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## “MAKE WE MERY”: LYRIC AS CONTEXT FOR COURTLY LIFE IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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In his recent article entitled “Interpretive Laughter in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Robert Longworth discusses the variety of laughter in the poem and concludes that the poet’s treatment of it remains deliberately “inconclusive,” thereby frustrating “the certitude with which we would like to propound our own interpretive conclusions.”<sup>1</sup> Longworth’s conclusive inconclusiveness concerning the significance of interpretive laughter evinces one of the chief pleasures of reading and teaching this carefully constructed, highly symmetrical poem, that is, its suggestive ambiguities that allow for a plurality of interpretations.

Because of its symmetry, the poem quite naturally invites comparisons between elements such as the “beheading” game and the “exchange of winnings” game, the various ways of marking time (seasonal, historical, liturgical), the Christian and the apparently non-Christian aspects, the bedroom and hunting scenes of Fitt III, and the two courtly societies of Arthur and Bertilak themselves. Concerning the two courts, much scholarly ink has been spilled in an effort to determine the moral status of each, with lines often drawn based on positive or negative assessments of them. In addition to the poem itself, critics frequently draw on various literary and cultural contexts in their attempts to understand the status of these courts within the moral economy of the poem’s fictive world. Yet, in their efforts, critics have largely ignored one set of literary and cultural artifacts: Middle English lyrics. Here, I shall remedy in part this oversight, for certain Middle English lyrics provide engaging insights into the culture the *Gawain*-poet articulates. Indeed, examining the poem in light of these lyrics opens up interpretive possibilities for readers,

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Longworth, “Interpretive Laughter in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Philological Quarterly* 70 (1991): 146.

especially teachers and students, by illuminating certain passages of the narrative and, at times, complicating certain readings of these passages, particularly those concerning Arthur's and Bertilak's courts.

In the opening scene, the poet presents a picture of Arthur's society in its "first age": youthful and merry in its jousting, dancing, and feasting.<sup>2</sup> Arthur himself is young and described ambiguously as "sumquat childgered" (86) and restless (87), with "3onge blod" and "brayn wylde" (89). We then see Arthur standing before the high table, talking of trifles (107-8), while the others begin a New Year's feast, presumably in honor of Christ's circumcision. The narrator further tells us that, as was his custom at such feasts, the king would not sit until he experienced something out of the ordinary: a strange story, a marvelous adventure, even a challenge to joust—apparently anything would do. This is the setting in which the Green Knight dramatically appears to propose his rather odd, yet engaging, "Crystemas gomen" (283).

While all critics recognize the youth of Arthur's court—after all, they are but "berdlez childer" (280), as the Green Knight condescendingly observes—many disagree on the significance of the court's youth. Those who view the court positively consider it lively and innocent, as yet untouched by the moral corruption that destroys the Round Table later in the Arthurian story. Laila Gross, for instance, focuses on the gaiety of the New Year's celebration, implying a positive view of the court in her discussion of narrative movement.<sup>3</sup> Martin Stevens considers the court to be not so much youthful as in its "golden age," and its festivities "not mere occasions of mindless, unmitigated frolic....[but] also times of devotion to God."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, those who view the court negatively consider it brash and vain, already marred by moral decay. For instance, Bernard Levy perceives an excessively merry court delighting "in the pleasures of the senses for their own sake" while remaining oblivious to the Holy Day's significance.<sup>5</sup> Arnold Soucy and J.M. Leighton see it as undis-

<sup>2</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), line 54. Hereafter, in-text parenthetical line references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup>Laila Gross, "Telescoping Time in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Orbis Litterarum* 24 (1969): 132-3.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Stevens, "Laughter and Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Speculum* 47 (1972): 67, 68.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard S. Levy, "Gawain's Spiritual Journey: *Imitatio Christi* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 6 (1965): 79.

ciplined and immature, as yet unaware of the mutability of life.<sup>6</sup> And Marietta Patrick interprets the court's youth and playfulness as somewhat frivolous, suggesting "a lack of balance and wholeness."<sup>7</sup>

The interpretation that Arthur's court is frivolous and immature has some merit. For instance, Arthur's behavior, especially his desire to witness something out of the ordinary, seems out of place for a solemn festival such as the Christmas season. Indeed, for Soucy, focusing strictly on the narrative economy within the poem, Arthur's desire is a mark of his childishness.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this view of Arthur and his court is somewhat incomplete. In a basic sense, the king simply calls for participation in the feast through a performance of some kind.

When we turn to Middle English Christmas lyrics, we find a similar pattern of requesting participation in the celebration through performance. Take, for instance, the three-stanza lyric that begins "Make we mery bothe more and lasse" (Balliol Oxford MS 354). The lyric situation in this poem connotes a Christmas feast during which the persona demands full participation, saying in the first stanza:

Lett no man cum into this hall,  
Grome, page, nor yet marshall,  
But that sum sport he bring withall,  
For now ys the tyme of Crystmas.<sup>9</sup>

As the lyric continues, the persona invites a range of activity—song or "oder sport" (5–6)—and provides a purpose for it: "That yt may please at thys festyng" (7), that is, for entertainment. The persona then concludes: if one refuses, cast him out "to the stokkes" (11), that is, "excommunicate" him from the Christmas gathering. The persona

<sup>6</sup>Arnold F. Soucy, "Linear Pattern within the Cyclical Pattern of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (Ph.D. diss., U of Minn., 1972), 32–6; J.M. Leighton, "Christian and Pagan Symbolism and Ritual in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Theoria* 43 (1974): 51.

<sup>7</sup>Marietta S. Patrick, "A Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Ball State University Forum* 24, no. 4 (1983): 28–9.

<sup>8</sup>Soucy, 37–8. Tolkien and Gordon note that Arthur followed this custom at high feasts in several French romances, p. 76, n. 90 ff. While recognizing this feature within the context of literary tradition, Soucy argues that the *Gawain*-poet uses the feature specifically to emphasize Arthur's childishness.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Leighton Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), lyric #11, p. 9, lines 1–4 (subsequent in-text parenthetical line references are to this edition). The lyric is also available in Maxwell S. Luria and Richard L. Hoffman, eds., *Middle English Lyrics* (New York: Norton, 1974), lyric #144, p. 133.

articulates the overriding reason for the request in the repeating fourth, eighth, and twelfth lines, which is also repeated as the second line of the refrain: "For now ys the tyme of Crystmas."

We find virtually the same movement in the five-stanza lyric, "Make we mere as we may" (British Library Additional MS 14997), only here the situation focuses specifically on the New Year. After setting the scene as Yuletide—a time of "merthe and gomyn"<sup>10</sup>—this persona, too, invites participation through performance of a carole, with the promise in the third stanza that "Yf he con non we schall hym lere" (11). Again, the persona provides a purpose, "So that we be mere allway" (12). Then, in the fourth stanza, the persona states that, if one refuses to be joyful, "In a diche I wolde he were" (15), that is, again "excommunicate" him from the festive gathering. So, the persona concludes:

Mende the fyre, and make gud chere!  
 Fyll the cuppe, Ser Botelere!  
 Let euery mon drinke to hys fere!  
 Thys endes my carol with care awaye. (17–20)

This final invitation to drink rounds out the movement of this lyric: a call to fellowship and full participation in the New Year's celebration.

These two lyrics at their core invite audience members to participate in a game of sorts. The implied rules, quite simply, suggest that if one is going to feast, one should contribute to the entertainment. The game aspect of these two lyrics mirrors the game aspect of Arthur's request. Though one could critique Arthur for the rules of his game—that he refuses to eat until something happens—his basic call for merriment and sport seems in keeping with Christmas season celebrations, at least within a literary milieu, if not actual courtly practice. Indeed, Arthur himself suggests this association when, after the Green Knight departs, he turns to Guinevere and says:

"Dere dame, to-day demay you neuer;  
 Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse,  
 Laykyng of interludez, to laze and to syng,  
 Among þise kynde caroles of knyztet and ladyez.  
 Neuer þe lece to my mete I may me wel dres,  
 For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake." (470–5)

<sup>10</sup>Greene, #10, p. 9, lines 2, 4 (subsequent parenthetical line references are to this edition); this lyric is also available in Luria and Hoffman (#147, p. 136).

Turning to Bertilak's court, we see a similar attention paid to this game aspect of the holiday season.

In his quest for the Green Chapel, Gawain arrives at Bertilak's court on Christmas Eve after a nearly two-month journey through a cold and wild landscape. With a "fayre fyre" (832) burning in the hearth, the warmth of the court stands in stark contrast with the environment through which Gawain just passed. Bertilak himself, a bearded man of "hygh eldee" (844), greets the wanderer, saying "'3e are welcum to welde as yow lykez / Dat here is; al is yowre awen, to haue at yowre wyлле / and welde'" (835-7). They dine on fish, as a final Advent meal, and proceed to the chapel to pray the Christmas Eve Compline. The following three days, then, are spent feasting and dancing in celebration of the holy season. As readers of the poem know, of course, Gawain remains until New Year's day, during which time he and the host play the "exchange of winnings" game.

As with the Round Table, Bertilak's court evokes differing interpretations among certain critics. Those who view the court positively consider it vibrant and mature, marked by a level of discipline not evident in Arthur's court. For instance, in comparing the two courts, Soucy interprets numerous details of Bertilak's court—including its apparent piety (daily Mass), its life-sustaining activities (hunting), and its inclusion of physically mature people in its social structure (Bertilak is middle-aged and bearded; Morgan is an old woman who holds a place of honor)—as indicating a sensitivity to the vagaries of life and an openness to risk taking and change.<sup>11</sup> Those who view this court negatively, consider it deceptive, threatening, and potentially damning. Levy, for example, interprets Bertilak as the devil himself, and virtually every detail of his court and its activities as an aspect of the biblical "wilderness," in which Gawain, in imitation of Christ, is tempted.<sup>12</sup>

Considering the moral import of the "exchange of winnings" game, the view that Bertilak's court is a perilous place for the hero seems evident, for it is really here, and not so much at the Green Chapel, that Gawain's chivalric "troth" and Christian virtue are tested (as perhaps it would be for anyone on such an arduous quest). Yet, to view the court as simply a "den of iniquity" flattens the vibrant picture the poet evokes: a picture that, in certain details, seems to be a lively and human portrait of a courtly culture.

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<sup>11</sup>Soucy, 54-70.

<sup>12</sup>Levy, 90-9.

Gawain arrives at the very close of Advent, a penitential season during the Middle Ages, and Bertilak's court seems acutely aware of the season's penitential nature. When served the Christmas Eve meal, for instance, Gawain's attendants apologize for the fare, saying "Dis penaunce now 3e take, / And eft his schal amende" (897-8). While one could question the apparent lavishness of this meal, as Levy does,<sup>13</sup> one might be hard-pressed to find fault with an attempt to make fish palatable at the end of the Advent season. As the Middle English lyric beginning "Farewell, Advent" suggests (Cambridge University Ee. MS 1.12), a steady diet of such fare could become tiresome. In this comical song of sixteen stanzas, the persona sets the theme in the first stanza by addressing Advent, saying:

With paciens thou hast vs fedde  
And made vs go hungrie to bedde;  
For lak of mete we were nyghe dedde;  
Farewele fro vs both alle and sume.<sup>14</sup>

In the following stanzas, then, we find delightful images of "stinking fische not worthe a louce" (7). Indeed, the persona uses a comical series of piscatory images—"Salt fische and samon [that] was to dere" (10), "plaices thynne / Nothing on them but bone and skynne" (13-4), and "muskilles gaping afture the mone" (17)—to lodge his complaint against Advent. The lyric's movement, drawing each "eastate" (41) of society into the persona's side of the complaint, from "knight" and "squier" (45) to "labouring man" (49) to "monke and frere / Chanon and nonne" (53-4), leads to a final celebratory note ushering Advent out and Christmas in, a note one can almost hear between the lines in the Christmas celebration at Bertilak's court and, in retrospect, at Arthur's court as well.

While this lyric presents a comical view of the transition between Advent and Christmas, it also suggests a release from the strictures of the Advent season and a relief from the mundane that the Christmas season provides. Turning to other Middle English lyrics, we find similar correspondences with certain aspects of life at Bertilak's court. For instance, in the lyric beginning "Tidinges I bring you, for to tell" (Bodleian MS 29734), the persona describes a hunt, recounting a great struggle with "a bor so brime," and declares:

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 93-4.

<sup>14</sup>Greene, #3, pp. 4-5, lines 1-4 (subsequent parenthetical line references are to this edition); this lyric is also available in Luria and Hoffman (#146, pp. 134-5).

Me for to kill sor sharply ameved,  
 That brimly best so cruel and unrid,  
     Ther tamed I him,  
 And reft from him both lith and lime.<sup>15</sup>

The persona then presents the boar's head as testimony and invites his audience to share his joy, saying "Now etes therof anon" (13). Similarly, the carols beginning "Caput apri refero" (Balliol Oxford MS 354) and "The bores hede in hond I bring" (National Library Wales, Porkington MS 10) present a joyous return from the hunt and subsequent invitation to feast.<sup>16</sup> These boar's head carols illuminate, to a degree, the social impact of Bertilak's own hunt on the second day and his joyous return. Presumably, it is this kind of fare that replaced the fish of Advent, and, in light of the lyric "Farewelle, Advent," acquiring it was indeed a cause for joy. While the boar's hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has various moral ramifications, which I shall not attend to here, this activity also, quite simply, seems to be part of the general seasonal celebration, again at least within a literary context if not in actual historical practice.

Similarly, the "exchange of winnings" game itself, of which the boar's hunt plays a central part, seems part of the general milieu of the Christmas season, as well as in hindsight a moral test of Gawain.<sup>17</sup> I only need mention now the two lyrics discussed earlier in relation to Arthur's court to emphasize what I mean. Like Arthur, who proposes a game of sorts at Camelot, Bertilak's proposal, on the surface at least, seems in line with the literary milieu of the lyrics "Make we mery bothe more and lasse" and "Make we mere as we may." It is not surprising, then, that neither Gawain nor many first-time readers sense the moral import of the game Bertilak proposes until the end of the poem.

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<sup>15</sup>Luria and Hoffman, #151, p. 138, lines 6-9; the subsequent parenthetical line reference is to this edition.

<sup>16</sup>Greene, #132A, p. 91, and #135, p. 93; these lyrics are also available in Luria and Hoffman, #153, pp. 139-40, and #154, p. 140, respectively. Greene anthologizes other boar's head carols, as well.

<sup>17</sup>The "exchange of winnings" game is not the only festive game Bertilak invites. On Christmas Eve, for instance, he proposes a game of mirth-making in which the winner will have his hood as a prize (981-90). Similarly, much sport, song, and dance punctuate the three-day Christmas celebration (995-1023).



These lyrics, and others, provide an interesting literary context for certain aspects of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>18</sup> While I am not arguing direct influence in either direction, I am suggesting that lyrics such as these can inform our readings of the narrative.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, following Mark Allen's argument for reading medieval lyrics and dramas together, they provide an illuminating pedagogical tool for teaching the poem, as suggested earlier.<sup>20</sup> I have taught the poem in two types of literature courses—an introductory course and a course in medieval and Renaissance literature designed for non-English majors. One of the points I like to raise for discussion is a comparison of the two courts. After preliminary discussions, I ask students to take a position on the moral status of each court, and, perhaps not surprisingly, the interpretive conclusions they draw generally follow the lines that critics draw. I then introduce the lyrics and ask students to reread sections of the narrative in light of them. Because these lyrics pertain to subject matter similar to certain aspects of the narrative, but with different perspectives, reading them tends to open up interpretive possibilities for students. In playing with the correspondences between the lyrics and the narrative, most students modify and some completely revise their interpretations of the courts in light of the insights the lyrics suggest. In the end, as they respond through interpretive performances to my own invitation to participate in this "literary feast," students typically begin to see the playfulness of the poem within a larger context of what might be called "medieval Christmas literature."

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a Christmas poem, marked by joy, laughter, and festivity as well as testing and spiritual growth.

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<sup>18</sup>In addition to courtly life, lyrics can illuminate other aspects of the poem. For example, Gawain leaves Camelot on All Souls' Day (November 2), a feast on which Christians traditionally are mindful of death, and a somber tone at the court marks his departure; all, including Gawain, believe he journeys to his death. Death lyrics such as "Now bernes, buirdes, bolde and blithe" (Luria and Hoffman #238, pp. 226-8) can provide another perspective on Gawain's and the court's mood as well as suggest the significance of this feast day in the lives of medieval Christians. Similarly, holly and ivy carols, such as those Greene anthologized (#s 136-9), can suggest possible interpretations of the bob of holly the Green Knight carries when first entering Arthur's court.

<sup>19</sup>Nor could I argue for such a relationship, for the lyrics discussed here all survive in 15th-century manuscripts. Strictly speaking, then, my readings of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in light of the lyrics could very well be anachronistic.

<sup>20</sup>Mark Allen, "Middle English Drama and Middle English Lyrics," *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, ed. Richard Emmerson (New York: MLA, 1990), 106-10.

While none of the lyrics discussed here leads to interpretive closure—in the end, the question of the moral status of the two courts remains open—bringing lyrics to bear on the poem in an attempt to illuminate aspects of the narrative can emphasize the poem's own focus on game. Moreover, some of these lyrics can illuminate the multi-faceted significance of the Christmas season for late medieval Christians. Not only was it a time to celebrate the miracle of the Incarnation but it also provided a much needed respite, at least in some quarters of society, from an otherwise long, cold, and drab winter.

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