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ASPECTS OF GROTESQUE REALISM IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

by Robert Levine

Although critics no longer refer to its comic tone as an example of "surface lightheartedness," and although many now consider the comic elements part of the essential structure and purpose of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, nevertheless they tend to avoid paying particular attention to the vivid, detailed images of slaughter and dismemberment that contribute to the poem's peculiar gaiety.[1] An exclusive (sometimes called "classical") notion of medieval genres and ineffective definitions of "realism," of the comic, and of the grotesque are some of the impediments that stand in the way of properly evaluating these images. For example, when he rediscovered what J. R. Hulbert had originally proposed as the source of several elements in the transactions at Bertilak's castle, Alain Renoir called the twelfth-century *comoedia*, the *Miles Gloriosus*, a "minor analogue" of *Sir Gawain*, concluding that "the two poems have little in common. . . . *Sir Gawain* is a chivalrous courtly romance, the *Miles Gloriosus* a bawdy academic farce."[2]

To insist upon exclusive definitions of genre is, however, to misunderstand medieval literary decorum; Ernst Curtius has remarked: "The Middle Ages loved all kinds of crossings and mixtures of stylistic genres. And in fact we find in the Middle Ages *ludicra* within domains and genres which, to our modern taste, schooled by classical aesthetics, absolutely exclude such mixtures."[3] Instead of using the concept of genre, then, as an excluding process only, we might more usefully follow a prescription that Claudio Guillen derives from reading Ariosto:

> Let us remember that . . . the sixteenth-century debate on whether *Orlando Furioso* was a "poema epico" or a "poema romanzesco" demonstrated that although no single generic norm could possibly do justice to a masterpiece like Ariosto's, the combined use of several genres would allow the critics to surround and seize, so to speak, their quarry. Taken together, the different genres are like coordinates through which the individual poem can be apprehended and understood.[4]

To watch the play of coordinates within the text of *Sir Gawain* may help to demonstrate the inclusive nature of medieval literary decorum.

The ability to tolerate and to enjoy mixing apparently contradictory genres may reflect not only a psychological complexity but a social or cultural circumstance as well. In the remarks with which he concludes his study of fabliaux, Joseph Bédier suggests as much when he speculates on the fact that romances of the Round Table and fabliaux pleased the same group of people in the Middle Ages. He called this aesthetic phenomenon a literary fact, "qui nous prouve une sorte de parenté entre le monde des chevaliers, plus grossier qu'on ne le soupçonnerait sous son élégance superficielle, et le monde des bourgeois, plus affiné qu'il ne semblerait, sous sa grossièreté foncière."[5] That the same audience could appreciate two different genres does not, of course, mean that that they would necessarily tolerate mixing the genres in a single work. Curtius's work, however, suggests that such tolerance did exist, and at least one recent reader implies the existence of such toleration in fourteenth-century England, when he asserts that the host's wife in *Sir Gawain* seems "not so much a 'fairy mistress' as the heroine of a fabliau."[6]

Other critics have detected heterogeneous elements in the poem. Sacvan Bercovitch introduces the problematic term "realism" when he argues that the romance elements in *Sir Gawain* operate in dialectical opposition to a "comic-realistic spirit," producing a kind of antiromance, in which a traditional romance episode alternates with a "humorous and realistic scene that implicitly undercuts its predecessor."[7] J. A. Burrow calls the poem "both a lay of marvels and a moral tale" and suggests that "penitential thinking is a likely source of what Frye calls 'low mimetic' realism in later medieval literature; and that it is the probable prime source of such realism in *Sir Gawain*."[8] Both Bercovitch and Burrow, then, provide us with a term, "realism," whose meaning is as difficult to determine as the term "fabliau;" in fact, their meanings are sometimes dependent on each other.

Bédier's definition of fabliau as a short, funny story in verse seems to involve no appeal to "realism," although he does rule out the element of the supernatural.[9] Charles Muscatine remarks that the genre shows "a remarkable preoccupation with the animal facts of life."[10] At this point, perhaps the most relevant and useful discussion of the function of "realism" in medieval literature is contained in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*.[11] A major impulse in medieval and early modern literature, according to Bakhtin, is the tendency to debase aristocratic or courtly ideals (Bédier's "élégance superficielle") by means of the techniques of "grotesque realism," with particular emphasis on the "material bodily lower stratum" (roughly Muscatine's

"animal facts of life" and Bédier's "grossièreté foncière"). Although
Sir Gawain does not teem with as many examples as Rabelais's text,
nevertheless it does display a number of the features of grotesque
realism, by means of which the poet sharpens his ironic perspective
towards a world of "blysse and blunder" (18).

Among the techniques of grotesque realism described by Bakhtin,
three are significantly at work in *Sir Gawain*: laughter conquers ter-
ror (pp. 335-36), cuckoldry is an obsession (pp. 239-44), images of
games abound (pp. 231-39). All three are at the service of the prin-
ciple of "debasement": "debasement is the fundamental artistic princi-
ple of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought
on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and
mixed with its images" (pp. 370-71). According to Bakhtin, the
images of games were seen as a condensed formula of life and the
historic process; fortune and misfortune, gain and loss, crowning
and uncrowning are particularly prevalent polarities (p. 235).

The extent to which the principle of debasement and the techniques
of grotesque realism operate in the poem is partially dependent on
the fact that *Sir Gawain* derives some of its sustenance from a dirty,
though elegant story, the *Miles Gloriosus*. However, the *Miles Glor-
iosus* is, strictly speaking, not a fabliau, but a *comoedia*, a far more
rhetorically elaborate genre. As Jurgen Beyer has demonstrated, the
formal differences between fabliau and *comoedia* far outweigh their
resemblances.[12] Nevertheless, *comoedia* and fabliau make relentless
use of the technique of debasement, frequently relying on ironic
contrasts between aristocratic "élégance superficielle" and bourgeois
"grossièreté foncière."[13]

To consider the relationship, then, between a fourteenth-century
West-Midland alliterative romance and a twelfth-century Latin *com-
oedia* is not an arbitrary strategy; it may, in fact, aid in the process
of imagining the original audience's response to *Sir Gawain*, par-
ticularly if Larry Benson's assertion about Chaucer's use of fabliaux
may be extended to the activities of the *Pearl*-poet: "the medieval
poet, free of the modern obsession with novelty, invites comparison,
almost demands that we recognize the twice-told quality of his tale
even as we recognize the originality that has made the old tale new."[14]

Hulbert, the first critic to suggest a connection between the *Miles
Gloriosus* and *Sir Gawain*, was less timid than Renoir in acknowledg-
ing the Middle English poem's debt to the *comoedia*: "This story has
obviously a relationship with *GGK*, in the proposition of the husband
of the exchange of winnings, and the three-day settlement of the
lover with the husband." According to Hulbert, the Pearl-poet "in-
creased Gawain's obligations, and made the test more clear-cut, by

adding the device of the exchange of winnings and the daily settle-
ment with the husband, which he probably derived from a popular
tale similar to the *Miles Gloriosus.*"[15] In both poems a young knight
is received hospitably at a wealthy stranger's home, agrees to share
his winnings with his host, and receives an offer of love, or at least
carnal satisfaction, from the host's wife, who subsequently makes him
a gift (money in the *Miles Gloriosus,* a green girdle in *Sir Gawain*).

Most seekers after sources and analogues, however, have concen-
trated their attention on Irish, Old French, and Welsh sagas and
romances.[16] Although their work has produced significant results,
they have confined themselves to tracing similar plots, without con-
sidering at any length the possibility that images and tone may be
"inherited" as well. By using some of Bakhtin's categories, first to
identify elements of grotesque realism in *Sir Gawain,* then to identify
parallel elements in the *Miles Gloriosus,* we may be able to account
for some of the unusual qualities of the Middle English poem.

For example, Tolkien and Gordon criticize the *Pearl*-poet for ex-
cess: "the narrative is not without its superfluities, most conspicuous
in the descriptions of the hunts and the breaking of the deer, which
are extended, for enjoyment, rather beyond the bounds of reasonable
elaboration."[17] Later critics have argued for the relevance of these
descriptions; H. L. Savage, for instance, argues for the symbolic, alle-
gorical significance of the hunts in the forest and their parallelism
to the hunts in the bedroom.[18] Nevertheless, the length and detail of
the descriptions may, and perhaps *should* seem excessive. Excess —
going beyond reasonable bounds — is a central characteristic of gro-
tesque realism, as are the images of the lower bodily stratum, par-
ticularly those of "slaughter, dismemberment, and bowels," which
proliferate in the hunting scenes.[19] Certainly the two stanzas in
which a hind is butchered and disemboweled bring a wealth of such
images into the poem (1330-52). There is the inventory of the bodily
parts of the deer: *slot, schyre, bale, bowelez, knot, gargulun, wesaunt,
wynt-hole, guttez, schulderes, brest, byȝt, avanters, rymez, rybbez,
rygge bonez, haunche, noumbles, byȝes, lappes, bakbon.* And there
are the verbs of cutting, pulling, tearing, breaking, flinging, hauling,
heaving, hewing: *slyt, sesed, schaued, knitten, rytte, rent, brek,
laucyng, gryped, departed, walt, scher, haled, britned, brayden, ryuez,
voydez, lance, ryde, euenden, heuen, hwen.* How much of this is es-
sential in terms of classical decorum?

After the disemboweling, the hunters perform a violently literal
"uncrowning," beheading the hind, distributing its liver and lungs
to the hounds, and returning to the castle, where Gawain awaits
them, anticipating his own beheading.

In return for the "schyree grece schorne vpon rybbes" (1378) given to him by his host, Gawain gives Bertilak a kiss, all that he dared accept from the more comprehensive offer by his host's wife: "ʒe ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale. . ." (1237-38). The associations generated by this sequence of passages certainly seem to connect animals, violence, sex, and eating, with no attempt to establish a hierarchical order among them. Such associations are frequent in fabliaux; however, they also occur in comoedia, and in Arthurian romance.

The anonymous author of the twelfth- or thirteenth-century comoedia, De Tribus Puellis, provides an example in Latin elegiacs of a playful combination of animal, erotic, and gustatory elements:

"Care meus, comede quas nunc tibi porrigo coxas,
Ut tribuam coxas hac tibi nocte meas.
Grande tibi precium do, nam mea crura ferendo
Premia magna feres, si tamen illa feres."
Has ego suscepi, cum carnibus ossa comedi,
Nam non ulla michi dulcior esca fuit.

["My dear, eat these hips which I offer you, that I may offer my hips to you this evening. I offer you a sizeable gift, for by taking my legs, you will receive great rewards, but only if you take them." I took the hips, ate the bones with the meat, and never ate anything sweeter.][20]

Receiving his reward that evening in bed with the lady, the poet touches her legs:

Quando manus retrahens palpabam crura tenella;
Illa fuere michi dulcia melle magis.
Mox dixi: "Non est ullum preciosius aurum.
Non est in mundo res mihi commodior.
Dilexi vere nobis data crura columbe,
Sed que nunc teneo diligo crura magis."

[Pulling back my hand, I caressed her delicate limbs; they were much sweeter than honey to me. Immediately I said: "There is no gold more precious. I certainly liked our pigeon limbs, but I much prefer the limbs I now hold."][21]

By adding money to food and sex, the Latin author has compounded the comic vulgarity of the passage, without intensifying the debasement, in Bakhtin's sense.

Wolfram von Eschenbach provides an even more complex illustra-

tion when he describes Parzival's encounter with the exquisite lady, Jeschute. After devoting sixteen lines to a description of the sleeping woman's carnal appeal, with particular attention to her mouth, and to her "süezen lip" (sweet body), Wolfram tells us that Parzival hastily, and with no appreciation of the action he was taking, embraced Jeschute, snatched her brooch, and complained of hunger:

> der knappe klageten hunger san.
> diu frouwe was ir libes lieht:
> si sprach "ir solt min ezzen nieht.
> waert ir ze frumen wise,
> ir naemt iu ander spise."

> [Then the lad complained of hunger. The lady's body was radiantly lovely. "You shan't eat me!" she said. "If you were sensible, you would take some other food."][22]

Parzival follows her involuntary order, choosing to feast on bread, wine, and two partridges.

Food and sex can be associated elsewhere in medieval literature with sacrament, as Charlotte Morse has indicated, and those associations can occur in different genres: in the *Queste*, for example, "Perceval withstands a temptation to sexual intercourse and instead feeds upon the Living Bread. In *Cleanness*, Abraham and Lot share meals with the angels (the Trinity), while the men of Sodom want to have unnatural intercourse with the angels."[23]

In *Sir Gawain*, however, the poet (who is also the author of *Cleanness*) makes a less obvious but much deeper connection between sex and food by adding violence and death to his text, prodigally scattering images of slaughter, dismemberment, and bowels. For example, during the butchering of the boar, uncrowning in the form of decapitation, slaughter, and dismemberment follow furiously upon one another:

> Fyrst he hewes of his hed and on hiȝe settez,
> And syþen rendez him al roghe bi þe rygge after,
> Braydez out þe boweles. . . .
> (1607-09)

In considering the analogies between the scenes in the forest and the scenes in the bedroom, critics tend to identify Gawain with the hunted animal. However, in a transitional passage that precedes the capture and decapitation of the animal, the poet suggests that the lady and the boar are parallel figures:

Þe lede with þe ladyez layked alle day,
Bot þe lorde ouer þe londez launced ful ofte,
Swez his uncely swyn. . . .

(1560-62)

The playful identification of the lady with the beast suggestively
heightens our awareness that both Bertilak and Gawain are dealing
with, and overcoming, the instinctual. Since the lady has just told
Gawain, "I com hider sengel" (1531), some restraint must be sum-
moned up to resist hearing resonances in *sengel*, "alone," of *sengler*,
"boar," particularly since this is the only line in the poem in which
sengel occurs.

Such playfulness, of course, has been recognized as a quality of
the poem;[24] playfulness, the sense of literature and life as a game, is
also a characteristic of fabliau, *comoedia*, and grotesque realism. The
Pearl-poet, however, a more refined, sophisticated artist, plays the
game better than most, although the poet of the *Miles Gloriosus* pro-
vides very lively competition. For example, when the host offers to
assist his guest with a significant sum of money, the poet plays with
conventional notions of identity, fidelity, and substance:

Res mea te mouit, plus te mea lingua mouebit,
Paruulus in visu crescet in aure stupor;
Me tibi teque mihi lucri mensura coequet;
Vna sit in duplici partitione fides,
Indiuisa sibi, modio res diuidat uno;
Vnio fit fidei, sectio justa rei.
Ecce tibi loculus nummis satur; accipe nummos;
Munere gaza meo sit tua, tuque meus.

(41-48)

[My substance moves you, my tongue will move you more;
the amazement at what you have seen will grow at what you
hear. Sharing my wealth will make you my equal; let our faith
be split in two, yet it will remain undivided and firm, united
by a fair distribution. Lo, here is a purse full of coins; accept
the coins. Let your treasure be mine, and mine yours.][25]

In his offer of a contract to Gawain, Bertilak also emphasizes the
virtue of fidelity, but instead of playing upon notions of substance
and wealth, he emphasizes the degree to which he and Gawain are
engaged in a game of skill and chance:

"ʒet firre," quoþ þe freke, "a forwarde we make:
Quat-so-euer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez,

And quat chek so ȝe acheue chaunge me þerforne.
Swete, swap we so, sware with trawþe,
Queþer, leude, so lymp, lere oþer better."
                                    (1105-09)

Chek denotes whatever fortune or luck may grant, and will be used
later in the poem (2195) as a term borrowed from chess, "check,"
when Gawain acknowledges the apparently aleatory nature of the
process in which he finds himself involved:

Now I fele hit is þe fende, in my fiue wyttez,
Þat hatz stoken me þis steuen to strye me here.
Þis is a chapel of meschaunce, þat chekke hit bytyde.
                                    (2193-95)

Certainly images of games abound in *Sir Gawain*, in the *Miles
Gloriosus*, and in the literature of grotesque realism. In both the
Middle English poem and the Medieval Latin *comoedia* the games
themselves are played masterfully by a woman: the host's wife.

In the *Miles Gloriosus*, the host's wife extends the techniques of
debasement by offering to buy the soldier's love, in a kind of sym-
metrical competition with her husband:

Te mihi diues emam, quia me sibi dicior emit
    Vir meus; exemplum subsequar ipsa suum.
Vt mihi par esset, non ipse sed ipsa redemit
    Copia; pro domino bursa diserta fuit.
Munera rethoricos penitus nouere colores;
    Nummus ubi loquitur, Tullius ipse silet. . . .
Non sibi, set rebus nupsi; sua corporis usu,
    Non animo; rerum, non sua sponsa fui.
Corpus emi potuit, set cor mihi mansit inemptum.
    Non emit, nec habet; idque quod emit, habet.
Corpus habet, non cor; illi sum corpore presens,
    Corde procul; corpus do tibi corque meum.
Vir mihi uerus eris uerus amor; ille laboret
    Et tua sit merces; hic aret, ipse metas;
Ieiunet, comede; siciat, bibe; conferat, aufer;
    Sudet, lude; fleat, plaude; recedat, ades.
                                    (77-82, 91-100)

[Rich, I shall buy you for my pleasure, as my wealthy husband
bought me for himself; I shall follow his example. Not his
self, but his money bought me, that he might become my
equal. His purse was eloquent. Money has a profound knowl-

edge of rhetoric; when cash speaks, Cicero himself is silent.
. . . I married his wealth, not the man, with my body, not
with my soul. He has my body, not my heart; with him I am
present in body, far away in heart; I'll give you both body
and heart. You'll be my true husband, my true love. Let his
be the labor, yours the profit. Let him plow, and you reap.
Let him go hungry, while you eat, let him go thirsty while you
drink, let him heap up, while you carry off, let him sweat
while you play, let him weep while you applaud. Let him de-
part, while you remain.]26

The host's wife, then, compounds love, money, eating, drinking, toil-
ing, and rhetoric in her elaborately playful proposition; Bertilak's
wife is less elaborate, perhaps more subtle, in her proposition, retain-
ing some of the elements at work in her Latin model, in particular,
rhetoric, money, and love:

> "In god fayth, Sir Gawayn," quoþ þe gay lady,
> "Þe prys and þe prowes þat plesez al oþer,
> If I hit lakked oþer set at lyȝt, hit were littel daynté;
> Bot hit ar laydes innoȝe þat leuer wer nowþe
> Haf þe, hende, in hor holde, as I þe habbe here,
> To daly with derely your daynté wordez,
> Keuer hem comfort and colen her carez,
> Þen much of the garysoun oþer golde þat þay hauen.
> Bot I louue þat ilk lorde þat þe lyfte haldez,
> I haf hit holly in my honde þat al desyres,
>   þurȝe grace."
>
>   (1248-58)

The ironic juxtaposition of sex and money, a commonplace of me-
dieval lyric, is actively at work in Sir Gawain. Bertilak asks Gawain:
"How payez yow þis play?" upon returning from hunting the deer
(1379). Gawain replies with a kiss, which he describes as his
"cheuicaunce" (1390). Both Bertilak and Gawain, then, reinforce the
connections among sex, business, and games, consequently debasing,
in Bakhtin's sense of the word, the sacred aspect of sexuality.

After the killing of the boar, Gawain again kisses Bertilak, in ex-
change for the gomen (1635) his host gives him; Gawain describes
the kiss as "Alle my get" (1638). His host continues the game by
remarking: "ȝe ben ryche in a whyle, / Such chaffer and ȝe drowe"
(1646-47). Again, after the killing of the fox, Gawain and Bertilak
exchange their winnings, as well as a brief dialogue after Gawain
has kissed his host three times:

"Bi Kryst," quoþ þat oþer knyȝt, "ȝe cach much sele
In cheuisaunce of þis chaffer, ȝif ȝe hade goud chepez."
"ȝe, of þe chepe no charg," quoþ chefly þat oþer,
"As is pertly payed þe chepez þat I aȝte."
(1938-41)

Connecting food, sex, and money, using images of slaughter and dismemberment, crowning and uncrowning, offering all of these elements as components of an elaborate game, the poet of *Sir Gawain* produces a composition that reflects the techniques of grotesque realism, as well as the inclusive nature of genres (particularly of the romance) in medieval literature. A Christian *spoudogelaios*, he puts these strategies to work in a poem designed to uphold a sacred, Christian system of values.[27]

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1. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. xxiv. All citations of *Sir Gawain* are from this edition.
2. "A Minor Analogue of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Neophil*, 44 (1960), 37.
3. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 424.
4. *Literature as System* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 121.
5. *Les Fabliaux*, 6th ed. (Paris: H. Champion, 1964), p. 434. See also Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux* (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1957), p. 43.
6. Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), p. 50.
7. "Romance and Anti-Romance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 258.
8. *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: R. & K. Paul, 1965), p. 184.
9. *Les Fabliaux*, p. 37.
10. *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1957), p. 59.
11. Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T. Press, 1968.
12. *Schwank und Moral* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1969), pp. 18-33.
13. For some other parallels between the genres see Joachim Suchomski, *"Delectatio" und "Utilitas"* (Bern, Munich: Francke, 1975).
14. Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. ix.
15. "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt," *MP*, 13 (1916), 700, 701.
16. See *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 530-37, for a useful survey by Laura Loomis.
17. *Sir Gawain*, p. xxi.

18. "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes etc.," *JEGP*, 27 (1928), 1-15, and the second chapter of his *The Gawain-Poet* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1956), pp. 31-48.

19. Bakhtin, pp. 223-24.

20. Ed. Paul Maury, in *La Comédie Latine en France au XIIᵉ Siècle* (Paris: Société d'edition "Les Belles-lettres," 1931), II, 239.

21. Ibid., II, 242.

22. *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, ed. Karl Lachmann, 6th ed. (Berlin, Leipzig: W. de Gruyter, 1926); *Parzival: Studienausgabe* (repr. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1965), lines 13122-26. Translation by Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage, *Parzival* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 74.

23. *The Pattern of Judgement in the Queste and Cleanness* (Columbia, Mo.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 48.

24. See Robert G. Cook, "The Play-Element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Tulane Studies in English*, 13 (1963), 5-31. For more general considerations of the play element in literature see Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (New York: J. and J. Harper Editions, 1970); Hugo Rahner, "Der spielende Mensch," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 16 (1948), 11-87; and Suchomski.

25. Ed. Robert Baschet, *La Comedie Latine*, I, 197.

26. Ibid., I, 199-200.

27. For a brief discussion of the Christian spoudogelaios, see Rahner, and my "Wolfram von Eschenbach: *Homo Ludens*," forthcoming in *Viator*.