

Feasts and Feasting in the Fourteenth Century

Gawain and the Green Knight

J.S. Mackley – University of Northampton

In the British Library in London is a small, unassuming manuscript measuring five inches by seven inches. It contains 90 leaves of parchment, has the shelfmark Cotton Nero A.x., and contains the poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*, along with three devotional poems (*Pearl*, *Patience* and *Cleanness*). Written in the mid- to late-fourteenth century in a Cheshire dialect, *Gawain* tells of a time that Camelot is in its infancy: during the Christmas feast, a knight enters King Arthur's court, dressed all in green, with green skin, hair and even accompanied by a green horse. He challenges the court to a "Christmas game" – he will endure a blow from one of the Camelot knights, and will deliver a return blow the following year. Gawain takes the challenge and beheads the knight, but the decapitated body picks up its severed head, which tells Gawain to seek him out at the Green Chapel the following year. When searching for the Green Knight's location, Gawain finds a castle where he is invited by the host, Sir Bercilak, to spend Christmas in comfort, as the Green Chapel is "only a short distance hence". Then Gawain is invited to partake in an "exchange of winnings" game: Sir Bercilak will go out hunting, while Gawain remains in the castle; whatever Bercilak "wins" he will give to Gawain, and whatever Gawain "wins" he will give to Sir Bercilak. However, while Bercilak hunts animals, his wife¹ tries to seduce Gawain in his bedchamber – each day Gawain tries to sidestep her seduction and concede only a kiss, which he dutifully gives to Bercilak on his return, in exchange for the animals that Bercilak has hunted. The poem ends with Gawain confronting the Green Knight at the allotted time and facing his final challenge.²

Gawain and the Green Knight gives what is believed to be the earliest descriptions of Christmas feasts in English literature. Here, Christmas is a fifteen-day celebration: Arthur and his court hold a feast for New Year in the first part of the text (ll. 37–129), and the

¹ The "Lady" is unnamed in the text, the Lord reveals his name at the end of the poem. For the purposes of this discussion the Lord will be called Sir Bercilak and the lady, Lady Hautdesert.

² This chapter's principal focus is on the feasts and celebrations, in *Gawain and the Green Knight*. For other discussions, particularly the moral predicament in which Gawain finds himself, as well as the nature of the testing of Gawain, the reader is directed to some of the enormous body of literature on *Gawain*, including Barron (1980), Brewer and Gibson (1998), Burrow (1965 and 2001), Davenport, (1978), Putter (1996) and Spearing (2010).

second Christmas celebration is in Sir Bercilak's castle – Christmas, in particular, is a four-day celebration described in Fitt 2 (ll. 875–1034). Further celebrations between Christmas and New Year are described in Fitt 3 (ll. 1648–89 in particular). The religious aspect of the feast is important – the word “feast” is first recorded as denoting a religious festival in 1290, and the text describes that the king and his knights have been celebrating mass in the chapel, before they all, priests included, descend into revelry. Hensch notes that the religious observances were particularly important on Holy days, and this is seen later in the poem when Bercilak leaves to hunt before daybreak, and has breakfast only after he has said mass. (l. 1135; Hensch 1976, 19)

There are descriptions of games before the feast actually begins including jousting and tourneying, ring-dancing, music, dancing through the night; the ladies give gifts in good spirits and all wash before sitting down to the meal – this function is also seen in another poem in the *Gawain* manuscript, a series of Biblical exempla called Cleanness, when the washing is performed before the meal served by Lot. (l. 831) Although in *Gawain* the knights are named as brothers of the Round Table, the celebrations described have a table layout associated with the more traditional feasting of the Middle Ages. The high table is set on a raised dais which is described in its finery, adorned with fine silk, a canopy of red over Guinevere, as well as ornate tapestries of rich material, embroidered with precious gems. The seating is arranged in a strict hierarchy according to their relationship to King Arthur: “When they had washed fittingly, they took their places, the man of higher rank, in each case, in the higher position, as was most fitting”. (ll. 72–73)³ King Arthur is in the centre with his queen on his left and Bishop Baldwin on his right; on Guinevere's left are Arthur's two nephews, Gawain and his younger brother Agravain; on Baldwin's right is Yvain, Arthur's half-brother. No one is seated opposite them: this is for the convenience of food being served. For the other guests in the hall, their tables are set endways to the high table, and although they are not named, those highest in rank sit closest to the high table. It is possible that some of these guests would be the tenants who worked the land, as it was traditional to invite such tenants to a meal at Christmas. (Dyer 1998, 68) Such a meal would have normally included bread, cheese, pottage and meat, although with this being the king's court, this would most likely have been more extravagant. (Hammond 1996, 36)

³ Translations have been taken from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

The seating of guests according to nobility in Camelot – a motif that is also seen when Gawain spends Christmas at Castle Hautdesert – corresponds with an exemplum in *Cleanness*. One of the sections of this poem tells the story of Belshazzar’s feast told which appears in the Biblical Book of Daniel. Here, Belshazzar “intended to make such a banquet that the king of every land should come to it ... and acknowledge him as lord To praise him in his royal state”. (l. 1365–71) Putter argues that Belshazzar’s feast is “designed for the single purpose of self-glorification and indulgence”. (Putter 1996, 214) In *Gawain*, Arthur is also demonstrating his decadence, but it is a feast celebrating Christ’s birth and that those from the outside are welcomed in. In *Cleanness*, it is only Belshazzar who sits on the high dais, contrasting with Arthur’s honoured guests in *Gawain*. While *Cleanness* uses Belshazzar’s feast to emulate, and contrast with, the wedding feast parable from Mathew’s gospel, Belshazzar places *himself* in the position of the divine, both symbolically in his position on the dais, and then using holy relics as decorations. He uses the temple vessels for alcohol and his own drunkenness which Nichols describes as bringing “the mock religiosity of an anti-mass”. (Nichols 1985, 86)

The Vision of Piers Plowman – a theological allegory about living a Christian life contemporary with *Gawain* – describes how the feast should not be an excuse for decadence and extravagance, but an opportunity for Christian charity. (B XI 189–95) Being as “drunk as the devil” (l. 1500), Belshazzar calls the traditional Christmas toast of “Wassayl!” as well as toasting the heathen gods. (ll. 1508, 1522) These blasphemies invoke the writing on the wall that warns Belshazzar that he has been weighed, measured and found wanting; and that night he receives divine retribution when he is clubbed to death in his own bed. While feasts are a celebration of excess, *Cleanness* describes how feasting itself is not condemned, except when it is turned to an evil purpose.

In *Gawain*, those on the dais receive double portions of food. (l. 61) The first course is announced with a trumpet fanfare as well as drums and noble pipes. There is also good beer and fine wine. The “precious” food arrives in abundance, with so many silver dishes set down on the table cloth that it is “difficult to find space in front of the people” (l. 123). The food is described as a pottage, a thick stew or soup with twelve dishes shared between two people.

The types of food bought by the gentry at Christmas are listed by Hammond (1996, 65–66) which includes the varieties of fish consumed on Christmas Eve, which was still a fast

(and is described in some detail when Gawain arrives at Bercilak's castle); Hammond gives an example of the kinds of food that would have been consumed by a household during the festivities by listing the supplies for Richard de Swinfield's three-day Christmas feasts which include "1 boar, 2 complete carcasses and 3 quarters of beef, 2 calves, 4 does, 4 pigs, about 60 fowls (hens and possibly capons), 8 partridges and 2 geese, as well as bread and cheese", along with four gallons of white wine and forty gallons of red, although the amount of ale consumed (in addition to the above) is not known. (Hammond 1996, 65) Other details concerning the types of food and how they were cooked are evidenced in the foods prepared by the chief Master cooks to King Richard II, which was given the name *A Forme of Cury* by later editors. Dating from around 1390, the scroll contains some 200 recipes, with ingredients including "chykens", "gees", "fesauntes, pertruches, capons and cerlewes" as well as "pykes", "congur", "eles", "oysters", "muskles" and "laumpreys". (Heatt and Butler 1985, 93–97)

For King Arthur and his court, the Christmas celebrations are set over fifteen days. The text describes how "New Year was so young that it was newly arrived". (l. 60) Derek Brewer argues that "At certain periods the feast of Christmas began on the feast-day known as *O sapientia* ... which is set for the 16th, or in some non-English calendars, the 17th December" and further notes that New Year's Day falls fifteen days from 17th December. (Brewer 1997, 137) However, as Christmas contains traces of Anglo-Saxon paganism, it is worth mentioning that "Yule" was one of the most important parts of the Anglo-Saxon year. Writing in 725, the Venerable Bede noted that the month that we now call December was known as *ǣrra gēola* (before Yule), and the month that followed was known as *æftera gēola*: "the months of Guili [Yule] derive their name from the day when the Sun turns back [and begins] to increase, because one of [these months] precedes [this day] and the other follows". (Wallis 2012, 54) The start of Yule is likely to have been during the three days of the winter solstice, literally translated from the Latin *solstitium* "the point at which the sun seems to stand still", where the sun rises at the same point of the horizon. (Groom 2013, 300) Hutton suggests that it could be derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *hweal*, denoting the wheel of the year and the circular course of the sun as it passes through the wheeling points of the solstices and the equinoxes. (Hutton 1997, 6) I suggest it is more likely linked with the Breton word (of Greek derivation) *heol*, meaning "Sun". At Stonehenge, which many believe is an astrological calendar, the "heel stone" stands on the line where the sun

would set for the Winter Solstice and rise for the summer solstice, and so should perhaps be more properly named the *heol*-stone. The western church focused on the Nativity (the feast of the rising Son) as a means of eclipsing the other celebrations that occurred at the same time: the winter solstice, Saturnalia, Woðen's Wild Hunt, the feast of Mithra and the *Kalendae* (the ancient Roman festival of midwinter and New Year).

This *quinzaine* of celebration would have incorporated *Modranecht* – mother's night – a celebration on Christmas Eve. (Wallis 2012, 53; Shaw 2011, 44–45; North 1997, 227; Chambers 1903, i 231, 265) This time may well have involved making leftover fruits into a cake, and food may be left out for the female elves and spirits. (Davidson 1984, 111) This is perhaps the beginning of the tradition of the Christmas cake. According to Groom, the night before midwinter was believed to be a safe time for fortune telling because the spirits and fairies were powerless at this time of year. (Groom 2013, 303) Greenery was brought into the house to protect the tree spirits from the harsh winters although never before *Modranicht*, and perhaps this is represented in *Gawain* by the appearance of the Green Knight, who may be the very epitome of the greenwood itself. After the twelve days (that is, Epiphany, or Twelfth Night) the greenery was taken back outside so the spirits could be released once more and again, food might be left out for the spirits. This perhaps parallels the Magi bringing their gifts to the Christ-child. This also suggests elements of *carnivale* where the kings become the servants of the child, as well as further links to the periods of lawlessness in Saturnalia.

If the festivities began at the start of Sagittarius, then fifteen days would take us to the feast of Epiphany and the gifts of the Magi are represented in *Gawain* by the giving of "hondselle" or "3eres-3iftes" which are presents and New Year gifts, (ll. 66, 67); this tradition goes back to the giving of *strenae* in Roman times. (Groom 2013, 284) These were gifts given for good luck at New Year (still seen in the ritual of first-footing, more traditional in Scotland and the North of England, as well as the giving of *étrennes* in France). These gifts were given at New Year until the Victorian re-imagining of the festive season and Christmas became the focal point of the celebrations. Later in the poem, the adventurous story of "strange happenings" that Arthur hears is described as a "gift", using the same word as the presents given at New Year, *handselle*. (l. 491)

King Arthur, amid all of these festivities, is described as being "sumquat childgered" (l. 85) which Andrews and Waldron translate as "somewhat boyish", and which is often

interpreted negatively: perhaps Arthur is boyish because he is inexperienced. However, it is equally plausible to read this as Arthur being “childlike”, that is, having the innocence of a child on Christmas morning and believing in the magic that surrounds the celebrations.⁴ He undertakes that he will not eat until such time as he had heard a marvellous story, or seen some impressive feat of arms and is described as being “agitated by his young blood and his restless mind”. (l. 89) That could, however, also represent his child-like excitement for Christmas. This happens when the Green Knight intrudes on the feast – and here it is worth mentioning the parallels that the five feasts depicted in *Cleanness* are all subject to interruptions in one form or another.

The Green Knight is handsome and terrifying and carries an enormous axe in one hand and a holly bob, a symbol of peace, in the other. His hair, clothes and horse are all green. He comes in, quite literally as a spirit of the greenwood, brought in from outdoors, represented in modern days by Christmas trees, wreaths, holly and ivy and mistletoe. He claims that he is not here to fight, but instead challenges Arthur’s court to a Christmas game. When no one takes the challenge, the Green Knight speaks depreciatively of the Camelot knights, describing them as “beardless children” (perhaps this also refers back to the description of Arthur being “sumquat childgered”); Arthur initially takes the challenge, but Gawain, Arthur’s nephew, offers to take the challenge in Arthur’s place. The “game” is that the Green Knight will “stand a stroke” from Gawain, and he will “deal out another to him ... a year hence”. (ll. 294, 298) The Green Knight makes Gawain repeat the contract, but when Gawain swears “truly” and offers his word of honour, the Green Knight tells Gawain that his word “is enough for the New Year” demonstrating, perhaps, one of the earliest examples of the power and binding nature of the New Year’s resolution. Gawain decapitates the knight, only to be told by the severed head to seek him out at the green chapel “a year hence”.

The Green Knight’s appearance contains themes that one would expect in a Christmas Mummer’s play, which would traditionally be performed as part of the feast. The play included the elements of sacrifice which, in the Mummer’s Play would be seen through the death of the valiant soldier, and then through the killing and resurrection of the Turkish Knight; here the sacrifice represents the life- and growth-cycle to ensure the harvest for the

⁴ If, as is often argued, *Gawain* was written under the patronage of King Richard II, then it is possible that the poet drew similarities between Richard and Arthur through their youthful countenance.

coming year; this is likewise represented by King Arthur – *rex quondam, rexque futurus*. (Chambers 1903, i 213; Withington 1918 i 5; Weston 1993, xxiv) This theme also calls to mind the celebrations of Saturnalia when the Roman authorities would choose an “enemy of the people” to represent *The Lord of Misrule* who would enjoy an abundance of pleasures during this time of celebration and preside over the revelries. After this time, the victim was brutally murdered, representing the destruction of the forces of darkness.⁵

While the Green Knight interrupts the feast, his appearance is accepted as a “lord of misrule” with reference to the distraction he provides through his Christmas game. His intention is to “pass as in peace”; conversely, where the intention is not peaceful, the interruption of a feast is a validation for slaughter. Geoffrey of Monmouth describes how the Trojans, the first human settlers of Britain, are justified in attacking the indigenous giants *because* he giants attacked on a holy day; likewise, Grendel’s apparently unprovoked attack on Heorot after the feast (and the first to spill blood) justifies Beowulf’s retaliation.

After the Christmas feast in *Gawain*, the passing of the months is described and there is a brief description of how the meals become more frugal: Lent can “test a body with fish and planer food”. (l. 503) Dyer notes that during the fourteenth century, there was a “generally strict observance of fish days on three days a week, and throughout Lent”. (Dyer 1983, 193) This fast represents the period that Christ spent fasting in the wilderness. (Matthew 4: 1–11) Jonassen argues that Chaucer’s description of the Franklin in the *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* demonstrates the meats that would have been customary for the season of Christmas and Shrovetide, which are alternated with the fish diet common with fasting days. (Jonassen 1994, 101)

Gawain stays at Camelot until 2 November – All Souls’ Day. As he travels through Wales looking for the Green Chapel, he is described as “often companionless, he remains alone at night where he did not find the food that he liked – or perhaps not to the standard that he expects. (l. 694) However, it is on Christmas Eve, the pagan *modranicht*, that Gawain prays to Mary and hopes that she will direct him to a place where he can say mass for Christmas. No sooner than he had genuflected three times, he sees “the finest castle a knight had ever known”, with towers, pinnacle and chimneys so intricate that it appears as

⁵ Although these plays are typically associated with the coming of spring, Withington notes that “the fixing of Christian ecclesiastical feasts has shifted the seasons of the festivals, which accounts for the performances of these plays at Christmas” (i 5–6).

though they have been “cut out of paper”. (l. 802) This description is particularly significant as another poem in the *Gawain* manuscript, *Cleanness*, has an account of the Biblical story of Belshazzar’s feast, when the dishes of roast meats are served with “raised canopies over them, carved on top, cut out of paper and tipped with gold. (ll. 1407–12) On the other hand, in another devotional poem in the same manuscript entitled *Pearl*, the maiden wears a decorated crown of pearls with high pinnacles (l. 205) but unlike the insubstantial nature of the castle and the table decorations, here the crown is a symbol of purity and virginity.

When Gawain is welcome into the castle, he is met by Sir Bercilak, the Lord of the Castle, and invited “to enjoy whatever is here, as you please” (l. 835) He is also given the opportunity to change into rich robes – a chance to remove his armour as well as his helmet, his sword, and, significantly, his shield. It is in this section that we get a more detailed description of the furnishings and the feast: Gawain is seated in a chair with cushioned on quilted seats; he is dressed in an embroidered, hooded mantle of brown silk, lined with ermine. As seen with the description of Guinevere in the celebrations at Camelot, hospitality and status are shown by how comfortable the guest is made to feel. These lavish clothes and furnishings demonstrate how Gawain is considered an honoured guest. (Nichols 1985, 203) In addition, when Gawain leaves, he discovers that his horse has been looked after, which as Henisch remarks, is “one more proof of his host’s meticulous courtesy”. (Henisch 1976, 192)

A trestle table is set up, covered with a pure white table runner, and laid with a napkin, salt-cellar and silver spoons: this table dressing is sufficient confirmation that Gawain is among civilised company. (Henisch 1976, 153) As seen in Camelot, Gawain washes before the meal. (l. 887) The food is, once again, served in double helpings. Christmas Eve is the last day of the Advent fast, and consequently the meal must be without meat. (Henisch 1976, 43) Gawain is served copious amounts of wine and eats many kinds of fish, in “subtle sauces”, baked in bread, grilled on the embers, boiled, or in a broth flavoured with spices. Dyer observes that herbs and vegetables, such as leeks, onions and garlic, would be used for flavouring. (Dyer 1983, 196) Sir Bercilak modestly asks Gawain to accept the “penance” of this meal, promising that the next meal – the ostentatious feast of Christmas – will be better.

It is night when the dinner is over. The two knights celebrate evensong together and it is here that Gawain first sees Lady Hautdesert, described as the “most beautiful creature

alive ... and lovelier than Guinevere” and becomes infatuated with her. The Lady is accompanied by another, older lady, who is “highly honoured” (l. 949) by the men around her. On Christmas Day, for both breakfast and dinner, the household enjoy “many delicacies”. (l. 998) Again, each is seated on the dais according to a strict hierarchy; the older female is placed in a position of honour, with Sir Bercilak on one side, and Gawain and Lady Hautdesert on the other, and “each man is served according to rank”. (l. 1006) During the feast there is the playing of trumpets, kettledrums and “much piping”. (l. 1017)

The Christmas festivities continue for a further four days, after Christmas the feast of St Stephen and then the feast of St John the Evangelist (27 December) are named specifically – the feast of the Holy Innocents (Childermass) should also have been included for the dates to be complete. After the feasts of Christmas, Sir Bercilak reveals that he knows the location of the green chapel – just two miles from the castle. With this in mind, he invites Gawain to stay for the next three days and Sir Bercilak says he will go hunting and give Gawain the spoils of his day; Gawain, in return, will stay in the castle and exchange whatever he “wins”. This exchange of winnings would be seen as a further example of Sir Bercilak’s generosity.

Over the next three days (29–31 December), Sir Bercilak hunts with his entourage, succeeding in hunting a flock of deer on the first day; on the second day he kills a particularly fierce wild boar; and on the third it is no more than a simple fox. The hunts are described with great sincerity. The plumpest of the slaughtered deer are gathered by the men of “highest rank” and their retainers. On the thinnest of the deer, the hunters find “two fingers breadth of flesh – those that are bigger obviously had considerably more. There then follows a graphic description of the preparation of the deer, and how the hunters

slit the hollow at the base of the throat, took hold of the gullet, scraped it with a sharp knife, and tied up the flesh. Then they slit along the four legs and stripped off the hide; they opened the belly, drew the bowels carefully to avoid undoing the ligature of the knot. They seized the throat and properly separated the gullet from the wind-pipe and tossed out the cuts. They cut out the shoulder-joints with their sharp knives, drawing them through a small hole so as to keep the sides intact; then they cut the breast and divided it in two. And then one of them begins once again at the neck, quickly cuts the carcass open right to the fork, removes the neck offal and truly after that they promptly loosen all the membranes on the ribs; thus they correctly clear out the offal along the bones of the back right down to the haunch, so that it all hung together, and they lift it up quite intact and cut it off there. (ll. 1330–46)

Presumably the deer was served for the meal that evening, although this is not in the text and it could equally have been preserved, by being treated with salt or smoking it. All that the text describes is that the food that evening had “many new delicacies”. (l. 1401) The celebrations continue with flaming torches, great noise and music including festive songs and ring-dancing, as well as merriment and minstrelsy, and more wine: indeed, there are many references to wine while Gawain stays in Castle Hautdesert (ll. 980, 1025, 1112, 1403, 1409, 1668, 1684, 1935) suggesting that he may have seen experienced all the events through a cloud of intoxication.

On the second day, Sir Bercilak hunts a “huge and broad” boar, “the greatest boar of all” which turns out to be a vicious and formidable adversary. This is a personal challenge for him and demonstrates his prowess, after all, when his hunters fire arrows its hide is so tough that none of the arrows “would penetrate the bristles of his brow”. (l. 1457) Again, the animal is killed and there is detailed description of the preparation of this animal – cutting off the head and then slitting the meat along the backbone, drawing out the bowels (l. 1610) and burning them on red-hot embers and served with bread for the hunting dogs. (l. 1611) Then he cuts the meat into bright broad slabs.

The hunting of the deer and the boar during the Christmas period demonstrates, as Dyer argues, that “households were usually able to obtain supplies of some fresh meat and fish throughout the year” rather than the myth of a mass “autumn slaughter” of animals, followed by a diet of salt meat throughout the winter. (Dyer 1983, 193)

The third day sees Sir Bercilak hunting a fox, who manages to elude the hunters for much of the day until Sir Bercilak corners and kills the fox with his hounds, and then strip the pelt from the fox. (l. 1921)

During each of these days that Sir Bercilak is hunting, Gawain remains in the castle where Lady Hautdesert enters his bedchamber every morning and flirts with Gawain, so that he is tested to refuse the lady’s advances but without offending her. At the same time, he is careful not to abuse his host’s hospitality as he “was concerned about his courtesy, lest he should be boorish, and more about his guilt if he were to commit sin and be a traitor to the man who owned that house”. (ll. 1173–75)

The temptation of Gawain (and how it is linked to the final showdown with the Green Knight) is beyond the remit of this chapter, suffice it to say that the animals are a metaphor for how Gawain responds to the lady: on the first day, he is timid like the deer, on

the second he is more forceful, like the boar, and on the third day he is cunning, like the fox. On two of the three occasions, he persuades the lady to leave and concedes only a kiss, which is dutifully given to Sir Bercilak on his return (hence, the “exchange of winnings”). On the final day, the Lady persuades him to accept a silk girdle that she claims will make him impervious to the Green Knight’s blade. Gawain accepts it, not as a love token, but as a means of escaping his fate. When Sir Bercilak returns that night, Gawain dutifully concedes the kisses that he won during the day, but conceals the girdle and thus he has broken the rules of the game, after all, the silk would have beaten the fox fur. But then, Gawain was in an impossible quandary: he did not have to reveal the source of the kisses he received, but to reveal the girdle (and its source) may well have signalled to Sir Bercilak his wife’s potential infidelity. The final section focuses on Gawain’s confrontation with the Green Knight and the significance of the temptations in the castle. The section ends with a rather unconvincing explanation as to why the Green Knight challenged Arthur’s court and with the Green Knight inviting Gawain back to “make merry in my house”. (l. 2468) Having realised that he has been tested in a game of which no one has told him the rules, Gawain would be justified in feeling that his host’s “hospitality” completely opposes the rules of courtesy that holds in such high regard, just like the Belshazzar’s ego-centric and sacrilegious feast in *Cleanness*. After Belshazzar’s death, the city is restored to peace, but after Gawain completes his trial, he returns to Camelot, shamed and humiliated and in apparent disgrace, but perhaps wiser from his experience. For King Arthur and his knights, however, they see Gawain’s tale as a marvel, and all knights join in fellowship wearing a bright green ribbon as a symbol of Gawain’s honour.

Feasting in any literature is an example of excess, particularly so at weddings, Christmas and other important festivals and the descriptions of the feasts in *Gawain and the Green Knight* offer an insight into the frivolity and the imagination that went into a convivial extravaganza as well as the “fasting” diet. It contrasts with the descriptions in other texts: for example, the account of Chaucer’s Franklin in *The General Prologue* describes how it “snows” food in the Franklin’s house, and while, as Brewer notes feasts are an “incredibly wasteful extravagance”, there is no mention of any guests enjoying the Franklin’s hospitality. (Brewer 1997, 131) Likewise, in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the unnamed knight is forced into marriage with the loathly damsel and his duress is shown by the lack of the wedding banquet: “there

nas no joye ne feest at al". ("there was neither joy nor feast" l. 1078) At the other end of the scale, in the Romance *The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (which is essentially the same theme as *The Wife of Bath's Tale*) Dame Ragnelle assigns for herself the place of honour "in the open halle I wolle dyne, in myddys of all the rowte" (In the midst of the company, ll. 579–80) suggesting there is an expectation of a wedding feast and when she is there, she is described, despite her clothes costing three thousand marks, as taking "the prize of foulness" (l. 595–6), and eats three capons, three curlews and great roasts as much as six people. The text criticises her lack of manners and refinement to the point that knights and squires both curse her: "All men that saw her bade the devil chew on her bones". (ll. 616–17) Another example of hyperbolic excess is seen in the satirical *Land of Cockayne* where the geese (a high-status food) fly, already spit-roasted, and call for the monks who live there to eat them, providing a hedonistic contrast to the monastic discipline represented in *The Voyage of Brendan* which describes the process of fasting as well as the times of celebration.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight describes the extravagant Christmas celebrations and even though this is set against an Arthurian backdrop, it provides a useful insight into aristocratic feasting and decadence. Christmas was a celebration that ran for fifteen days, probably from the solstice to Epiphany, and it is a time of excessive food and drinking. The feast was an opportunity for opulence where royalty and the aristocracy could demonstrate their wealth and generosity, courtesy and hospitality, and this is particularly demonstrated when *Gawain* is contrasted the devotional poem, *Cleanness*, despite the fact that, in *Gawain*, the host has an ulterior motive for his generosity. What *Gawain* describes is social hierarchy, table settings, and food (both in terms of fasting and feasting diets) and gift giving. If the depiction of Arthur is an allusion to King Richard II, then it might be that, instead of the usual Christmas celebrations in Westminster, Windsor or Eltham, the poem of *Gawain* was written for when he celebrated with Christmas feasts and jousting at Lichfield in 1398. (Bennett 1983, 234) Derek Pearsall suggests that the poem "would have made an excellent entertainment for a Christmas or New Year "house party". (Pearsall 1982, 51) Or indeed, despite his shame, the story that Gawain recounts to Arthur about his adventures at Sir Bercilak's castle may be the "marvellous story" that Arthur wished to hear before he allows himself to settle down to eat. Either way, *Gawain* has resonances of the Mummer's Plays

and the Saturnalia revels. In particular this is demonstrated through a reading that the youthful Arthur – in the spring of life – faces the disorder brought by the Green Knight, the Lord of Misrule, who represents the seasons, particularly when carrying the holly bob “which is greenest when the woods are bare”. (l. 207) As seen in the descriptions of Saturnalia, the Lord of Misrule is sacrificed at the end of the festival, just as the Green Knight is decapitated, symbolised by the sword dance in the Mummer’s play.

The fifteen days of Christmas and New Year, which extend probably from the solstice to Epiphany, is a time of excessive food and drinking; however, it was also an opportunity to demonstrate generosity and conviviality. The elaborate events that surround the green knight and the marvels that he performs are like the extravagances of the feast, but like Sir Bercilak’s castle, they are like the table decorations of Belshazzar’s feast: cut out of paper, and, ultimately, insubstantial and just for show.

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