage.
> Thyn instrument—so weylawey the while!—
> Makestow of wommen, what thou wolt bigile. (ll. 365-371)

Here, the Man of Law explicitly references the connection between Satan and women via the figure of Eve, in order to classify the Sultaness as inherently duplicitous because she is a woman and therefore, Satan’s ready instrument.[94] However, although unintended, the

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[93] Interestingly, the comparison to Semiramis is also an apt one, if we read the Sultaness as intentionally massacring her son and his followers not merely on religious grounds, but also as a means of maintaining her own agency and authority to rule.

[94] See note 6 for a number of sources that deal with the question of women’s iniquity in general. Of course, the earliest association of Satan with women as his instruments against Man and, by association, God, is biblical; first, the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, and also, as Katherine Low shows, in the figure of Job’s Wife: “Like a demon lingering behind the gossiping women in church, Satan lingers behind traditions of the power of Job’s wife’s speech to impact Job emotionally and spiritually. Her words wield power—the power of the Devil” (*The Bible, Gender, and Reception History*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013, pg. 56). Throughout the medieval and early modern periods Satan continued to be associated with women as a lord ruling over them, particularly in terms of witchcraft and sorcery; medieval writers who dealt with this subject include Gratian, William of Malmesbury, and St. Thomas Aquinas (Kors & Peters, 1979). The subject of Satan’s relationship to witches has been extensively surveyed in a number of documentary readers, including those by Alan Kors and Edward Peters (University of Philadelphia Press, 1972) and

blanket association of women with Satan's influence must also call into question Custance's role in beguiling the Sultan so that he is willing to set aside his religious faith in order to make her his bride. The Man of Law accuses Satan of preparing to "fordoon this Cristen marriage" through the Sultaness's actions (369); yet, that Cristen marriage can only occur if the Sultan recants his faith, which from the Islamic perspective will destroy him. Reading from this stance renders Custance the tempting figure and the Sultaness, the one attempting to stop her from wielding her negative influence on the Sultan and, through him, the entire Saracen community. While the Man of Law makes the generalization that all women are associated with Satan's influence, his excoriation of the Sultaness in comparison with his praise of Custance seems to contradict that statement by figuring the Sultaness specifically as Satan's weapon against men in his narrative. Dependent upon the subject-position from which the story is viewed, only one of the two women figures can be read as the one being used by Satan. We can see that Chaucer is aware of and, I think, exploiting the tension inherent in one's subject-position in this type of scenario, because although the Man of Law classifies the Sultaness as a wicked woman for her plot, the Sultaness's plot is hatched in order to protect her people

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Darren Oldridge (Routledge, 2008). Of course, the mid-fourteenth century *Malleus Maleficarum* witch hunting guide by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger includes exhaustive discussion of witches' relationship with Satan, and the topic is also touched on in Part Three of *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (University of Philadelphia Press, 2002.) Miguel A. de la Torre and Albert Hernàndez offer an accessible discussion of the relationship of Satan with witches in *The Quest for the Historical Satan* (Fortress Press, 2011). Although of course the Sultaness can be linked with Satan as a woman and therefore in association with Eve, she might also, perhaps, be linked with witchcraft, her powers of persuasion the result of sorcery as much as of rhetorical and persuasive skill; certainly, his professional capacity would permit the Man of Law to be privy to cases involving witchcraft and he would have been aware of the explicit relationship forged according to superstition between Satan and witches. It would be in keeping both with his character and with the demonization of the Sultaness to characterize her in this way, although that argument falls well beyond the bounds of the current study.

from servitude and damnation.[95] Interestingly too, the rationale under which the Sultaness is operating relies on arguments that sound like those which would be made by a Christian who found him- or herself being forced to convert to Islam, in which case it is difficult to read full disapprobation into this moment on the part of Chaucer.

It is possible, then, to question whether Chaucer agrees with the Man of Law in his categorizing of the Sultaness as a wicked woman, because he so carefully presents the Sultaness's reasons for her decision to enter into this plot against her son, and those reasons are not wicked, but upright, in nature: the upholding of her religious beliefs in the face of imminent oppression. Although the way in which she goes about the upholding of her faith against enemies is counter to the traditional female wielding of influence, the fact that she does continue to protect the integrity of her religion through her speech renders a straightforward reading of the Sultaness along gendered lines in this moment nearly impossible. Reading from the Man of Law's position, the Sultaness becomes everything that is negative and evil about womankind, and as a woman, Custance is unwittingly associated with this tradition. Yet, reading from the Sultaness's position, the only response is to fight oppression with pre-emptive suppression; to stop the conversion and save her people from a total act of apostasy, and Custance is distanced from the

[95] Of particular interest here is the fact that Chaucer regularly explores the tensions between a female's traditional social role and that which she performs in his *oeuvre*, as evidenced for example in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, much of the *Legend of Good Women*, and even the formel eagle in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Although not part of the immediate discussion above, this revelation that Chaucer's version of the Constance tale does not follow the traditional mode of presenting Constance as a model of female piety and moral strength, but troubles that more straightforward reading by including this moment of tension in the gendered roles of the female figures in this text, is worthy of further examination in a later project.

Sultaness along religious lines that render Custance the evil temptress. To read Custance as the heroine of this tale, we have to acknowledge the Sultaness's subject position as a valid one, which means that ultimately, we have to contend with the Sultaness not only as perpetrator of heinous crimes against the Christians, but also as a victim of Christianity's progression through the world. The moment becomes fraught with irresolvable issues and it becomes clear that the Sultaness is not simply acting wickedly because she is a woman influenced by Satan—as the Man of Law would have us believe—but rather, that she genuinely sees no other way out of this situation, and she therefore takes a last desperate stance in favor of her people and for the honor of her faith by using the feast as an occasion to stop the conversion process in particularly violent fashion.

The Sultaness greets Custance, the Sultan, and their respective retinues, and the feast is begun. Here, there is an interesting meta-narrative reflection on the fleeting nature of man's joy on earth, and it is difficult to ascertain whether this comes from Chaucer's point of view, or from the Man of Law's:

> O sodeyn wo, that evere art successour
> To worldly blisse, spreynd with bitternesse,
> The end of the joye of our worldly-labour![96]
> Wo occupieth the fyn of oure gladnesse.
> Herke this conseil for thy sikernesse:
> Upon thy glade day have in thy mynde
> The unwar wo or harm that comth bihynde. (ll. 414-425)

Chaucer writes several hundred years after the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts that codified in Old English the fatalistic, stark world view that permits the *Beowulf*-poet to speak of the future burning of Heorot even as he describes current festivities being enjoyed within it, or to finish those festivities out with a sudden attack on the sleeping hall-dwellers. In these lines of the *MOL Tale*, we can see the same understanding of the world's joys as temporary lulls in an ongoing narrative of suffering brought about by the unknown and the unexpected. If this is an act of characterization on Chaucer's part, then the Man of Law might be read as an old-fashioned figure well-steeped in traditional early English Christian ideas of human fate and suffering in the temporal world;[97] if it is an act of

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[96] In her comments on an early draft of this chapter, Amy Vines points out that this line is reminiscent of Chaucer's means of describing women's work in particular (for instance, the description of Griselda as a girl who "knew wel labour but noon ydel ese" in the *Clerk's Tale* (l. 217). Although beyond the scope of the current study, it would be interesting to consider this line in *MOL Tale* as referring to a specific kind of women's labor, or more precisely, as contradicting, subverting, or satirizing that labor, especially since here, the Sultaness will be killing her son, a different sort of "labor" from that generally expected of mothers.

[97] And this also might suggest that as a member of the English courts the Man of Law understands Anglo-Norman and is rendering the story of the Noble Constance into English to try to win the storytelling contest by giving his English-speaking audience a translation of Trevet's originally Anglo-Norman story; this would be in keeping with Chaucer's tendency to play with the limits and relationships between English, French, and Latin. It also falls into line with the Man of Law's description in the General Prologue, where he is viewed as "Discreet […] and of greet reverence […]/ For his science and for his heigh renoun"; furthermore, he is stated explicitly to have "caas and doomes alle / That from the tyme of kyng William were falle" from which he can "endite and make a thing / Ther koude no wight pynche at his writing"; finally, "every statut koude he pleyn by rote." (ll. 311-326) If the Man of Law is capable of reading and memorizing all of the legal documents from the reign of William I, he is certainly also capable of reading

authorship on Chaucer's part, it might suggest some early English—perhaps, Anglo-Saxon— influence on his writings, at least in terms of culturally-received notions of the fleeting nature of human joys in the face of temporal suffering. More likely, we are seeing here some bleeding over of the thematic influences of Chaucer's work in translating Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy,* which have been identified in texts like *The House of Fame, Troilus and Crisseyde*, and *The Knight's Tale*.[98] Whichever reading one takes of that passage, there can be no confusion over the fact that this prevalent fatalism throughout the text has an essential influence on the Sultaness's actions at the feast. In the next passage, the Sultaness's plot comes to fruition:

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the chronicles and histories from the period as well. Although historically the earliest documents from the post-Conquest period were still rendered in Latin, by the twelfth century Anglo-Norman was regularly spoken in the courts and was used in law reports, charters, and ordinances. (See, for example, Michael Gervers and Brian Merrilees, "A Twelfth-Century Hospitaller Charter in Anglo-Norman," in *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 6 (1979): pp. 131-135 and Paul Brand, "The Language of the English Legal Profession: The Emergence of a Distinctive Legal Lexicon in Insular French," in *The Anglo-Norman Language and Its Contexts*, ed. Richard P. Ingham (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), pp. 94-101.) This group of sources coupled with his Prologue description provide a great deal of contextual information in support of the heretofore unconsidered scholarly question as to whether the Man of Law is using his training in Anglo-Norman to assist himself in telling an "original" tale and therefore, as to whether Chaucer's pilgrims might be still more nuanced in terms of their presentation as figures of his time and age, even going so far as to have embedded within their prologue introductions and stories a history of their development as multilingual speakers and writers engaged not simply in telling stories, but in translating them. Is Chaucer translating, for instance, the *Knight's Tale*, or does the Knight know Italian? It is a question worth pursuing in a future study.

[98] Benson, pp. 396 and 1003. Note that if we read Boethian influences in the *Man of Law's Tale*, which has not heretofore been done, then the composition date of *Boece*—set sometime between the 1370s and 1380s—although definitely corroborating the suggestion first set forth by J.S.P. Tatlock that the *Man of Law's Tale* is a later composition from around the 1390s, also opens back up the possibility that the *Man of Law's Tale* might have been an earlier composition which was held to be most likely prior to Tatlock's study (Benson, pp. 856-857.) This might be a project worth considering in future, one which potentially could shed light on the ongoing critical debate surrounding the dating of the individual *Canterbury Tales* and which were originally grouped together. Although clearly beyond the scope of this current study, it would be important and potentially significantly alter scholarship on this tale, if an explicit link could be determined between Chaucer's translation of Boethius and his translation of this Custance story.

> […] shortly for to tellen, at o word,
> The Sowdan and the Cristen everichone
> Been al tohewe and stiked at the bord,
> But it were oonly dame Custance alone.
> […] Ne ther was Surryen noon that was converted,
> That of the conseil of the Sowdan woot,
> That he nas al tohewe he asterted,
> And Custance han they take anon, foot-hoot,
> And in a ship al steereless, God woot,
> They han hir set, and bidde hire lerne saille […] (ll. 428-440)

Unlike in Trevet's original Anglo-Norman version of this tale, the Man of Law locates the Christians and Saracens in a single hall for men and women, and the massacre is truncated substantially from Trevet's original, detailed account of the event. Instead of focusing on the murders of the Christians, the Man of Law hastily glosses over those events in order to turn more quickly to Custance, the subject of the tale, suggesting that he is not so much focused on the violence in the scene as on its effect upon his story's protagonist.

Trevet's version of the tale focuses heavily on cultural aspects like the separation of the men from the women, and the Saracens who first serve everyone at the tables and then committ the treacherous massacre, in accordance with a world view in which Crusades narratives, as well as hagiographic ones, played a major role in how the relationship between Christians and pagans played out. In such narratives, Christians and Saracens (or, more generally, all pagans) came from insurmountably different worlds, and so either Christians killed or converted pagans, or pagans killed and rendered into martyrs the Christians, which in turn provided grounds for future Crusades. The Man of Law, by comparison, depicts the massacre in a streamlined stanza that ends in the fresh

accusation of the Sultaness as performing this act not out of a sense of religious duty, but because she wishes to rule the country on her own:

> For shortly for to tellen, at o word,
> The Sowdan and the Cristen everichone
> Been al tohewe and striked at the bord,
> But it were oonly dame Custance alone.
> This olde Sowdanesse, cursed krone,
> Hath with hir freendes doon this cursed dede,
> For she hirself wolde al the contree lede. (428-434)

This is an abrupt shift from the characterization of the Sultaness prior to this stanza. The Man of Law has described her as Satan's instrument, a figure seeking to murder Christians in the name of Allah, and a woman usurping masculine power by eschewing her role as mother and noblewoman, but until this point there has been no explicit association of this deed with a political motivation. Rather, the Sultaness's actions have been characterized throughout as religiously inspired. Now, with this stanza, the Man of Law accuses her not simply of plotting to preserve her people's religious purity through a forcible purging of the Christian element, but of plotting with her friends to take political control over the remaining Saracen community. This addition of a political aspect is important in terms of rendering the Sultaness as fully Other as it is possible for her to be; not only are her actions in direct contradiction to the Christian faith and of the codes that govern correct behavior in the hall which she is intended to oversee and serve in her capacity as its lady, but now she is also in violation of the rules of hospitality and of truce; the conversion should have been the peaceful beginning of a new political and Christian community, not the bloody end of the older Saracen one. Because she adheres

to none of the codes ascribed to western European medieval society, the Sultaness is here legible as a figure fully outside of that society—which is, of course, already a known point, as she is the Sultaness of Syria and worships Muhammed. But beyond her foreignness, her violation as a woman of all of the established codes of conduct also figures her as transgressing not only against the laws that govern human conduct but also, as transgressing against the governing characteristics of the sexes. This stripping of her humanly and womanly qualities effectively dehumanizes the Sultaness and those of her people who choose to follow her, paving the way for the Emperor of Rome's attack upon them to be viewed not simply as an act of retaliation for his daughter's seeming death at their hands, but as an early instance of genocide, in which the Syrians, existing outside of any governing law and having performed an inhumane act in massacring the Christians, ultimately are killed, themselves—not for their religious difference, but for their inhumanity. This distinction is important because it adheres to the same rhetoric of inhuman difference that underscores much of the medieval persecution of non-Christians.

The Sultaness therefore brings about the destruction of her people that she was so desperate to stave off through her refusal to adhere to any of the established codes of conduct; but in so doing, she also makes it possible for those who remain alive—that is, for the three Christians who escaped the massacre to report back to Rome, their Roman brethren, Custance, and those in the communities which Custance subsequently embraces and converts— to feel gratitude for their blessings and to renew their vows of community and kinship against a perceived shared enemy. The barbarian Northumberland tribe into which Custance marries converts to Christianity, and her son becomes the Emperor of

Rome following her father's death. The stark contrast between the Sultaness's inhumanity and Custance's strong adherence to the moral and conduct codes that govern right Christian living in medieval England are, perhaps, intended to convey the superiority of the Christian woman; yet, at the same time, because the Sultaness's initial, terrible actions are the catalyst for the union between Custance and Alla that leads to far greater stability and peace within the empire, the story becomes more than simply a contrast of Christian and pagan cultures. The Sultaness is vilified not because she is pagan, but because she chooses to live outside of the established codes that govern human behavior. By casting off her proper role as a woman and violating the moral, legal, and behavioral codes that identify an individual as a person in a given society, she permits herself and her followers to be classified as inhuman, resulting in their deaths. The intersection of gender and violence in this story therefore becomes a productive means of exploring human responses to external threats to a community's stability. The *Man of Law's Tale* is not merely a story of Christian right living, or of the moral superiority of Christians to pagans, but of the importance of living according to the codes that identify an individual as belonging to a particular human community, such as the court of Alla, and deserving of consideration as such. When no such governing code is identifiable, the individual in question is by association unidentifiable as belonging to a given human community, and the violence that ensues purges the inhuman element, reinforcing the established codes by destroying those who would, themselves, see them destroyed. As a figure deeply concerned with legal codes and their reinforcement, written

into being in a time when such codes were being challenged by the king, himself,[99] Chaucer's Man of Law has reshaped the *Tale of Constance* to reflect the need to adhere to governing codes of conduct and right living by highlighting the desirable outcomes that derive from such a choice. The violence at the wedding feast catalyzes this sustained reflection on traditional social roles and customs by illustrating the damage that diverging from them can cause.

Clarus's Saga: A More Seren(a) Approach to Violence at the Feast

At first glance, *Clarus's Saga*[100] has little in common with Chaucer's *MOL Tale*. It is written in Old Norse, rather than in Middle English, and it is a stand-alone tale, rather than part of a longer frame narrative like the *Canterbury Tales*. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this study, there is no death involved in the story's violence, and in fact it ends in a happily-ever-after scenario for the central female who transgresses against the standard codes of good conduct. However, *Clarus's Saga* was written down in the same timeframe in which Chaucer was writing—that is, the final third of the fourteenth century[101]—it was translated into the vernacular tongue from an

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[99] In a turbulent political environment characterized by, for example, Wat Tyler's rebellion, Richard II sought absolute rule through occasionally tyrannical means that overruled the governing legal and political codes; so much so that regulatory baronial committees formed to hold his rule in check according to Magna Carta. Marion Turner gives a good overview of Chaucer's literary response to these conditions in *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late-Fourteenth Century London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[100] Also called *Clari's* or *Klárús saga.*

[101] Based on linguistic evidence Dennis Kearney places the earliest ON translation from a lost Latin original around 1290 (16); the earliest extant manuscript of the text, AM 657 a-b, 4:0, is c. 1375 (23). Dennis Ferrell Kearney, *Clárús's Saga: An Edition and Translation*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Mssissippi, 1990. All citations from the text are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically by page number.

earlier Latin original tale,[102] and, as with the *Man of Law's Tale*, the narrative of *Clarus's Saga* revolves around the breaking of established codes of conduct on the part of a woman and the repercussions of that violation of etiquette, so that again, the intersection of violence and female gender lies at the heart of a productive, if unexpectedly so, *dénouement* for the protagonist. What is especially astonishing about *Clarus's Saga* is that while the woman figure evinces the penchant for forceful, inciting actions intended to provoke violence which characterize many women figures in Old-Norse Icelandic texts,[103] the narrative is by far the less bloody of the two discussed in this chapter. *Clári's*

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[102] Kearney, "*Cláris Saga*," pg. 8.

[103] Most book-length studies focusing on women in Old Norse Icelandic literature include at least one chapter on their violent and aggressive nature, particularly in terms of their role as inciters who goad their husbands, sons, or other male family members into performing acts of violence, usually related to blood feuds; see for instance Susan Clark,"Cold are the Counsels of Women: The Revengeful Woman in Icelandic Family Sagas," in *Women as Protagonists and Poets in the German Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen, (Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), pp.1-27 and Zoe Borovsky's essay, "'En hon er blandin mjok': Women and Insults in Old Norse Literature" in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, eds. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-14. It is important to bear in mind that these characterizations of women as being excessively violent in Old Norse texts form a literary motif that is not borne out to nearly so great a degree in historical evidence of women's lives in medieval Iceland. Judith Jesch (1991) and Jenny Jochens (1995; 1996) offer important corrective historical studies on this matter. Few commentaries on the Old Norse Icelandic literary tradition fail to remark upon the violent nature of its various texts. Prior to a more considered approach to the intersections of torture, brutality, and the judicial system in Old Norse Icelandic culture, Larissa Tracy touches on the "generally violent tenor of Scandinavian literature" (108) in her chapter on the Icelandic sagas in *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012)*. In *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir notes that "[…] gory details of violence are […] recurrent features in Old-Norse Icelandic literature" (New York: Palgrave, 2013), pg. 67. Editors and translators of individual sagas also remark upon the violent nature of these texts; Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson attempt in the Introduction to their translation to reclaim *Grettir's Saga* from its traditional classification as a "crude folktale filled with monsters and blind violence" (vii)—not to refute its violent nature, but to argue for a more nuanced approach to the violent altercations that mark the various sections of this story. Robert Cook writes in the Introduction to his translation of *Njal's Saga* that "much blood is shed […] much of it is shamefully shed" (xv), while in her introduction to Bernard Scudder's translation of *Egil's Saga* Svanhildur Óskarsdöttir remarks that "the saga is marked by dramatic scenes and, at times, horrific events" (xvii).

Saga rounds out this chapter by providing a more nuanced view of the variety of kinds of violence enacted by women upon their communities at the feast by signaling a necessary shift in our understanding of Old Norse literary violence as not always being brutal, bloody, and deadly in nature. Taken together, Chaucer's *MOL Tale* and the Old Norse *Clarus's Saga* show that women who employ violence at the feast do so not as an emotional outburst but for specific, calculated reasons—generally, to control a community that appears to be moving beyond their control. In this, they are not unlike their male counterparts and therefore, the idea that gender plays a significant role generally in the kinds of violence men and women perform might require reconsideration. Women appear to wield violence for the same reasons as men do, and often, in the same ways,[104] in medieval literary texts.

Because neither the original Latin text nor its earliest Norse translations is extant, it is impossible to say for certain whether the current iteration of *Clarus's Saga* follows the original story, which makes it difficult to determine to what degree the tale in its existing form exhibits an Old Norse *ethos* (which would, perhaps, color how we read the women's violence in this tale, since Norse women traditionally are read as more violent than their counterparts in other Western European cultures). As Dennis Kearney shows through a concise linguistic study there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the current form has at least been translated from an earlier Norwegian version through the lens of Old Norse cultural mores, permitting us to classify the version I am using in this study as

[104] Though not always, as I show in my discussion of "Albinus and Rosamund" in chapter two.

an Old Norse Icelandic text.[105] *Clarus's Saga* belongs to the category of Old Norse literature known as *riddarasögur*—the chivalric sagas, which scholars like Kearney have argued are not properly sagas at all, but rather romances.[106] This may in part explain why there is no physical violence in *Clarus's Saga*, as in the case of outlawry for murder that characterizes the outlaw sagas like *Grettisaga* or the blood feuds that characterize many of the family sagas, most famously *Brennu-Njáls saga*. As a romance, the narrative is more concerned with the development and testing of the hero through a series of adventures—although, as I will show, in this case the story focuses much more intentionally and specifically on the testing of Serena, the king's daughter at the center of the plot.[107]

Because *Clarus's Saga* is an obscure text for English readers, some description of the main narrative points is necessary to provide context for my argument. In a few short pages we are presented with a brief summary of the childhood and learning of Prince Clarus who, having mastered the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of European education, begin to tutor with a famous Arabian scholar, Master Perus. Master Perus sets Clarus to the task of composing a poem in five verses of the beautiful daughter of the king of France, a woman of unsurpassed learning and wisdom, who dwells in a tower in her father's palace

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[105] Kearney, "*Cláris Saga*," pp. 16-24.
[106] Kearney, "*Cláris Saga*," pp. 1-4.
[107] In fact, at least one scholar finds her role important enough that she earns a place in the narrative's title; Otto Mausser calls his German translation of the story *Prinz Clarus und Prinzessin Serena: Ein romantisches Liebesmarchen*. Some scholars believe the story has more in common with fairy tales in which the woman is tested, found wanting, and suffers punishment before being reinstated to her proper rank as a changed woman than with romances focusing on male protagonists; see Kearney, pp. 27-28.

with her maidens; only her father the King and his retainers enter the tower, which is guarded day and night by a thousand armed knights.

When Perus asks Clarus the next day if his poem is composed, Clarus responds, "I have been awake all night doing something other than the verses, for I think so much of the young lady whom you spoke of, that I mean to do much more than five verses. For, having heard your own story, I know of no young lady of my high position and rank other than this one" (112). Perus grows alarmed, and replies that "I told you only this about the princess, which was wonderful, outstanding. But there is much more to say about her that is bad and unbecoming. Because however many worthy lads she mocked already with her sorcery and cleverness, it is difficult to count those who went on the same business, and now you will go too […] lay away that from your mind! For no living man can stand against her vileness" (112-113). Despite Perus's protestations and warnings of the princess's cruelty and sorcery, Clarus is determined to look upon her face for himself; he petitions his father, the emperor Tiburcius, who outfits sixty ships with goods and noblemen to accompany him across the sea to France on a wooing expedition to bring Serena, the French princess, back as Clarus's wife.

In France, Clarus is met with great courtesy, and when Alexander, the French king, "knew how worthy a man had visited him, he sent his knights to meet the emperor's son and invite him home to a three day feast, which invitation he accepted with thanks and gratitude" (115). The feast is prepared, and Clarus impressed everyone present with his noble bearing: "Alexander the king greeted him with all honor and seated him on a throne near himself. Now there was an excellent feast with many rare and expensive gifts

and kingly drinks. All the men of the country and equally the king himself wondered greatly at the fairness and courtesy, skill and decorum of Clárús the emperor's son" (115). In a passage reminiscent of Chaucer's description of the nature of rumor in the dream vision *House of Fame*, news of Clarus's excellent qualities flies forth from the Hall and travels throughout the castle until it reaches the ears of the Princess, who is not present at the feast but remains secure in her tower:

> There quickly grew a great shouting in the hall, and not only in the hall, but it spread like a grass-fire about the entire city because though one might search the whole world, one could not find such a man as Clárús the emperor's son. Indeed, this rumor got into the courtyard and through the locked door of the castle to the ears of the princess, at which she was greatly curious about the truth of the news. And now was passed the first day of the feast (115-116). [108]

With her curiosity piqued by these rumors, the next morning Lady Serena sends her chambermaid to "take note with all attention stature and fairness, and all seemly behavior, skill, and courtesy of this foreign prince" so that the maid might "perceive fully whether he may be worthy or not because of his decorum be invited to a banquet by us"; almost as an afterthought to this command, Serena exhorts the maid to "take care for your life, that you fail us not" at which point the maid replies simply, "I go gladly to do your bidding" (117).

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[108] Clearly, by this point in the medieval period the image of rumor spreading in this fashion had become a standard motif; compare this scene, for instance, to Chaucer's description of the rumors flying from the windows of the House of Rumor to Fame, who transforms them and sends them forward, c. 1379-1380 (*House of Fame*, ll. 2088-2120).

The casual manner in which Serena's cruel streak is hinted at in this exchange underscores Master Perus's earlier attestation to her true nature; she threatens to have her maid killed if she fails to perform the appointed task set to her, which is an extreme response in such a situation but is in keeping with the conventional literary presentation of women in Norse literature as being inherently cruel in nature. Her words hint that she is perfectly capable of violent responses when her will is not satisfied, and this threat of violence creates the tension that continues to be felt from this point through the end of the narrative. If it were not for Serena's inherently violent nature, there would be no conflict in this otherwise straightforward, boy-meets-girl tale. It is precisely the intersection of female gender and violence that renders the narrative a compelling one, and the composer of this tale has carefully juxtaposed Clarus's especially noble and courteous reputation and actions against Serena's character—noble, but deeply flawed because she is prone to cruelty and violence. Although both Clarus and Serena hail from royal families, Clarus is depicted as above reproach, while Serena is portrayed as potentially deadly when crossed, and it is impossible not to notice the clearly defined gender markers of man as a figure of good and woman as a corrupt figure that suggest the upright but tempted Adam and the corrupt and tempting Eve who so deeply inform the male and female figures in medieval literature, as I discussed earlier concerning Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. *Clári's Saga* is set up so that, without the inherent conflict between the sexes, the story would be a short one resulting in a swifter resolution of happiness through betrothal and marriage, and it is Serena's inherently violent nature that causes the situation to extend into a lengthier ordeal in which both figures must suffer before resolution can be achieved; paradoxically,

without her penchant for conflict there would be no narrative worth considering. The tensions between gender and violence, and art and creation, are clearly visible in this narrative (as, I would argue, they were in Chaucer's *MOL Tale* as well.) The development and exploration of these particular tensions is a common narrative technique in medieval literature, and especially in romance texts based in French and Anglo-Norman source materials, suggesting again a genre-based function for this type of gender-based violence.[109]

After the maid, Tecia, returns with a favorable report concerning Clarus's noble bearing, Serena waits until her father's feast has ended, and Clarus has reciprocated the favor by inviting her father to feast with him and his retinue in their tents; then, she bids Tecia to "go with your twelve maids down to the prince's tent and invite him today up in the tower into our company with as many folk as he likes" (119). Tecia replies that she is "obliged to do your bidding" but that she "would ask you that you handle this man respectfully, treating him as your nobility demands and as he best deserves, eschewing everything false and deceptive" (119). In this comment we see yet again reference to Serena's reputation for treating men badly after inviting them into her presence, and given her comments concerning the maid's bodily safety should she cross her mistress's wishes, it is a sign of how noble Clarus has appeared to her that Tecia would dare to speak to Serena in this fashion. Predictably, Serena is angered by Tecia's comments:

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[109] They appear, for instance, in Marie de France's *lais*, especially "Guigemar" and "Lanval", in addition to Chaucer's *MOL Tale*, an adaptation of an Anglo-Norman chronicle. See Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, trans. and ed., *The Lais of Marie de France* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978).I am indebted to Amy Vines for pointing that out in reading an earlier draft of this chapter.

“when Lady Serena heard her outburst, she answered furiously, ‘Be silent, and do our bidding, and give us no advice beforehand unless you are asked.’ And now ceased this conversation” (119). Although she has spoken out of turn, Tecia knows better than to do so a second time in the wake of her mistress’s vitriolic response to her words. From a reader’s perspective, it is clear that Serena is not disposed to heed Tecia’s request, and that Clarus can expect to be treated poorly as a guest at Serena’s feast. Regardless of how Clarus behaves at the feast, Serena has no intention of serving as a peace-weaving figure, but plans from the outset to goad and incite Clarus, either into bad behavior or as a result of it. While Serena’s choice to act as an inciter is in violation of the acceptable practices of women at the feast, it is also in keeping with the literary characterization of Old Norse women as goaders and inciters of men. There are, in effect, two competing standards of behavior present in this narrative: the historical conduct codes that urge women in Northern European medieval societies to perform their role as peace-weaver in the hall—an intersection of female gender and power--and the literary motif of the Old Norse woman inciting men into violent altercations through their words, which creates an intersection of female gender and violence, stripping the woman of her social currency by forcing her to adhere to a negative construction of female agency. In order to follow one expected code of womanly behavior, Serena must eschew the other, and in the hands of her (probably male) author, it is her role as the temptress of the man into potentially sinful, but certainly unacceptable, behavior that is upheld in this narrative, so that the intersection of female gender and violence, rather than of female gender and power, becomes the overarching narrative concern. Because of this distinction, Serena can be

read as embodying the negative female archetype of the evil temptress, which leaves her open for criticism and punishment for her actions. It also provides a context for why she might make the choice to treat Clarus as she does at her feast; the violence stems from her characterization as a negative, corrupting female figure.

The feast is lavishly described for the full span of a chapter, beginning with the preparations: "Everything was covered with gold embroidered purple and gold woven carpets, and others of the most costly materials" (121); the arrival of Clarus and his retinue to a lavish welcome: "And when he came through the door, there were serving maids with handbasins of pure gold" (121), and the ritualized seating:

> And when the emperor's son had come through the door, the lady stood up across from him, greeted him courteously, and all his bidden men. And he greeted her very gladly. Then was given a bath, and next they [Serena and Clarus] sat down together on the high seat, and Clarus's knights were aligned outwards from him by rank, and receding from the princess sat her ladies-in-waiting, and chosen to stand before and pay their respects to the guests were the most graceful folk who were in France. (122)

As with all medieval romances featuring feasting-scenes, the emphasis is much more on the behaviors and actions of the feasting community than it is on what is served at the table; of the full dinner we are simply told, "They had now the most expensive feast, with all kinds of entertainment and good food, with choice wine and the most noble drinks" (123). What matters is the noble behavior of the guests and their hosts, and up to this point this feast is a successful event in that regard. Sitting together at the high table, Clarus and Serena fall into conversation; he tells her "frankly all his business and his suit", and for her part, "the princess received his words very gladly, so that her responses

seemed favorable” (123). Because everyone is behaving according to prescribed etiquette at this point in the narrative—Clarus, speaking and behaving nobly towards Serena, and Serena, making glad and merry and receiving him favorably in return— the feast seems to have provided Clarus with exactly the occasion needed to achieve his goal of securing the French princess’s hand in marriage. However, with her next action, Serena demonstrates for us how swiftly things can shift from good to bad, and how flimsy the success of a feast is, dependent as it is on everyone behaving properly.

As they are served the last course of the feast, a boiled egg “which many courtly men find good to eat after their meal” Serena invites Clarus to partake of her egg with her: “Lord Clarus […] will you for courtesy’s sake divide this egg with me and have the other part?” Clarus responds that he will gladly do so, and “began to take the egg in courtly fashion” (123). The author’s emphasis of the courtly nature of this exchange is significant, because it highlights how carefully both of the characters are adhering to the high standards of behavior required from noblemen and women at a feast. Because of the emphasis on courtliness, what happens next is even more shocking for its aberrance:

> And just as he took the egg, she brushed him with her fingers. And because of the slipperiness of the egg-shell and her management of the action[110], he dropped the egg and spilled it on his chest so the yolk stained his kirtle all the way down to his belt. (124-125)

[110] Kearney translates this as “nudge” but points out in a footnote that the word “nudge” connotes “guidance” or “management”; I think that clarification of that is warranted to underscore that she has created this situation by forcing him to spill the egg upon himself and have therefore altered the translation to reflect that.

For a modern audience, this moment does not seem particularly violent in nature, or even particularly troublesome; while embarrassing, spilling one's food is not a life-threatening action. However, for a fourteenth-century Northern European audience, the loss of honor Clarus faces as a result of this humiliating situation is significant.[111] Serena's deed is clearly intended to undermine Clarus's reputation and, consequently, to leave him open to ridicule and lesser treatment from others. Such a loss of face can have a domino effect that spirals into the young man's being forced to prove his status—in Old Norse Icelandic literary tradition, generally through a physical altercation in which he ends up killing the other man to reinforce his own worth. This domino effect of violence begun by a woman's goading actions or words is a common literary pattern in Old Norse Icelandic literature—it is found in most of the sagas, including particularly notable instances in *Njal's Saga*, the *Saga of the Volsungs*, and *Laxdæla's Saga*. However, what is significant here and what qualifies Serena's action as not simply goading, but an act of violence in its own right, is that generally, women's inciting and goading in the Old Norse literary tradition is intended to spur or shame male kinsmen into actions that will protect or restore the family's honor.[112] Serena's action, by comparison, is intended not to protect or

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[111] The scholarship on the importance of personal honor in heroic societies is not ambivalent on this point. From Vilhelm Grønbech's study, *Vor folkeæt I oldtiden* (Copenhagen, 1955) to Theodore Andersson's 1970 article, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas" (which summarizes Grønbech's argument; *Speculum* 45.4 (1970), pp. 575-593) the importance of personal honor in Icelandic literature and culture is apparent. More recently, Richard Bauman describes and analyzes the importance of one's public performance of courtesy in "Performance and Honor in Thirteenth Century Iceland," *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (1986), pp. 131-150.

[112] For discussion of this characterization of women's goading as being in advocacy of their family's honor, see Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 994-95; Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 134-135; and Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature," *The Journal of American Folkore* 112.443 (1999), pp. 6-39.

to restore her family's honor, but to destroy Clarus's reputation and humiliate him; it is not an act of vengeance, which would be understood and accepted within the structures of Icelandic culture, but a preemptive attack borne of undeserved ill-will toward her guest. Where the goading and inciting behavior of the women in most sagas is classified as a form of women's honor and, by association, women's power, then, Serena's behavior is aberrant and signals her own dishonor in failing to adhere to accepted codes of behavior. Because it is not an honorable deed intended to preserve honor, but rather a dishonorable deed intended to injure another, Serena's action in forcing Clarus to drop the egg down his front constitutes an act of violence against him.

Viewed almost as a virtue when used for the purposes of inciting kinsmen to preserve family honor, Serena's goading is instead a sign of her base nature, a fact made evident in the narrator's description of her change in aspect following the dropping of the egg down Clarus's front:

> Here now was a quick change, as if grey clouds had come over the glad sunshine or contrary weather had struck a ship which had previously sailed in good weather and he might now better call her "Severa" than Serena; because she cast off her charm and she took on a hostile aspect, and on top of all this, she mocked him with the following words: "See here," she said. "We have [a] boor and stinking vagabond such as you! Why did you drag your flat feet shamefully out of your mother's house, since you do not even have the manners to successfully carry food to your mouth in the company of decent folk. And immediately get out of this room, you rotten churl with all your footings and good for nothings which you dragged in here, if you will remain unmocked! (125)

As Carol Clover notes, calling a man's appearance poor, accusing him of failings of honor, and declaring him a breaker of alimentary taboos are among the greatest ways to

offend men in medieval Iceland.[113] Serena's words here are therefore intended not simply to point out Clarus's unworthiness to remain in her presence, but to openly insult him as well. This compounds the violence of her initial action in causing him to spill the egg down his front by explicitly calling attention to how it diminishes Clarus's standing and then using this to expel him from the room in the most humiliating way she can manage.

Clarus's reaction to Serena's goading is exactly what we would expect; he "went to his tent, so red and angry, that he thought it would have been better for him to have little money or to lose a great part of the privilege to which he was born, than such shame as he had got" (125). Abruptly, without a word of farewell either to Serena or to her father, Clarus and his retinue sail back to Saxland, and Clarus demands that no one speak of what happened in the princess's tower: "none knew he had been insulted except those who were in the tower with him, and he had, for their life's sake, charged each of them to say nothing nor should they disobey in even the smallest way" (126). However, Clarus is too highborn to suffer for long in silence and without response the shame of Serena's actions against him; he eventually tells his father and Master Perus what happened, "bidding the both of them, the emperor for his reputation's sake, and Perus for the sake of his wisdom to advise how he might recover his worthiness" (127). The emperor responds with anger, "thinking that his majesty had been diminished" and Master Perus, although at first insisting that it is best to leave Serena alone and have nothing more to do with her, eventually gives in to Clarus's goading and says that if they lay the kingdom in his hands

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[113] Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68.2 (1993), pp. 263-287: 373.

for three years, he will resolve the situation, although “I know not whether the prize will be shame or honor” (127-128). Reluctantly, the emperor agrees to this demand. The next several chapters comprise the preparation of an elaborate, multi-year and multi-step plot to bring about the princess Serena’s fall from social grace, in retaliation for her humiliation of Clarus. The fact that the primary activity conducted throughout the kingdom now ruled by Perus comprises the mustering of all of the kingdom’s wealth and resources towards arranging for Serena’s downfall shows the significance of her initial violence against Clarus—they are willing to risk bankrupting their nation to see her paid back for the offense. This elaborate scheme is necessary because of Serena’s gender—because she is a woman, Clarus cannot simply return violence for violence by challenging her to a duel or through similar means. He must instead attempt to attract her attention and trick her into humiliation through a demonstration of wealth that appeals to her greed.

After three years, the preparations are complete and Clarus, disguised by Perus with ashes which brown his skin,[114] presents himself as another suitor to the French princess. Erecting a magnificent tent on the shore, they attract Serena’s attention, and she

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[114] “And now Master Perus took out of his pouch a kerchief and undid it, and in it was something like ashes. This he poured all over the emperor’s son’s face, and smeared it firmly until his face warmed beneath his hands. Afterwards he took a mirror and bade the emperor’s son look at himself so he could see that no harm was done. He saw that his face was now somewhat browned, like those men are who are a longtime in those faraway places under the sun’s heat” (135). The wording here is slightly ambiguous; he could be disguised as a Northern European who has been on Crusade or pilgrimage, or he could be disguised as a Middle Eastern man indigenous to those sunnier regions. If the latter, then this is an early instance of literary ethnic passing, a common trope in French and Anglo-Norman romance and *chansons de geste* centered on the Crusades, such as the Charlemagne cycle, and also found in German epics like the Dietrich cycle. If it is an act of ethnic passing, then lady Serena’s favorable response to him suggests that miscegenation might have held little to no stigma for the culture that produced this story. I have located no research suggesting that ethnic passing and miscegenation are common or, indeed, present in other Old Norse sagas; further research in this area might be warranted at a later date.

feels "wonder and greed" at the sight of the tent, deciding that she wishes to own it (137). She sends Tecla to invite the young man and his retinue into her tower for a feast, and "there was much preparation in the tower much like before" (139). When the men arrive for the feast, "the lord [Clarus] conducted himself coldly. But lady Serena conducted herself very gladly and blithely, suiting her temper to please him" (140). Eventually, after they have drunk enough ale, Clarus warms to her, until she divulges her desire to purchase the tent from him. Clarus replies that the only way she will have the tent is if she agrees to offer up her virginity to him. At first, Serena falls silent, taking mental note of the situation; then, "when she had considered what tricks she knew, she said thus: '[…] If you will promise me and swear that you will obtain my father's permission to take me, as a chaste royal child, as queen, and we shall not reveal this shame which is to be, then we will conclude the matter" (141). In other words, if he agrees to marry her afterward to maintain her honor, she will give him her virginity in exchange for the tent. However, Serena has no intention of following through with this course of action; as already noted, she has thought through all of her tricks and come up with a plan to get what she wants without sacrificing her virginity to do so.

Clarus does agree to her plan, and arrives in the evening for their assignment. Tecla undresses him, and he enters into Serena's bed. Serena then orders Tecla to bring them a sleeping draught, and after drinking from the cup herself, refills it not with the wine she has just drunk, but with a potion which puts Clarus to sleep. While he sleeps, "the princess stood and dressed herself. And now she bid Tecla to call 5 retainers from the tower part of the building, and each of them with his largest rod. And when they came

in, the lady said to them: 'Take this boy who is lying in the bed, and tip him out on the floor, and beat him so he will remember it well in the morning when he wakes!" (142) Whereas before, the violence she enacted upon Clarus was more symbolic than actual, this time her violence against the unknown prince Eskelvarð of Blueland—of course, Clarus in disguise—is actual, and brutal, in nature. Far from giving up her virginity for the tent she covets, Serena punishes the man who would have her so easily, so that this violence visited upon him is directly related to the feast that leads to it. Her retainers carry out the punishment, "throwing him down on the floor like a bale of hay, beating the hide completely off him between head and heels, so that no part remained whole, and flesh and hide and blood remained on the rods" (142). Miraculously, Clarus survives this beating, which resembles a flaying in its removal of his flesh and hide;[115] he returns in the morning to his men, where "he was helped in all ways as best as could be" (143). Again, in this episode the intersection of violence and gender is apparent: had Serena been a man, she would not have offered her virginity to obtain the tent, and therefore

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[115] Although no attempt is made to preserve them, which is generally what would associate this beating more specifically with the act of flaying. I have already discussed the flaying of animals, specifically horses, in the first chapter of this dissertation. Flaying humans--which is recorded in historical texts from the ancient Assyrian and Classical Greco-Roman period through the American western expansion--was a particularly brutal form of torture and execution implemented throughout the medieval period, generally involving the use of specialized knives to remove the skin from the body. Usually, an effort was made to keep the skin whole, and it was then displayed as a warning to other would-be traitors and those who committed other serious crimes; it was also a popular motif in hagiography, most famously connected with St. Bartholomew the Apostle, who was flayed and then crucified. It is also a common motif in romances, where the flayed skin is used as a disguise in efforts at ethnic passing. The rise of interest in material culture has foregrounded the importance of skins in medieval manuscripts, and by association the idea of reading and examining skins produced by flaying is also garnering wider scholarly interest; the study of flaying is also important in the ongoing efforts to reassess medieval violence: in addition to a 2006 article by Sarah Kay in the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.1 ("Original Skin: Flaying, Reading and Thinking in the Legend of St. Bartholomew and Other Works") a volume of essays on historical and literary instances of medieval and early modern flaying is forthcoming from Brill Publishing's *Explorations in Medieval Culture* series. This "flaying" of Clarus is significant enough to be considered in a future study, although it is not within the scope of the current one.

would not have found herself in the position of retaliating forcefully against the man who would claim it without first marrying her to preserve her honor. And yet again, the intersection of Serena's female gender and violence is the only thing preventing the story from ending here with her own death as the price she pays for her actions; because she is a woman, Clarus will not respond with the physical violence that ordinarily would be the repayment for such humiliation. In fact, in his suffering for her sins and near-martyrdom at the hands of her men, Clarus is characterized as a Christlike figure, returning patience for evildoing.

A second tent, even more magnificent than the first, in then erected, and as before, Serena is overcome with desire to possess it for herself. She orders Tecla to go to the shore to attempt a reconciliation. Tecla responds in terror, "How can I do that, my lady! To go within the sight of the lord after the trickery which he got before from my words? Nothing less shall happen except he shall strike off my head or burn me with fire if I come into his eyesight" (144). Serena responds correctly that Tecla will not come to harm, presumably because she knows that no highborn man will harm a woman unless in a time of war. Although Master Perus advises him not to trust Serena, Clarus responds that "she was of such character that she could improve herself" and "there is an exception for every rule" (145). Despite his efforts to give her the chance to redeem herself, however, the scene unfolds as before, with the feast followed by Clarus's being drugged by Serena and "hide-beaten and ejected with the same injury as before" (146). Master Perus and Clarus quarrel over his choices to continue pursuing the princess, until Clarus finally snaps that "his [Perus's] head would absolutely be struck off if he did not take

responsibility for all their bad luck and manage to turn this disgrace back around on the one who started it" (146). With only one more element left in their elaborate plot, the situation looks dire; Serena's womanly wiles appear to have bested the men seeking her humiliation.

When Clarus has had the chance to mend from the second beating, they set out the third tent, this one decorated with a lavish griffin. Again, Serena sees and covets the tent, and again she sends an unwilling Tecla to ask the strange man to dinner. However, this time Perus arranges for Tecla to be enchanted, so that she must be loyal to Clarus over Serena. So enchanted, Tecla reveals to them how Serena has been giving Clarus a sleeping draught each night, and promises to mix the draught with another liquid of similar color in order to ensure that Clarus does not fall into so deep a sleep as he has heretofore. This time, he is feasted, drugged, and beaten, but awakens in the night and finds his way back into Serena's bed before daybreak; thus, having thwarted her, he proceeds to rejoin her in her tower for a fortnight, then goes to the king to request her hand in marriage. The king readily consents, he "released her dowry, very generously, gold and treasures—so much that it couldn't be measured" (152). At this point, having secured Serena as Clarus's wife (although he is still disguised as Eskelvarð), Clarus and Perus now set about arranging for her punishment for all of her transgressions against Clarus. When she awakens, she finds herself not on her bed with woven linens, but rather in a bed "with a rough leather cover. Slats were laid on a level field and posts were bound together with leather straps like the customary herdsmen's huts" (153). She is lying next to "a fiend, not little, and rather ugly; he was black as a raven, and his nose was long and

crooked; he was in all ways deformed. He looked up in the air and snored like a dwarf-dog. A streak of slime ran down from his nose to his mouth; it went in and out with his breathing" (153). At first deciding she must be dreaming, Serena tries to go back to sleep, but when the fiend awakens and informs her that he is her new husband, Eskelvarð, and that this is "what your greed got you! […] Here is now Eskelvarð the king's son with his beautiful pavilion and other riches. Rightly were you punished for your arrogance" (154). Serena responds that since they have married now she will have to make the most of it, and that once she has dressed him up in fine clothes people will overlook his ugliness; he rebuffs her offer and leaves abruptly, threatening to beat her if she follows him. Inexplicably, however, Serena does follow him, and for the next year endures a cycle of abuse, he selling her fine clothes to pay for his meals and throwing her scraps, and she following him regardless, seeking to please him despite his insults and scolding.

After a year has passed, the fiend breaks his foot in an accident and demands that Serena go to the cathedral to beg for alms. She does so, and finds herself in the presence of:

> a large and well-dressed band of noblefolk coming out of the church […] in the middle of the troop she thought she recognized Clarus the emperor's son […] None of those high folk even did her the honor of looking her way, there where she pitifully sat, except Clarus the emperor's son. He rode out of the group towards her and gave her so strong a blow under the ear that she got another one from the wall by her, and became very dizzy. (162)

Here, in a position of noble authority in juxtaposition to her impoverished state, Clarus is able to give Serena the physical blow that he would have liked to have given her after her first insult to his honor. Serena is in no position now to enact vengeance upon Clarus for

his strike upon her. Eleven chapters after the initial instance of violence at the feast enacted by Serena upon Clarus, with the majority of the action in this tale centered on his elaborate schemes first to trick her into marrying him in disguise and then to repay her for her transgressions against him, Clarus has brought her to heel and taught her the humility she so desperately needed, coming just shy of breaking her spirit entirely. Indeed, Serena returns to the hut outside the city walls where the fiend awaits her return "newly full of grief, for she was tormented by the thought that by some miracle Clarus the emperor's son had known her, though she was barely recognizable; for her pride was not yet so dead that that [sic] she thought that it no great calamity to be recognized by him in such a state" (163). She is humiliated, but perseveres. Meeting a burgher along the way back to the hut, she is able to procure provisions for the fiend and herself; the fiend responds by insulting her and forcing her to sleep outside, as has been his wont. He then sends her out twice more, and twice more, she meets Clarus and receives a blow, then meets the burgher and receives provisions. In this way, Clarus enacts revenge against her for the three beatings he suffered under her orders as Eskelvarð; and with his scheme completed, he begins to make restitution. The burgher she has met along the way asks her to come to his home for safety, and when she does he "set before her the richest foods and choicest wines and attended her himself, and comforted her with fair promises, saying that now she should mend, and that the heaviest part of her life had passed" (165). After the feast, he clothes her in fine raiment and takes her into another room, where she finds her maid Tecla and a number of other servants.

These maids lead her into yet another room, where Clarus is seated on a throne. He stands, and greets her with a speech that reveals the whole scheme against her and underscores the lesson she is to take from it:

> Now lady Serena […] you are come here, and you have endured rare troubles and difficulties for a while, and have borne them with excellent patience and unheard of virtue. Keep both of these bound in your memory for a long time—the harsh person you were before, and the dutiful person you were after your great ordeal. See now […] the broken-footed lad whom you have followed, vexing and alarming you all last year with his cleverness and magic! And this is none other than master Perus. Now, for your constancy and rare virtue, we judge you in all things absolved and reconciled with us for your crime and in all ways deserving of such honor to which you were born. And now you know there are more magicians than yourself! (167)

Serena's stubbornness—her tendency to follow through with a plan regardless of circumstances in pursuit of a single-minded goal—resulted in the initial act of violence at the feast that led to Clarus's counter-scheme of vengeance. However, Clarus has taken that stubbornness and converted it into a virtue by forcing Serena to see through to the end an unpleasant situation laced with violence against her. Of the three studies in this chapter, this is the only one that results in a happy ending, and that is only, as the author of this tale writes, "because of the ambition of Clarus and the skill of Perus which they used in revenge for the tricks which she played on the emperor's son" (168). Significantly, in her stubbornness and willful behavior Serena has always been constant, but it is only through Clarus's actions that her constancy is transformed from a negative character trait into a virtuous one. Even though it ends well with their marriage recognized and ratified, the idea that women's inherently sinful nature is a destructive force which requires the intervention of a strong man remains at the core of the tale. It is

possible that this signals a demeaning of Serena as a woman whose violence does not result in any meaningful change or repercussion to anyone but herself.

In both Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and the anonymous Old Norse *Clari's Saga*, a woman using the occasion of the feast as a means of enacting violence upon others lies at the heart of the story. Chaucer's tale centers on the use of violence to prevent a change of lifestyle brought about through religious conversion, and *Clari's Saga* focuses on the use of violence to humiliate and enact vengeance upon another for personal transgressions against the individual. Although when women throw feasts in medieval literary texts it is often in order to facilitate an act of violence, these tales demonstrate that the form and function of that violence, and its ultimate outcome, are very different in nature. The intersection of gender and violence at the feast in medieval literary texts like those examined in this chapter shows the complicated nature of medieval violence; far from being "one-size-fits-all" and senseless in nature, the violence enacted by these women is performed for very specific, carefully-considered reasons which, in turn, point to cultural anxieties surrounding the fear of forcible religious conversion and its repercussions for one's soul, the power and authority of corrupt and cruel rulers, and concern over the equality of honor in a noble marriage between individuals hailing from different societies. In the case of these two narratives, the fact that the violence at the feast is initiated by women against the male authority figures and those who uphold their authority is an essential component to the plot, in stark contrast to our modern understanding of women as peace-weavers and patronesses. These women refuse to allow their way of life to be altered or destroyed without a fight.

The violence at these feasts occurs because the women violate their roles as hostesses, patrons, and peace-weavers, transgressing against the codes of etiquette that dictate how women behave in the hall. However, the violence that ensues as a result of those transgressions against etiquette also exposes key issues that must be addressed in order for a community to move on, functioning as a unified entity. In the case of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, the Sultaness's actions in ordering her son and his followers massacred following his marriage to Custance may be perceived as having been performed out of spite, but at the same time a very real concern for one's post-conversion soul lies at the heart of her actions, leading the reader to question: what is the price of religious conversion, and how far is too far to go in terms of protecting the soul from eternal damnation? And in the case of *Clari's Saga*, the initial dishonor visited upon Clarus by Serena, and the extreme efforts to which Clarus goes in order to redress them, provide an opportunity for thinking about how marrying into another culture can lead either directly or indirectly to a lessening of one's pride and honor through the breaking of unwritten and unspoken rules of conduct that must be learned experientially. In both cases, the nature of women and their role in society is examined, criticized, and left open for debate, so that ultimately, such tales contribute to the ongoing conversation about women that is found at the heart of so much of medieval literature. Both the Sultaness, and Serena, show us that women are as violent as their male counterparts when it is in their best interests, or in support of their most dearly-held convictions, for them to be so.

CHAPTER V

FEASTS IN ARTHURIAN ROMANCE: MARVELS, MIRACLES, AND POISON

Among medieval texts, it is those comprising the Arthurian legends that are best-known for their opulent scenes of feasting. From the vivid description of Arthur's coronation in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136/7)[116] and its twelfth- and thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman and English adaptations to romances like Chrétien de Troyes's twelfth-century French prose *Lancelot* and Gottfried von Strassburg's thirteenth-century Middle High German *Tristan*; from the celebrated feasts in the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to Sir Thomas Malory's English *Le Morte Darthur* published in 1485, writers from various European cultures sought in their depictions of King Arthur's court to capture a world of unparalleled splendor, bounty, and munificence. In fact, most of the extant medieval Arthurian texts include at least one feast, and at least one of these texts is deliberately built around a series of feasts as its narrative structure.[117] Therefore, it is

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[116] See chapter two for discussion of this text.

[117] The fourteenth century Latin "Arthur and Gorlagon" follows King Arthur to a series of feasts at which he is the guest, on a quest to learn "the nature or the heart of a woman" through a series of dialogues with his hosts. Frank A.Milne, trans., "Arthur and Gorlagon" in *Folk-Lore* 15 (1904), pp. 40-67, Reprinted in *Werewolves in Western Culture: A Lycanthropy Reader*, ed. Charlotte F. Otten (New York: Dorset Press, 1986): pp. 235-255). In a recent essay Jeff Massey compellingly suggests that this strange text, traditionally viewed as a "Latin Arthurian romance" for lack of a better classification, in fact may have been intended to be performed at a feast, as an Interlude, or entertainment between courses. Jeff Massey, "The Werewolf at the Head Table," in *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* , eds. Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 183-206.

small wonder that when faced with the need to create greater "political authority and courtly identity"[118] King Edward I of England turned to the Arthurian legend for inspiration, hosting a series of Arthurian-themed feasts and jousts in 1279, 1284, 1299; the king also held the famed "Feast of the Swans" of 1306, and his grandson Edward III hosted an Arthurian joust and feast in 1344.[119] By the reign of Richard II in 1377, "the intruder at the feast" motif present in a number of Arthurian romances had become a ritualized element in actual English coronation banquets.[120] The intention was to underscore the king's position with this "historical" romance motif, in which an intruder interrupts the banquet to declare himself champion against anyone in the room who wishes to challenge the king's claim to the throne.[121] On such historical occasions as reported by contemporary chroniclers no one actually took up the challenge; rather, the

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[118] Aisling Byrne, "The King's Champion: Re-Enacting Arthurian Romance at the English Coronation Banquet," *English Studies* 94.5 (2013): pp. 505-518: 505.

[119] Matthew Giancarlo, *Parliament and Literature in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 37; see also Byrne (note 1), Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002), pp. 203-204 and Roger Sherman Loomis, "Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast" in *Speculum* 28 (1953), pp. 114-127.

[120] The intruder at the feast motif appears most famously of course in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but also in the anonymous Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus*, in Sir Thomas Malory's *Sankgraal*, with the arrival of the unknown Galahad, and in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* with the arrival of the Roman contingent. It was common enough a concept in medieval cultures to merit a term expressly devoted to its expression in Old Norse Icelandic (sing. *boðsletta* (f.) or *boðslotti* (m.); pl. *boðslóð* or *boðleið* (f.)) (Zoega 62).

[121] Byrne, pg. 507. Of course, this idea of the intruder at the feast is found in many romances beyond the Arthurian tradition, but its best-known iterations are those in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. In another article, "The Intruder at the Feast: Negotiating Boundaries in Medieval Insular Romance" Byrne classifies the "intruder at the feast" motif as necessary to the narrative (35) and explores its various functions in Celtic and Arthurian texts. *Arthurian Literature* 27, Eds. Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 33-58. Ritualized events such as this intruder at the feast were not exclusive to the later medieval period; as Donald Bullough points out, writing of the era of the *Beowulf*-poet, "Challenges and boasts, often ritualized—part of the confirmation of or challenge to establish precedence—were (it would appear) a normal part of a 'lordly' feast and might confirm the group solidarity or endanger it" (14).

event provided an opportunity for all of the knights present at the feast to re-dedicate themselves and renew their vows of loyalty to the newly-crowned monarch.[122]

Although they seem both in literary and historical contexts to be moments of peace and community, when we look more closely at medieval literary Arthurian feasts, we can see that for all of their opulence and overt hospitality, in fact they are often either themselves scenes of violence and community conflict, or the harbingers of such scenes. From the feast as a stage for the game of strokes between Gawain and Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to the feast as a scene of exclusion and humiliation leading to community rupture in Sir Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, to the poisoning of the Scottish Knight in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and Malory's *le Morte Darthur*, the clear tensions between what a feast is meant to be—an event of community celebration—and its actual status as a potentially or fully realized violent space are readily visible throughout the medieval Arthurian corpus. In the romance tradition which comprises the subject of this chapter, those tensions are exploited both for narrative effect and to draw the reader's attention explicitly to the thematic issues of loyalty and treason that underpin the

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[122] For instance, Jean Froissart reports of Henry IV's coronation in his *Chronicles* that: "in the midst of the dinner there came in a knight who was called Dymoke, all armed upon a good horse richly apparelled, and had a knight before him bearing his spear, and his sword by his side and his dagger. The knight took the king a libel, the which was read. Therein was contained, that if there were other knight, squire or any other gentleman, that would say that King henry was not rightful king, he was there ready to fight with him in that quarrel, before the king or whereas it should please him to appoint. That bill was cried by an herald in six places of the hall and in the town. There was none that would challenge him" (471). As seen by Byrne ("The King's Champion" p. 509) Richard Grafton, continuing John Hardyng's chronicle, similarly notes that no one rises to the challenge issued by the intruder: "At the seconde course came into ye hall, sir Robert Democke the Kynges champion, making a proclamacioun that whosoeuer would saye that Kyng Richarde was not lawfullye Kyng, he woulde fight with hym at the vtteraunce, and threwe downe his gauntlet, & then all the hall cried Kyng Richard. And so he did in thre partes of the halle, and then one broughte hym a cup of wyne couered, & when he had dronke he caste oute the drinke, & departed with the cuppe" (518).

medieval Arthurian corpus, so that the violence at the feast illustrates the essential, yet often artificial, nature of a seemingly unified community--in comparison, for example, to battlefield violence where the community is, in fact, unified in the single authentic goal of victory against the enemy.

Substantial studies exist on Arthurian politics and the political activities in the Great Hall,[123] the jousts and battles,[124] the activities of individual knights in the woods or on quest or adventure,[125] and the adulterous moments in bedrooms,[126] as lenses for examining and analyzing the rise and fall of Camelot, but by comparison not enough critical attention has been paid to what goes on in the feast halls beyond the immediately marvelous or miraculous and the occasional poisoning. This gap in the scholarship likely occurs because of a scholarly bias towards the more overtly political and treasonous elements of Arthurian romance; however, in fact the feast scenes are moments in which such issues are shown to be far more prevalent within and damaging to the community than is generally acknowledged. Beyond their immediate gratification as narrative points in which Arthur's *largesse* is proved, the knights are tested and sent on adventures, and

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[123] For instance, Kristen Lee Over, *Kingship, Conquest, and Patria: Literary and Cultural Identities in Medieval French and Welsh Arthurian Romance* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005) and Ruth Lexton, *Contested Language in Malory's* Morte Darthur*: The Politics of Romance in Fifteenth Century England* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014).

[124] For example, Andrew Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in* Le Morte Darthur (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997) and Lynch, "'Thou Woll Never Have Done': Ideology, Context, and Excess in Malory's War" in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory's* Morte Darthur, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 24-41.

[125] Cf Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur* (London: D.S. Brewer, 1992) and Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005).

[126] See for instance Megan Leitch, "(Dis)Figuring Transgressive Desire: Blood, Sex, and Stained Sheets in Malory's *Morte Darthur*" in *Arthurian Literature* 28, eds. David Clark and Kate McLune (2011), pp. 21-28 and Karen Cherewatuk, "Malory's Thighs and Lancelot's Buttock: Ignoble Wounds and Moral Transgression in the *Morte Darthur*" in Arthurian Literature XXXI, eds. Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson (London: D.S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 35-59.

Guinevere is fingered as a murderess, Arthurian feasts provide an unexpected but crucial means of exploring the fissures in Camelot that so often correspond to contemporary political issues and thus permit medieval Arthurian literature to serve as a critical lens for examining medieval political culture. Most of the scholarship which does exist on the subject of Arthurian feasts either focuses on the appropriation of Arthurian motifs by real-life kings—as in the case of Edwards I and III noted above—or on a specific textual feast, such as Henry Harder's examination of the political clout of the feast in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*[127] or the many studies of the Grail feast.[128] However, by the time the romance tradition developed, Arthurian writers recognized the limitations of courtly and chivalric codes of conduct, and used the expected behaviors associated with them as plot motifs; so that, for instance, Arthur's refusal to eat until a miracle or marvel has occurred signals an expected interruption to the feast that is employed to pre-empt actual interruptions. The violence which earlier writers like Geoffrey in the chronicle tradition show as being an inevitable result of postcolonial tensions is more scripted in nature in the later romances featuring a more homogenous society—an effort on the part of writers to control the violence towards a particular interpretation, usually as regards loyalty and treason. The medieval Arthurian romance feast is therefore a ritualized form

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[127] "Feasting in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*" in *Chivalric Literature: Essays on Relations Between Literature and Life in the Later Middle Ages*, eds. Larry Benson and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1980): pp. 49-61.

[128] The range of approaches to this subject is vast; for instance, chapter six of Mary Frances Zambreno's unpublished dissertation of 1988 considers how "the reality of the moment of the Grail Feast is that it transforms the whole world which contains it, the world of romance, into something more nearly resembling Christian reality, this-world-in-time. The world of romance is thus brought up to its own apocalyptic conclusion by the *Queste*, and its apocalypse is to reintigrate romance with reality. In this sense, the Grail Feast is sacramental, but limited: the larger transformation is beyond it. (130) By contrast, Gina L. Greco's 1998 article "From the Last Supper to the Arthurian Feast: translation and the Round Table" connects the symbolism of the Grail feast textually to the biblical Last Supper.

of wish-fulfillment that, in fact, never signals the alleged unity of the Round Table but rather showcases the doomed nature of Camelot by exposing the myriad socio-political conflicts—hidden in plain sight, if we know what to look for—that ultimately lead to the community's dissolution. While these issues are present in far more visible form in other events such as the battles and councils and in the bedrooms, because the feast hall is often the scene of a community's heroic efforts to contain and neutralize them, paradoxically it is in feasting scenes that we can most easily examine their initial development and from there, trace their impact on the overall narrative. Each Arthurian feast thus provides a narrative space not simply for considering whether, how, and to what degree the community is unified but, more importantly, for realizing that the community was never truly unified to begin with. As I show below, critical attention to the feasts in Arthurian romances, and in particular to the kinds of violence that occur at or following those feasts, provides a heretofore-unacknowledged means of thinking about the ideas of loyalty and treason as not just political, but cultural and societal, concerns, and this understanding allows us to see far more clearly how deeply personal these issues of loyalty and treason are.[129] Beyond the loyalty of a knight or queen to the king, relationships more generally, and especially the importance of an individual's choices

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[129] The centrality of socio-cultural and political concerns over treason in medieval English literature, particularly in texts penned during the Wars of the Roses, form the subject of recent and important scholarly studies, in particular as regards the depiction of treason in romances including, especially, Malory's *Morte Darthur*; see Lydia Fletcher, "'Traytoures' and 'Treson': the Language of Treason in the Works of Sir Thomas Malory" in *Arthurian Literature* 28, eds. David Clark and Kate McClune (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 75-88 and Megan Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

concerning loyalty and treason within those relationships, are shown to be at the heart of medieval Arthurian romance.

In order to make this argument for the centrality of the individual in exposing the community's weakness through violence at the Arthurian feast, I have chosen the two texts that arguably contain the most famous feasting scenes in Arthurian romance: the anonymous fourteenth century alliterative romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knig*ht, and Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century prose romance, the *Morte Darthur*. Reading through the lens of the violence at the feast in these romances reveals them to illustrate in striking fashion a profound shift in focus on the relationships between an individual and the community to which she or he belongs. The fourteenth century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* emphasizes the concept of loyalty, viewing it as a mutually-beneficial choice that must be made and upheld regardless of the compromises necessary in order to maintain community integrity. By contrast, in the *Morte Darthur* Malory is deeply preoccupied not so much with loyalty *perse*, but rather, with the role of treason in interpersonal relationships, a very different approach to the subject of community that is focused on the negative impact of treason, rather than the importance and beneficial function of loyalty. To show this contrast between these two texts, I first examine the game of strokes and subsequent adventure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, paying particular attention to the ways in which the marvelous and the violent intersect and serve to shape the character of Gawain and draw attention to the issues of loyalty and morality in Camelot that lead to his near-demise. I then turn to a consideration of the poisoning scene in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur,* reading it against its likely source texts,

the thirteenth-century French *Mort Artu* and the late-fourteenth or early fifteenth-century *Stanzaic Morte Arthur,* to show how Malory's alterations of the scene from its French sources speak specifically to the issues of loyalty and treason on an individual level that I am arguing are essential to Arthurian romance.[130] My analysis of these texts shows that far from being tangential to the real action, the feast scenes in Arthurian romance are essential moments in the narrative for thinking about the unavoidable tensions and corruptions involved in participating actively in human society. In particular, in the Arthurian romance, these tensions and corruptions are essentially tied in earlier narratives to the concept of loyalty and, by the fifteenth century, to that of treason, on both the individual and community level.

***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:**
Violent Marvels and the Loyal Chivalric Community

Recent scholarship on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* focuses primarily on questions of gender and women's agency, religious imagery and symbolism, and the courtesy and chivalry which have historically been most of interest to the poem's critical readers.[131] Very little research examines the ways in which violence is used to shape the

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[130] Ralph Norris most recently reviews the relationship between these texts in *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pg. 140; earlier discussions of the relationship between these texts are found in the Commentary section, volume three of Eugene Vinaver's edition of the *Morte Darthur* (1967; rev. P.J.C. Field, 1990) and in Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 235-248.
[131] For the most recent discussions of gender and women's agency in *SGGK*, see Lawrence Warner, "The Lady, the Goddess, and The Text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *The Chaucer Review* 48.3 (2014), pp. 334-351 and Warner's "Mary, Unmindful of Her Knight: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Traditions of Sexual Hospitality" *in Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35.1 (2013), pp. 263-287. See also

narrative. Violence permeates this poem, particularly during the first feasting scene. In fact, this is the most openly violent feasting scene in the Arthurian canon. Because this text begins with a violent act (albeit one framed as a game) which then serves as the foundation for the overall narrative, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter, *SGGK*) presents the clearest example of the ways in which medieval writers of Arthurian romance both used violence as a shaping principle in their narratives, and then used those narratives to offer up critique of that violence. Particularly compelling in this case is the fact that among the sources and analogues for *SGGK* is the Irish text *Bricru's Feast*, which almost certainly served as the original source text for Gawain's game of strokes with the Green Giant.[132] Comparing the feasting violence in *SGGK* against *Bricru's Feast* suggests that unlike his Irish counterpart, who presents the violence to the community as internal in nature, the Gawain poet uses the scene to illustrate cultural anxieties

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Paul Battles, "Amended Texts, Emended Ladies: Female Agency and the Textual Editing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *Chaucer Review* 44.3 (2010), pp. 323-343. Work on the poem's religious motifs and symbols includes David Beauregard's "Moral Theology in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Pentangle, The Green Knight, and the Perfection of Virtue" in *Renascence* 65.3 (Spring, 2013), pp. 145-162, J.S. Russell's "Sir Gawain and the White Monks: Cistercian Spirituality and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 39.2 (2013), pp. 207-226, Benjamin Utter's "Gawain and Goliath: Davidic Parallels and the Problem of Penance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 44 (2013), pp. 121-155, and Larissa Tracy, "A Knight of God, Or The Goddess? Rethinking Religious Syncretism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *Arthuriana* 17.3 (2007), pp. 31-55. Recent articles discussing the motifs of courtesy and chivalry in the poem include Andreas H. Jucker, "Courtesy and Politeness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *The International Review of English Studies* 49.3 (December, 2014), 5-19, Carl Grey Martin's "The Cipher of Chivalry: Violence as Courtly Play in the World of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *The Chaucer Review* 43.3 (2009), pp. 311-329, and Jill Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics and Courtly Ethics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009), pp. 231-265.

[132] While the c. eighth-century Middle Irish *Fled Bricrenn* ("Bricriu's Feast") from the Ulster cycle of Irish mythology is generally accepted as the original source for this scene, Elisabeth Brewer finds the Carados (King Caradoc) versions found in the late-twelfth century continuations of Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* more contemporary to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and therefore the likely means by which the story found its way from the earlier Irish tradition into the Middle English, via Celtic analogues ultimately resulting in the French text. See Elisabeth Brewer, *From Cuchulainn to Gawain* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), pp. 9-21 and Elisabeth Brewer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Sources and Analogues* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 1-3 and 18-32.

surrounding identity and alterity and the threat to a community imposed by strangers. Following the initial act of violence in the game of strokes as a narrative arc shows how it works specifically to present an ongoing consideration throughout *SGGK* of the ways in which the tension between personal choices and community pressures is bound up in the threat, the performance, and the aftermath of violence.[133] By the end of this tale, the reader is left contemplating the deep relationship between an individual and the community to which he belongs. When the individual is tested and found wanting, and his life is on the line, he is reliant on his adversaries for mercy and, perhaps even more importantly, he is reliant upon the community to which he returns for absolution. Following the trail of violence in *SGGK* and considering the response of Arthur's court to Gawain's return leads us to the conclusion that however flawed an individual and his community might be, it is better to forgive and attempt to move on together towards a better future than to cast blame and allow the community to dissolve—perhaps, a lesson hard-learned from examples of such mistakes as those made by the Britons in Geoffrey's *HRB*. In comparison to the failed efforts at cultural assimilation warned of in the

[133] Although there is no room in the present study for a full comparative presentation of the eighth-century Irish analogue *Fled Bricrenn* with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Irish version of the story does not focus on character presentation and development in the same way as does *SGGK*; the focus is on the game of strokes as a culturally-sanctioned means of displaying one's courage and strength. The winner of the Irish game of strokes gains status and wealth: "'Get up,' said Terror; 'the sovranty of the heroes of Erin to Cuchulainn, and the Champion's Portion without contest'" (Brewer 10). The Irish version is concerned with the game of strokes as a means of determining a single individual as more impressive and more deserving of praise and honor than everyone else, of that individual's being worthy of kingship. There is no sense of the importance of the community in this endeavor; the focus is on the individual, and the individual is presented from the beginning as being clearly worthy of praise and honor, so that the game of strokes simply ratifies what is already known about Cuchulainn. In *SGGK*, the focus is not on showcasing one individual's clearly superior nature, so much--as the present section will show--on how individuals within the community negotiate temptation and deal with their human failings (or not)—a very different emphasis, perhaps tied to the fact that *Fled Bricrenn* was composed in a pre-Christian, Celtic society while *SGGK* was written for a Christian community concerned with moral issues of significance to the church, like temptation, sin, and redemption.

chronicle, the idea that maintaining the community requires steadfast loyalty to individual knight, to king, and to court, even when serious and potentially costly errors have been made, lies at the center of the romance.

SGGK opens with an encapsulated historical overview of Britain derived from the chronicle tradition and beginning with the violent siege and assault on Ancient Troy. Significant to this study is the second line of the text, which specifically addresses the buildings destroyed by the Greeks: "Þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondeȝ and askez."[134] (The walls breached and burnt down to brands and ashes.) While this line is surely intended to mean the walls surrounding the city and is employed to show how Britain rose from the ashes of Troy and became its natural successor, it also calls to a modern reader's mind the Anglo-Saxon anxieties surrounding the image of the burning hall which are evidenced in texts such as *Beowulf*; this affinity suggesting a degree of continuity between earlier Anglo-Saxon cultures and the fourteenth-century English audience of *SGGK* in terms of such concerns.[135] In fourteenth-century east Cheshire, the likely provenance of the manuscript preserving the single extant copy of *SGGK*, such concerns would be immediate, as much of the architecture was timber-framed and therefore, fire continued to be a risk throughout the medieval period.[136] The medieval audience of this

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[134] Unless otherwise specified, all Middle English citations are taken from J.R.R. Tolkien's and E.V. Gordon's edition of the text, with translations into modern English from Marie Borroff's edition..
[135] Compare this line in *SGGK* for instance to lines 81-85 in *Beowulf*: "Sele hlīfad / hēah ond horngēaþ; heaðowylma bās; / laðan līges; ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn, / þæt se [e]cghete āþumsw[ēo]an / æfter wælnīðe wæcnan scolde" ["The hall towered / high and horn-gabled—it awaited hostile fires, / the surges of war; the time was not yet at hand / when the sword-hate of sworn in-laws / should arise after ruthless violence."]
[136] A number of extant buildings in East Cheshire dating to around and slightly after the late-fourteenth century are timber-framed constructions; for instance, The Church of St. James and St. Paul in Marton (established in 1343), Little Moreton Hall, built around 1504, and the Gawsworth OldHall, constructed after 1480. See Peter de Figueiredo and Julian Treuherz, *Cheshire Country Houses* (Chichester:

poem, listening to it read in the great hall of a manor house, might therefore experience an immediate connection to Britain's violent past through the medium of fire, which burned Troy and constantly lurks as a threat to the very hall in which they were seated.[137] From this point, violence is reiterated throughout the first twenty-two lines of the poem, recurring again with the poet's description of historic Britain as a place "Where werre and wrake and wonder / Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne," [Where war and wrack and wonder / by shifts have sojourned there] (ll. 16-17) and yet again with the description of its inhabitants as "Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden,/In mony turned tyme tene þat wroȝten" [Bold boys bred there, in broils delighting,/ that did in their day many a deed most dire] (ll. 21-22). The poet intimates that this violent past of Britain has subsided with the rule of Arthur, described as "of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges,/Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle" [of those that here built, of British kings / King Arthur was counted most courteous of all] (ll. 25-26). Even if the medieval audience for this poem were not aware of the time-honored adage, "history repeats itself," this opening, regularly punctuated by instances of violence, invites those interacting with the poem to expect some sort of test of Arthur's courtesy, some form of violent altercation that shows that his is the most courteous and honorable reign in Britain.

Phillimore, 1988) and Clare Hartwell, Matthew Hyde, Edward Hubbard, and Pevsner, Nikolaus, *Cheshire*, *The Buildings of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

[137] While there is no scholarly consensus as to who the Gawain-poet may have been or who patronized or heard his works, that he wrote for a noble audience has been tentatively approved by consensus. Possible patrons include King Richard II, John of Gaunt, Sir John Stanley, or Sir Robert Grosvenor, who all maintained appropriate households for this type of literary entertainment. See John Bowers, "Introduction" in *An Introduction the Gawain Poet* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), pp. xi-xiv, esp. xiii. The idea that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, at least, either derived from oral tradition or was intended to be read aloud to an audience has been noted by A.C. Spearing, among others. "Poetic Identity" in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet,* Ed. Derek Brewer (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 35-52: 38-39.

In *SGGK*, the test does not come from within the court, as in the case of postcolonial chronicles like Geoffrey of Monmouth's; rather, in the hands of the Gawain-poet, Arthur's court is from the outset an established and unified entity:

> Þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse
> With mony luflych lorde, ledez of þe best,
> Rekenly of þe Rounde Table alle þo rich breþer,
> With rych reuel oryȝt and rechles merþes. (ll. 37-40)

> [This king lay at Camelot at Christmastide; / Many good knights and gay his guests were there, / Arrayed of the Round Table rightful brothers / With feasting and fellowship and carefree mirth]

Significantly, the Gawain-poet does not include any suggestion that by the time of Arthur's reign there were any postcolonial anxieties, as there are in the chronicle counterparts—these knights are already brothers in arms and members of the Round Table.[138] By the fourteenth century, the enemy was no longer the potentially violent

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[138] The Round Table was introduced into the Chronicle tradition by Robert Wace, who wrote of it as being created by Arthur and intended to promote a sense of community by allowing that :

> Fist Artur la Runde Table
> Dunt Bretun dient mainte fable.
> Illuec seeient li vassal
> Tuit chevalment e tuit egal;
> A la table egalment seeient
> E egalment servi esteeient;
> Nul d'els ne se poeit vanter
> Qu'il seïet plus halt de sun per,
> Tuit esteient assis meian,
> Ne n'I aveit nul de forain. (ll. 9750-9760)

> [Arthur had the Round Table made, about which the British tell many a tale. There sat the vassals, all equal, all leaders; they were placed equally around the table and equally

postcolonial (because post-Roman occupation and Arthurian conquest of Northern Europe) nature of British society, but rather, came from the possibility of invasion by those who did not yet belong to the established ruling order. The conflict in this narrative is not a postcolonial one, but one grounded in a clearly evident and defined "enemy" from beyond the Arthurian court who, in fact, reveals that the true enemy is the court's own limitations, which is an essential point in understanding how violence at the feast is used in this text.

There is more than a suggestion in the feast which opens the main narrative line in *SGGK* that Arthur actively courts such external tests to the established community of Camelot. As Byrne notes, later medieval kings of England, including Richard II, make use of the motif of the uninvited guest interrupting the feast at their coronations in order to provide their retinue with the opportunity to visibly dedicate themselves to the king's reign.[139] Such an interruption and challenge to the established order, however orchestrated, has the desired effect of bringing everyone together in a sense of community and purpose by focusing attention on external threats to the stability of the court; in fact, it was easier to perform communal harmony at these later historical feasts precisely because the violence was orchestrated. In *SGGK*, one of the narratives that inspired those real kings of England to undertake such an event, Arthur refuses even to sit

> served. None of them could boast that he sat higher than his peer; each was seated between two others, none at the end of the table.]

[139] Byrne, "The King's Champion," see note 2.

down at the meal until he has witnessed or been told of a marvel, or one of his knights is challenged to participate in a joust or other life-threatening event:

> Þat he [Arthur] þurȝ nobelay had nomen, he wolde neuer ete
> Vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were
> Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale,
> Of sum mayn meruayle, þat he myȝt trawe,
> Of alderes, of armes, of oþer auenturus,
> Oþer sum segg hym bisoȝt of sum siker knyȝt
> To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in jopardé to lay,
> Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,
> As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue.
> Þis watz þe kynges countenaunce where he in court were,
> At vch farand fest among his fre meny
> in halle. (ll. 91-101)

> [he [Arthur] nobly had willed, he would never eat / On so high a holiday, till he had heard first / Of some fair feat or fray, some far-borne tale, / Of some marvel of might, that he might trust, / By champions of chivalry achieved in arms, / Or some suppliant came seeking some single knight / To join with him in jousting, in jeopardy each / To lay life for life, and leave it to fortune / To afford him on field fair hap or other, / Such is the king's custom, when his court he holds / At each far-famed feast among his fair host so dear.]

There is a degree of arrogance reflected in Arthur's assurance first, that no threat will arise during the feast from within the feast hall and therefore that a marvel must be brought in by a stranger and second, that such a marvel or feat is inevitably forthcoming. There is also a childish, self-centered aspect to his choice to hold up the entire community until his desire is fulfilled. This is a far cry from the Anglo-Saxon tradition examined in chapter one, wherein there was always the threat of violence from within the hall community and the King was the first to be served at the feast, in recognition of his position, and from the early chronicle tradition that so clearly inscribed the scene of the

feast of Whitsun as one bringing together disparate individuals into a new community. In this established later-medieval romance community, Arthur appears unable to conceive of disorder or violence as stemming from within his own retinue; yet, at the same time, the poet alerts us to Arthur's refusal to eat until an interruption to the feast has occurred. He seems at once certain that his courtiers are up to any challenge, and eager to see his confidence in them tested. Because the poet tells us that this refusal to eat until something marvelous or dangerous has occurred is his habit, we can see that for Arthur, every feast must be ritualistically constructed through such interruption into a testing ground and potential space of violence, re-enacting the unification of the community against an external threat in order to strengthen the community's identity as the greatest court in the land. Therefore, by considering his behavior at this—and, according to the poet, every feast—we can see that Arthur is the central destabilizing force in his own kingdom, even in narratives like *SGGK* in which there is no hint of the recalcitrance he shows in other narratives to deal with destabilizing issues such as the illicit affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. Arthur can, in fact, be read as actively courting the violence he purports to want to avoid through such community-building efforts as the feast, testing his knights' loyalty in ways that transgress against their understanding of the event's purpose; in fact, if he were not the king, this behavior might be classified as treasonous because of its damaging effect on the court's stability. In other words, Arthur's need for constant reassurance of his court's renown in fact destabilizes the court and sets the stage for the feast as a scene of community testing and violence, one that ultimately shapes the entire narrative of *SGGK*.

The audience for *SGGK* does not have to wait long for the interruption to this feast: a scant thirty-five lines later, as the court is finishing the first course and Arthur stands before the high dais speaking with Guinevere, Gawain, Agravain, Yvain, and Bishop Baldwin, "Þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster, /On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe" [There hurtles in at the hall-door an unknown rider, / One of the greatest on ground in growth of his frame] (ll. 136-137). The fact that this is a stranger and that he is larger than the other figures in the hall immediately elevates the potential for danger which his arrival heralds, a potential that is heightened even further by the description of his skin as being "oueral enker-grene" [green as green can be] (ln. 150) and by the description of the ax which he carries:

> in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe,
> Þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare,
> And an ax in his oþer, a hoge and vnmete,
> A spetos sparþe to expoun in spelle, quoso myȝt.
> Þe lenkþe of an elnȝerde þe large hede hade,
> Þe grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen,
> Þe bit burnyst bryȝt, with a brod egge
> As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores, (ll. 206-213)
>
> [in his one hand he had a holly bob / That is goodliest in green when groves are bare, / And an ax in his other, a huge and immense, / A wicked piece of work in words to expound / The head on its haft was an ell long; / The spike of green steel, resplendent with gold; / The blade burnished bright, with a broad edge, / As well shaped to shear as a sharp razor].

There could be no more marvelous and potentially dangerous interruption to this feast than the arrival of an unknown green giant mounted on horseback and handily armed with a deadly weapon. Yet, those present in the hall do not seem urgently concerned for

their safety; in fact, they are curiously nonplussed by the possibility that they might find themselves hewn into pieces by this stranger's ax. In response to the figure's arrival, far from being alarmed, we are told that "Al studied þat þer stod, and stalked hym nerre / Wyth al þe wonder of þe worlde what he worch schulde" [All the onlookers eyed him, and edged nearer, / And awaited in wonder what he would do] (ll. 237-238). They do not respond to his challenge to identify the leader of this court—in many cases not, we are told by the poet, out of a sense of dread or fear for their safety, but rather from their desire to defer to Arthur's sovereignty:

> I deme hit not al for doute,
> Bot sum for cortaysye--
> Bot let hym þat al schulde loute
> Cast vnto þat wyȝe. (ll. 246-249)
>
> [Not all, I think, for dread, / But some of courteous grace / Let him who was their head / Be spokesman in that place.]

What is emphasized here, as in the historical feasts hosted by Edward I and III as described by Byrne, is the need to follow the established rules and rituals of the hall even in the face of such interruptions. The giant is a marvelous being with the potential to unleash violence upon the community. The community, however, seems certain of its safety in the face of that threat, and this may be because of its careful adherence to protocol.[140] By not addressing the giant but rather, permitting Arthur to negotiate his

[140] In reading an earlier draft of this chapter, Amy Vines wondered whether Arthur's courtiers might, in fact, have thought that Arthur had arranged for this interruption to happen. Given the historical record of kings like Edward III and Richard II making intentional use of such Arthurian motifs in their own feasts, it

presence, the court approves Arthur's sovereignty and upholds the community's sense of itself as one body unified under his leadership; this, in turn, has the desired effect of letting the stranger know that this community stands together in the face of all challenges through a visible show of its unity.

When Arthur has greeted the stranger and asked him to tell them his story, the knight defers. He claims that he has come to see for himself whether Arthur's court is as impressive as he has heard, emphasizing their chivalric feats—their ability to perform violence—over their courtliness:

> þy burȝ and þy burnes best ar holden,
> Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
> Þe wyȝtest and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde,
> Preue for to play wyth in oþer pure laykez,
> And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp,
> And þat hatz wayned me hider, iwyis, at þis tyme. (ll. 259-264)

> [your court and your company are counted the best, / Stoutest under steel-gear on steeds to ride, / Worthiest of their works the wide world over, / And peerless to prove in passages of arms, / And courtesy is here carried to its height, / And so in this season I have sought you out.]

He next claims that he has come in peace, but does so by emphasizing the ways in which he is fully capable of inflicting great violence upon the hall:

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is possible that this intentional deployment of interruptions to the feast has its origins in the romances, although it would require research beyond the scope of this study to be able to determine whether or not this might have been the case.

Ȝe may be seker bi þis braunch þat I bere here
Þat I passe as in pes, and no plyȝt seche;
For had I founded in fere in feȝtyng wyse,
I haue a hauberghe at home and a helme boþe,
A schelde and a scharp spere, schinande bryȝt,
Ande oþer weppenes to welde, I wene wel, als;
Bot for I wolde no were, my wedez ar softer. (ll. 265-271)

[You may be certain by the branch that I bear in hand / That I pass here in peace, and would part friends, / For had I come to this court on combat bent, / I have a hauberk at home, and a helm beside, / A shield and a sharp spear, shining bright, / And other weapons as well, war-gear of the best; / But as I willed no war, I wore no metal.]

By bringing into this scene a stranger who points out that he is capable of inflicting violence but has left his war implements at home, the poet emphasizes that the threats to Arthur's community come from without, rather than within, the hall.[141] However, as we have seen, even though this is the case Arthur has an intrinsic need to test the community's stability for himself. When the stranger asks for a contest ("if þou be so bold as alle burnez tellen,/Þou wyl grant me godly þe gomen þat I ask bi ryȝt" (ll. 272-273) [if you be so bold as all men believe, / You will graciously grant the game I ask by right]) Arthur's response is a challenge to violence:

Arthour con onsware,
And sayd, 'Sir cortays knyȝt,
If þou craue batayl bare,
Here faylez þou not to fyȝt.' (ll. 275-278)

[141] We are also reminded that, although violence is inappropriate at the feast, it is often—perhaps always—subtly present.

> [Arthur answer gave / And said, 'Sir courteous knight, / If contest here you crave, / You shall not fail to fight.]

This challenge seems to be directed at the knight, but, because the poet has already classified this as a behavior pattern of Arthur's, it can also be read as a challenge to the community to remain vigilant and prepared to deal with any threat. If we read it in this way, then the Green Knight's next words ("'Nay, frayst I no fyȝt, in fayth I þe telle, / Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdlez chylder" (ll. 279-280) [Nay, to fight, in good faith, is far from my thought; / There are about on these benches but beardless children]) form a counter-challenge in which he is not so much ridiculing Arthur's knights as unworthy opponents in battle, as he is pointing out that Arthur's issuing of a challenge in response to his request for a game puts Arthur's blameless and innocent courtiers on the line in an inappropriate way. This moment has often been read as a slight upon the whole community,[142] but I think it is more profitably read as a critique of Arthur's continuous need to test and cause instability within the community. Reading it this way sets up the game of strokes as offering an opportunity for the courtiers to indeed make good on their promise of loyalty and fealty to Arthur, and thereby underscores Arthur's character as a deeply flawed individual whose worth as a ruler is only upheld through the willingness of his court to support him. The community is strong because each individual makes the

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[142] A reading supported by the communal wearing of the green sash at the end of the poem, as Jennifer Feather pointed out in her comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

choice to participate in that strength, and this happens not because of Arthur's generosity and nobility, but in spite of Arthur's incessant need to test his knights.[143]

This reading of the scene as being focused on Arthur's flawed character is further supported by the knight's challenge; instead of asking whether there is anyone so brave as to stand in opposition to him for this game of strokes, he asks if there are any "Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede," [so bold in his blood, his brain so wild] (ln. 286) that he would engage in this contest. When we read this scene simply as a challenge of Arthur's court generally, then this line merely seems like an insult intended to elicit a hotheaded response from an untested knight eager to prove himself against this stranger who dares to challenge the courage and intelligence of the courtiers. But we might instead understand that by issuing the challenge in this particular phrasing, the knight is actually disapproving of Arthur's tendency to place his knights unnecessarily in danger. The Green Knight acknowledges that the court is renowned for its courage only a few lines above; here, he contextualizes his challenge by asking if there is anyone bold enough in his blood *and also* crazy enough to take him on in this game. In such a reading, the knight's phrasing suggests that it is not a question of whether the knights are brave and courageous so much as that he thinks it would be crazy for a knight to stand against him in the game of strokes. In exchange for the game, if the other knight lives, the Green Knight will reward him with the ax which he carries ("If any freke be so felle to fonde þat I telle, / Lepe lyȝtly me to, and lach þis weppen,/ I quit-clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his

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[143] As Denise Baker noted in her comments on an early draft of this chapter, a need perhaps born of Arthur's youth and impulsiveness in this particular narrative.

auen" [If there be one so willful my words to assay, / Let him leap hither lightly, lay hold of this weapon, / I quitclaim it forever, keep it as his own] (ll. 291-293). This ax, however, is symbolic of the violence the knight will be subjected to and engaged in against this stranger on Arthur's behalf. The reward for engaging in a game of strokes for the honor of Arthur's court is therefore the promise of further violence, because the game is inherently reciprocal. The reciprocal nature of the game of strokes calls forth the bigger question: what does the knight really get out of all of this, besides bragging rights should he live, and what might be construed as a sort of secular version of martyrdom status in the Camelot cause if he loses? Traditionally, chivalric knights are understood as literary figures who would relish such an opportunity to demonstrate their prowess, and indeed that is how Gawain is most often classified in this case. However, that interpretation fails to take into consideration that while, yes, the knights are certainly devoted to chivalry, and also to God, to their king, and to their court, asking them to lay their life on the line at a feast in order to secure bragging rights is taking it a bit too far. I think that rather than reading the Green knight's challenge simply as an insult designed to call forth a hotheaded knight to engage in the contest, we can also read this moment as a stinging critique of the chivalric system that requires honorable knights to perform such deeds for kings who might not deserve their courageous loyalty. If we do so, it serves not only to critique the chivalric structures that put young men's lives on the line sometimes needlessly, but also deepens the moral concerns of the poem and calls forth a number of questions that have not yet been asked of this text—should a king ask his knights to engage in, or permit them to submit themselves to, unnecessary tests in moments (like

this feast) that should be safe and nonviolent, or is that an abuse of the king's God-granted authority? Could Arthur's constant testing of his men in such moments be construed as preying on their loyalty in order to assure him of their loyalty? I think that for the Green Knight, the answer to both of these questions is "yes" and that this challenge is designed to reveal Arthur's moral weaknesses as much as it is to offer a knight the chance to test himself both individually and as a champion of the court.

Following through with this reading, when "Alle þe heredmen in halle, þe hyȝ and þe loȝe" [all that household in hall, the high and the low] (ln. 302) grow even more still after his words—a moment traditionally read as evidence that no one wants to engage with the knight on these terms and thus as a sign of fear—what we might be seeing instead is a moment of realization, that the members of the court might actually be taking his words to heart and wondering if it is not an act of folly to take up this challenge. At their silence, the Green Knight actually does level a charge of cowardice against the full court:

> What, is þis Arthures hous,' quoþ þe haþel þenne,
> 'Þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
> Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
> Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
> Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyȝes speche,
> For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!' (ll. 309-315)

> [What, is this Arthur's house," said that horse-man then, / "Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide? / Where is now your arrogance and your awesome deeds, / Your valor and your victories and your vaunting words? / Now are the revel and renown of the Round Table / Overwhelmed with a word of one man's speech, / For all cower and quake and no cut felt!]

The specific way in which this speech is structured suggests it not to be a blanket insult to the knights so much as a targeted one intended for Arthur. Explicitly naming this as Arthur's house immediately establishes Arthur's sovereignty over the space and the individuals within it, which means he is ultimately responsible for them. To then level a charge that "your" arrogance and "your" awesome deeds, "your" valor and "your" victories and "your" vaunting words are absent in this house, with the "your" in every instance the plural and not the singular version of the word, means that the knight is speaking not simply to the courtiers, but to Arthur and the courtiers collectively. I argue that ultimately the insult is intended to be received as one aimed directly at Arthur, and indeed, this is precisely how it is received: "þe lorde [Arthur] greued; / Þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face / and lere" ["the lord grieved; / The blood for sheer shame shot to his face / and pride"] (ll. 316-318). We are also told that Arthur "wex as wroth as wynde" ["with rage his face flushed red"] (ln. 319) and on the next line, "So did alle þat þer were" ["and so did all beside"] (ln. 320). Arthur's response to the charge of cowardice is not shame and rage for his wronged knights, but shame and rage because he has been singled out as the king of a court so charged. The knights have let him down by not taking up this challenge swiftly enough to avoid the charge of cowardice now leveled against all of them, but especially against Arthur as their king. The precise ordering of his emotions within these lines supports this reading; first, Arthur flushes, ashamed that he and his court have been charged with cowardice; next, his pride is triggered in response to that shame; and finally, he is angered—perhaps, not necessarily by the charge of cowardice so much as by the court that has thusly left him in the position of feeling this

shame and need to prove his worth. When the rest of the court follows suit by growing angry in the next line, are they angry because of the knight's charge of cowardice, or because of Arthur's shame in their failure to take on this contest that has so clearly been shown to be one that was not theirs in the first place? That none of the courtiers steps forward immediately to defend their collective value against this charge of cowardice, thus forcing Arthur, himself, to take up the ax, suggests that perhaps their anger is directed at Arthur more so than at the Green Knight for placing them in this position. Arthur's knights have not taken up the challenge to bring violence into the hall, because they have had it pointed out to them by the Knight's description of the "game" that their reward for engaging in that violence is still further violence, and this is not an instance in which the violence is necessary, as it would be for, say, a battle or jousting tournament. But Arthur, himself, takes up that challenge because he has been embarrassed as the king at the head of a retinue that refuses to uphold the court's honor by accepting it. The knights are being reasonable to avoid unnecessary violence; Arthur is not. As the king Arthur should be concerned with his subjects' well-being, and he should be the one to uphold hospitality in the hall. Yet, here he is prepared to bring violence into the hall, himself, rather than allow this game to go unplayed, because the Green Knight has leveled a charge of cowardice against him and the court of which he is head.

Morally speaking, then, Arthur's behavior does not fulfill his role as protector of those who have sworn allegiance to him, and by taking up the ax and preparing to enter the game himself either he is behaving like the consummate host by giving the knight what he has asked for, or he is permitting his personal sense of shame and honor to

interfere with his role both as king and host. Knowing Gawain's reputation for courtesy matters tremendously in determining which of these interpretations is the better one, since Gawain is the one who steps in to stop Arthur from pursuing the choice to enter into the contest himself. Gawain is best-known for three primary attributes: his great strength, which waxes and wanes with the movement of the sun; his pledge to honor and serve all women; and his great courtesy. His courtesy is the benchmark by which the courtesy of all other knights in the Arthurian canon are measured, and because of this, Gawain is a consummate member of the hall community, one who knows and adheres to all of the social niceties required and expected.[144] Because of this quality, Gawain would be the one of all the knights to realize when Arthur has overstepped his bounds as the king and host; furthermore, he of all of the knights is best-suited to handle that moment with tact and diplomacy, rescuing Arthur from ignominy through his own courteous action. *SGGK* is most often read as a poem concerned with questions of morality—but almost always, the morality in question is that of Gawain, himself, as he negotiates the affair with Bertilak's wife. If we read this moment at the feast as a moral failing on Arthur's part that is rescued in turn by Gawain's courtesy, then we see that morality is even more carefully inscribed into the fabric of the poem, and even more so, intertwined with violence.

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[144] The quintessential study of Gawain's courtesy is Jonathan Nicholls's *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), which reads the figure of Gawain against contemporary conduct manuals to explore how carefully his character has been shaped by medieval expectations of courteous conduct. Nicholls draws in part on the earlier work of B. J. Whiting in tracing Gawain's reputation in medieval literature ("Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*" in *Medieval Studies* 9 (1947), pp. 189-234. More recently, a number of scholars weigh in on Gawain's reputation for courtesy in medieval texts spanning multiple national traditions in the 2006 *Gawain: A Casebook* edited by Raymond Thompson and Keith Busby for Routledge.

Gawain's courtesy permits him to understand the ignoble position Arthur finds himself in as he takes up the Green Knight's challenge, himself, not because of a sense of hospitality but through embarrassment and a desire to save face. Arthur is morally wrong to place his court in a vulnerable position when there is no real issue at stake beyond a single stranger's charge of cowardice; even in a chivalric community, when this challenge is issued in association with a game rather than in terms of a battle or other major conflict, resorting to violence in the feasting hall is unnecessary. Arthur's choice therefore places everyone in the hall in a position to experience violence; as a king responsible for his community's well-being, this is a morally reprehensible action. Gawain's courtesy prevents the court from suffering further shame, but cannot undo the violence that results from Arthur's breach of hospitality. Gawain's courtesy is therefore twinned with violence, and by accepting the challenge and shouldering the burden of that violence himself he is able to preserve the moral fiber of this court by preventing Arthur from engaging in an immoral action. In Gawain's hands, the game is not morally wrong because Gawain is a member of the community and not its head; he is charged with upholding the court's honor, but he is not responsible for the safety and well-being of its inhabitants in the way that the king is. In this initial feasting scene, we see that Gawain is more than capable of passing the tests of morality, courtesy, and courage that are set forth in such moments. It is exceptionally important to see this, because it shows that Gawain possesses the proclivity and ability to uphold morality in a potentially deadly situation, which underscores the later moral failing with which this poem is preoccupied as one stemming not from an inherent inability on Gawain's part to withstand temptation, but

something else, entirely: something not present in this first feast. Therefore, beyond reading this first feast as a critique of Arthur's kingship and a narrative catalyst for the quest, we must also consider the ways in which it presents and begins to develop the reader's understanding of Gawain's character.

Every feast in *SGGK* is an occasion on which Gawain undertakes unfamiliar and potentially transformative challenges in order to enhance his reputation and advance his personal chivalric pursuits, a fact made clear in examination of the events of the first and third feasts. The first feast in the text signals a disruption of events with the arrival of the Green Knight, who does not interrupt the narrative and feast so much as enters into them, and whose challenge catalyzes Gawain's quest. This first feast signifies change for Gawain, both during the event and also in its aftermath. During the feast, Gawain, correctly employing a modesty *topos* in keeping with his lower stature among Arthur's knights at this point in his career, asks Arthur for the right to take up the stranger's challenge ("I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest / And lest lur of my lyf quo laytes the soth" [I am the weakest of them, I know, and the dullest-minded / So my death would be the least loss, if truth should be told] ll. 354-355). Gawain negotiates this request properly according to chivalric mores and the standards of courtesy, and as a result he is awarded the opportunity to test his skill against the intruder.

His success in this first knightly action means that Gawain is no longer an untested knight and, in fact, he wins immediate honor and praise not only from his own community, but also from the Knight he has bested:

> Bigog quoth the grene knygt Sir Gawan melykes
> that y schal fang at thy fust that y haf frayst here
> and hatz redily rehersed bi reson ful trwe
> clanly al the covenant that y the kyge asked. (ll. 390-393)

> [By God, said the Green Knight, Sir Gawain, I am pleased / That I shall get from your hands what I have asked for here. / And you have fully repeated, in exact terms, / Without omission the full covenant I put to the king]

But successfully negotiating this initial series of challenges and "winning" this first round of the game of strokes places Gawain in a triply-dangerous position: first, because in picking up his head and walking away the Green Knight reveals himself to be a supernatural being that cannot be killed; second, because Gawain now must embark upon his first quest, continuing his knightly training away from the relative safety of Arthur's court; and third, because this initial success could cause Gawain to be overly-sure of his abilities and possibly to make mistakes as a result; this possibility only slightly tempered by the fear-inducing, otherworldly nature of the Green Knight. At this point, we realize that this feast is not just a quiet moment in the narrative that provides us with the chance to examine and critique the Arthurian court; there is a genuine contest involved, and not everybody can win. If the game of strokes took place on a jousting field, or in some other space generally associated with chivalric activity, these new challenges which Gawain faces could be viewed as fully within our expectations, because knights are supposed to negotiate potentially life-threatening situations in those spaces. That it happens during a feast challenges our preconceived notions of the function that feasts are meant to perform within a narrative. By insisting that a marvelous event occur at the feast before he will eat, Arthur invades the courtly space of the feasting hall and overrules it by asserting

chivalric opportunities in place of the communal meal, so that everything is chivalric and nothing is courtly. There is no safe space and therefore, there is no true sense of community, because everyone is potentially being tested at any given time. This feast, then, is not an interlude in the action, but the moment of its catalyst; it is not a respite for Gawain, but a series of nuanced tests verifying his readiness for the quest ahead; it is not simply a social event, but a different testing ground for the chivalric sensibilities that undergird this narrative; and it is not an interruption of the narrative, but very much a real and important part of it. Moreover, it signals a transformative point for Gawain. No matter how he returns, living or dead, Gawain will return in an altered state of being: either he will rise to the challenge, successfully complete the game of strokes, and return to Arthur's court an honored and victorious knight, or he will be defeated and fail in his calling, perhaps even dying as a result of his failure. This threat of imminent transformation, of violence, and of possible death, coming as it does at the feast, serves as a point of tension between social and chivalric ideologies, the moment of celebration and community not interrupted, but informed, by a challenge to the status quo that can only result in irrevocable change for Gawain and, by association, for the court.

While the circumstances of the third feast at Bertilak's castle are vastly different from the first one in Arthur's court, as are the actual tests it administers, in fact it performs a similar function as a litmus test of Gawain's chivalric acumen. Where the first feast occurs publicly and serves as the catalyst for Gawain's adventure, this one is a private meal that seems to act as a "pause button," slowing the narrative and allowing the reader and Gawain, himself, to regroup prior to continuing the adventure. However,

closer examination shows that this feast is actually performing important work in stripping away the seductive social and chivalric trappings of the romance and exposing Gawain's essential character as a noble man – the character he must possess in order to succeed as a knight. This revelation of Gawain's innate nobility is possible precisely because at Bercilak's castle he is not exposed needlessly to the potential for violence as he is at Arthur's court; here, Gawain can rely primarily on courtesy, rather than on chivalry.

Gawain, having been received by his host, Bercilak, is seated in his chamber before the fire, when "sone watz telded up a tabil on trestez ful fayre / clad wyth a clene clothe that cler quyt schewed / sanap and salure and sylverin sponez". [soon a table was deftly set up on trestles / spread with a fine tablecloth, brilliantly white / with overcloth and salt-cellar, and silver spoons.] (ll. 885-887). When the preparations have been made, Gawain sits to an elaborate meal:

> wyth sere sewes and sete, sesonde of the best
> double felde as hit fallez and fele kyn fisthes
> summe baken i bred summe brad on the gledez
> summe sothen summe i sewe savered with spyces
> and ay sawes so sleghe that the segge liked
> *the freke calde hit afest dul frely and oft*. (ll. 890-895)

> […many excellent dishes, wonderfully seasoned, / In double portions, as is fitting, and all kinds of fish:/ Some baked in pastry, some grilled over coals,/ Some boiled, some in stews flavored with spices, / Always with subtle sauces that the knight found tasty./ Many times he graciously called it a feast…]

That Gawain eats this "feast" alone, in the presence only of the attendants waiting upon him, is significant for two reasons. First, as a stranger to this court, he has to negotiate

this new cultural space by treating everyone with courtesy, or risk offending the host lord through his improper actions towards the servants. In this, Gawain acquits himself well, speaking politely to everyone and answering their questions. Secondly, and more importantly, in a text contemporary to *SGGK*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the taking of meals in one's private room is criticized as ignoble behavior on the part of wealthy men:

> Elyng is the halle, uche daye in the wyke,
> There the lorde ne the lady liketh nought to sytte.
> Now hath uche riche a reule to eten bi hymselve
> In a pryvé parloure for pore mennes sake,
> […] And al to spille that spende shal another.
>
> [Unhappy is the hall, every day in the week,/ Where the lord and the lady have no liking to sit./ Now has each rich man a rule to eat by himself/ In a private parlor to avoid poor men/…And all to spare and to save what some one else will spend.][145]

If we take Langland's criticism that lords eating meals in private rooms is the act of wealthy men seeking to avoid interacting with those of lesser status as a common understanding of the time, because it is explicitly criticized as such in contemporary conduct manuals as well, then Gawain's actions become even more indicative of his truly

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[145] William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H.A. Shepherd eds. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 145. 98-103. Concern over one's presence at table was one of the matters addressed in the conduct manuals of medieval Europe; for instance, in MS Oriel 79—in a courtesy text bound with *The Vision of Piers Plowman,* copied by at least one reader (Richard Hill, a pupil of John Lydgate's, in ms. Balliol 354), and later revised into Caxton's *Book of Curtesye*—the author advises the "Lytle childe" : "A[s] ye be commaundyd, so ye do algate, / Beth not wyth-oute cause from the tabul absent; / Hit is plesaunce vnto the gret astate / To se theyre saruaunt about them present; / Haunteth no halkes, for then ye woll be schent" (18. 120-124.). See Frederick Furnivall, ed., *Caxton's Book of Curtesye* Early English Text Society E.S. 111, 1868; reprint 2010.

noble character. Gawain refuses the opportunity presented to him as a guest to be treated as a man who does not wish to be in the company of those of lesser status. By explicitly and repeatedly referring to this meal as a “feast,” he transforms the private room in which he is dining into a feasting hall, and because at a feast everyone has a part to play and serves a function without which the feast could not happen, this renders those serving this meal to him participants in the feast, rather than simply servants waiting on a guest. They, in turn, report his courtesy to Bertilak, and thusly vetted and approved, Gawain gains access to Bertilak’s court and the story progresses. Because Gawain has designated this an instance of feasting, as we have already seen with the first feast in the narrative there is an element of potential surprise and danger involved. In a strange hall, waited on by strange attendants, and the hall’s lord not present at the meal, Gawain does not know what to expect, and therefore there is a sense of anticipation and an underlying anxiety present as well; he is, of course, on his best behavior, but he is also on his guard, however discreetly, prepared for anything that might happen. He relies throughout the meal on courtesy, rather than on chivalry, all the while aware that he may need to turn to chivalry should his courteous behavior be met with hostility.

This moment that at first seems like a lull in the action thus has real narrative work to do: by showing us a Gawain who is stripped of the trappings and visual cues of the true feast hall but who still exhibits an inherent sense of propriety and true nobility, this “private feast” shows us what we otherwise could not have seen. Without this meal, we would not have seen Gawain function solely as an individual outside of Arthur’s court and removed from chivalric spaces, and therefore could not gauge his courtesy and

nobility, since heretofore the focus has been on his behavior as a chivalric knight. Because of his role as a guest in Bertilak's home, this meal reveals Gawain's inherent nobility of character: when he refuses to be treated as a man above other men, he proves that he deserves that treatment, and so we watch him struggle to negotiate the conflicting roles of guest and knight. This is particularly the case with regards to his association with Bertilak's wife, because we are watching a man who has now so clearly proven his innate nobility in private, being tested to the limits of what a man can stand in public. We have also seen him negotiating potentially deadly moments in these feasting scenes, where such moments should not be expected. This private "feast" in his room is therefore not a pause in the narrative, but a crucial moment that, successfully navigated, creates far greater stakes for Gawain in the events that follow, because it shows us that he possesses on a fundamental level the qualities a knight must have in order to succeed: now, every further test pushes him towards a breaking point that we can associate not only with his station as a knight, but with his quintessential being. The narrative work this feast does in revealing Gawain's innate character also reveals to us that at the foundation of *SGGK* lies not simply a contest of chivalric prowess staged by Morgan le Fay to bring about Guinevere's demise, but a human struggle to remain true to oneself against all odds. We should not forget that throughout this feast, Gawain is still dealing as well with the knowledge that at some point in the near future, he must expect the conclusion of the violent game of strokes that has led him here in the first place. Ultimately, Gawain's story is one of identity development and testing—one which centralizes on the figure of

Gawain, but extends as well to the full Arthurian community, as becomes evident upon his return following the final test of the game of strokes.

Gawain returns to Camelot embarrassed and ashamed of his failure to successfully complete the game of strokes due to his choice to accept the girdle from Lady Bertilak rather than to rely on his faith. He is well-received: "Þe kyng kyssez þe knyȝt, and þe whene alce, / And syþen mony syker knyȝt þat soȝt hym to haylce" [The king kisses the knight, and the queen as well, / And many a comrade came to clasp him in arms] (ll. 2492-2493) and then he relates the story of his adventure to them, leaving nothing out and showing them the nick on his neck sustained at the hands of the Green Knight. He is presented as being humiliated, in much the same fashion as Arthur's earlier humiliation was constructed:

> He tened quen he schulde telle,
> He groned for gref and grame;
> Þe blod in his face con melle,
> When he hit schulde schewe, for schame. (ll. 2501-2504)
>
> [With rage in his heart he speaks, / And grieves with many a groan; / The blood burns in his cheeks / For shame at what must be shown.]

Then, as he displays the garter, his words are self-recriminating:

> 'Lo! lorde,' quoþ þe leude, and þe lace hondeled,
> 'Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,
> Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue
> Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf caȝt þare;
> Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,
> And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last;
> For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit,
> For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.' (ll. 2505-2512)

> [Behold, sir,' said he, and handles the belt / This is the blazon of the blemish that I bear on my neck; / This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there / For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there; / And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last. / For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit, / For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore.]

Gawain is clearly distressed by his moral failings as an individual, but he fails to consider the situation from a community vantage-point: the damages sustained to his pride are the collateral damage of the violence that his deeds have prevented from being visited upon king and court. We might read him as absorbing the violence, placing his reputation in its path to shield the court from it in an almost Christ-like act of love. His nobility and courtesy in taking on the game of strokes in Arthur's place may have revealed his own cowardice and coveting, but by doing so he has protected the overall community from the exposure of its collective weaknesses. In fact, he has done exactly what a knight of Arthur's court is meant to do—he has taken on the test, and taken the fall in status associated with that test, in order to uphold the honor of the community. For Arthur, this constitutes a major victory—a truth evinced in his glorification of Gawain's garter not as a badge of shame, but one of honor which the entire court will now adopt and wear as a symbol of unity and community. Gawain has not failed, but sacrificed himself for the greater good, as all truly great knights of Camelot should do. The garter, which represents Gawain's moral failings as an individual, thus paradoxically becomes a symbol of strength and purpose for the group: those wearing it pledge to uphold the honor of the community against all comers, as Gawain has done. Gawain's loyalty is rewarded with the loyalty of the community in a mutually-beneficial, if short-sighted, resolution to the immediate conflict. This is not a particularly reassuring ending, since it

upholds Arthur's right to subject his knights to constant testing and threats of violence both on and off the battlefield and therefore, signals that the court will continue to face similar instances of perhaps unnecessary violence in future; however, it also fortifies the overarching idea presented in the first feast of the poem and following through to this final one that however flawed an individual and his community might be it is better to forgive and resolve to move on together towards a better future, than to cast blame and allow the community to disassemble in the name of morality. The emphasis on loyalty in this earlier romance narrative reveals a socio-cultural focus on the importance of preserving alliances that is grounded in the individual's choice to uphold oaths of loyalty in order to maintain the community bond, which is a continuation of the kind of community building, assimilative work the earliest Arthurian narratives like Geoffrey's chronicle sought to perform. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, the focus is not on cultural assimilation and the alliance of nations through weddings and kinship—that is, not so much on a historical idea of nation-building—but rather, on the individual in relation to the community: an appropriate focus for a romance, as opposed to a chronicle, text. Turning to Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, we find a very different focus—no longer one on alliances and loyalty, but rather, emphasizing treason and the dangers of the interpersonal relationships and alliances that the earlier narratives actively promote and seek to establish and preserve. The latter sections of Malory's Arthuriad comprise a cynical narrative that maps out the failures of the Arthurian promise of peace and nationhood, beginning with an act of violence at a feast.

The Death of Arthur: Poison, Gender, and Treason at the Arthurian Feast

The scene of the poisoning of the knight at the feast in the "Lancelot and Guinevere" section of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* has received attention recently as one in which the limitations and failings of late-medieval British judicial activity are being examined and critiqued, and how it focuses a negative lens on the character of Guinevere.[146] I contribute to the ongoing scholarly attention to this particular feast the idea that it serves as a test of the individual and the community in terms of their reaction to treason in the form of violence, and that therefore examining the scene primarily for its negative portrayal of Guinevere's role as the queen presiding over the feast limits our ability to produce a culturally relevant reading of this scene in association with the overall narrative. In this scene, unlike those examined in chapter three of this dissertation in which the women actually do plan and carry out violent acts, the woman is

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[146] In a recent article, "Wounded Bodies: Kingship, National Identity, and Illegitimate Torture in the English Arthurian Tradition," Larissa Tracy uses the death of Arthur texts (The *Stanzaic* and *Alliterative* versions, as well as Malory's) as lenses for examination and critique of the medieval English justice system. Guinevere's trial-by-combat following the poisoning at the feast serves as the central scene around which her argument for a reconsideration of the commonly-held view of medieval political practices as inherently more torturous and barbaric than modern ones is structured. *Arthurian Literature* 32 (2015), pp. 1-29. I am indebted to Dr. Tracy for allowing me to read and make use of the manuscript version of this article in my dissertation. The negative characterization of Guinevere is found as early as 1960 with the publication of Charles Moorman's "Courtly Love in Malory" (*English Literary History* 27.3, pp. 163-176) and continues to be prevalent in much of the influential Malorian scholarship of the 1980s, including essays by Mary Etta Scott ("The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: A Study of Malory's Women" published in the Mid-Hudson Language Studies 5 (1982), pp. 21-29) and John Michael Walsh ("Malory's 'Very Mater of *Le Chevaler du Charyot'*: Characterization and Structure" published in *Studies in Malory*, ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo, 1985, pp. 199-226). More recently, feminist scholars like Sarah J. Hill have sought to reclaim Malory's Guinevere as a powerful and upright queenly figure ("Recovering Malory's Guinevere," in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (Routledge, 2002, pp. 267-278), while Kenneth Hodges urges a consideration of Guinevere from a political standpoint rather than a romantic one in "Guinevere's Politics in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104.1 (2005), pp. 54-79.

framed for an evil deed carried out at a feast which she in fact did not commit. Reading the figure of Guinevere at the feast against the women in the feasting scenes from *Beowulf* and the *Mabinogion* and against the mother-in-law in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the wife in *Clari's Saga*, shows us how differently her role as the unwitting source of violence functions by comparison, while considering her against earlier versions of this story reveals Malory's adaptations of the narrative to address the ways in which treason functions to undermine even those characters who seemingly are not (or, not yet) engaged in it. Such revelations shed light on the cultural contexts of Malory's choices as a writer during the treacherous Wars of the Roses, and on the relationship of Guinevere's characterization both to her own earlier iterations, and to other medieval literary women figures.

Ultimately, this feast scene and its aftermath demand a reconsideration of how we read the Guinevere figure in *Le Morte Darthur*. While she is customarily blamed as the source of the fall of Camelot for her adulterous affair with Lancelot, she is also presented in this feast scene as the source of violence not of her own making and therefore, her role transcends issues of gender and nobility. She is not merely the adulterous wife, the treasonous queen, or the unfairly pilloried woman; she is also an individual caught up in the ongoing struggles for authority and control at Camelot. This feast scene and its aftermath show us the limitations of power associated not simply with women in positions of authority, but more generally, with humans living together in a community, regardless of social position. When we focus specifically on this feast and trace the violence that occurs after it, Malory's work becomes a tapestry into which are woven the

anxieties not simply of women living in a man's world, but of human being in a world in which the prevalence of treason both horizontal—that is, between people of the same social standing—and hirerarchical, between ruling figures and their courtiers, means that there is no guarantee of safety, regardless of where you sit in the feast hall.[147]

In order to understand the changes that Malory makes to this scene which permit my claims, it is necessary first to consider its earlier versions. While the thirteenth-century French *La Mort le Roi Artu* is the original source for the scene, the fourteenth-century *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* presents the story in more or less the same terms, and a comparison of this text to the *Morte Darthur* suffices to show how Malory alters the narrative. Queen Guinevere sits to table to eat, with Sir Gawain seated to one side of her and an unnamed Scottish knight seated on the other. A squire "with a pyson þat he hath wrought" empoisons an apple intended for Sir Gawain. (842)[148] No motive is given for his wanting to kill Gawain. He places the apple on top of the basket of fruit and sets the basket before the queen, "For he thought the lady bright / Wold the beste to Gawayne bede." (848-849) However, "she it yaff to the scottisshe knight." (850) The other knights pull the Scottish knight's body onto the table, and Guinevere laments that she will be blamed for this death:

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[147] Megan Leitch identifies this dual nature of treason: "The more familiar hierarchical idea of treason in late medieval England rests in the legal definition of treason as an attempt to harm or kill one's king, master, husband, or prelate. In addition, however, horizontal betrayals of one's neighbor, brother-in-arms, friend, or even foe could be considered treasonous: according to the law of arms […] according to non-institutional ideas of betrayal of bonds of affinity or expectations of chivalric conduct; and, especially significantly, according to the concept of the commonweal, which gained political currency from c.1450 onwards […] Thus, treason was antithetical to community, and what community meant was shaped by ideas and accusations of treason as well as the other way around […] The romances of the Wars of the Roses are informed by both hierarchical and horizontal understandings of treason" *Romancing Treason*, 4.
[148] Citations from the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur* taken from J. Douglas Bruce's edition for the Early English Text Society (1903; rep. 1959).

> 'Wellaway!' than sayd the queen,
> 'Jhesu Criste! What may I sayne!
> Certis, now will all men wene
> My-self that I the knight haue slayne. (860-864)

The *Stanzaic* poet does not explain why Guinevere believes she will be blamed for his death. She administers first aid, but it is too late and the poisoned knight dies. He is buried, and on his tomb, "A Crafty clerke the lettres droughe, / how there lay the scottisshe knight / That queen Genure with poison slough." (877-879) After a short time, the dead knight's brother, Sir Mador, arrives at court, seemingly with no knowledge of his brother's fate, which he learns of upon entering the woods one day and coming across the tomb. He then returns to the court and formally charges Guinevere with his brother's death, setting into motion the events that reveal the extent of treason at Arthur's court and lead to its demise. The lack of explanation for Guinevere's certainty that she will be blamed for the knight's death and for why Mador is unaware of his brother's death show that the Stanzaic poet is not so much concerned with ensuring that the story follows through sensibly as he is in playing up Guinevere's role as suspected killer for effect.

In Malory's retelling of the story, such plot holes are carefully revised, creating a narrative that is more unified and thus, that draws attention not to what information is missing, but to what information is present: the depiction of the scene as revelatory of the treachery at court. Lancelot and Guinevere have an argument over their relationship which ends with Guinevere banishing Lancelot from court and Sir Bors counseling him to go to "the good ermytayge here beside Wyndesore" and await a signal of better tidings.

(XVIII.410v: 21-22)[149] Whereas the Stanzaic version simply says she is sitting to table, in Malory's version Guinevere "lete make a pryvy d[yn]ere in London"; this gathering is described further as "a grete feste of all maner of deyntees," to which she invites twenty-four knights of the Round Table to mask her sorrow at Lancelot's departure and demonstrate her equal love for the other knights ("all was for to shew outward that she had as grete joy in all other knyghtes of the Round Table as she had in sir Launcelot" XVIII.411r: 13-15). Rather than simply offering the fruit to the best knight, as in the Stanzaic version, Guinevere offers it because: "sir Gawayne had a custom [...] that he loved well all maner of fruyte, and in especiall appyls and pearys. And therefore whomsoever dyned other fested sir Gawayne wolde commonly purvey for good fruyte for hym. And so ded the queen; for to please sir Gawayne she lette purvey for hym all maner of fruyte." (XVIII.411r: 29-35) In retribution for the death of his brother Lamorak at Gawain's hands, Sir Pyonell "empoysonde sertayn appylls for to empoysen sir Gawayne." (XVIII.411v: 1-5) Over the course of the meal, however, Sir Patryse (as Malory has named the heretofore anonymous Scottish knight) grows tipsy from the wine and takes an apple to eat; the apple he chooses is one of the poisoned ones and "whan he had etyn hit he swall sore tylle h[e] braste, and there sir Patryse felle downe suddeynly dede amonge hem." (XVIII.411v: 10-12) The knights leap from the table "ashamed and araged for wratthe oute of hir wittis, for the wyste nat what to sey; considerynge queen Gwenyvere made the feste and dyner they had all suspeccion unto hir." (XVIII.411v: 13-

[149] All citations from Malory's *Morte Darthur* are taken from Vinaver, *Works*, second edition and follow Vinaver's organization of the materials by book, chapter, page side, and lines.

16) Gawain tells her, "all folks that knowith my condicion undirstone that I love well fruyte. And now I se well I had nere be slayne. Therefore, madam, I drede me lest ye woll be shamed," while, present at the event rather than learning about it later, "there opynly sir Mador appeled the queen of the deth of hys cousin sir Patryse"—Malory here converting the death of a brother into the death of a cousin. (XVIII.411v: 28-29) For their part, the rest of the knights stand dumb, unwilling to speak because they all suspect Guinevere of the poisoning. That poisoning, regardless of who performed it, constitutes an act of horizontal treason, so that the violence at this feast forces the community to acknowledge and deal with treachery at Camelot.

Significantly, Malory incorporates neither the *Stanzaic* version's description of Guinevere's certainty that she will be blamed for this deed, nor that of the Scottish knight's tomb and the words against Guinevere carved upon it. Instead, Malory writes Guinevere as both source and victim of the violence at the feast. She is unaware of the poisoned apple, and genuinely alarmed and upset by the knight's unexpected death. Unlike her Stanzaic counterpart, she does not immediately wail that she will be assumed the killer; it is not until after the knights have spoken of their suspicions that she begins to fear for her life. Whereas in the earlier narrative she is explicitly figured as the murderer by the writer, the other figures, and in her own words, with Sir Mador demanding justice for his brother's death by means of trial by combat, in Malory's version neither Malory nor Guinevere participate in her naming as killer, and Guinevere's guilt is to be determined by trial by combat, so that she becomes a suspect who must be put to trial, rather than a convicted killer who must pay for her crime. This presents a significant shift

in the story, and one that speaks to Malory's interests as a writer in depicting his figures as part of the larger narrative community rather than the central figures in their isolated episode. He is not so much invested in Guinevere's guilt, as in how everyone involved reacts to Sir Patryse's death—that is, how everyone negotiates this unexpected instance of violent treason, and its aftermath.

Because of his focus on the various ways in which the members of the court negotiate this act of treason, Malory is much more interested in the individual than is his counterpart author of the Stanzaic *Morte*, as evidenced in his own refusal to blame Guinevere openly for the death of the knight, and in his giving the knight a name, an identity, rather than simply referring to him by his country of origin. Because Malory gives each figure of the story a distinct identity, each figure can be read as an individual, and in this scene, we see individuals, as well as the overall community, negotiating Sir Patryse's death in very different ways. Gawain does not outright accuse Guinevere, but states that the circumstances do not look good for her: "My lady the queen! […] I drede me leste ye woll be shamed." (XVIII.411v: 17-21) The queen is struck dumb in shock: "Than the queen stood stylle and was so sore abashed that she wyst nat what to sey." (XVIII.411v: 22-23) By contrast, Sir Mador "opynly […] appeled the queen of the deth of hys cousyn sir Patryse." (XVIII.411v: 28-29) The other knights "stood they alle stylle, that none wolde speke a word ayenste hym, for they all had grete suspeccion unto the queen bycause she lete make that dyner." (XVIII.411v: 30-32) Malory's focus on the relationships in this scene connects it to the larger web of political intrigue grounded in the concept of treason that serves as the backbone for the overall *Morte Darthur* and,

indeed, that is at the heart of most of the later medieval English Arthurian tales.[150] Despite the fact that Sir Patryse has died eating an apple he might well have reached for, himself, Malory's Gawain negotiates the situation by explicitly reinforcing his relationship with Guinevere—"*my lady the quene*!"—and his words show him to be concerned with the repercussions of this moment for her. He displays here not only the courtesy for which the Gawain figure is famous but also, and more importantly, that his behavior suggests that, while like his fellow knights he harbors his suspicions, he does not reject his relationship with the queen over a situation that is not clearly her fault. Sir Mador, on the other hand, addresses and accuses Guinevere directly without the courtesy of calling her "my lady" or "my queen," refusing to acknowledge a specific relationship between them, even as he reinforces his blood ties to the dead knight: "for here have I loste a full noble knyghtr of my bloode." (XVIII.411v: 25) The other knights, we are told, remain silent at Mador's accusation because they suspect the queen of the deed, since she was giving the dinner. Their silence demonstrates that their alliance lies not with the queen, wife of the king, but with their fellow knight who is in the same threatened position as they are in the face of this death, and who has voiced their suspicions for them.

When the knights go to Arthur and Mador accuses the queen of treason, Arthur points out that as the king his relationship in the situation to everyone must be as judge;

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[150] See, for instance, Thomas Chestre's late-fourteenth century "Sir Launfal" in which Guinevere and Launfal both stand charged with treason (and Chestre, like Malory, deliberately develops the centrality of treason in his version of the story in comparison to its twelfth-century Anglo-Norman and thirteenth-century Middle English iterations). "Sir Launfal," in *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), pp. 190-218.

therefore, although he believes Guinevere to be blameless, he cannot fight on her behalf. He requests instead that Mador name the day for a trial by combat and that one of the other knights agree to fight on Guinevere's behalf as her champion. Mador's vocalization of their collective suspicion of the queen's guilt gives the knights the support they need to refuse Arthur's request for a champion—a refusal that otherwise could be viewed in itself as a treasonous act. In fact, Mador excuses them collectively by reminding Arthur that "though ye be oure kynge, in that degré ye are but a knight as we ar, and ye are sworne unto knyghthode as welle as we be. And therefore I beseche you that ye be nat displeased, for there ys none of all thes four-and-twenty knyghtes that were bodyn to thys diyner but all they have grete suspeccion unto the queen" (XVIII.412: 18-23) By reminding Arthur that he has sworn the same oaths of knighthood as the other knights, Mador reminds him of the alliance that binds them together. When he then turns to the other knights and asks them whether they will serve as Guinevere's champion, their collective "no," although justified, is also a sign that Arthur is no longer the unchallenged king of Camelot. In this moment, Arthur's vassals view him as a knight responsible for deciding who he will support—the knights siding with Mador in the charge of treason, or his wife and political partner, Guinevere. Mador presses his claim for justice while also continuing to use the initial violence that began this episode in ways that are destructive to the fabric of the community; in fact, his claim to want justice is really a thinly-veiled desire for vengeance. If he has his way, Guinevere will have no champion to stand for her in the trial by combat and thus, no choice but to be burned in an act of retribution for the death of his cousin. Mador's desire for vengeance, while couched in terms of making

certain that they abide by the justice system is not in the best interests of the community, since Guinevere's death will leave Camelot without the presence of a queen who passes out favors to her husband's knights, forging ties borne of patronage to strengthen the knightly community. Here is where Malory's construction of Guinevere as both source and victim of the violence at the feast is especially poignant, because her unwitting participation in the death of Sir Patryse may lead to her own death. In turn, her death, while intended as a form of justice for the knight's death, in fact ultimately will lead to the unraveling of the knightly community at whose heart Guinevere's patronage serves as a grounding force, despite the rumors and accusations that follow her. The focus of the court is not on her patronage as symbolic of her stabilizing presence and thus, her likely innocence, but on the fear of treason on an interpersonal level which the violence at the feast has uncovered as a primary motivating factor in the actions of the knights.

That Malory is particularly interested in the web of alliances in this scene and how they affect the negotiation of treason throughout the episode is clearest when we consider that in the Stanzaic version of events, Guinevere goes to Gawain and asks him to stand as her champion in this trial, and Gawain refuses because he witnessed the death at her supper and believes her to be guilty:

> And to syr gawayne than she yede,
> On knes downe be-fore hym felle […]
> 'Me[r]cy,' she cried […]
> 'Lord, as I no gilt haue of thys dede […]
> To-day [to] helpe me in thys need?'
> Gawayne answeryd […]
> 'Dame, saw I nat And sat be-syde,
> The knight what thou with poison slough? […]
> A-gayne the Ryght wille I not Ryde. (1357-1370)

Malory's version, however, omits this moment entirely; rather, once the knights collectively refuse to serve as her champion, Guinevere is ordered by Arthur to ask Sir Bors to stand up for her in the trial and there is no mention of asking Gawain in particular. This change to the narrative protects Gawain for the time being from having to refuse and thus, to cause strain in his relationship with Guinevere as his aunt as well as his queen, leading to greater dramatic intensity when he turns on her and Lancelot following his brothers' death at Lancelot's hands. It also has the added benefit of allowing Bors to exhibit both his loyalty to Arthur and Guinevere and also to Lancelot, whom he summons to fight in his stead as the best possibility of Lancelot's being re-accepted to court by Guinevere following his exile. While the other knights permit the initial poisoning to threaten the court by placing the queen on trial and possibly allowing her to be executed for treason, when he is pressed to take sides in the matter Bors negotiates the threat of violence by using it productively to bring an exiled brother-in-arms back into good graces. We see clearly here how violence in the form of Patryse's poisoning is being used destructively—to seek the queen's execution for treason—but also productively, as a means of permitting Lancelot to return to the court and resume his position as the queen's champion. Malory's interest in the individualized negotiation of violent situations therefore sets the poisoning scene in his *Morte Darthur* apart as an episode that highlights how the initial instance of violence at the feast and its aftermath can be used differentially for destructive and productive purposes by various characters: in this case, by Bors and Mador. This distinction raises the stakes for the reader, who has to determine which character to support and, by consequence, which values are most

significant—the protection of king and queen, loyalty, the upholding of knightly oaths, or personal honor—and for the textual community that is now thrown into opposing and competing camps along those same loyalty lines. This is only true in Malory's version of Guinevere's feast, and supports the idea that he revised the scene specifically to so interrogate the question of treason and its negotiation. Thus, Malory brings Guinevere's feast—already an inciting moment of violence in the earlier texts—into alignment with the overall narrative of the *Morte Darthur*, turning it into a sustained discussion of the continuous struggle required to uphold chivalric ideals in the face of treacherous human interactions that constantly threaten to undermine the community.

Traditionally, while battles and tournaments clearly pit knights against one another for the purpose of winning honor and acclaim, the feast is supposed to be a space of inclusion and community. When we trace the violence at the feast into the broader narrative in late medieval works like Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, we can see that in fact, the feast is also a space in which knights have to make choices in terms of their alliances. The feast, like any other human endeavor, is therefore a place where, when individual agency and personal desires meet unanticipated conflicts with community traditions, goals, and laws, each member of the community must negotiate that conflict by determining whether it is more important to uphold personal honor—as does Gawain; to strive for personal ambition—as does Mador; to uphold community beliefs—as does Arthur; to support another individual within the community in his or her own petition for honor, ambition, or authority because it is best for the community—as Bors does for Lancelot; or to support another individual within the community in his or

her own petition for honor, ambition, or authority because it is in one's own best interests to do so, as the twenty-four knights do in supporting Mador's petition.[151] Because individual figures always make alliances and decide what is in their best interests in tournaments and jousts, those scenes provide expected moments of such insight; however, here at the feast, we see a very different version of some of these figures, as I have I shown for instance to be the case with Sir Bors, which in turn requires us to be more circumspect in our determination of the true character of each figure. To illustrate this need for a reassessment of how we are reading Malorian figures based on how they have negotiated the violence at this feast, I turn in this final section of the chapter to the figure of Guinevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur* as a specific case study.

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[151] Reading the feast and its aftermath in this way calls for a reconsideration of the figures of Bors and Mador, in particular, and that reconsideration permits tenuous claims to be made about the origins of these figures; although for the purposes of time and space constraints these claims cannot be verified, they provide substantial material for future research to test and validate them; I therefore list them here not as findings for the dissertation itself, but as future projects. While many readers of the *Morte Darthur* might consider Bors a means to an end in his use of this situation as an opportunity to bring Lancelot back to court, reading through the violence at the feast and its aftermath shows us that Bors in fact can be construed as the knight exhibiting the most desirable forms of loyalty and honor, because he is the one who steps up to the occasion and uses the violence productively to support the community in its time of need; because Bors is Lancelot's cousin, Malory's admiration of the French tales might be extended to an admiration of the French figures in those tales, which would suggest that we by extension should reconsider Malory's Lancelot as being similarly possessed of loyalty and honor beyond that generally accorded to him. This suggests that Malory could have been impressed with French chivalric practices moreso than his own English ones. Mador de la Porte has tenuously been connected with an earlier Welsh Arthurian figure, Arthur's porter Glewlwyd ("Mador's epithet "of the Gate" suggests he might have been Arthur's porter. If so, Mador might be equated with Glewlwyd Mightygrasp who is Arthur's porter in medieval Welsh tales," "Mador," *Quondam et Futurus*, 3 August 2015. Web). Because as I show in chapter one characters in medieval Welsh narratives are more concerned with personal honor than the upholding of the community, Mador's preoccupation with gaining retributive justice against Guinevere, which would uphold his own honor as the victim of her alleged crime, is strongly suggestive of that possibility, which in turn would strengthen the argument that Camelot was a Welsh location, since Mador's Welsh alter-ego was Arthur's porter. .

Because Malory's Guinevere's response to the death of Sir Patryse is so different from the response of the Guinevere figure in either of Malory's source materials, he seems to be drawing from a different inspiration for her portrayal. Unlike the representation of Guinevere in the *Stanzaic Morte*, where she acknowledges immediately that she will be found guilty of the knight's death, Malory's Guinevere remains silent, and swoons in shock, then permits Arthur to make the arrangements for the trial by combat which will determine her fate. In this, as in her role as the unwitting source of violence performed upon the community, she is much like her Welsh counterpart Branwen from the second branch of the *Mabinogion*, who despite her position as a noblewoman has little control over her own fate, and who had no intention at any point of doing harm to anyone. A consideration of Malory's Guinevere in comparison with other literary women figures whose actions (whether intentional or not) turn into instances of violence at the feast suggests that she shares affinities with the Welsh presentation of women in such situations. Such a comparison indicates that there may be greater Welsh influence upon the Arthurian tradition than has been generally recognized. For instance, as I discuss in chapter three, in Chaucer's Middle English *The Man of Law's Tale* the mother-in-law intentionally calls for a massacre of her guests, while in the Old Norse *Clari's Saga* the queen again deliberately provokes violence; that in *Beowulf* the Thryth character also incites violence in the hall suggests that Germanic and Old Norse women causing violence in the hall do so for explicit reasons, in comparison to the welsh Branwen and Malory's figure of Guinevere, who do not intentionally cause violence. Caxton specifically mentions the Welsh oral tradition in the introduction to his edition of

Malory's *Morte Darthur*; this is mainly in reference to the place-names, with Camelot being associated as a Welsh location, although he also notes in passing a literary Arthurian tradition in Welsh.[152] Guinevere's passive negotiation of the violence at the feast, with its affinities to Branwen's negotiation of the violent aftermath of the feast in the Welsh Mabinogion and its very different portrayal in comparison to figures from Germanic texts and to its own earlier iterations, suggests that the figure of Guinevere might provide us with an avenue for considering Malory's largely-unrealized debt to the Welsh literary tradition. Regardless of whether this is the case, Malory's Guinevere is as much victim as source of the violence at her feast, and she is so not because of his source materials, but because Malory chose to revise her into such a figure. This particular presentation of Guinevere renders her a representation of how the intersection of personal honor and community needs in treacherous moments serves as a tension point in the stability of a chivalric community; it also forces us to consider the limitations of the governing codes of conduct to protect individuals from violence: in this case, the violence tied to accusations of treason. Like Sir Patryse, Guinevere becomes collateral damage in the ongoing struggle between the individual knights at court for recognition, honor, and vengeance for slights whether real or perceived, which all speak to the anxieties over treason which lie at the heart of this romance. Her importance to the narrative is not so

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[152] From Caxton's *Preface*: "[…] there can no man resonably gaynsaye but there was a kyng of thys lande named Arthur. For in al places, Crysten and hethen, he is reputed and taken for one of the nine worthy, and the first of the thre Crysten men […] And yet of record remayne in wytnesse of hym in Wales, in the toune of Camelot, the grete stones and mervayllous werkys of yron lyeing under the grounde, and ryal vautes which dyvers now lyvyng hath seen […] And many noble volumes be made of hym and of his noble knyghtes […] in Walsshe ben many, and also in Frensshe, and somme in Englysshe, but nowher nygh alle." (Vinaver cxlv)

much as the adulterous queen, as it is that she is here, the victim of violence targeted at someone else, entirely and therefore, finds herself at the mercy of forces beyond her control as much as does anyone at the table.

The instability of Camelot becomes most clearly visible, then, not in the adulterous affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, but in the way in which the individual knights, Guinevere, and Arthur, respectively, respond to the poisoning of Patryse. Because there is no true consensus for how the situation must be handled, there is no true consensus concerning how the law functions. Where there is no true consensus for how the law functions, there is room for doubt concerning the king's authority, each individual knight's position at court, and the relationship between the king, the queen, and the knights. Such doubt, in turn, provides room for dissent; and that dissent, for insurrection. Camelot is doomed not because Guinevere and Lancelot are sleeping together, but because despite the chivalric oath that binds the knights to Arthur, the wedding oaths that bind Arthur to Guinevere, and the patronage that binds Arthur, Guinevere, and the knights into a community, a poisoned apple can find its way into a bowl at the dinner table of a feast given by the queen.

This feast underscores the highly unstable nature of the Arthurian community by allowing Guinevere—the patroness of the knights and Arthur's queen, and therefore a woman whose position should provide a degree of security—to become unwittingly the central figure of instability in a scene that should have been a moment of greater unification among the knights, bringing them together in solidarity after the departure of Lancelot, who heretofore had been considered the polarizing force at Camelot. In fact,

this scene reveals that although Lancelot and Guinevere have been carrying on an illicit affair, there is much more involved in the instability at court than their dalliance. The concern Malory displays in his version of this feasting episode is not with Guinevere's innocence or guilt, but with the conflicting systems of governance that first, permit the poisoning to occur at all; second, result in an innocent woman's being accused of treason because of that poisoning; and third, permit the community to respond in very different ways to that accusation, rather than with one understanding of how things should be done. It is those conflicts in governance which ultimately permit Bors to bring Lancelot back to court; thus, those conflicts in governance ultimately lead to the discovery of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair and the fall of Camelot. Because these conflicts are present but are not so carefully developed in the earlier French and Stanzaic versions of the *Morte*, Malory appears to be responding to their presence differently than did earlier writers of this narrative. This difference suggests that Malory is using this episode to critique conflicting ideas of justice and the anxieties tied to treason in his own time.[153] The feasting episode in the "Lancelot and Guinevere" portion of Malory's *Morte Darthur* signifies the writer's deep ambivalence towards the systems of governance that permit the fall of Camelot and his own imprisonment.

This chapter has focused on two representative Arthurian romances in order to illustrate how an act of violence at the feast serves in each to illuminate the author's

[153] That Malory wrote the *Morte Darthur* while imprisoned for various charges of robbery, extortion, rape, and possible conspiracy against the king, and that he was the only prisoner who did not benefit from two general pardons issued by Edward IV, is well documented by his biographers, in particular P.J. C,. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993) and Christina Hardyment, *Malory: The Knight Who Became King Arthur's Chronicler* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

particular preoccpuations concerning the socio-political climate of Camelot. In the fourteenth-century *SGGK*, the focus is on loyalty and the tensions caused when loyalty and morality collide and force a community to evaluate which is more important. Arthur is shown to use violence to test his knights and force them to prove their loyalty and courage. However, when violence is presented from an external force at the initial feast and Gawain subsequently negotiates that violence on his own, it tests instead his moral fiber, and his failure to meet the challenge successfully shows that he is, indeed, a loyal and courageous knight, but one whose morality is questionable. Gawain's faltering moral integrity developed in the court in which he was raised and served, and thus upon his return to Camelot he serves as a figure who sheds light on the weak moral fiber of the court. Instead of acknowledging the fault, the court fails to see that this was a moral issue and instead embraces once again Gawain's courage and loyalty. Standing in solidarity, everyone adopts the garter as a symbol of that loyalty and courage, willfully ignoring the issue that led to its being bestowed upon Gawain in the first place, and this shows the instability at the heart of Camelot. The meaning of violence in this text, then, is to expose the moral weaknesses of the characters and force them either to face or to ignore those weaknesses, thus serving as a warning to the reader that loyalty and courage are only part of what constitutes a good knight. In Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur*, by contrast, the emphasis is not on loyalty, but on treason. The violence at the feast is unexpected and sudden, is misattributed to Guinevere because of personal bias and prior rumor, and serves to highlight the conflicts that lie at the intersection between the justice system, personal honor, and community integrity. The poisoning of Sir Patryse provides a

platform for considering the many ways in which such moments of treason show how alliances and personal relationships constantly threaten to undermine the overall chivalric and courtly community of Camelot. These representative instances of violence at the feast and its aftermath in Arthurian texts therefore point to a particular use of that violence on the part of each writer to critique various socio-political issues, and because each instance of violence holds a different meaning, we cannot point to "Arthurian violence" as a single concept. Reading the violence not in the battlefields and tournaments where they are expected, but in the feasts where they are not, shows us that violence in Arthurian texts is not excessive and gratuitous, but instead holds particular significance and meaning for each narrative and its readers.

CHAPTER VI

FEASTING THE GREENWOOD: OUTLAWS AND (DIS)ORDER AT THE FEAST

The first chapter of this dissertation considered the importance of identity, disenfranchisement, and authority as factors in violence in Welsh and Old English feasting scenes. In chapter two, I examined scenes of violence at the feast from a Latin chronicle and a Middle English narrative based on an Anglo-Norman chronicle, arguing that these feasts highlight postcolonial anxieties over who is, and who is not, a figure with authority and agency in the newly-formed community. Chapter three took a comparative look at the ways in which female gender and violence intersect at the feast in a Middle English and Old Norse romance, to argue that gender might not play as great a role in the decision to perform an act of violence at a feast as simply being a human in a tenuous position. In chapter four, I looked specifically at the ways in which violence at the feast is used as a motif for exploring issues of loyalty and betrayal in Middle English Arthurian romances. This final chapter brings the dissertation full circle, looking at the importance of identity, disenfranchisement, and authority as factors in violence at the feast in Middle English outlaw narratives to argue that at the center of such instances of violence lies a need for jutice or redress for insult or injury on the part of an individual with no other opportunity to gain it.

The eponymous main characters of the English outlaw tales are often read as "anti-heroes" who challenge the conventions of "chivalry, aristocracy, loyalty,

masculinity and militarism" to borrow Neil Cartlidge's list of the medieval values found in romance narratives.[154] Rather than engaging in courtly and chivalric endeavors, the outlaws participate in more mundane exploits—roaming about the English countryside and forests, entering archery contests, hunting and poaching, and generally behaving as tricksters—and scholarly work on these texts tends to focus on the historical and cultural significance of such scenes and motifs in the outlaw tales as evidence of their popular, folk origins which permit critics to label them as, essentially, anti-heroic, because they are not chivalric.

In comparison with their romance counterparts, the outlaw tales of medieval England are rarely associated with events such as the feast. However, in fact there are many instances of feasting and eating throughout these stories, suggesting that food and its consumption is as central to the outlaw tale as to the romance. Furthermore, the rise of interest in medieval material culture has seen a surge of interest in the topic of food and feast in outlaw studies.[155] This chapter contributes to the emerging scholarly

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[154] See Neil Cartlidge, "Introduction," *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 1-8: 1.

[155] Recent papers on the subject of food and feasting in medieval outlaw tales include Alex Kaufman, "Playing With Food: Medieval Manners and Unruly Behavior in the Domestic Space of Outlaw Tales," delivered at the International Association of Robin Hood Studies 9th Biennial Conference at the University of St. Louis, October 30-November 2, 2014; Eric Carlson, "Grendel's Eucharist: An Outlaw's Last Supper", Renee Ward, "The Social Contracts of 'Mete and drink' in the Tale of Gamelyn", Sarah Harlan-Haughey, "Blood on the Table: The Subversion of Fellowship in The Gest of Robin Hood", and Lorraine Stock, "'Let os was, and to mete': Preparing and Consuming Food as Signifiers of Class and Gender Identity in Select Ballads and Robin Hood Films," all delivered in the IARHS-sponsored "Food and Feast in Medieval Outlaw Texts" session at the 50th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, May 14-17, 2015; and Melissa Ridley Elmes, "Conduct and Character: The Overlooked Importance of Feast Scenes in the Medieval Robin Hood Texts", Sherron Lux, "Greenwood Gastronomy", and Ryan Naughton, "Feasting as Narrative Progression in The Tale of Gamelyn" in the IARHS-sponsored "Food and Feast in Medieval Outlaw Texts" session at the Southeastern Medieval Association Conference, Little Rock, Arkansas, October 22-24, 2015. A session on food and feast in post-medieval outlaw tales will be presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association conference in

conversation on food and feasting in outlaw narratives by considering the ways in which violence and feasting intersect in such tales. By charting the development of violence before, during, and in the aftermath of feasting scenes in three of the better-known outlaw narratives—*the Geste of Robin Hood, The Tale of Gamelyn* and *Hereward the Wake* I show how each seemingly isolated feasting scene serves as an anchoring plot point for the presentation of violence as a form of identity testing, either for the outlaws, themselves, or for those whom they have invited to the feast. In some cases, the violence falls along social or class-related lines; in others, along the cultural lines formed by the ongoing struggle to unify the Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon communities. In every instance, however, regardless of the root cause, the violence is tied to the socio-cultural concerns that lie at the heart of each story and its audience, concerns that fall largely along the lines of class and the ongoing identity confusion of postcolonial, post-Conquest England. In particular, these class and identity concerns are tied to the availability of modes of justice to the disenfreanchised members of a given community. As Richard Firth Green notes, in no case is the violence in the outlaw tales either "brutal" or "lawless"; rather, the outlaws operate according to their understanding of honor, which in turn is tied to bigger societal considerations of community and identity.[156] Outlaw tales—

Hartford, Connecticut March 17-20, 2016 and a session on medieval outlaw texts has also been proposed for the International Medieval Congress at Leeds, 4-7 July, 2016. A proposal is on the table (pun intended) for an edited collection of essays on the subject of food and feasting in outlaw tales, to be edited by Alex Kaufman, Melissa Ridley Elmes and Penny Vlagopulous and published in Ashgate's *Outlaws in Literature, History and Culture* series in 2018.

[156] Green writes that "thieves' honor means that when the outlaws spar among themselves (as they do with surprising regularity) their ritual violence is contained by a set of clearly recognized rules. Only in their dealing with outsiders, and particularly with those who are implicated in some way with the legal authority of the state, are those rules suspended." Richard Firth Green, "Violence in the Early Robin Hood Poems" in '*A Great Effusion of Blood"' Interpreting Medieval Violence*, eds. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thierry, and

often read as subversive “anti-romances”[157]—thus prove rather to be a different branch of the same ongoing literary debate about what it means to be English that is found in the chronicles and romances and often presented in terms of the negotiation of violence at feasts along cultural lines, as I have demonstrated most specifically in my example in chapter two of the Feast of Whitsun in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *HRB*. This final chapter therefore brings the often-marginalized outlaw tales into alignment with their more canonical counterparts, such as the Arthurian romances, arguing for a reassessment of their critical value by showing how they fit into the ongoing conversations on identity, authority, power, and agency that developed between and among medieval English texts throughout the post-Conquest to fifteenth century period.

Conduct and Character: The Feast Scene in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*

The tradition of the Robin Hood tales, dating back to their first appearance in late fifteenth century manuscripts including Andrew Wyntoun’s and Walter Bower’s chronicles and the texts of *Robin Hood and the Monk*, *Robin Hood and the Potter*, and *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*, holds that Robin is an Anglo-Saxon outlaw at odds with the corruption of the Anglo-Norman state and church officials.[158] However, this view appears

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Oren Falk (Toronto UP, 2004, reprt. 2015), 268-286: 271. I would take this argument a step further and add that this difference in how the outlaws conduct acts of violence among themselves versus with outsiders is because they meet the unreasonable demands placed upon the common people by a corrupt legal system with unreasonable force, and that in fact such response is still in keeping with their understanding of interpersonal and intercommunal conflicts.

[157] as by Cartlidge *et al* (2012); see n. 153 above.

[158] For discussion of the early manuscript traditions of Robin Hood, see Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, “The Chronicler’s Robin Hood” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2000) pp. 24-29; “Robin Hood and the Monk” in Knight and Ohlgren, pp. 31-56; “Robin Hood and the

to stem predominantly from a nationalist reading of the Robin Hood figure that has been passed down and upheld through several generations of scholars. Close reading reveals rather that the Robin Hood figure is much less evidently Anglo-Saxon in nature than he is a slippery signifier, a liminal figure passing effortlessly between the cultural divides as the need arises. Read against the feasts of English Arthurian romance, for instance, scenes such as Robin Hood's refusal to eat until a stranger arrives in the *Gest*—long recognized as a parallel to the Arthurian motif--and his disguised presence at the meal with the Sheriff and his wife in *Robin Hood and the Potter*—requiring that he deploy correct conduct in order to avoid being discovered—reveal themselves as being far from incidental to the narrative, or simply opportunities to showcase Robin Hood as an outlaw and a trickster figure. While, as this study shows, there is a normative aspect to feasting culture in the English romances, feast scenes like those in the Robin Hood tales offer a different perspective that derives from outside that norm, showing the feast not from the point of view of the victor, the noble host, or another privileged figure but from that of the outlaw--a figure not usually associated with the feast at all. In fact, such scenes provide important context for understanding the Robin Hood figure as embodying a variety of conducts in accordance with the situation at hand; one of those forms of conduct, of course, being violent in nature.[159]

Potter," in Knight and Ohlgren, pp. 57-79; "A Gest of Robin Hood," in Knight and Ohlgren, pp. 80-168; also Thomas Ohlgren and Lister Matheson, *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425-ca. 1600* (Tempe: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013).

[159] Interestingly, however, there is far more explicit and physical violence at the actual event of the feast in medieval romance than there is in the Robin Hood outlaw tales; although it is beyond the scope of the current study, a more developed comparative analysis between the feasts of the romances and the outlaw tales specifically may shed further light on the nature of medieval violence, particularly if tales from the

Robin Hood might thus be read not simply as an outlaw, an "anti-hero," or a trickster, but rather as a polysemic figure that cannot be defined by traditional social categories, savvy in his understanding of conduct mores and sophisticated in his ability to use this knowledge to read and respond to various social interactions. In him, readers might find a blueprint for handling a variety of situations not by adhering to customary modes of governance, but by manipulating them to serve a particular need. In order to read Robin Hood as such an exemplar, we must first understand that these tales deliberately construct him as living and acting outside of the accepted bounds of the social, legal, and religious codes within which thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literary figures were expected to operate, which is easy enough to do. But, we must also acknowledge that, in order to live and operate successfully outside of those governing codes, Robin Hood and his men often resort to instances of potential and actual violence against others that, although unlawful, prove to be ultimately productive and beneficial, rather than destructive, in nature. This understanding about their violence is more difficult for the audience to accomplish, because it suggests that the codes of conduct and etiquette by which societies are governed are limited in the authority they are able to confer, and that sometimes it is preferable to break free of these in order not to live without rules, but rather to construct a personal rule that is aligned with individual needs and desires. These texts therefore show different modes of authority in operation,

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same region and timeframe are juxtaposed against one another, which might help to illuminate why certain forms of violence occur in the romance as opposed to the outlaw tale in the literature of that time and place.

challenging the idea that authority is derived from a governing code rather than from the individual's decisions and choices.

Such a reading of their unlawful violence as being a productive force might be construed as anachronistically anarchist; however, I believe that for a fifteenth-century English audience dealing with ongoing religious and political corruption at the institutional level,[160] the idea that one must take personal responsibility for his or her actions because the governing codes and those who are expected to enforce them cannot be counted on would have been a welcome intervention.[161] In his behavior at the feast in the *Geste* Robin Hood shows the audience both how to construct one's identity beyond recognized social categories, and how to negotiate difficult moments when the codes that

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[160] The distinction between local and institutional corruptions is important, particularly in light of recent revisionist readings of English church history that argue that on a local level as concerns tending to parishioners' religious needs, the gentry and common folk did not believe the Church was corrupt, but rather that it was a structural, administrative problem. Edward Powell provides a good overview of the "judicial corruption, bastard feudalism and gentry violence" (30) which bled from the fourteenth into the fifteenth century, giving rise to more vigilante outlaw activity. "Law and Justice." *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*. Rosemary Horrox, Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 29-41. David Rollison points out that the "institutional church attacked by William Langland and others in the late-fourteenth century, and by William Tyndale and his evangelical colleagues in the 1520s and 1530s, *was* corrupt" (69). *Commune, Country, and Commonwealth: The People of Cirencester, 1117-1643* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011).

[161] Although the dating of the *Geste* is still in doubt, there is a scholarly consensus that it is unlikely to have been composed prior to 1400, and I agree with Stephen knight and Thomas Ohlgren that it is probably slightly later than that, although also probably composed at least in part of episodes gleaned from earlier tales. "Introduction: *The Gest of Robyn Hode*." *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2000), Pp. 80-89. For a good general social history of the period associated with the Robin Hood legend, see Jeremy Goldberg, *Medieval England: A Social History 1250-1550* (London: Hodder Arnold Publishing, 2004) and Rosemary Horrox, *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

should protect the individual instead leave him or her at the mercy of authorities who refuse to properly uphold their responsibilities to the people. Because he knows the rules in any given situation, Robin Hood can use those rules to his advantage, adhering to or breaking them as needed, so that he represents no single social order. Therefore, Robin Hood serves as a polysemic figure, one who can be read in a variety of ways because he fits in or makes his own way regardless of rank or situation—an important skill for a rapidly shifting socio-economic population like that of late-medieval England.

Three scholarly studies in particular support my characterization of Robin Hood as a figure intended to be read as operating intentionally beyond the trifecta of codes that governed much of medieval English literature —social, religious, and political—in order to showcase the possibility of personal agency and responsibility. First, Jess Bessinger's claim that the *Geste* is "class conscious and anti-ecclesiastical" like other major late medieval texts by Chaucer, Langland, and Gower sets the stage for my claim that Robin Hood's actions should be read as critical of established modes of governance such as the social and religious codes that were increasingly viewed as being under the purveyance of corrupt individuals in positions of authority.[162] Richard Kaueper adds to this the third rung, the legal system, arguing that the *Gest* is a "running commentary on the corrupt power of the sheriff in local society." [163] And finally, Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren synthesize these ideas to state that the poem "expressed in some detail a sense of the wrongs imposed by the alienated authorities of church, town, and state, and in that

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[162] "The *Gest of Robyn Hode* Revisited." *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*. Ed Larry D. Benson. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pg. 364.
[163] *War, Justice, and Public Order.* Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 335-336.

sense it connects with the fully-developed strains of the period and the tensions basic to the outlaw myth." [164] Beyond this, Douglas Gray's [165] and Knight's and Ohlgren's [166] observation that Robin Hood is described in the *Gest* with the same words used to describe both the knight ("curteyse and gentyll") and the sheriff ("prowde"), as well as his own men ("gode") and even God and Mary ("dere") lend credence to my argument as well; while these scholars focus on the possible significance of the number of times each adjective is employed, I want to point out that ultimately even if a term appears only once, it is sufficient to link his character to that of others described with each adjective—as such, Robin Hood is legible as a polysemic figure, characterized in association with other figures ranging from the holiest and most virtuous to the corrupt and most profane and thus, legible to audience members regardless of their own social position.

By insisting that Robin Hood not be associated with any given rank or order but rather, that he be read beyond social and class structures, this polysemic designation is significant to our understanding of the stories as critiquing the limitations of governing codes of conduct, and of Robin Hood as exemplifying the importance of acting in one's best interests in the face of those limitations in order to achieve a best personal outcome—a fact most clearly evident in how he handles himself during the ordinarily highly-ritualized and code-governed event of a feast. Following Alex Kaufman's contention that "food in [the] outlaw narratives […] can serve as an ingredient for

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[164] "Introduction," pg. 86.
[165] "The Robin Hood Poems." *Poetica* 18: 1-39: pg. 25.
[166] "Introduction," pg. 85.

disruption"[167] and extending this idea to read the feast where said food is served as disruptive of the social order and, ultimately, the overall narrative, a close reading of the first feast in the *Gest of Robyn Hode* provides an example of how reading him as a polysemic figure works to overturn traditional views of Robin Hood as merely a trickster or outlaw, in support of a greater scholarly appreciation of these stories as critical of the *status quo* and suggestive of ways to circumvent corrupt power systems.

The whole of the First Fytte of the *Geste* is devoted to the preparations for and execution of a feast. The slippery nature of Robin's character is showcased with virtuosic precision throughout the Fytte. The scene opens in Barnesdale wood, where Robin, described within two stanzas as being of "freborne blode" (2), a "gode yeman" (3), and a "proude" (5) and "curteyse outlaw" (7), leans against a tree.[168] Little John urges him to dine, but Robin replies that "to dyne I haue no lust / Tyll I haue some bolde baron / Or some vnketh gest" (22-24); Robin's reply to Little John aligns himself with King Arthur, who famously refuses to eat until he has encountered some stranger or marvel.[169] However, after this remark, in which he associates himself with a famed King, Robin then adds, "[Here shal come a lord or sire] / That may paye for the best/ Or some knygot or some squyere, / That dwelleth here by west" (25-27).[170] It becomes clear that, rather

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[167] "Playing With Food: Medieval Manners and Unruly Behavior in the Domestic Space of Outlaw Tales." Paper delivered at the IAHRS Biennial Conference, University of St. Louis, October 30-November 2 2014.
[168] All line numbers from *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* refer to Wynkyn de Worde's edition (c. 1506) in Ohlgren and Matheson, 2013.
[169] Most famously in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Borroff, 2010: ll. 85-106) and in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, for instance at the Grail feast (Shepherd, 2004: 498).
[170] The line "Here shal come a lord or sire" is not found in Wynkyn's edition, but is added by Knight and Ohlgren based on evidence that it was accidentally dropped. See Knight and Ohlgren 2000: 91; Ohlgren and Matheson 2013: 94 n. 24.

than hosting the stranger at a feast and demonstrating his own *largesse* as would the king he has invoked, Robin intends to trick his visitor into thinking he is being feasted, then to force the stranger to pay for the meal. While in giving the feast Robin will be adhering to a time-honored ritual of welcoming a stranger to one's home, in forcing the stranger to pay for that feast he will also be subverting that ritual and capitalizing on someone else's fortune in order to dine so well. Robin therefore disrupts the expected feast narrative by playing all of the required roles at once, constructing himself as both noble, kinglike host and trickster, outlaw guest—that is, as a polysemic figure that cannot be pinned down to a single category of behavior.

Within the first seven stanzas of the *Geste*, then, Robin is characterized as a freeborn man, a forester, an outlaw, a nobleman, a king, and a tricky swindler. In the next stanza, he is further described as a pious man who hears three Masses daily before a meal (31-32), and following this revelation we are also told that because of his devotion to the Virgin Mary and for fear of committing a deadly sin, "Wolde he neuer do company harme / That ony woman was ynne" (38-39). When Little John asks him to furnish a code by which the men should prepare the feast ("Where we shall take where we shall leue [...] Where we shall robbe where we shall reue / Where we shall bete and bynde" [44-47]), Robin replies that no harm should be done to farmers, yeomen, or upright knights and squires:

> Ther of no fors sayd Robyn
> We shal do well y nough
> But loke ye do no housbonde harme
> That tylleth with his plough
> No more ye shall no good yeman

That walketh by grene wode shawe
Ne no knight ne no squyer
That wolde be a good felawe (48-55)

Instead, he instructs them, “these bysshoppes and thyse archebysshoppes / Ye shall them bete and bynde” (56-57) and also that “the hye sheryfe of notynghame / hym holde in your mynde” (58-59). When they have beaten and bound any bishops or archbishops they have come across, and always on the lookout for the Sheriff of Nottingham, Little John, Much, and Will Scarlett are to “walke up to the sayles / and so to watlynge street / and wayte after some vnketh gest […and] Brynge hym to lodge to me” (68-74).

The many aspects of Robin’s character are piling up by this point—while he is pious, devout, and possessed of the desire to protect women and hard-working men, these positive traits do nothing to hinder his ruthless ordering of brutal treatment of church officials. Although we are not told why he gives these particular orders, the overall medieval Robin Hood tradition provides plenty of context for reading this action as a response to the corrupt nature of such officials, and this literary context is supported by historical record of widespread violence and corrupt activities among the English clergy throughout the thirteenth century which saw the development of the early Robin Hood canon.[171] Thus, Robin Hood can be read as both corrupt and upstanding, as both one who punishes those who live outside of the governing codes, and one who himself lives

[171] In an important but overlooked study, James R. King outlines in particular the widespread violent activity of bishops and lesser clergy, alike, during the baron’s war, or Simon de Montefort’s rebellion. Indeed, King links it directly with the often-violent characterization of the Friar Tuck figure from the Robin Hood legend. “The Friar Tuck Syndrome: Clerical Violence and the Baron’s War.” *The Final Argument: The Imprint of Violence on Society in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Donald J. Kagay and L.J. Andrew Villalon, Eds. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), pp. 27-54.

outside of those codes. An outlaw with no social standing, a noble leader of his men but not recognized as noble by others, and a man who abides by high standards of being and behaving and also lives outside of the governing codes of conduct and engages in outlawry, Robin Hood lives beyond understood social organization, conducting himself as a nobleman as much as an outlaw: he is at once possessed of no authority, and all authority. This classless and lawless status permits him to do what common men can only dream of doing—to hold accountable and to punish corrupt legal and religious officials who cause difficulties for people who try to live by the codes of conduct and law that they, themselves, flaunt because they can. This multi-faceted status works not because he is an outlaw, which is a figure with a specific social standing, but because he is polysemous, a figure whose slippery characterization permits him to live beyond even his designation as an outlaw—to construct a life for himself based on his needs and desires, and fueled by his own moral code, which proves to be highly situational in nature. The text appears to suggest that if Robin's moral code can be reworked according to situation, the audience's moral code can and should be situationally reworked in a similar way.

When Little John brings Robin Hood a knight of sorrowful countenance to share his table, Robin greets him nobly, "Welcome, syr knyght […] welcome thou arte to me" (116-117); the men engage in the familiar pre-feasting washing rituals described in conduct books like Caxton's *Book of Courtesy* and the 1475 *Babees Book*: "They wasshed togyder and wyped bothe/ and set tyll theyr dynere" (124-125), an act that both underscores Robin's own noble upbringing and ensures that the knight is treated according to his proper status. They dine in kingly fashion:

> Brede and wyne they had ynough
> And nombles of the dere
> Swannes and fesauntes they had full good
> And foules of the reuere (126-129)

There is no mention of other individuals; although the knight greets Robin by saying to him, "God the saue […] and all thy fayre meyne" (122-123), suggesting that other men are present. Because Robin Hood sent Little John and Much to find the stranger, saying he would have the dinner ready when they arrived, there is an ambiguity of community in this meal: who caught and killed these beasts? Who prepared them? Who baked the bread? Where did the wine come from? Who served this meal? There are no answers to these questions present in the text. The usual relationship between lord and servants is blurred, and there is even the possibility that Robin Hood, himself, prepared some or all of this feast, conflating him yet again as a polysemic figure; he is lord and servant and feaster and preparer of the feast, as well as host and guest. The blurring of social statuses within Robin as a polysemic figure draws attention to the artificiality of social structures and classes, asking the reader to consider the nature of nobility, gentry, and commoner, and whether and why such designations matter in one's interactions with others.

When the meal has ended, the knight offers to return the favor by having Robin to feast at his expense sometime in future; Robin Hood here springs upon him his expectation of being so feasted now: "pay or ye wende […] Me thynketh it is good ryght / It was neuer the maner by dere worthy god / A yeman pay for a knght" (144-147). When the knight claims that he has "nought in my cofers […] That I may profer for shame" (148-149) Robin sends Little John to see whether this is true or not and

immediately shifts his position, stating that if it is true that the knight is possessed only of ten shillings, “I wyll not one peny” (157); further, if the knight needs more money, “more shall I len the” (159). No mention is made of what will happen should the knight prove to be lying, which is a significant omission that supports the claim that Robin conducts himself according to each situation, rather than according to an overarching code. In this moment, the knight is being tested, but is also being given the benefit of the doubt. If he proves to be honest in his words, then Robin will help him; if not, then Robin will decide on a to-be-determined different course of action, rather than a preordained one. Robin’s decision here is a silent rebuke of the legal system with its established codes predetermining what punishment occurs for what given situation; his justice is generous and humane by comparison, because it allows for the moral fluctuations of individuals rather than relying on a predetermined morality of an entire social class.

When the knight proves to be telling the truth, Robin orders his glass refilled and coaxes his story out of him, first ascertaining his character: “I trowe thou were made a knight of forse / […] And okerer or elles a lechoure” (178-182)—was he pressed into military service, or did he engage in immoral acts such as usury or lechery which would have necessitated his conscription? The knight responds that “my aunsetters knyghtes haue be” (187); he comes from an old family but has taken a financial hit due to his son’s accidental killing of a Lancaster at a joust: “I had a sone for soth […] when he was twenty winter olde / In felde wolde Iuste full feyre / He slewe a knight of lancastshyre” (204-208). To save his son he has sold all of his possessions: “for to saue hym in his right / my goodes both sette and solde” (210-211), and his lands are now held in security by an

abbot: “my londes beth sette to wedde / to a ryche abbot here beside” (212-214); he requires 400 pounds to have them released back to him: “What is the sommesayd Robyn / Trouthe than tell thou me / Syr he sayd foure hondred pounde / the abbot tolde it to me” (216-219). The knight therefore reveals himself as an upstanding figure who has fallen on hard times through no fault of his own, but rather because he adheres to the governing judicial system, which has failed to protect his interests in order to protect the interests of a corrupt church official.

Learning that the knight is the victim of a corrupted use of power on the part of authorities, Robin without hesitation orders Little John to produce from his coffers the full sum owed, brings the knight yards of cloth to replace his threadbare clothing, and outfits him with a new horse and saddle, golden spurs, and Little John as a servant for the knight’s return trip (264-321). Where Robin’s original intention was to swindle the knight into providing a meal for him, Robin now displays that this was an entirely unnecessary action; he has wealth enough, however ill-gotten, to provide for the knight instead. In this scene, Robin Hood acts as a lord and patron, a bondsman, and a merchant. However, although he gives money in a demonstration of lordly *largesse*, it is solely to benefit the knight and not in exchange for an oath of loyalty and service. While he serves as a bondsman, he exacts no security in exchange for the money required to lift the knight from his debts. While he produces a merchant’s wares, he does not charge for them as a merchant would. Yet again, then, Robin displays a range of incongruous traits that cross social classes and orders, and thus aid in his polysemous characterization. Because he is not governed by the ordinary codes of conduct associated with any of these positions—

codes which would necessitate mutual benefit—Robin is able to behave with true charity and kindness towards the knight, despite his original intention to swindle and cheat the knight of his monies. The knight proving to be uncorrupt and worthy, Robin answers in kind by eschewing the ordinary mutuality of such a transaction in order to express true, uncorrupted charity.

While other scenes in the *Geste* showcase Robin Hood's cutthroat and ruthless outlaw activities, the loyal camaraderie he shares with his men, and his trickster qualities, this feast demonstrates the full and complex range of Robin Hood's character, revealing him not to be simply an outlaw (however noble), a trickster, or an "anti-hero"—the usual categories to which he is assigned by the readers of his tales—but rather, a polysemic figure: a noble and courteous lord, a proud and cunning outlaw, a freeborn man, a good yeoman, a ruthless cutthroat, a defender of women and of the morally upright and hard-working, a pious and devout worshiper of Mary and God, a punisher of corrupt authorities, yet himself a figure both of authority and of a lack of authority, a host, servant, and guest at the feast, a patron, a merchant, a bondsman, and even a king. As a figure representative of all walks of human life, Robin is beholden to none of them; he falls beyond the categories and boundaries of society and thus, beyond the governing codes that prescribe who people are and how they should behave and that are so easily manipulated by corrupt officials for personal gain. Because he does not ascribe to and cannot be tied to any single social category, Robin provides a template for living not by the established codes of conduct and character that tie people to a prescribed social organization, but as a human being who must determine for himself what constitutes right

and wrong and how to behave toward another person in any given situation. This feast and its aftermath demonstrate late medieval cultural anxieties concerning the limited authority of the codes governing Church and State, as evidenced by their manipulation by corrupt authorities for personal gain. Robin Hood's behavior in the *Geste*'s feast by comparison demonstrates the necessity of relying on personal agency for the answers when those officials and their codes fail to support members of a community. In some ways, read thusly as a resourceful and socially-pluralistic figure, Robin Hood, a highly subversive and heterodox figure for some audiences of his time,[172] might be viewed as an early medieval precursor of the Renaissance Man and, by association, of the humanist approach to learning and living that, although under attack by those who prefer dogmatic approaches to governing codes, still serves as a cornerstone of modern Western society.

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[172] For discussion of Robin Hood as a subversive figure see A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), esp. chapters 7 & 8, and Vera Nunning, "Fictions of Collective Memory." *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 21: Literature, Literary History, and Cultural Memory*. Herbert Grabes, ed. (Göttingen: Hubert and Company, 2006), pp. 305-330.

The Tale of Gamelyn:

Brother-on-Brother Violence and the Problem of Cleric-Laity Associations in Fourteenth-Century England [173]

It is not possible to discuss violence of any sort in the medieval outlaw tradition without considering the *Tale of Gamelyn*, since, although it has been called a "conservative story"[174] in terms of its presentation of early English politics it is widely acknowledged as one of the most violent of the outlaw tales.[175] However, as Knight and Ohlgren point out, scholars suggest that the violence in the *Tale of Gamelyn* has a purpose to it; for example, J.A.W. Bennett and Douglas Gray refer to it as "rough

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[173] The *Tale of Gamelyn* dates to about the middle of the fourteenth century and is found in twenty-five medieval manuscripts of the C and D family of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; however, Knight and Ohlgren warn us to be leery of assuming that this relatively large number of extant manuscripts of the text signal any degree of popularity, focusing rather on its importance as a possible second tale for the Cook.[173] The origin for the *Tale* is unknown, although careful philological work suggests that it derives from a location with a high Scandinavian population, such as Lincolnshire or Leicestershire. (Knight and Ohlgren, "Introduction," pg. 184) Although this does not fit in with the overall argument of this dissertation, my reading of the feast in the *Tale of Gamelyn* may shed light on the question of narrative origin, because, if the feasting violence in this text can be shown to hold affinities with particularly Scandinavian forms of violence as outlined in the case studies on *Beowulf* and *Clari's Saga* in earlier chapters, then there is likely a more explicit link between the tale and that culture than has heretofore been shown; similarly, if the feasting violence has more in common with Anglo-French or Anglo-Norman instances, that would support the idea of an Anglo-French original set forth by W.W. Skeat. (Knight and Ohlgren, "Introduction," pg. 184) Richard Kaeuper's argument that it is meant for an audience whose "horizons are essentially local" ("An Historian's Reading of the *Tale of Gamelyn*," *Medium Aevum* 52 (1983): pp. 51-62: 53) and John Scattergood's characterization of this as a "precious text" that "preserves intact and unmodified certain attitudes and assumptions, characteristic of a provincial culture and a gentry class which … felt itself to be threatened by encroachments against its traditional privileges and local ways, which it intended to preserve by any means that were necessary" ("*The Tale of Gamelyn*: The Noble Robber as Provincial Hero," in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carole Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994): pp. 159-194: 190) further support this possibility by locating the *Tale* as one meant for a particular audience in a particular time and place and therefore rendering it possible to read the violence in the feast scene as more culturally specific than it has heretofore been considered as being.

[174] Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 93.

[175] As J.A.W. Bennett and Douglas Gray note, "all the emphasis is on action—chiefly in the shape of brawls." *Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 162.

justice."[176] The medieval outlaw tales in general, and the *Tale of Gamelyn* in particular, attract critical sympathy for the reasons behind violence enacted by their eponymous characters that is generally not found in studies of the violence in their romance counterparts. That sympathy appears to lie in the idea that the violence—while, of course, undesirable—is undertaken with the intention to right a wrong; therefore, that it is understandable, if not necessarily excusable. Thanks to film adaptations like the popular 1938 film "The Adventures of Robin Hood" modern readers, in particular, are more likely than not to view outlaws like Robin Hood and Gamelyn through a romantic lens that considers their violent deeds as righting the wrongs done to the common folk in the absence of their king. However, the recovery efforts of medieval literary scholars of the outlaw narratives show that, in fact, the violence in these texts is much more complex and personal in nature. In the *Tale of Gamelyn*, for example, violence is certainly used in an effort to right the wrongs that have been done to the eponymous character—however, those wrongs have been enacted not by a corrupt government, but by his own, greedy older brother. Gamelyn participates not in the romantic and altruistic stealing from the rich to give to the poor action often associated with the outlaws by modern readers but rather, in ongoing efforts to regain control of his own, neglected lands and restore his own social and legal standing following his brother's appropriation of his property through legal, albeit corrupt, means. Because of this focus on the intersection of family dynamics with a legal conflict, the *Tale of Gamelyn* might profitably be read alongside,

[176] Bennett and Gray, p. 163, quoted in Knight and Ohlgren, p. 188.

for example, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* as a narrative in which a character uses violence to thwart a family member whose actions threaten to drastically alter one's socio-political position and thus, one's power and agency.

The *Tale of Gamelyn* is a story of the failure of inheritance laws, the chivalric code, and religious codes of conduct to stay the corruption of the individual human being in the face of temptation and personal gain. From the beginning, this tale concerns itself with the repercussions of a legal system that fails to provide for all parties involved. Gamelyn, the youngest of three brothers, is left out of the family inheritance, despite his father's desire that he be provided for. Instead, he lives in the home of his eldest brother until he comes of age and realizes that what should have been his portion of their father's lands has been mismanaged to ruin, at which point his brother violently turns upon him. Gamelyn next becomes a knight, but his actions are far from the chivalric ideal as he uses this position and the authority it provides him with to seek violent revenge and restitution upon his eldest brother. Gamelyn appeals to the monks who visit his brother's house for aid, but they are too preoccupied with the meal before them to intercede upon his behalf, culminating yet again in a violent altercation between Gamelyn and his would-be oppressors. Little wonder, then, that Nancy Mason Bradbury argues that Gamelyn "is not the anti-hero of a chivalric romance, but rather the genuine hero of a vehemently anti-clerical, mildly anti-chivalric, and deeply anti-authoritarian popular tale."[177] At every step of the narrative, Gamelyn struggles against a set of legal and conduct codes that leave no

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[177] Nancy Mason Bradbury, "Gamelyn," in *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 129-144: 130.

room for the person not in control of the lands, the home, the meal, or the commodities served at that meal to maneuver for a better socio-cultural standing or to seek redress for wrongs done to him; as Bradbury notes Gamelyn is either treated to "bonds or blows,"[178] either fettered or flayed at the orders of those possessed of more authority than he has, although not necessarily higher social standing.

Gamelyn ultimately conducts vigilante justice against his brother and his brother's allies because the actual justice system leaves no room for consideration of his unacknowledged rights. The two banquets which appear at the heart of this *Tale* in the third *Fitt* bring this reality most clearly to the reader's attention. I do not read these banquets, as Bradbury does, as scenes of mealtime violence exaggerated for "carnivalesque" effect,[179] which I think lessens their impact as social commentary by relegating them to the folk tradition that critics historically dismiss as less worthy of our attention because less important within their own culture in comparison to other texts like the romances. Rather, this chapter suggests that the banquets in the *Tale of Gamelyn* are moments in which the feast, an event that should be a moment of community and bonding, becomes instead the scene of a violent altercation intended to reset the *status quo* by punishing those who have already transgressed against it in overstepping their authority. This use of the feast for the purposes of enacting violence upon one's oppressor works because it is an unexpected site for such violence, bringing the element of surprise into play. Gamelyn's violence is not gratuitous, but meaningful; he conducts it

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[178] Bradbury, "Gamelyn," pg. 138.
[179] Bradbury, "Gamelyn," pp. 136-139.

in a calculated and intentional fashion toward a specific end. The characterization of Gamelyn's violent deeds as intentional and meaningful, rather than senseless and excessive, aligns the violence before and at the feast in the *Tale of Gamelyn* with the violence in each of the other texts examined in this dissertation, while the corrupt behaviors of the clergy which elicit that violence are closely aligned to similar textual scenes of clerical corruption at the feast in *Piers Plowman*, a decidedly non-carnivalesque contemporary text. These affinities recommend a closer reading of the *Tale of Gamelyn* for the ways in which it might contribute to scholarly conversations on violence and clerical corruption in medieval English texts.

The seemingly-unnecessary violence with which Gamelyn deals with the porter at the gate at the opening of the first banquet is the first element that Bradbury uses to classify the scene as carnivalesque in nature. When the porter refuses to let Gamelyn enter, Gamelyn "smote the wikett with his foote and breke awaie the pyne;" then, when the porter runs from him, Gamelyn tells him "by my feye […] that travaile is ylore, For I am of fote as light as thou if thou haddest it swore" (296-300). He chases the porter down and "girt him in the nek that the boon to-brake, / And toke hym by that oon arme and threwe hym in a welle, / seven fadme depe as I have herde telle." (302-304). While we can certainly read this as a moment in which Gamelyn unnecessarily takes his anger out on the porter, we should also remember that Gamelyn sees the porter as intentionally obstructing his efforts at seeking justice for the wrongs done to him; the porter represents the system that has kept Gamelyn locked out of his own inheritance. The violence may be excessive, but it is not senseless, there is a clear purpose to it: Gamelyn uses violence as a

tool to remove the first of the barriers between him and what he views as his rightful cause.

After dealing with the porter, Gamelyn leads his menyé into his brother's hall, where he plays host in his brother's stead, saying to them:

> Ye be welcome without eny greve,
> For we wil be maisters here and axe no man leve.
> Yesterday I lefte […]
> In my brothers seler five tonne of wyne;
> I wil not this company partyn atwynne,
> And ye wil done after me while sope is therinne;
> And if my brother gruche or make foule chere,
> Either for spence of mete and drink that we spende here,
> I am oure catour and here oure alther purs,
> He shal have for his grucchingr Seint Maries curs […] (313-320)

Bradbury reads this scene as a "transgression of boundaries and the replacement of fasting by feasting."[180] While it is certainly a transgression of boundaries, though, I think Jones is more correct in his estimation of the moment as an instance in which Gamelyn, coming into his own physically, oversteps his bounds not in a carnivalesque way so much as in a way calculated to get his brother's attention and take from his brother what he feels was taken from him—an act of reciprocal justice.[181] In other words, finding himself at the mercy of his brother and without recourse to social or legal means of justice, Gamelyn takes matters into his own hands in a violent vigilante move calculated to demonstrate that he is, in fact, not as powerless as he seems, because he does know how to use violence to achieve his aims. Reading it this way brings the scene into line with the

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[180] Bradbury, "Gamelyn," p. 136.
[181] Timothy Jones, *Outlawry in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 140.

other feasts found throughout this study, illustrating yet again the nature of the medieval literary feast which erupts into violence; it is not an excessively violent scene exaggerated for comic or sensational effect, but one that showcases how the social and political codes leave little room for the handling of interpersonal conflicts like those created by family members, especially when there are corrupt figures of power involved in their interpretation and upholding, forcing the individual to act outside of the accepted codes of conduct. The unexpected nature of violence at the feast makes it particularly suited to highlighting such concerns. Gamelyn's violence erupts as a result of his frustration with his unjust treatment at his brother's hands, as much as it reveals a desire to make his brother look bad in the eyes of his supporters.

For his part, Gamelyn's brother waits until the guests have parted, and Gamelyn "stood anon alone frend had he noon" (346), then, "Gamelyn was taken and ful hard ybounde" (348) at which point his brother asks him, "Who made the so bold / For to stroien the stoor of myn household?" (351-352) When Gamelyn replies that he has done so in response to the brother's wasteful stewardship of his rightful property, his brother responds that he will make Gamelyn his proper heir. However, demanding that Gamelyn first atone for the death of his porter, the brother ties him hand and foot to a post, leaving him to languish there without food or drink and spreading rumors that he is tied up by reason of insanity. The steward, Adam, takes pity on Gamelyn and unties him, giving him food and drink, then suggests a plan by which Gamelyn may employ violence to coerce his brother into yielding to his demands during Sunday's banquet, at which many religious clerics will be present. He will petition for the clerics' mercy, and either they

will have him released from bondage, or Adam will help him beat them with staffs. Gamelyn agrees to the plan, which sets up the next feast as a potentially violent occasion, with the violence not stemming from outside the feast hall—as was the case with the first feast when Gamelyn entered the hall with his menyé, slaying the Porter to gain entry—but rather, from within the hall, which brings with it the element of surprise. The conflict between Gamelyn and his older brother is thus scheduled to come to a climax at that feast, whether for good or for ill, and this in turn creates suspense within the narrative as the reader wonders what the outcome will be.

As the guests "both leest and mest" enter the hall for the banquet, they "casten her yen on yonge Gamelyn" who stands tied to the post as they walk into the hall (456-458). Gamelyn serves therefore as a warning to those who would enter the hall with bad intent, but also functions as a spectacle, an unusual sight for everyone to focus on. He also becomes a talking-point about how to deal with violence at the feast?, as his brother takes the occasion to "of Gamelyn … he tolde hem with mouthe / Al the harme and the shame that he telle couthe" (461-462). Because he is tied fast to the post and cannot act, Gamelyn appears to be a contained threat to the community, his presence signaling his brother's ability to keep the peace and prevent further disruption and disorder. However, after a few courses have been served Gamelyn demands that he, too, be fed, at which point his brother tells the feasting guests that "Gamelyn was wode" (468). At this, Gamelyn embarks upon Adam's plan, pleading that the clerics have him released, but their response is unanimously that they would rather he be dead than freed, and that any

who would free him ought to be cursed. Gamelyn, sizing up the situation, declares his position in association with the other figures currently in the hall:

> ‘Ow!’ Seide Gamelyn, ‘so brouke I my bone!
> Now have I spied that frendes have I none
> Cursed mote he worth both flesshe and blood,
> That ever doth priour or abbot eny good!’ (485-489)

Because they have turned their backs upon him in his time of need, Gamelyn determines that the priors and abbots are as worthy of being cursed as he is in their eyes. Declaring that he has no friends in the hall, he creates an antagonistic space in which it is him-versus-them, and clearly states that they deserve no good to be done to them, signaling his intent to see that they are treated badly if it is in his power to ensure it. In the absence of mercy or a legal system that will permit Gamelyn to be heard and properly treated, he chooses to take matters into his own hands and enact a vigilante form of justice that will not end in the death of his enemies, but certainly in their pain and humiliation—the same characteristics of his own treatment at their hands. This is far from the altruistic violence so often associated with the medieval outlaw figures by modern audiences; Gamelyn’s actions are very much in line with the usual uses of violence by a medieval figure: they are intended to control, to constrain, and to manipulate, his enemies into submitting to his will.

Adam, hearing Gamelyn’s words, decides it is time and brings two staves to the hall. Gamelyn casts off his fetters, accepts the stave, and they begin to attack the clerics. During the attack, Gamelyn “spreyeth holy watere with an oken spire, / That some that stode upright felle in the fire” (499-500); a clear pun on the clerics’ use of holy water to

provide absolution for the sins of the laypersons. As far as laypersons go, we are told that during this altercation "There was no lewe man that in the halle stode, / That wold do Gamelyn anything but goode, / But stoden besides and lete hem both wirche, / For thei had no rewthe of men of holy chirche" (501-504). In other words, the laymen at the feast agree with Gamelyn's punishment of the clerics, which suggests that the unholy behavior of these holy men is a recognized characteristic and not an anomaly in this case. The beating is intended to be a collection of the clerics' debt to Gamelyn, that debt being the justice, mercy, and absolution they have neglected to afford him in their capacity as religious men who should provide God's grace to the downtrodden; this is a fact made clear when Adam urges Gamelyn "for Seinte Charité/ [to] Pay good lyveré for the love of me, / And I wil kepe the door so ever here I masse / Er they bene assoilled ther shal non passé" (509-512). Because they are religious men, Adam also exhorts Gamelyn to be certain not to draw blood in his ministrations of justice, nor to mar the tonsure that signals their status as holy men:

> Gamelyn […] do hem but goode;
> Thei bene men of holy churche drowe of hem no blode
> Save wel the crownes and do hem no harmes,
> But breke both her legges and sithen her armes. (517-520)

In other words, Adam seems to be explaining to Gamelyn that there is a limit to the kinds and degree of violence that one can enact upon a religious figure.[182] As he beats them

[182] I am unsure as to whether or not there were, in fact, rules concerning the type and severity of violence one might enact upon a member of the Church, and this is an area in which future research might be

before an audience of laymen, being certain not to disturb their tonsures or draw blood, in order to preserve the markers that signify their social position, Gamelyn turns the tables on the religious men at the feast. He began the feast as its spectacle, the figure bound to a post within plain view as everyone entered, drawing the attention and scorn of the feasting guests and serving as the central topic of their conversation at the table. Now, Gamelyn ends the feast by turning its invited guests into the spectacle, a grand finale of scrambling, fearful figures desperate to escape the hall. The violence carried out at this feast against the clerics, classified as it is through Adam's words as a form of confession and absolution ("ere they ben assoilled ther none shal passe" (512) becomes a grim parody of their role as the center of attention in Church services as much as it does a ringing indictment of the corrupt nature of the legal system in which they play an essential role as God's representatives. Gamelyn, in his capacity as the figure granting them absolution through his beatings, becomes for this brief moment a secular cleric, bestowing upon the (un)deserving religious officials what he feels to warrant their just due. It is significant that this occurs at a feast, which is supposed to be a moment of unity and communion, rather than one of absolution and justice.

Directly following their beating, the clerics hurry home "in cartes and waynes" and bemoan their error in attending the unfortunate feast, since "Us had be bet at home

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needed. It is, however, tempting to consider that if they were injured in ways that left them bearing marks, they might be construed as martyrs and thus, attract the sympathy of those who see them so injured. This would be a counterproductive result of the violence Gamelyn is enacting upon them, which is not intended to call attention and aid to them, but rather to him. Visible wounds would also make it easier for charges of injury to be pressed against Gamelyn which, again, would be counterproductive to his goals in meting out the violence. This is an area perhaps worthy of further development in later versions of this project.

with water and breed" (524-528). Having successfully made them aware of how it feels to be the unwitting spectacle at a feast, while also ensuring they have received a just penalty for their unjust treatment of him, Gamelyn next turns his attention to his brother. Again, as with the clerics, his goal is not to cause his brother to bleed or to be permanently marred in any way; rather, he wants his brother to suffer a punishment that is in keeping with the wrongs he has done to Gamelyn. He therefore takes up his staff and "girt him in the nek that he overthrewe / A litel above the girdle the rigge-bone he barst; / And sette him in the fetters theras he sat arst" (532-534). Having thus exacted physical restitution for his brother's wrongs against him, and placed his brother in shackles as he, himself was in order that he also experience that shame and humiliation, Gamelyn and Adam wash themselves and sit down to the table, where "what some for her love, and some for her awe, / Alle the servants served hem on the beste lawe" (539-540). The tables have been entirely turned at this point; Gamelyn and his guest are now eating and enjoying the spectacle of his brother in fetters. Gamelyn has not taken his revenge against his brother too far, but rather has met him in full reciprocity, action for action, showing that his choices are borne not merely out of a sense of righteous indignation or revenge, but more so out of a sense of justice. The legal system having failed him as concerns his inheritance, and the religious having turned their backs on him in his time of need, Gamelyn has taken it upon himself to create a space in which he is able to ensure a just outcome for himself; the only way this is possible is, of course, because his brother has called a feast in which everyone Gamelyn needed to face down was present, so that Gamelyn, with Adam's assistance, is ultimately able to right the wrongs done to him in

one fell swoop. This happens at a feast because there is no other domestic venue in which all of the necessary figures would be present.

I have read the violence enacted at the feasts in the *Tale of Gamelyn* as instances of justice handled as a form of reciprocity in the absence of legal or conduct codes that would permit Gamelyn as a figure with little authority to seek justice along more traditional lines. I have also shown that this violence was enacted not only against his brother, but also a legal figure, his brother's allies, and the corrupt friars who take his side against Gamelyn. I would like to take a step from this reading into the discussion of Gamelyn's likely function in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a matter of much debate. That Gamelyn was in some fashion linked to the *Canterbury Tales* is not in doubt, given its presence among twenty-four (per Jones, 2010) or twenty-five (per Bowers, 1992 and Ohlgren and Knight, 2000) of the *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts.[183] It is most often attributed as a tale meant for the Cook, since it appears with a spurious link ("but here-of I will passe as now / and of yong Gamelyne I wil telle yow") after the incomplete *Cook's Tale* in those twenty-four/five manuscripts.[184] In his 1721 edition of the *Tales* Thomas Urry printed it as the Cook's Tale based on its location in the manuscripts, but added in a note that "had I found it without Inscription, and had been left to my Fancy to have bestow'd it on which of the Pilgrims I had pleas'd, I should

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[183] Jones, *Outlawry in Medieval Literature*, 139; Bowers, "The Cook's Tale," 33; Ohlgren and Knight, "Introduction to The Tale of Gamelyn," 184.
[184] Bowers, "The Cook's Tale," 33.

certainly have adjudg'd it to the Squire's Yeoman."[185] W.W. Skeat "adapted Urry's suggestion and speculated that the tale must have been found among Chaucer's papers after his death and that he 'contemplated recasting it,' perhaps as the *Yeoman's Tale*.[186] I agree with Jones that "these connections with Gamelyn with Chaucer's Yeoman are probably due to the influence of Robin Hood ballads and the desire to connect England's most famous outlaw and bowman with the father of English poetry."[187]

However, this desire to link the *Tale of Gamelyn* to the Yeoman for the purposes of aligning the Robin Hood outlaw tradition more clearly with Chaucer's character overlooks another possibility that is opened when we consider the banquet scenes specifically. Based on the nature of the violence at that feast—as a form of vigilante justice enacted upon corrupt political and religious officials—I would like to put forth the suggestion that perhaps, this tale might ultimately have fallen to the Man of Law, or at least be profitably read against the *Man of Law's Tale* which, as I showed in chapter three, also features a feast held by a figure with social status but little authority (the Sultaness) who uses the occasion as an opportunity to enact vigilante justice by slaying her people—including her own son, the Sultan--lest they fall prey to the corruption of Christianity. As with Gamelyn, in the absence of a legal code that permits her agency or recourse against the choices made by others—in her case, her son's decision that they will all convert to Christianity to permit him to marry Custance—the Sultaness takes

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[185] *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer in Fourteen Volumes*, Volume 6: *The Miscellaneous Pieces* from Urry's edition 1721, *The Canterbury Tales* from Tyrwhitt's Edition 1775 (Edinburgh: The Apollo Press by the Martins, 1782), p. 5
[186] Jones, *Outlawry in Medieval Literature*, 140.
[187] Jones, *Outlawry in Medieval Literature*, 140.

matters into her own hands, going beyond the social and legal codes that restrain her in order to reciprocate physical violence for the spiritual violence that has been enacted upon her by that decision. Since hers is also an act of reciprocal justice, the feast scenes show a similarity between the Sultaness and Gamelyn that recommends further study.

Reading through the feast into the story, then, reveals the *Tale of Gamelyn* to be focused not so much on the outlawry and violence, as on the corrupt legal and social systems that lead to it. With its focus on legal questions, the Tale would certainly be one that would appeal to a lawyer. Even though there are glaring differences between the feasts in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Tale of Gamelyn*, the underlying similarities in terms of the issues they reveal and are intended to manage—questions of who in the family wields the authority, of the effects of religious corruption on a community, and of a legal system that offers no wherewithal to those who are most in need of protection through law—point to a common set of anxieties and concerns that would be a consistent form of characterization through narrative. Regardless of whether the *Tale of Gamelyn* is meant ultimately for the Cook, the Yeoman or, as I have suggested, the Man of Law, the similarities it evinces to the *Man of Law's Tale* as Chaucer tells it provide further context for the social, political, and religious anxieties Chaucer demonstrates throughout his *Canterbury Tales*—anxieties well-documented as being of concern both to Chaucer and to his courtly audiences. Because the *Tale of Gamelyn* does align so well ideologically with the Man of Law's tale, its importance should be considered beyond its role as an outlaw text or, barring that, the outlaw narrative should be offered more critical importance than has heretofore been the case. Far from belonging to the fringes of the

medieval literary tradition as an excessively violent and anti-heroic story, the *Tale of Gamelyn* as I have read it here seems very much to be a text revealing socio-political and religious anxieties and one man's brave and self-reliant response to them that would appeal to a broad audience including members of the gentry and lesser nobility, as well as commoners. It is very appropriate that the feast, as the only social event at which anyone and everyone might be present, in some capacity and therefore, the most inclusive community event, be the locus of a moment that challenges the status quo and demands a reconsideration of the necessity of acknowledging the agency of every individual, not simply those with power and authority.

Hereward the Wake: Historical Fiction, Fictionalized History, and the Boundaries of Narrative Beheading

It is in many ways fitting that this study ends with discussion of the story of Hereward the Wake, a narrative that bridges the fictional status of Gamelyn and the pseudo-historical one of Robin Hood. Unlike either Robin Hood or Gamelyn, Hereward is actually a verified historical figure, documented in no fewer than three of England's early medieval historical texts: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *Domesday Book*, and Gaimar's *L'Histoire des Angleis*.[188] However, the prose *Gesta* in which his full life is recorded comprises both obviously fictionalized episodes and eyewitness accounts gleaned from his contemporaries, rendering it a hybridized text that blurs the lines between chronicle and romance, history and legend. As such, this narrative synthesizes

[188] See Knight and Ohlgren, "Introduction," 633.

the genres examined throughout this dissertation, providing a fitting summation of the subject of negotiating violence at the feast in medieval British texts by reminding us that at its heart, such violence is always implemented in an effort to force a change intended to improve the condition of its perpetrator by redressing some limitation on the part of governing codes of behavior to account for some wrong that has been committed either upon the individual, the community, or both.

Despite his status as a particularly English hero and one who is documented in England's earliest chronicles, Hereward is a relatively little-studied figure among the outlaws; indeed, the only substantive recent scholarship on his legend was published by John Hayward in 1988 and by Paul Dalton in 2009.[189] While early in England's literary culture Hereward played a substantial role as an English outlaw/hero, he is hardly considered in modern discussions of the English literary canon, which I find to be an unfortunate repercussion of the ongoing trend to divide medieval studies into discipline-specific approaches rather than considering medieval subjects from an interdisciplinary standpoint, so that Hereward is generally to be found in the custody of historians rather than of literary critics.[190] In many ways, though, Hereward's *Gesta* is a rich document for consideration of the current and important ongoing field discussions of medieval ideas of England and Englishness, of the tensions between textuality and orality, and of the

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[189] In addition to these two article-length studies, Timothy S. Jones discusses Hereward's *Gesta* on pages 74-87 of his *Outlawry in Medieval Literature*; Maurice Keen's two chapters on Hereward in his 1961 *Outlaws of Medieval Legend* remain required reading for scholars interested in the legend and its historical origins.

[190] Nineteenth-century English historian Charles Plummer famously remarked that "Hereward has a brief life in history and a long one in romance" in his 1889 *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel* II, 265 (qtd. In Ohlgren and Knight, p. 633). Yet, the majority of studies on his legend focus on its historicity, rather than on literary themes and characteristics.

slippery nature of the medieval construction of *fama,* that are at the center of recent and rich literary studies. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will constrain myself to discussing chapter fourteen of the *Gesta Herewardi*, in which Hereward returns from exile to find his brother killed and his family's lands transferred to French ownership, subsequently exacting revenge upon the French during a feast. The entire *Gesta* is a sustained reflection on England and Englishness in the immediate wake of the Norman Conquest, centered on Hereward's outlaw vigilante status in juxtaposition with the corrupt French aristocracy now ruling the country—indeed, Maurice Keen labels Hereward "the lineal ancestor of the later English outlaws" for this very reason.[191] But this feasting episode in particular provides a textual moment in which the tensions between the corrupt authorities in power and the common people, the law and vigilante justice, are placed under scrutiny, and in which the audience of the text is explicitly confronted with the highly individualized nature of figural receptions—in short, it is a scene in which we can clearly see the legend of Hereward being debated and teased into form through the reactions of others to his actions within the text. And those actions, predictably, are violent in nature.

Because the tale is not well-known, a brief summary of the events leading up to the feast at the center of this analysis is in order. Hereward, the son of an English nobleman, is "tough in work and rough in play, readily provoking fights among those of his own age and often stirring up strife among his elders in town and village" but "had no equal in acts of daring and bravery, not even among his elders" and "excelled in manly

[191] Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, 11.

deeds." (639-640).[192] Because of his combative nature, he causes great strife for his parents, who find themselves "quarreling with their friends and neighbors every day, and almost daily having to protect their son with drawn swords or weapons when he returned from sport or from fighting" (640). Ultimately, his father drives him from the home and petitions King Edward to send Hereward into exile, which Edward does. While in exile, Hereward distinguishes himself through brave and valorous deeds, much in the way of the Old Norse outlaws like those discussed in chapter three;[193] among these deeds most important for the current discussion are that he was "honourably detained" by the count in Flanders, "fights on behalf of the Count of Flanders against the neighboring Count of Guines" and "takes the central role in two campaigns against rebellious Frisian armies" (640).

As chapter fourteen opens, Hereward ends his exile, returning to England from Flanders, only to learn from his hosts that his brother has been slain and his lands given to the slayers:

> There was among us a certain younger son of our lord whom his father, when dying, commended to his people, together with his mother; and he was to be his heir if his brother, called Hereward, shouldn't return—a man most vigorous and conspicuous in all courage, whom while still a lad his father had driven away from his presence by way of punishment. And now, three days ago, certain men seized his inheritance with the consent of the king and took it for themselves,

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[192] All citations of *Hereward the Wake* taken from Knight and Ohlgren, 2000, pp. 638-667.

[193] This comparison of Hereward to Nordic outlaws is not entirely unreasonable, given that the part of the country from which Hereward hails, the Isle of Ely, was invaded in 1070 by the Danish king Swein Estrithson, and that there are longstanding prior ties between the people of Ely and Denmark; in fact, Knight and Ohlgren point out that Hereward was likely of Danish descent, himself (633). Therefore, there easily could have been Danish and even Old Norse cultural and literary elements in place by the time Hereward the Wake's *Gesta* was composed, so that such elements could have crept into his narrative as well.

> destroying our light, the son and heir of our lord, while he was protecting his widowed mother from them as they were demanding from her his father's riches and treasures—and because he slew two of those who had dishonorably abused her. By way of revenge because he had killed two Frenchmen, they cut off his head and set it up over the gate of the house—here it still is. (641)

His host then laments, "Alas, wretched men that we are, we have no power of vengeance! Would that his brother Hereward, a very great man, so we've often heard, were here now; for then truly before the moon set and the sun set forth its rays of light, every one of them would be lying dead like our lord's son!" (641). Two important facts beyond the summary of events that have transpired in Hereward's absence are brought to light in these words: first, that Hereward has earned for himself a positive reputation during his exile, and second, that in his absence as well the Frenchmen have established enough control over the region that the natives feel powerless to prevent them from taking what they will and do not believe they have the means to redress their actions. The reader is implicitly reminded through this scene that Hereward, an outlaw and now the only surviving member of his immediate family, has a reason to exact blood vengeance from his brother's killers, and has no reason to fear the repercussions of an altercation between himself and the Frenchmen—they can kill him, but they cannot torture his family or throw them in jail in response to Hereward's deeds. Existing beyond the bounds of the law, both a member of this community who is familiar with the lay of the land and an outsider whose lack of ties render him impervious to retaliation, Hereward is uniquely positioned to seek vengeance upon the French. His story from this point on becomes the tale not merely of an outlaw, but of an outlaw who has nothing left to lose but his own life—a figure poised for legendary status.

We are not told why, but Hereward does not immediately go to the manor to confront the French; rather, he and his hosts retire to their beds to sleep. After lying in bed for a while, Hereward "heard some way away the voices of people singing, the sound of harp and viol and the merriment of those applauding" (641-642). Startled, he sends a boy to discover the source of the noise—"what the sound was that echoed in his ears" (642). The boy returns with the news that it is "the merriment of those joining in the party given on the occasion of their entering into the inheritance of his lord's son, who had been killed by them on the previous day" (642). It is at this point that Hereward arms himself and a servant and goes to the hall. In some ways, the scene is reminiscent of a description of Grendel from the Beowulf narrative, who also goes to the hall to attack when he is disturbed by the noise of revelry by those who have kept him outside of the community;[194] it is also reminiscent of the relationship between Gamelyn and the servant Adam, who plot together to enact vengeance upon the dinner-goers in that narrative, so that Hereward provides textual evidence of these as being recurring narrative motifs. This recurrent narrative motif usage is also present in the commentary on the drunkenness of the revelers in (unspoken, but clearly indicated) terms of the Aristotelian view of excess as a moral flaw;[195] Hereward "approached the party-goers *who were now overcome with*

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[194] Ða se ellengǣst earfoðlīce
Þrāge geþlode, sē þe in þysrtum bād,
Þæt hē dōgora gehwām dream gehyrde
Hlūdne in healle; þǣr wæs hearpan dwēg,
Swutol sang scopes. (ll. 86-90a)

[A bold demon who waited in darkness / wretchedly suffered all the while, / for every day he heard the joyful din . loud in the hall, with the harp's sound, / the clear song of the scop. (Liuzza trans. ll. 86-90a)]

[195] *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 2, section 2: "First, then, let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health (for to gain light

drunkenness, intending to pledge them for his brother's death with a draught of bitterness and wine of sorrow" (642; emphasis mine) in a moment reminiscent of similar scenes in the Old English *Judith*, when the drunkenness of Holofernes and his men causes them to fall senseless, paving the way for Judith's vengeance upon him,[196] or of the criticism of drunkenness on the part of writers ranging from Raymond Llull and his translator William Caxton[197] to Geoffrey Chaucer in, for instance, the *Pardoner's Tale*. Such textual affinities align Hereward more closely than not with the greater literary canon of

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on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things); both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it. So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean." (371). Also, Book 3 on Temperance. "Nichomachean Ethics." *Introduction to Aristotle*, Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged; ed. Richard McKeon (Chicago: Universigty of Chiccago Press, 1973), pp. 338-583.

[196] From "Judith" edited by Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), pp. 99-112:

Swa se inwidda ofer ealne dæg
Dryhtguman sine drencte mid wine,
Swiðmod sinces brytta, oðþæt hie on swiman lagon,
Oferdrencte his duguðe ealle, swylce hie wæron deaðe geslegene,
Agotene goda gehwylces. (ll. 28-32a)

[So, for the whole day, the wicked one / stern dispenser of treasures / drenched his men with wine until they lay unconscious / all of his troops as drunk as if they had been struck down by death / drained of all ability.] (translation mine.)

[197] Discussed in Sarah Gordon's *Culinary Comedy in Medieval French Literature* (West Lafayette: Purdue University So, for the whole day, the wicked one / stern dispenser of treasures / drenched his men with wine until they lay unconscious / all of his troops as drunk as if they had been struck down by death / drained of all ability.] (translation mine.)

[197] Discussed in Sarah Gordon's *Culinary Comedy in Medieval Press, 2007)*, p. 31.

chivalric and courtly literatures throughout the medieval period, rendering its general exclusion from that canon by modern critics a questionable practice.[198]

As Hereward draws near to the manor, he finds his brother's head on the gate; "taking it, he kissed it and concealed it, wrapped in a cloth" (642).[199] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen characterizes beheading as a "kind of monstrosity, the becoming-monstrous of the human through fragmentation, through the reduction of embodied identity from five limbs and a torso to a liminal object, an uncanny thing."[200] Although this might be true from the viewpoint of the Frenchmen who have rendered the brother this object, it is clearly not true for Hereward; rather than viewing the head as monstrous, he still appears to see his brother reflected within its features. He brings the head with him into the manor, perhaps as a talisman or reminder of his mission; perhaps to bring his brother along in the vengeance being sought against his killers; perhaps even to give his brother the chance to witness that vengeance even though dead. Regardless of the sentiment behind it, the bringing of the head into the manor is a symbolic act on Hereward's part. By carrying his brother's head into the hall, Hereward presents a unified family front against their enemies and returns to the head, representative of his brother, a degree of the agency and veneration that the French sought to strip him of in decapitating him and

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[198] See my discussion of its canonicity on pp. 30-31,above.

[199] It is significant that the brother's death is by decapitation, since this was a method of execution brought to England by William the Conqueror and thus intimately aassociated with the French at the time of the writing of the *Gesta Herewardi*; see Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey, "Introduction," *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* (Leiden: Brill Press, 2012) pp. 1-13, esp. 4.

[200] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Preface," *Heads Will Roll*, pp. vii-ix.

placing him on the gate as an object of warning, or a grisly decoration, reflecting their newfound authority over the lives and deaths of the native-born people of this region.

After he has venerated his brother's head, Hereward "advanced through the entrance of the building to search out the guests. He saw them all by the fireside *overcome with drunkenness*, the soldiers reclining in the women's laps." (642; emphasis mine) Again, there seems to be here a clear allusion to Aristotle's idea that excess leads to being unprepared to face danger or sinfulness properly, so that a man is left in a vulnerable position. As they lie there, a jester entertains them, "playing a lute, abusing the English race and performing antics in the middle of the hall meant in imitation of English dancing, who eventually demanded in payment from their lord something which had belonged to the parents of the remarkable lad killed the previous day" (642). The writer of this narrative here switches swiftly from a discussion of the Frenchmen's corrupt condition to a focus on the postcolonial nature of the scene before Hereward; the French are rewriting the hall space, mocking the English and in so doing, recreating the space as a French one in which the English possess no authority but are instead mocked by their conquerors. The jester re-appropriates English manners and customs for entertainment purposes, and even demands that the material objects of the English be handed over, re-appropriated as payment for his abuse of their once-owners. The French are shown to be systematically erasing the authoritative presence of the English from the hall, so that the English cannot be viewed as anything other than abject figures to be mocked and scorned for their ways.

At this point, the French abuse of the absent English is criticized; one of the girls at the banquet, “unable to tolerate these words, replied: ‘There still survives a distinguished soldier by the name of Hereward, brother to the lad killed yesterday and well-known on our country (that is to say, Flanders); and if he were here, none of these would be left alive when the sun spread abroad its rays of light’” (642). This speech is astonishing in two ways: first, that a woman is daring to speak out against the actions of the men in charge of the hall; and second, that that woman is identified not as a French or an English woman but as one from Flanders. The fact that her nationality is so explicitly framed within her words suggests its importance to the story; however she has come to be here at this feasting scene, this woman’s words tie the earlier exploits and deeds of Hereward in Flanders into this moment, likely to provide narrative unity to an otherwise-sprawling episodic text. That this is an intentional compositional choice on the part of the writer becomes even more likely with the response made to the girl’s words by the new lord of the manor, who retorts, “Well, I happen to know the man, and a great scoundrel he is, for he stole the gifts which were sent to the prince of our country from Frisia and distributed them unfairly after the prince had appointed him leader of the soldiers. Now he would have suffered death on the gallows, if he hadn’t ensured his safety by running away, not daring to stay in any land this side of the alps!” (642) Again, we have the explicit mention of the earlier deeds of Herreward in Frisia, creating a sense of narrative unity between this scene and the earlier recorded exploits. It’s a particularly skillful compositional choice because here in this moment, at this feast, we are presented with a mini-conflict between Flanders and Frisia, this time on English soil, where Hereward can

rewrite the moment as an English victory for the English, rather than simply as an Englishman in service of the Frisian king; an opportunity for a victorious homecoming in which he strikes a blow against English enemies, for England, on English soil. This scene therefore becomes Hereward's introductory foray into legendary English outlaw status; where heretofore he has been regarded as a distinguished Englishman in exile, now he has the ability to transform that reputation into a domestic one.[201]

The focus in this scene on Hereward's reputation is of particular interest; the author of the *Gesta* demonstrates a keen awareness of the ways in which differing viewpoints affect our reception of a figure, and there is a great deal of subtext present within the words of the girl and the lord concerning the constructions of identity and *fama* that lie at the heart of this text. The girl, hailing from Flanders, has a highly positive view of Hereward, who has distinguished himself there as an ally of the king; the lord, on the other hand, has a highly negative view of Hereward because of his own strong connections to Frisia, where Hereward has built his good reputation with Flanders through military service against the Frisians. Where an audience sympathetic to the Flemish cause might read Hereward's redistribution of wealth as an action in which he uses his status as a military leader to positively impact the people, the French lord, siding with the Frisians, finds his behavior to be corrupt and criminal. The reader of the narrative is thus confronted with two different viewpoints, and must choose what to

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[201] While Robin Hood and Gamelyn are also characterized as legendary English outlaws, it is Hereward's demonstrated historicity that sets him apart in this regard; Robin Hood's actual identity—if, indeed, he existed at all—is still a matter of scholarly debate, and Gamelyn has no clear historical counterpart but rather appears to be part of the folk tradition of "the fair unknown" (Knight and Ohlgren, 185).

think; in this choice, the sources of the information must also be taken into account. If a reader views Hereward's actions as upstanding and good, then the reader finds the girl's outrage at the French abuse of the English to be compelling evidence that her words are intended in support of Hereward, rather than in harm of him, so that the reader aligns him- or herself with the girl on Hereward's side. If a reader finds Hereward's actions to constitute criminal behavior, then the reader is more concerned with upholding the letter of the existing law, and might find him- or herself siding with the French against outlawry. A keen reader familiar with the Old Norse flyting tradition might read the French lord's words as a flyting being conducted in the absence of its subject, which could be construed as a cowardly act—would the lord say the same things to Hereward's face?—and this, too, might affect audience reception of the characterization of Hereward, who might be seen as heroic by comparison. The ultimate question, of course, is not whether or not Hereward is an outlaw, but whether or not he is a distinguished and commendable man as well. This scene therefore becomes a moment in which the author is clearly presenting the tensions inherently present in the construction of an individual's reputation—how you know the individual, your political and social leanings, and your own reputation, all are factors in how the individual about whom you are speaking is viewed by others. The answers to such questions are essential in how we choose to read and interpret violence in such instances—that is, whether or not we support and approve, or condemn, the violent act is determined by our association with its perpetrator.

The jester picks up on the French lord's words, and "continued repeatedly to abuse him [Hereward] as he sang to the lute." (642) Hereward is increasingly agitated by

this continued insult to his name, until finally he "leapt out and struck him [the jester] through with a single blow of his sword, and then turned to attack the guests. Some were incapable of rising because they were drunk, and others unable to go to their help because they were unarmed" (642). The explicit mention of the drunken and unprepared state of the Frenchmen for a third time renders the scene's debt to Aristotelian notions of temperance and excess beyond doubt. This focus on temperance and excess does, however, call into question whether or not Hereward's actions might also be viewed as excessive; when he has finished, "he laid low fourteen of them together with their lord, with the aid of the single attendant whom he set at the entrance of the hall so that whoever escaped the hands of one might fall to the other" (642). Hereward has thus turned the hall—earlier a scene of feasting and merriment—into a death trap for his enemies, systematically enacting revenge against them both for his brother's death and for his own abuse at their hands. After Hereward has killed these men, "that same night he set their heads over the gate where his brother's head had been, giving thanks to the Bestower of all grace that his brother's blood was now avenged" (642). Hereward therefore reclaims the space for his family's honor, rewriting it as a space not of French victory over the English but of English victory over the French, and even appropriating the French proclivity for beheading their enemies in order to provide visual proof that the French no longer hold the manor; their heads now decorate the gate as a grisly triumphal arch visually announcing Hereward's return and successful act of vengeance against them. Because the entire scene up until this point has been preoccupied with the idea of reputation and the construction of *fama*, Hereward's retaliatory actions should give us

pause: if he were not the eponymous hero of this story, would we approve of his mode of vengeance? Did fourteen Frenchmen, mostly weaponless and senseless, among them a jester armed only with a lute, need to die in order for Hereward's brother's death to be avenged? Was his revenge appropriate, or excessive in nature? Obviously, from a legal standpoint, his actions are criminal; he is a murderer. However, as a man stripped of his position and cast into exile, and one whose family lands were confiscated and redistributed without his knowledge or consent by the conquering French aristocracy and whose brother was killed in that action, Hereward is not operating within the constraints of the law; his is an act of blood vengeance, a vigilante response, because he has no official recourse to turn to. The audience for this text therefore has to weigh the situation carefully: whose side do I fall on, here? Is Hereward in the right? Does that make the legal system ineffective? Can I not trust the law? Is vigilante justice the only justice an Englishman has in the wake of the Norman conquest? The *Gesta Herewardi*—and in particular, this grisly homecoming feasting scene—demands of its audience sustained reflection on the nature and limitations of the law in post-Conquest England to provide equally for all citizens.

The English society depicted within the text has a clear response to Hereward's actions, and that response falls evenly along ethnic lines:

> In the morning, […] the neighbors and those living round about were filled with astonishment at what was done. And almost all the Frenchmen in the district were frightened, abandoning the lands assigned to them and fleeing, lest the same thing should happen to them at the hands of such a man, should they have him for a neighbor. But having heard about him, the inhabitants of the country and his kinsfolk flocked to him, congratulating him on his return to his native land and to his father's inheritance, and advising him to guard it carefully in the meantime,

> dreading the anger of the king when he came to learn of the affair. In fact not unmindful of such matters, he lodged there forty-nine of the bravest men from his father's estate and among his kinsfolk, equipped and defended with all necessary military accoutrements. Meanwhile he wanted to carry on for a few days taking vengeance on those of his enemies in the neighborhood who still remained in their manors (643).

Rather significantly, Hereward is also knighted at this point, and his knighting ceremony is performed in a specifically English fashion that in the wake of the Conquest has fallen into disuse—again, rewriting the culture with the abandoned Englishness in order to re-inscribe the nation with an English mentality.[202] The author's preoccupation with Hereward's various receptions continues, with his English kinsfolk and neighbors rejoicing that he has re-taken the manor and his inheritance and offering to help him defend them, and the French fleeing from the area out of fear for their safety.

Ultimately, of course, Hereward becomes a legendary hero, valiantly holding out against the cruelties of the French and seeking to reassert English authority over English lands—but he is only heroic when he is viewed from the vantage-point of England and Englishness that sought to preserve England from its conquerors and restore it to its native groups. Historically, William the Conqueror made efforts to integrate the French

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[202] In the narrative, the ceremony is specifically described as being English, rather than French, in nature: "When Hereward realized that he was the leader and lord of such men, and day by day saw his force growing larger with fugitives, the condemned and disinherited, he remembered that he had never been girt with the belt and sword of knighthood according to the tradition of his race. And so with two of the most eminent of his men, one named Winter and the other Gaenoch, he went to the Abbot of Peterborough called Brand, a man of very noble birth, in order that he might gird him with the sword and belt of knighthood in the English tradition, lest after becoming the chief and leader of so many men, the inhabitants of the country should disparage him for not being knighted. […] Hereward wanted himself and his men to be knighted in this way because he heard that it had been ruled by the French that if anyone were knighted by a monk, cleric, or any ordained minister, it ought not to be reckoned the equal of true knighthood, but invalid and anachronistic." (643)

aristocracy into English society through the bestowing upon them of confiscated lands and intermarriage with Anglo-Saxon noble families, while the English saw this activity not as efforts at integration but rather as oppressive French rule, a clash in viewpoints that continued throughout the Anglo-Norman period. The vigilante violence conducted in response to Anglo-Norman rule was, at the time, hailed as necessary and good, and figures like Hereward, holding out against their invading enemies, were hailed as national heroes. However, such outlaw bands also delayed the development of a unified post-Conquest society and in many ways, their actions contributed to the lawlessness and violence they saw themselves as battling; meeting the corruption of the law by state officials operating under their own understanding of it with criminal behavior led to well-documented ongoing social problems throughout the period.[203] The "insecurity, vulnerability, and limitations of the law and the government machinery that enforced it"[204] in dealing with those who saw themselves as being outside of the law, and the often violent repercussions of those limits, are very clear in *Hereward the Wake*. The feast that ends in the beheading of fourteen Frenchmen, and the placing of those heads upon the gate, provides a narrative boundary beyond which the text's audience must expect that there is no ultimate reconciliation possible; Hereward and his English vigilantes have drawn a clear ethnic and political line in the proverbial sand, and to continue reading beyond this textual moment is to understand that for Hereward and his supporters, there is no turning back: they are for England and against the French invaders, and will agree

[203] The ongoing issues of criminal behavior in medieval England are well-documented in the essays in John C. Appleby and Paul Dalton, eds. *Outlaws in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).
[204] Appleby and Dalton, "Introduction," 1.

to no law that favors the conquerors over the native society. In this, Hereward clearly paves the way for the later English outlaw heroes, including Robin Hood.

The outlaw tales of medieval England are, as I have shown, deeply concerned with the idea of England and Englishness, reflecting the ambivalence and anxieties of a post-Conquest native society living under unfamiliar rule and in fear of mistreatment at the hands of the invading group. They consider in particular the limits and corruptions of legal and clerical authority, and the outlaws' actions are presented in juxtaposition against legal and social realities that fail to offer them any formal or legitimate forms of redress when their rights are violated. In particular, when we consider the feasts in these texts, with the understanding that the feast is an essential cultural event that presents a community as it has identified itself socially and politically, we can see clearly how the feast scenes in outlaw tales are used to scrutinize the limits of the newer cultural norms and legal systems to account for the needs of a native population that has different views from their conquerors concerning issues such as inheritance laws, property rights, and political authority. The feast scenes gather together in one place both the newly-formed community accepting of the new rule, and the members of the former society who find themselves diminished in authority and agency under the new rule, and show clearly that anyone not identifying him- or herself with the current power structure is automatically at a disadvantage—a disadvantage that is not accounted for within the legal system, so that it can only be corrected through vigilante and criminal means.[205] Because the outlaws

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[205] In this depiction of a postcolonial society, the *Life of Hereward* demonstrates clear affinities with the chronicle tradition that forms part of its origin (see, for instance, my discussion in chapter two of Arthur's

find themselves with no other recourse to justice, they must enact their own—but this does not mean that they are lawless. Rather, they seek to create a law of their own that takes into accounts their needs and the needs of their people, that is applied differently dependent upon a given situation rather than as a blanket rule, and that takes into account the most disenfranchised members of a community—the knight stripped of his lands; the youngest brother stripped of his inheritance; the younger brother stripped of his head—in the final exacting of justice. This focus on seeking justice for the marginalized, the downtrodden, and the unjustly killed members of society is at the heart of the outlaw tale, and as I have shown the feast scenes in particular provide us with essential critical spaces for considering the interactions of those who have power with those who have been stripped of that power in Anglo-Norman England, specifically, and more generally, how "at various times, in different locations and in diverse ways, crime and outlawry powerfully influenced state, church, and community attitudes, responses, and policies."[206]

Literary outlaw heroes like Robin Hood, Gamelyn, and Hereward have for too long been marginalized in the literary canon, when in fact their narratives provide a crucial and largely-unexamined means of understanding the complex issues of identity, authority, and agency that lie at the heart of critical study of Anglo-Norman and Middle English texts. Their very status as popular, rather than noble, texts renders them highly desirable vehicles for the exploration of socio-political tensions codified into the literature of one of the most turbulent periods in medieval English history. By accessing

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Feast of Whitsun in the *HRB,* and in future development of this section it might be desirable to tease out those similarities in the construction of a stronger argument for the genre conventions of feasting culture which I have begun to develop throughout the greater project.
[206] Appleby and Dalton, "Introduction," 1.

these texts through the feasts that present cultural expectations and norms experienced and understood by Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman audiences, we can catch a glimpse of the ways that writers of these texts used cultural events like the feast as anchoring spaces in their development of ideas of identity and authority throughout their narratives; in this practice, the outlaw tales share much in common with their romance counterparts, and because of this similarity in the use of feasts as cultural anchors within the narrative—and especially, of the use of violence at the feast to illuminate the anxieties and issues of the feasting community, and the negotiation of that violence used as a means of identity testing and formation—the outlaw tales should, perhaps, be read more closely against their romance counterparts; it appears, to judge from this study, that such comparative reading might reveal greater and more nuanced understandings of the literary presentation of medieval English society.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have sought to articulate the various ways in which medieval writers made use of the common motif of violence at the feast in support of my argument that this was not as an excessive, sensational addition to their stories that was expected by an audience mired in a violent everyday reality, but rather an intentional employment of violence which held particular significance or meaning for the writer, the audience, the narrative, or all three. While showing through a comparative approach that a clear literary culture of feasting as an occasion haunted by the threat of violence developed in many genres throughout the medieval period, I have also insisted that each feast must be considered on its own terms as part of a specific narrative written for a particular time, place, and audience. I maintain that this attention to context is essential in avoiding the conflation of medieval literary feasts as a readily-understood motif employed for entertainment purposes, only, or even in the main. When we read medieval literary feasts, especially those at which or from which violence ensues, it should not be simply for their entertainment value or as an expected motif in a medieval narrative; rather, we should be attentive to the ways in which the violence is characterized and conducted, and how it fits in with the overarching narrative to form a sustained examination and critique of some limitation in the governing codes of the literary community. Such a reading, in turn, provides the audience with the opportunity to

consider the limitations of our own governing codes to account for individual agency. How might we avoid violence at the feast?

The feast is an unexpected, and therefore effective, narrative space for drawing our attention to violent altercations. We know that feasts are supposed to be occasions of celebration and community-building. When they turn violent, it is all the more shocking to us because it violates all of our understandings of how human communities are supposed to function. Feasts are supposed to be safe places, where everyone is enjoying him- and herself. They are governed by social considerations of how our behavior affects those around us. In the medieval period, this consideration of how one should behave in the company of others at the feast was so important that an entire tradition of conduct manuals was born from it. When neither the chivalric code governing how knights behave with their lords, nor the courtly code governing how knights behave with their ladies, nor the legal code, governing how individuals interact with their society, nor the conduct code governing basic good manners, is enough to stay a violent deed performed at a feast, it catches our attention: *what went wrong*?

In tracing the development and eruption of violence at the feast, we are forced to come to terms with the limitations of our governing codes truly to account for the individual who finds him- or herself devoid of any acceptable means of redressing a conflict. We want to read moments of seemingly excessive violence—like the Sultaness's massacre at the wedding of her son, for example—as instances where the perpetrator simply lost control of his- or her senses and conducted a crime of passion. In fact, at least in these texts, the violence is usually predetermined and carried out with chilling

precision, an intentional act of control, constraint, or coercion. When we cease to view medieval violence as "senseless" or "gratuitous" we are confronted with text after text in which violent deeds are conducted for a variety of reasons that boil down to one, primary goal: for an individual to gain, or to regain, power through a spectacular show of power over others. Violence becomes spectacle, and that spectacle in turn has led us to characterize medieval violence as senseless and excessive. However, as I have shown throughout this study, violence is more than spectacle; it is a defiant act of agency on the part of an individual who has found the governing codes by which she or he is expected to live to be untenable and has taken matters into his or her own hands. Far from senseless, such acts speak to a need on the part of their audience to reassess, reexamine, reevaluate, and, perhaps, to rewrite, the governing codes that failed to prevent them in the first place. It is the individual's responsibility to act within the customs and rules governing the community in order to contribute to peace and order; but the community, in turn, has to make that possible by not simply maintaining the importance of adhering to prescribed codes of conduct, but also and, perhaps, more importantly, affirming and respecting the right of each individual to be treated with dignity, respect, and justice. While the two are not mutually exclusive, through these many scenes of violence at the feast writers demonstrate that they were difficult to reconcile in the highly structured socio-political systems of medieval Britain.

The modern reader confronting such scenes has in them an opportunity to really consider the many, sometimes highly ingenious, sometimes deeply flawed ways in which the unexpected violence at the feast is negotiated. In doing so, we open a window onto a

medieval period that is not senselessly and excessively violent, but rather that is grappling with legal systems and conduct codes that have proven to be inhospitable and unlivable to the very people they are intended to govern. That the use of violence in response to these limitations is so widely present throughout the medieval Northern European literary tradition, in texts ranging from Anglo-Saxon epic, to Latin, Anglo-Norman, and Danish chronicle, to Welsh, Old Norse, and Middle English romance, suggests that the codes we have come to define the medieval period through and by in scholarly circles—for instance, the chivalric and courtly codes, and the conduct manuals—were ineffective tools of governance, and the insistence on relying on them as a means of limiting or avoiding unnecessary conflict was, in fact, a key contributing factor in perpetrating violence. Unless everyone agrees to abide by a given governing code, that code cannot suppress all of a community's latent conflicts. Scenes of violence at the feast in medieval literary texts provide a means of negotiating those conflicts outside of such governing codes, which ultimately proves to be a more productive means of handling the issues that threaten a community from within.

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