Food, Sex and Violence
Carnival in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Tobias Andersson
Abstract

This essay discusses the aspects of Carnival in the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the opposition between ordinary official life and the Carnival. Peter Burke’s and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on the Carnival are used throughout the analyse of the poem mainly with focus on four different aspects; food, sex, violence and games. The essay also discusses the questioning of rank, which was central to the spirit of the Carnival where all were considered equal. Gawain is the protagonist who throughout the poem manages to resist the spirit of the Carnival despite being challenged by three different antagonists who in their on ways symbolise the Carnival; the Green knight with aggressive and mocking speech, the Lady of the Castle who acts as the seducer and Lord Bertilak who in his three hunts shows that he embraces the spirit of the Carnival.
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Introduction

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of the most famous Arthurian stories and it was written in the fourteenth century by an unknown poet. He is therefore called “the Gawain-poet”. The story has all the ingredients of a romance such as adventures, temptations, love and the supernatural. The poem has according to Piotr Sadowski “a unique blend of the most important medieval traditions: the ideology and practices of the church and the court, and elements of popular traditions” (44).

Most of the story in the poem takes place during Christmas. At first in Camelot where we get to follow the feast from Christmas till New Years Eve, and the Green Knights arrival. Gawain, the main protagonist, is the knight who accepts the challenge from the Green Knight and subsequently is drawn into an unexpected adventure. Secondly, at the Castle de Hautdesert where Gawain awaits the second part of the challenge, again celebrating a Christmas feast. Gawain faces three different antagonists in the poem; the Green Knight and Lord Bertilak, who we in the end understand are the same person, and the Lady of Castle de Hautdesert. The plot is placed within these festivities which are described with high spirits and with focus on excess in eating and enjoying themselves. Martin Stevens, states that “even a casual reader cannot help noticing the holiday atmosphere, the joyous tone, and the laughter that prevails in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from beginning to end” (65). In the way which the feasts are described highlights the importance of revealing the plot within them. Sadowski argues that “these moments of the year were for some reason more important for the Gawain poet” (60).

The significance of the feasts in the poem reflects the importance of festivals and feasts in the Middle Ages, and the most important one was the Carnival. The Carnival differed in many ways from other festivals. Peter Burke, the author of *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, discusses that the Carnival had three different themes; food, sex and
violence (186). Burke states that competitions and some kind of play were a continuing event in the Carnival ritual (184), but also that it was a time where images of complete change of roles were popular, which he calls “the world upside down” (188). Mikhail Bakhtin takes it even further in his *Rabelais and His World* and he argues that the Carnival served a deeper purpose, that the Carnival created a second life for people, a kind of “festive life” (8). This second life, which they experienced as liberating, was made possible because of the removal of “hierarchical rank” (10). Bakhtin mentions that “rank was especially evident during official feast”, unlike the Carnival where “all were considered equal” (10). The spirit of the Carnival created a utopian world for a short period of time.

My aim is firstly to analyse the feasts and games in the poem. How are they described and can they be connected to the concept of Carnival? Further, the Carnival was a feast which was liberated from hierarchical rank, which separated it from the official feasts where social status was reinforced. I argue that Gawain’s encounters with the Green knight, Lord Bertilak and the Lady represent the opposition between the Carnival and ordinary life, where the Green Knight, Bertilak and the Lady symbolises the idea of the Carnival, and Gawain the symbol for ordinary, official life.

Since the discussion of the carnival is a complicated subject I will give a historical and theoretical background on the matter. Thereafter, I will firstly analyse the two Christmas feasts with focus on games and the excess of food in order to show influences from the Carnival. Secondly, Gawain’s and the Lady’s encounters in the bedroom scenes and the aspect of sex will be discussed. Thirdly, there will be a discussion on the aspect of violence in the poem with focus on Gawain’s and the Green Knight’s encounters in the Beheading game and Lord Bertilak’s three hunts.
History and theory of the Carnival

The most obvious connection between the feasts in the poem and the Carnival is the time of the events since the Carnival in the Middle Ages started in late December or in the beginning of January (Burke 182). Burke claims that Christmas was like the Carnival, a “great time for eating and drinking” but also a time for “‘misrule’ of various kind like ‘changing of clothes between men and women’” (193). Further, competitions in various forms also had an important part in the Carnival. Burke mentions foot races, horse races, jousts and tournaments (184). These games were not only a recreational past time. Bakhtin argues that “games drew the players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberated them from usual laws regulations” (235). The connection to games in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is rather important since the two main challenges in the poem are considered to be games and that they are not played according to the rules of everyday life. Moreover, Burke states that food, sex and violence were major themes in the Carnival and that “food was the most obvious” theme and that there was a lot of “heavy consumption of meat” (186). This aspect we will clearly see throughout the Christmas feasts, both in Camelot and in Castle de Hautdesert. However, sex was a more interesting theme because of its many levels of interpretation (186). It was a time of “intense sexual activity” but also a time when “young men could openly express their desire for ladies of higher social status” (202). Further, violence also played a large part in form of aggression, destruction and desecration (187). Burke mentions that “verbal aggression was licensed at this season” and that “more serious violence not infrequently occurred” (187). Bakhtin discusses that popular-festive images of “ruthless slaughter and the martyr’s death are transformed into a merry banquet; … Bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, blows, curses and abuses – all these elements are steeped in “merry time”” (211). However, all kinds of violence did not necessarily lead to conflicts. Bakhtin states that it was also a time when “abusive words are used affectionately, and mutual mockery is permitted” (16). This we will come across
throughout Gawain’s and the Green Knight’s/Bertilak’s encounters. It played a significant part in the Medieval man’s life which was divided in two: “the official and the carnival life” (96). As mentioned before, the feast of the Carnival was a time where hierarchical rank was suspended (10). It did not matter which class or status you had, everyone could participate on their own terms. This changed the ordinary contacts and communication and a “form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by barriers of caste, property, profession or age” (10). This was also emphasized in popular images which Burke calls “the world upside down” (188). These images symbolised a change in relations between men, but also between man and woman, with a reversal in age, sex and status (189).

**Food and games**

Different aspects of the Carnival are ever present in sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The different feasts in the poem contain according to Arthur Lindley many elements “of literal carnival” (69). The different elements which will be analysed in this section are the excess of food and the significance of the games.

The first part of the poem takes place in Camelot around Christmas and New Years and here we are introduced to Camelot and get in touch with the aspects of the Carnival for the first time. We get a feeling that the court “is of a place entirely given over to high-spirited revelry” (Anderson 167). We are according to Anderson given “a full account of its fifteen-day long Christmas and New Year festivities” (167). One of the first things we read is that King Arthur and his most trusted knights and friends prepare themselves for “carefree pleasures” (Gawain 40):

- Knights in great numbers at the tournament of sports
- Jousted with much joy, as gentle knights
- Will do, then rode to the court for the carol-dances.
The festival lasted fifteen long days
Of great mirth with all the meat that they could manage.
Such clamour and merriment were amazing to hear:
By day a joyful noise, dancing at night
A happiness that rang through rooms and halls
With lords and ladies pleasing themselves as they pleased. (Gawain 41–49)

The spirit is high and we read about the merry celebrations with games, dancing and lots of eating. The author uses nine lines to introduce the feast at King Arthur’s court and we cannot avoid noticing the positive tone in which it is described. According to Stevens “the song, the jest, the feast are part of the poem’s landscape of play” (69). In this description of what happened in the festival we clearly find many of the different aspects of the carnival. In this section we come in contact with tournaments, jousting and dancing. Firstly, Burke states that competitions such as “jousts or tournaments” were a frequently occurring theme in the Carnival (184). Events such as tournaments, jousts and dancing, were according to Juliet and Malcolm Vale accompanied by each other and they lasted for several days (34). Further, in line 45 we read “Of great mirth with all the meat that they could manage” (Gawain 45). Here the author stresses that they could eat as much as they wanted, with focus on meat and Burke states that it “was meat which put the carne in Carnival” and that there was a large “consumption of pork, beef and other meat” (186). All events which are analysed in this section have to do with games and excess of food entwined with “carefree pleasure” and feeling liberated. Knights, lords and ladies behaved as they wanted, without thinking about being courteous and respectable. That was, according to Burke, what the carnival was all about. He mentions that it was a time of ecstasy, of liberation (186). People were allowed to let go of the things which held them in chains, not permitting them to feel free.
The feast continues and only 15 lines later we get to read about the New Year’s feast at Camelot. Those who have read the story know that soon the mysterious Green Knight will arrive to challenge the court. But first the author describes a game which takes place among the knights and ladies:

Then noble knight ran forward with New Years gifts,
Handed out what they had, shouting, with loud
Guessing-games about each other’s gifts.
Even when they guessed wrong the ladies laughed-
And, believe me, those who won weren’t angry at all. (Gawain 66-70)

In this guessing game the purpose of the game is not obvious, except for having fun. We can only guess, but according to Keith Harrison “either kiss or be kissed depending on whether or not they get the answer right” (92). Since the author even mentions the game, we have to assume that it is important in the author’s description of the New Years feast in Camelot.

Further, in the feast we get a thorough description of the banquet and again read about food described with focus on excess:

And now a clatter of kettledrums, a chiffing of fifes:
Wild music that ricochets of walls and rafter;
And the listener’s hearts leap with the lively notes.
Costly and most delicious food are carried in:
Great mounds of steaming meat-so many dishes

…………………………………………………

Each man eats as he wishes,
Lustily takes his share;
Each pair has twelve full dishes, (Gawain 118-22, 126-28)
Music is played while the best food is brought in, and again the focus is on meat. As I have mentioned before, over-consumption of meat is closely linked with the aspects of Carnival. The author stresses in this section the importance of how they eat. We read that each man “lustily takes his share” and that in front of everyone there are “twelve full dishes” (127-28). This is clearly a description of a feast where people indulge themselves without thinking about the day after. It is within this feast that the Beheading game, the main adventure, starts and subsequently takes Gawain on a dangerous journey. A stranger, referred to as the Green Knight, comes to Camelot with a request:

So if you’re as bold as everyone says,

you’ll grant me graciously the sport that I seek

by right’ (272-73)

He is open to the court about his intentions; he seeks a sport, a game, not a fight and he says that “I need only some diversion for the new season” (284). Even though he says that he only wants some festive diversion, a game, the Green Knight has two motives. Firstly as mentioned above, he wants to play a game. The second motive, “test your mettle, gather whether there’s truth in the rumours of the Round Table’s renown” is to test the chivalry of Arthur’s court (257-58). Martin Lindley has interpreted this event as a confrontation between a king and a mock king (70). He argues that the role of king in carnival “is a role available to any number of actors” (70). The Green knight challenges the court not only to play a game, but also at who should be king at this feast. The rules of the Beheading game are quite simple and Gawain repeats them after accepting the challenge:

And I am to make this cut at you, come what may,

And a twelvemonth from no I’ll take another one

From you with whatever weapon you choose, to pay

It back. (Gawain 382-85)
Gawain shall with one blow from an axe, hit the Green Knight and after a year return an equal blow. Even though according to Stevens “the terms of this game cast [Gawain] into the inevitable role of the sure winner”, this kind of game was “typical of the contest which we expect to find in a medieval romance (69-70). The term for this was joust, which Juliet and Malcolm Vale describe as “a combat between two individual knights” (29). As I have mentioned before games such as these were common in the Carnival. Further, Bakhtin argues that games within the Carnival liberated the players from “usual laws and regulations” (235).

That is why no one in Camelot objected to the Green Knight’s twist in the game when he picked up his head and left Camelot. The Green Knight was not supposed to survive the decapitation, but no one in Camelot was shocked by the unexpected change in the game and instead they “Laughed as they watched him go” holding his head in his hand (Gawain 464).

After a year Gawain travels to face his challenge with the Green Knight and he ends up in Castle de Hautdesert. There he is greeted with a joyful welcome by Lord Bertilak and the Lady of the castle to stay as long as he wishes. There are two passages which enlighten us of the feast and its characteristics and Anderson mentions that “like Camelot, the Castle at Christmas is dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure” (191). The first one tells us about the feast on Christmas Eve:

Of several excellent soups, exquisitely seasoned,
Steaming and brimming over, then dishes of various fish
Some baked in bread, some broiled on the embers,
Some boiled, or stewed with spices, in their juice (Gawain 889-92)

In this passage we do not encounter the overwhelming eating of meat since Christmas Eve was according to Harrison “a fast day” hence the absence of meat (100). Instead, we get a thorough description of the excellent fish and soup which is “brimming”, of which he can eat
as much as he wants. Again there is focus on excess and even though there is no meat involved this is the third time food has such a significant role in the poem.

Lord Bertilak and the Lady of the Castle did not find out who Gawain was until after the feast on Christmas Eve and the knowledge of having one of King Arthur’s closest knights gave them much joy. Since Gawain whose “honour was held highest before all men” and was considered to be “the prince of courtesy” (Gawain 914, 919). Lord Bertilak gets very excited and challenges everybody to play some kind of game:

Declaring ‘He wins the honour of wearing this
Who makes up the most amusing Christmas game –
And, by my faith, with the help of my friends, I’ll fight
The best of you before I give this garment up.’

With whirling words and laughter the lord enjoys himself

That night, with many games for sir Gawain, (984-89)

In this section there seems to be a continual “emphasis on merrymaking” with games carrying on long into the night (Anderson 191). But this game seems to have a deeper purpose than just having fun. The person who comes up with “the most amusing Christmas game” wins some kind of garment (Gawain 985). This garment which Bertilak does not yield easily symbolises the crown of a king. In this game as well as in the Carnival the role of the king was vacant for anyone and in this case for the winner of the garment. Moreover, the feast contains more elements of game. Gawain and the Lady of the Castle enjoyed each other’s company and played their own kind of game:

No innuendo darkened their delicate speech;

Their witty word-play surpassed the sports of the other lords.

With blares (1014-15)
A game with conversation, a word game, illustrates the characters’ sophistication when no one but the Lady and Gawain can participate. These festivities continue with “Great mirth and merriment that day and the next, / And the third, as pleasure filled” (1020-21). Anderson argues that it is obvious that Bertilak is destined to entertain Gawain night and day “from Christmas Eve until Saint John’s day” (191). After the Christmas feast Lord Bertilak invites Gawain to stay until he travels to the Green Chapel. During this time the Lord challenges Gawain to play a different kind of game:

let’s settle on a bargain.

Whatever I win at hunting will henceforth be yours;

And you, in turn, will yield whatever you earn. (Gawain 1105-07)

The Lord sets this game to challenge Gawain and to have some fun during the time of Christmas until Gawain leaves for the Green Chapel. We understand that Gawain freely accepts this challenge and that it is going to be a game of honour and courtesy. “Whether we win or lose,’ ‘I’m ready for that / . . . / I must say I’m glad you wish to play this game.” (Gawain 1109-11). The episode of the Exchange of winnings is the one described most thoroughly and it consists of three different parts. The Lord’s three different hunts entwined with the Lady’s three attempts to seduce Gawain, followed by the Exchange of Winnings. Stevens states that “whether it was designed to codify or mock the game of love . . . the poet juxtaposes two fashionable game situations as integral parts in the Exchange of [Winnings]” (72). The outcome of this game is central to Gawain’s faith when he encounters the Green Knight the second time. The Lady’s attempts to seduce Gawain and the Lord’s three hunts will be discussed in the sections analysing sex and violence.

As mentioned before food and games were important in the Carnival ritual. This importance we have seen in many different places in the poem, for instance where the feasts are described in detail with focus on excess in eating, but also in the author’s description of
the different games in the poem. The games seem to be ordinary Christmas interludes, but they seem to bring the participants out of their ordinary life, giving them the opportunity to act as equals and feel liberated. Lords and ladies dance, play games and enjoy each others company throughout the different feasts in both Camelot and Castle de Hautdesert.

**Sex and the bedroom scene**

In the Carnival excess in sex and sexual activities were as important as excess in food and other pleasures, and it came in many disguises (Burke 186). In the poem we find three different parts which enlighten us of the importance of sexual activities. These different activities may not have an obvious connection to sex, but they fit within the range of sexual activities in the Carnival.

In the beginning of the poem we come in contact with the first hint of sexual activities: “With lords and ladies pleasing themselves as they pleased” (Gawain 49). This does of course not necessarily mean that they indulged in sexual activities. However, it is clearly suggested that they all, ladies and lords, did whatever they wanted to please themselves. Further, only 20 lines later the knights and ladies of Camelot play a guessing-game, which I have mentioned earlier. Harrison discusses the intention of the game to be “either kiss or be kissed” (92). Burke mentions that sex was one of the key themes in the Carnival and it “was a time of particularly intense sexual activity” (186).

The real testing of Gawain is in the three bedroom scenes where the Lady tries to seduce Gawain and we come in contact with what Burke called the “world upside down” (188). Lindley mentions that “so often in carnival, sexual roles are reversed, the predatory woman pursuing the chaste and blushing man” (69). In this game Gawain is not the pursuer but the pursued. This game also differs to the other games. Stevens argues that in order to
triumph in the game, he “is forced ultimately to refrain from playing” (75). Gawain chooses not to play and thereby does not embrace the spirit of the Carnival.

In the first bedroom scene Gawain surprisingly finds the Lady of the Castle coming to visit him. Gawain wakes up when she enters the door but gives the impression that he still sleeps when she sits on the bed next to him and he acts surprised when he fakes his wakening. She now begins her game by saying, “I have trapped you beautifully; unless we strike a bargain / I shall bind you in you bed – of that you can be sure” (Gawain 1210-11). She really caught Gawain with his guard down. What we do not know the first time we read the text is the lady’s agenda. However, it is clear that she tries to seduce him:

I’ll treasure.
Both my mind and body
Are only for your pleasure.
I’m here perforce, and ready
To serve you at your leisure. (1236-40)

This is clearly an attempt to seduce Gawain and according to Harrison “the words stop short of being downright sexual invitation, but not very far short” (102). Gawain is the knight who personifies courtesy and therefore does not give in to his desire. Her game with Gawain is a word game based on courtesy and they both use words to get what they desire. She wants him to fall for her attempts and Gawain wants to escape with both his and her honour intact. When she leaves she requests a kiss from him and Gawain accepts her request willingly: “I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight, / And more: I’ll not displease you, no need to plead further” (1303-04). Gawain manages to show restraint, by not giving in to his desire. He clearly remains courteous throughout the first part of the game and does not show any sign of giving in to the spirit of the Carnival. Stevens emphasizes that “the Gawain of this poem is not the frisky, playful knight of the story, but the temperate Christian who lives up to the
ideals of chastity” (76). He does not indulge himself in what is offered to him because if he would have embraced the carnival he could have let go of his restraint.

In the second bedroom scene everything repeats itself for Gawain “For she came again – expecting / To change his attitude” (Gawain 1474-75). The Lady of the Castle keeps on playing her game with Gawain and he is still totally unaware of her real intentions. When the Lady comes she starts by putting him against the wall but Gawain is not as surprised in the second meeting as in the first. She changes her angle and tries to lure him by giving Gawain a bad conscience:

How does it happen that I have sat beside you twice
Right here, and never heard the smallest word from you
About love-lore – not the least little thing.
Now, one so courteous and correct in his vows
Would, I think, be yearning to show a young woman
At least a tiny token of the crafts of love.
Or do you think – shame on you! – I’m to slow to follow? (1522-29)

Now she puts Gawain in serious trouble. This time she begins by flattering him and ends with the idea that Gawain finds himself superior too her, that she is too unintelligent for him and therefore he does not seduce her. Gawain answers courteously and at the same time he apologises in a humble manner:

It gives one great pleasure – great gladness –
That one so worthy as you should come to this room
And take pains with so poor a person, and sport (1536-38)

Gawain manages to save the situation a second time even though she “lured him on, enticing him to sin” (1550). He keeps on fighting his desire with courteous manner and this time she gives him two kisses. Here we also notice that the author uses the word sin to describe sex
and Anderson mentions that it is “a sin against chivalry, and Gawain does not want to betray his host” (193). Gawain a second time avoids to embrace the Carnival spirit in Castle de Hautdesert by remaining chivalrous and not accepting what he desires.

The third time the Lady comes to Gawain’s room she manages to make Gawain think twice before he refuses to accept her love:

For that lovely lady pressed him hard, persisted
Urgently, spurring him to the brink, and he thinks:

‘I must accept her affection, or refuse and offend her’, (Gawain 1770-73)

His biggest concern is the betrayal against the Lord if he gives into his lust. However, Gawain manages a third time to get out of trouble and he insists he has no interest in and feels no love for any woman. The Lady of the Castle accepts Gawain’s explanation and she offers Gawain a small gift as a token. She gives Gawain a green girdle, which would protect him from a stroke from a sword or an axe. When the Lady leaves Gawain she has this time given him three kisses.

The scenes with the Lady of the Castle’s attempts to seduce Gawain have a clear connection to the aspect of sex in the Carnival, but also to games. The Lady has, like the Green Knight, a hidden agenda and since this game of seduction is liberated from the rules and regulations in ordinary life, the Lady play’s her game according to the rules, or to be exact the none existing rules of the Carnival. Further, the excess of food, sex as well as violence is central to the notion of the Carnival. In the bedroom scenes the excess consists of the Lady’s eagerness and determination to seduce Gawain since she is denied not once or twice, but trice.
Violence and verbal abuse

Violent acts in the Carnival can be seen in many different ways, not just physical. In this section I will analyse and discuss the different aspects of violence in the poem. The most obvious events in the poem are the Beheading game and the three hunts. They all include an extreme form of violent act in the form of a beheading and the slaying of the prey. However, there are also elements of verbal aggression in the poem between the Green Knight and Gawain. This opposition between the Green Knight and Gawain has its roots in the way they differ to each other and that they in fact are each others opposites.

There are many brave knights in Camelot who could have answered the challenge from the Green Knight. However, it is Gawain who accepts the challenge and he is, according to Anderson, considered to be the knight who “takes the ideal of courtesy more seriously than that the rest of the court” (178). The reason for the author to choose Gawain to answer the challenge might be that Gawain and the Green Knight in many ways are the opposite of each other. As discussed earlier in the essay, one important aspect of the carnival was the removal of rank, and the possibility for people to become equal. As I have mentioned before the Green Knight challenged King Arthur and his knights mainly because they were considered to be the best, finest and bravest. But, if we analyse the methods in which he challenges the court we find his behaviour very carnivalesque. When he arrives to Camelot we get a detailed description on the Green knight: “… a hideous figure / Square-built and bulky, full fleshed from neck to thigh: / The heaviest horseman in the world, the tallest as well” (136-38). However, we do not know if the Green knight is a knight, if he is someone worthy of challenging the court. Moreover, when no one answers the challenge he starts to mock the court:

‘And this is supposed to be Arthur´s house,’ he cried,

‘Whose fame flies through the remotest regions!'
Where are your boasts of valour now, your bold victories,
Your pride, your prizes, your wrath and rousing words?
Am I right? All the pageantry and power of the Round Table
Made nothing by the words of one man?
You’re all white with fear, and not a whack fallen!’ (309-15)

These words come from a man who is an uninvited guest at this important and joyful occasion at Camelot. King Arthur and his knights are famous for their deeds in combat, still the Green Knight comes to Camelot and challenges them by using such insults to get them to answer. This leads to the conclusion that the Green Knight must have known this was permitted. Martin claims that: “This is the Green Knight’s level of play. Happy to fight and indifferent to injury” (313). The Green Knight behaves according to the rules of the carnival since it was a time when “maskers were allowed to insult individuals, and to criticise the authorities” (Burke 187). Further, when comparing Gawain to the Green knight we clearly get the description of someone the opposite of him. When he accepts the challenge we read:

    I would ask you,’ continued Gawain, to his master and king,
    ‘To bid me rise from my bench and stand beside you
    So that I can quit the table courteously
    Without causing displeasure to my lady queen. (Gawain 344-47)

Here we come in contact with Gawain for the first time in the poem, and from the beginning Gawain behaves extremely courteously, in the opposite of the Green knight who arrives from nowhere and offends the whole court. Another example is when Gawain insists that he is the one who should face the challenge and does this by undermining himself:

    I am the weakest and the least in wit;
    Loss of my life therefore of little account.
    I am, by birth, your nephew; besides that, nothing. (354-56)
Here we get both aspects of the official feast and the Carnival in the Middle Ages. Gawain is the protagonist who obeys the rules and behaves courteous. He does not embrace the spirit of the Carnival in Camelot, but in fact with his manner reinforces the hierarchy of Camelot unlike the Green Knight who behaves very carnivalesque with his aggressive and bold speech. Bakhtin emphasises that communication within the carnival is liberated “from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (10). Gawain is a symbol for ordinary life, and the Green Knight is a symbol for the carnival.

In the Beheading Game we find an extreme act of violence. Gawain shall with one blow, from an axe, hit the Green Knight and after a year return an equal blow. In this game the excess of violence is not symbolised by magnitude, but by effect. Gawain is focused on striking hard and clean and the court is expecting to see a head hit the floor with blood everywhere. The rule of the game only allows Gawain to strike once and the Green Knight cannot defend himself, but to cut someone’s head off with an axe is an extreme form of violence. When Gawain decapitates the Green Knight he uses an axe which is described as:

A dreadful weapon, difficult to describe:

The head of the big blade over a yard in length,

The spike of green steel and wrought gold,

The blade brightly polished, with a broad edge

Beautifully cast to bite keen as a razor; (209-13)

Again excess is apparent, but this time in the form of a huge and fierce weapon which Gawain uses on a man who does not defend himself. Further, this clearly fits some of the popular-festive images, which Bakhtin mentions, when a “ruthless slaughter and the martyr’s death are transformed into a merry banquet” (211). The Green Knight is voluntarily decapitated and the King and his knights laugh when he leaves with his head in his hand. Afterwards the feast can continue since King Arthur has been entertained.
In the section of the three hunts we also find excess in violence. Robert Levine argues that “Excess – going beyond reasonable bounds … proliferate in the hunting scenes” (68). At the first hunt we read that the Lord does not go on his hunt alone: “There were, I’m told, a hundred men of the boldest hunting blood” (Gawain 1144-45). Bertilak uses his best hunters and this enlightens the significance of the hunt and the lord’s desire to win. It feels like he prepares for a battle, for a war. He is at his hunt all day and “By sundown, he has slain so many beasts- / Does and other deer – it is a marvel to recall” (1321-22). Again we come in contact with excess, but this time with focus on killing animals in magnitude. The violence in the hunt is even described as a marvel which signifies that this kind of hunt does not regularly take place at Castle de Hautdesert.

The second day at the hunt starts of in a similar manner, but in this hunt the boar is the target. He increases the stakes in form of risk since this particular boar was huge and fierce and thereby considered to be a great trophy. The Lord is forced to put himself in danger this time and the extraordinary thing about the hunt of the fierce boar is that the Lord himself kills the boar:

They were much afraid the lord might be worsted.

Then the boar made a rush, right at the man,

And with a crash they tumbled together, splashing

In white water. But the beast was defeated. (Gawain 1583-91)

The Lord clearly seeks the challenge for life and death from the boar and his achievement is spectacular because he kills the boar with his sword. J.D. Burnley mentions that “the boar in the hunting field and in literature is considered to be a formidable antagonist and to encounter him face to face, armed only with a sword, is equivalent to facing a dangerous adversary in single combat” (6). The struggle between the boar and Lord Bertilak becomes equal since it is
considered to be an equal match and thereby fits the image of a contest situated within the Carnival.

The last day at the hunt Bertilak targets the fox in his hunt. He now sets out to track the animal that was considered to be inferior to other animals and was not particularly dangerous:

So he wound back, rapidly – Raynard was so wily
In this way, he led them all astray, the Lord and
His men, till the height of morning, among the mountains. (Gawain 1728-30)

In this “game” he must use his brains when tracking the fox, not his fighting skills. The fox does not give up easily and the hunt continues for the entire day, but in the end the fox is slain after a long and troublesome chase. However, in this passage the Lord does not kill the prey.

But the hounds rushed at him before he could run back
And fell on him in front of the horse’s feet
And harried their clever quarry, snapping and snarling. (1903-5)

The fox is bitten and torn to death by the hounds. The killing of the fox is probably even more savage than the other killings. Further, since the hounds killed the fox it becomes more equal and is in fact a fight between beast and beasts.

At the end of the poem when Gawain has been tested by Lord Bertilak and his Lady, he leaves to find the Green Knight. He is, unlike the Green Knight, not welcomed by a festival. He comes to the Green Chapel which he describes as a place where “the devil says morning prayer” (Gawain 2188). He is at a place which is the opposite of the beautiful and enlightened Camelot and if this is not enough the Green Knight arrives with his weapon described as:

Danish-made, its bright blade whetted for the blow,
Colossal and sharp, its shaft cunningly shaped.
Gauged by the gleaming lace he gripped it by

It was all of four feet broad, or more. (2223-26)

As in the beheading at Camelot the weapon is used as a symbol to reinforce the act of violence. Even though Gawain is not decapitated, the reader of the poem still expects the Green Knight to swing his deadly weapon with extreme force and sever Gawain’s head from his body. They greet each other and the Green Knight reminds Gawain of the pact but Gawain stands firm and has no intention to plead for his life. However, when the Green knight is about to strike, Gawain draws back his shoulder to avoid the blow. The Green knight stops and declares:

You’re not Gawain,’ he said, ‘ so noble and so good.

He’s not afraid of a whole army by hill or dale.

And now you tremble in terror even before I touch you.

I never knew he was such a lily-livered knight! (Gawain 2270-74)

Gawain becomes angry and declares that his momentary lack of courage had to do with that when his head has been chopped off, he “cannot put it back” (2283). Gawain finds his courage and steadies himself for the blow. Meanwhile, “then man in green chatted on cheerily, mocking him”, making Gawain fume with anger (2295). This passage clearly shows that the Green knight still is a part of the carnival. He mocks Gawain, who is a symbol for a society with a strong hierarchical order, for not living up to his reputation. This verbal abuse criticises Camelot and its authorities. However, Gawain is not decapitated and the Green Knight changes his tone towards Gawain and “pokes funs at him, cracks merry jokes” (2336). When Gawain is enlightened of the true identity of the Green Knight and the testing of him and Camelot, he feels ashamed:

To give in to my greed and go against myself

And the noble and generous code of knightly men.
I am proved false, faulty – those failings will haunt me. (2380-82)

The Green Knight, who we now know is Bertilak in disguise, just laughs and forgives Gawain for his misdeed to keep the girdle. He then invites Gawain to follow him back to the Castle where the feast continues:

And resume our festival and our New Year revels

once more

With my wife,’ insisted the lord,

‘Who was your foe before,

You’ll find a new accord;

Of that I’m very sure.’ (2401-06)

Gawain has the opportunity to go back and be a part of the merrymaking. Bertilak even says that he will find “a new accord” with the lady of the castle (2405). This is a matter of interpretation, but it seems that if he joins Bertilak in the festivities he will be able to continue what he and the lady did before, without betraying Bertilak.

The excess of violence in the Beheading game and the three hunts is easily identified with its detailed description of the weapons, the decapitation and the killings. The verbal abuse on the other hand, which the Green Knight uses when he confronts both Camelot and Gawain, is not as easy to interpret as a violent act. Burke discusses that verbal abuses was approved in the Carnival which allowed people criticise the establishment and this in some cases lead to more serious violence (187). This was made possible because rank or status made no difference in the Carnival, everyone was considered equal for this short period of time.
**Conclusion**

The poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has a lot of festive ingredients and it takes the reader on a playful adventure. In my analysis I have found many different and important aspects of the feast described with excess, which can be connected to the Carnival. The encounters between Gawain and the Green Knight show, through their characters and behaviour, that they are the opposite of each other, like ordinary life is the opposite of Carnival life. However, Gawain is not the opposite of Lord Bertilak and the Lady, but they have embraced the spirit of the Carnival and that is what separates them from Gawain.

In the first section I have found many different parts of the poem which have ingredients connecting the events to the Carnival. I think that Anderson sums up the atmosphere when he states that: “like Camelot, the Castle at Christmas is dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure” (191). Both Camelot and Castle de Hautdesert are celebrating a feast which is described in such detail, with focus on carefree pleasure and excess in food. The games are playful and the food is plentiful. In every meal in both Camelot and Castle de Hautdesert, except one, we find a detailed description of heavily amounts of meat. Already in line 45 we read:” Of great mirth with all the meat that they could manage”. This is later followed by another detailed description of the food on New Years Eve. They are all served with “Great mounds of steaming meat-so many dishes / (...) / Each pair has twelve full dishes” (Gawain 122, 128). That is a thorough description with focus on meat which clearly puts the feast within the range of the Carnival. Further, in the poem we read about a lot of different games such as jousts, tournaments, guessing-games, Christmas games, the Beheading game, and the Exchange of winnings. They are all games which fit within the boundaries of the Carnival.

In the second part I have analysed the bedroom scenes, with the lady’s three attempts to seduce Gawain, and here we find a clear connection to the aspect of sex in form of desire.
and seduction. We get to follow what Lindley describes as “the predatory woman pursuing the chaste and blushing man” (69). The lady of the castle offered her body to Gawain, but he showed restraint. He behaved polite, humble and courteous through all bedroom scenes unable to let go of his role as the most courteous knight in Camelot. If he would have embraced the concept of Carnival the Lady would hardly have rejected him after her attempts. Event though her agenda was to test Gawain. In the three bedroom scenes the author creates what Burke calls “the world upside down” with the lady seducing a blushing man (188).

Violence and verbal abuse is discussed in the last section with focus on the encounters between Gawain and the Green Knight in the Beheading game and the Lord’s three hunts. When the Green Knight arrives to Camelot he verbally abuses King Arthur and his knights. This kind of verbal abuse on the authorities was permitted in the Carnival and thereby the Green Knight behaves according to the spirit of the Carnival. Gawain who throughout the poem behaves extremely courteous and loyal to both King Arthur and Lord Bertilak shows no sign of embracing the spirit of the Carnival. Gawain and the Green Knight show that they are the complete opposites of each other. The beheading of someone is an extreme act of violence, which in the poem has a central part to the plot. But it is not just the extremeness of the beheading that connects the violence to the Carnival. By situating the beheading in a joyful feast, the author uses the medieval popular-festive images. Further, the descriptions of the three hunts are all full of violence, but with three different aspect which connect them to the Carnival. In the first hunt the focus lies on the amount of the killings, and the word marvel is used to emphasise that this is not something that happens often in Castle de Hautdesert. In the second hunt Bertilak himself challenges the boar, and consequently gives the boar an equal fight. In the third hunt they endure a long and troublesome chase to kill the fox. However, when they finally kill the fox it is the hounds that tear it apart. The hunt contains elements of excess in killing, extreme violence and a single combat.
Gawain throughout the poem acts courteous even though he is tested to full extent. His bravery is tested in the Beheading game, his loyalty is tested in the bedroom scenes and his reputation is tested throughout his stay in Castle de Hautdesert. Gawain triumphs in the bedroom scene as well as Lord Bertilak triumphs in his hunts, and both Gawain and the Green Knight accept their faith to be beheaded. The poem ends in status quo showing that neither the Carnival nor ordinary life is more important than the other.
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