

BLOOD ON THE TABLE: THE SUBVERSION OF FELLOWSHIP IN THE *A LYTELL GESTE OF ROBYN HODE*

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Outlaw narratives that influenced the epic poem of *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* are replete with scenes in which the basic fellowship of feasting is disrupted by extreme violence.¹ Consider, for example, Fouke fitz Waryn's feast right after he has forced his enemy, Pieres de Brubyle, to kill all his henchmen:

Equant tous furent liez, Fouke ly fist couper les testes de tous iceux qu'il avoit liez, e, quant yl avoit tous ces compaignons decoleez: "Vous, recreant chevaler, qe vous fetez apeler Fouke, vous y mentez. Je su Fouke, e ce savez vous bien, e je vus rendroy qe fausement m'avez alosee de larcyn." E ly coupa la teste meyntenant, e, quant avoit ce fet, apela ces compaignouns ; e soperent la, e se fyrent bien a eese.²

[When they were all bound, Fouke made him cut off the heads of all those he had bound, and when he had beheaded all his companions, Fouke said: "You craven knight, who call yourself Fouke, you are lying. I am Fouke and this you will soon know well. I shall pay you back for having me falsely accused of theft." At once he cut off his head and when he had done this he summoned his companions. They dined there and made merry.]

In his own outlaw narrative, Gamelyn echoes Fouke's feast among the broken bodies of his enemies:

While Gamelyn made orders of monke and frere,
Evere stood his brother and made foule chere;
Gamelyn up with his staf that he wel knewe,
And girt him in the nek that he overthrewe;
A litel above the girdel the rigge-boon he barst;
And sette him in the fetters theras he sat arst.
"Sitte ther, brother," seide Gamelyn,
"For to colen thi body as I did myn."
As swith as thei had wroken hem on her foon,
Thei asked water and wasshen anon,
What some for her love and some for her awe,

¹This paper was first presented at an *JARHS* session in 2015 at the 50th International Congress on Medieval Studies entitled "Food and Feast in Medieval Outlaw Texts," organized by Alexander Kaufman, Valerie B. Johnson, and Melissa Ridley Elmes. My thanks to this group, and twofold to Alex Kaufman for his helpful comments and suggestions. Small portions of this paper's argument also appear in chapters 5 and 6 of my book *The Ecology of the English Outlaw in Medieval Literature*.

² E.J. Hathaway et al., ed., *Fouke le Fitz Waryn* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), pages 31-32, lines 34-38, and 1-2. Glyn Burgess, trans., *Two Medieval Outlaws: Eustace the Monk and Fouke Fitz Waryn* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 132.

Alle the servantes served hem on the beste lawe.³

[While Gamelyn “made orders” of monk and friar, his brother stood by looking grumpy. Gamelyn grabbed his staff which he knew well and hit him in the neck and knocked him over. He broke his backbone a little above the waist and set him in fetters as he had been bound before. “Sit there, brother,” said Gamelyn, “to cool your body as I cooled mine.” As energetically as they had avenged themselves on their foes, they then asked for water and washed up, and thus some servants for love and some servants for fear served them in the most socially correct way.]

Both accounts gain their power by juxtaposing horrific violence and vengeance with “civilized” feasting sequences that serve to heighten their heroes’ unpredictable nature, their wildness and menace. The late medieval Robin Hood poems explore similar themes but in a slightly more subdued manner in the “feast under duress” set-pieces that stud the early poems. Apart from a few notable exceptions, feasting becomes an opportunity to explore tensions ironically, to examine the undercurrent of violent intentions below the veneer of exaggerated courtliness.

This study will discuss the feast scenes in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*, exploring the ways in which their content subverts the theme of fellowship, with its focus on social bonding—a matter of great importance to a potential audience of guild or fraternity members. Richard Tardif, Dean Hoffman, A. J. Pollard, Thomas Ohlgren, and Sherron Lux, among others, have persuasively argued that the *Geste* was produced for a mercantile, guild-oriented, urban audience, an audience preoccupied with upward mobility and social order.⁴ Ohlgren convincingly links the *Geste* to the contexts and even the specialized vocabulary of guild life. Hoffman has explored the distinct possibility that the *Geste* might have been performed during a guildhall feast by a “small troupe of costumed or masked actors, referred to as disguisers, whose improvisations among the guild members in the hall would have created a kind of theatrical running commentary on the evening’s ceremonies, particularly if the episodes of this lengthy poem were staged between the actual courses of the banquet in the manner of a great hall play or interlude.”⁵ Although I am intrigued by Hoffman’s plausible analysis of the ways in which this poem could be performed by mumming actors, I tend towards Ohlgren’s view that the *Geste* is most likely a rare example of a “talkyng,”

³ Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, ed., *The Tale of Gamelyn*, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 184-226, 209, lines 529–540. For a recent study of the social contexts of this poem, see Renée Ward, “Food, Feasts, and Temperance: The Social Contracts of ‘Mete and Drink’ in *The Tale of Gamelyn*,” in *Food and Feast in Premodern Outlaw Tales*, ed. Melissa Ridley Elmes and Kristin Boviard-Abbo, (New York: Routledge: 2021), 30-54.

⁴ Richard Tardif, “The ‘Mistry’ of Robin Hood: A New Social Context for the Ballads,” in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 345-61; Dean A. Hoffman, “‘I Wyll Be Thy True Servaunte / And Trewely Serve Thee’: Guildhall Minstrelsy in the *Gest of Robyn Hode*,” *The Drama Review* 49, no. 2 (2005): 119-134; A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2004); Thomas H. Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465–1560: Texts, Contexts, and Ideology* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007); and Thomas H. Ohlgren, “Edwardus redivivus in *A Gest of Robyn Hode*,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99, no. 1 (2000): 1-28.

⁵ Hoffman, “Guildhall Minstrelsy,” 121-22; Sherron Lux, “Of Courtesy and Community: Food and Feasting in *A Lytell Gest of Robyn Hode*,” in *Food and Feast in Premodern Outlaw Tales*, ed. Melissa Ridley Elmes and Kristin Boviard-Abbo (New York: Routledge: 2021), 75-92, 76. See also Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, who states that the *Geste* “was certainly printed, if not composed, in London during the last quarter of the fifteenth century,” 145.

a poem “probably orally recited or chanted by a minstrel.”⁶ However it was performed, it was enjoyed by people who wished to display the virtues of gentrification, fellowship, and hospitality that the outlaws perform, as Sherron Lux has demonstrated.⁷

The best place to see such values in action is at a feast where one’s manners and behavior are on display, because for late medieval people, “table manners were not trifles but matters of true significance.”⁸ The poet-compiler of the *Geste* is deeply concerned with manners—Ohlgren notes that he uses the word “curteyse” seventeen times—and with the mechanics of food and feasting, perhaps because they provide such a showcase for character and social status.⁹ Claire Sponsler notes:

When we follow social rules about food—such as taboos, rituals, and stipulations of etiquette—we perform precepts about food that guide how we act; thus, *to perform is also to behave*. ... Eating invites us to appraise, value, and assess, especially when the acts of doing and behaving around food are brought to the foreground and displayed in ways that underscore the theatrical and spectacular; at this juncture, to perform is to show.¹⁰

The *Geste* is preoccupied with the social displays feasting allows. Approximately 202 out of 1824 lines in the Wynkyn de Worde edition—12 percent of the poem—speak directly of food, and it is with food and feasting that the argument of this paper will be most concerned. But first, I provide a discussion of guild performative contexts.

I do not wish to be overly limiting in my analysis of the ramifications of the *Geste*’s potential performance in a guild setting—guilds certainly sponsored pageants with complicated messages and mystery plays where social tensions and identities were on display throughout the late Middle Ages into the Jacobean period.¹¹ They also sponsored civic fundraising events that certainly could and did at times spiral into chaos and misrule as their widespread outlawing in the early modern period suggests.¹² But a piece as ambivalent as the *Geste*, if it was performed at guild dinners, subverts the hierarchical mechanisms not only of society at large, but also the guild’s sacred tenets of religious and civic duty; it would reach guild members where they live, so to speak.

⁶ Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 163-65.

⁷ Lux, “Courtesy and Community,” 76-79.

⁸ Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 190.

⁹ Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 145.

¹⁰ Claire Sponsler, “Edible Theater,” in *The Queen’s Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 150.

¹¹ See Benjamin McRee, “Unity or Division? The Social Meaning of Guild Ceremony in Urban Communities,” in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt and Kathryn Reyerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 189-207, on the guilds’ display of social unity through pageantry. See also David M. Bergeron, “Anthony Munday: Pageant Poet to the City of London,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1967): 352, on the ways in which guilds used pageants for propagandistic purposes and to honor and forge connections with those with power, such as mayors.

¹² For a study of Robin Hood as fundraiser, see Katherine L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 127-130. Andrew Ayton discusses the close association of the name Robin Hood with criminality from the 1260’s onward in “Military Service and the Development of the Robin Hood Legend in the Fourteenth Century,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 36 (1992), 126-43. See also David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), 55.

Even if the function of Robin Hood plays and “talkings” was to blow off steam and give vent to potentially dangerous social tensions through the relatively safe medium of mimesis and fiction that gently lampoons guild aspirations, the result in the *Geste* is a complicated kind of self-parody. Food and violence are a dangerous combination for a feast and election context. Ohlgren outlines the volatile combination of food, drink, politics, and performance of Robin Hood material: “After the feasting in the guild hall, the election ceremonies took place, followed by entertainment and plays. Minstrels, often accompanied by musicians, performed dumb shows or mummings and even plays.¹³ So an audience of a guildhall performance of a Robin Hood poem would be feasting and choosing new leaders in the course of the evening—this reality might echo uncomfortably against the fiction they were consuming.

The performative context of the guild feast offered a different kind of excitement from that of, say, the parish fundraiser out-of-doors. The mechanisms of power are just as visible, and the parody is just as keen, but it perhaps cuts a little closer to the bone because it is more intimate and aimed at an in-group audience. Benjamin McRee characterizes exclusivity as a defining feature of the occasion of a guild feast:

The “apartness” of the feast was its principal strength. Isolated from the rest of the community in time and space, guild members were encouraged to leave their worries and their connections to the outside world behind as they were temporarily transported into a new and better world featuring rich food, drink-enriched entertainment, and a reminder of shared values. A feeling of camaraderie among the feasters as well as a renewed sense of corporate identity were natural products of guild commensalism.¹⁴

So any performance that dramatizes tensions just below the civil surface of fraternal life could be powerful, indeed. For example, as Ohlgren points out, the moment in the *Geste* when John mismeasures cloth—using a non-standard bow-stave to measure it, contrary to cloth guild’s imposition of the “Silver Yard” as a standard unit of measurement—would have been read not as evidence of Robin’s generosity, but rather as a humorous dramatization of “friction between a master guildsman and his lesser tradesmen.”¹⁵ Members of the audience would likely have identified with either Robin or Little John, depending on their status, and the old battle lines within the organization would be made visible through this shared parodic material.¹⁶

Meg Twycross notes that “[late medieval] plays were written to be performed by members of a closely-knit in-group for their fellows. Even if the group was highly stratified, nonetheless they were all part of this ‘family’ and shared the same private jokes. Editors have laboured manfully to recover these.”¹⁷ If the *Geste* was performed for a guild of cloth merchants like the Drapers or the Taylors, at least some of the private jokes are pretty obvious—the measuring of the cloth, and the pride of participation in an organized institution that rivals a king’s military or

¹³ Ohlgren, “Edwardus Redivivus,” 23.

¹⁴ McRee, “Unity or Division?,” 192.

¹⁵ Ohlgren, “Edwardus Redivivus,” 24.

¹⁶ Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, notes that the scene of the measured cloth is “marked by carnivalesque irreverence toward authority,” pointing to “discontent within the guild of the yeomanry or bachelor members,” 159.

¹⁷ Meg Twycross, “The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 69.

monkish orders spring quickly to mind.¹⁸ Others are not so obvious unless we imagine the feasting and praying and election that might have gone on around the performance of the *Geste*. For late medieval drama was a permeable affair—things dramatized within the ritualized fictional frame of a play or geste spilled out into the performance venue, and audience members participated in the action and ethos of the performance. As Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler remind us, the ritualistic frame could prove more porous than not, if only because of the position of spectators who enter the space of the theater to engage briefly in the dangerous play being enacted there, but who then return to the world beyond. In the case of late medieval performance, where the “theater” is often a guildhall, a city street, or a village green, that border would have been all the more porous.”¹⁹

The guilds’ use of notoriously wild figures like Robin Hood and Little John highlights a paradoxical pull both towards and away from aspirational gentility. In what ways was the worldview of earnest guild members “infected” by the wild motifs inherent in the outlaw fictions?

This essay will now explore the dynamics of that performative context of the guildhall further, especially considering the menacing quality of the Robin Hood’s feasts. The outlaw tradition from which the *Geste* draws its power has a very problematic relationship with food. Outlaw feasts can be stages for eruptions of taboo violence; consumption does not remain restrained and orderly, but often spirals out into violence and uncouthness, a process buttressed by the wild motifs inherent in the outlaw tradition. The early outlaw poems treat the audience to many dinners where the guest is prey and the host a predator—or vice versa.²⁰ So what does this mean for a guildhall audience interested in the performance of gentility and the reinforcement of social bonds through feasting? How does the violent inheritance of outlaw narratives overturn and complicate the celebratory, overblown feasts of the *Geste*? This essay explores the fissures and contradictions in the feasting theme in the *Geste*, showing that, perhaps in spite of themselves, this guildhall audience preserved and amplified the danger and violence that is a hallmark of earlier outlaw feasts. I offer insight on what this means for our readings of the social context of the late medieval outlaw poems.

In her study of guild culture and performances of masculinity, Christina Fitzgerald observes a regulatory power at work in ritual theater, productions which she argues, “intervened in the lives of the guildsmen to police and normalize their identities as guild members and as men, ... to discipline them into ‘docile bodies.’” But for all its power and control, “the ‘guild’ was not a tightly organized community, club, or secret society, but a loose bureaucratic and civic designation deployed by mechanisms of power.”²¹ To display this all-important power and prestige and encourage social cohesion, guildhall feasts had many courses, and astronomical numbers of

¹⁸ For a thorough list of the possible connections with guild culture, see Ohlgren, Chapter 4, “The ‘Marchant’ of Sherwood’: Mercantile Adventure in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*,” in *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 135-182.

¹⁹ Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, “Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama,” *New Literary History* 28, no. 2 (1997): 338.

²⁰ This is a central concern of my first book: Sarah Harlan-Haughey, *The Ecology of the English Outlaw in Medieval Literature: From Fen to Greenwood* (London and New York: 2016), see especially Chapters 1, 5, and 6.

²¹ Christina M. Fitzgerald, *Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 29.

animals were eaten, as in greenwood feasts.²² The outlaw narrative in this context seems to be what Hoffman described as “healthy self-parody.”²³ Both Hoffman and Ohlgren acknowledge potential tensions in the Robin Hood material that may affect the guild context, but my work here further explores the ramifications of the Robin Hood appropriation by guildsmen. Their choice to use the supreme trickster figure of the late Middle Ages for their dramas is intriguing since Robin Hood pushes against their aspirations at nearly every turn.

Despite the carnivalesque elements of their festivities, the guilds’ preoccupations with upward mobility and social order tended to suppress the more ebullient aspects of their many celebrations, instead emphatically emphasizing religion, masculinity, and ritual formality. According to Katherine Giles, guild regulations impressed upon the individual the importance of meeting high standards of polite behavior in public and private. These social codes not only mediated interactions between members, but also protected a guild’s reputation. Giles argues that such mandates were self-imposed by the urbanites of late medieval England, who understood that “urban life had always been and would always be a game of appearances,” making “respectable behavior ... simply part of the game.”²⁴ Even though a guild feast was a celebration, it was also an important forum for social display and the performance of virtue. One attended to make an appearance, to make a show of solidarity towards other members, to eat and drink well, and to network. “The feast’s defining rhetoric of honorable equality and commensality enabled new relationships to be forged, often between participants of different background or economic status,” notes Gervase Rosser. The feast’s “element of formality ... was vital to the event: this was a special dinner—[it] invested the occasion, and its accompanying social exchanges ... with a dignity and prestige with which individual participants could dress themselves as they stepped back into the quotidian world.”²⁵ After all, as Heather Swanson observes, “a close link remained between the members of prestigious guilds and the civic government, the social gatherings of the guild reinforcing the solidarity of the civic elite, and the holding of guild office a key step in the ‘cursus honorum,’ or path of honour to the highest civic office.”²⁶ Therefore, personal virtues as well as the virtues of the corporation as a whole were emphasized through the paraliturgical activities, the pageants and prayers, and through one’s courteous and civil behavior.

Medieval drama is didactic (which does not imply it could not also be entertaining) and intended to be performed for the sake of the audience’s souls, and certainly the *Geste* offers many

²² See Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 161; and Amy Appleford, “Performance in Households and Merchant Halls,” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, March 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.93>: “The Drapers’ election feast was also a substantial expense. In 1515, for example, it included thirty swans, dozens of quails, geese, pigeons, capons, conies, and venison, as well as herons and salmon for the high table. Records for 1528 and 1529 suggest that, to round out the feast, ‘Wafers and Ipocras’ (light cakes and spiced wine) were distributed to ‘all the hall,’ followed by ‘A Play,’” 6.

²³ Hoffman, “Guildhall Minstrelsy,” 121.

²⁴ Benjamin R. McRee, “Bonds of Community: Religious Gilds and Urban Society in Late Medieval England,” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1987), 118, quoted in Katherine Giles, “Medieval Guildhalls as Habitus,” in *An Archaeology of Social Identity: Guildhalls in York, c. 1350-1630*, ed. John Hedges (Oxford: John and Erica Hedges Ltd. and Archaeopress, 2000), 136.

²⁵ Gervase Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 122.

²⁶ Heather Swanson, *Medieval British Towns* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 129.

salutary lessons about honesty, courtesy, and loyalty to one's community, king, and god.²⁷ But these lessons are undermined by the inherent violence of the Robin Hood material. Thus, the guilds' and fraternities' enthusiastic use of unruly outlaw subject matter for entertainment is problematic, to say the least.²⁸ Greg Walker reminds us that "the cultural work of even the most seemingly didactic of plays might lie as much in its unintended consequences as its planned effects. Drama, by its very nature, passes beyond the complete control of its creators."²⁹ In what ways, then, did the performance of the *Geste* pass beyond the bounds of propriety and virtue?

If, as Ohlgren argues, the *Geste* is an artifact of the deliberate mercantile appropriation of knightly virtues, then the dialectic between a burgeoning aspirational middle class and the courtly literature of the aristocratic past is even more complicated, as the previous British outlaw texts are not just "knightly."³⁰ In fact, they all subvert the knightliness and courtliness they aspire to, especially in the most civilized of activities, feasting. Consider, for example, Fulk Fitz Waryn's feast surrounded by the decapitated bodies of his enemies, or Gamelyn's repeated bloody disruption of manorial banquets. The fictional outlaws of Robin Hood's heritage may be aspiring gentlemen, but their table manners are not polite. In the *Geste*, the politics of feasting are slightly more subtly deployed. The knightly quality of the greenwood outlaws is certainly emphasized by the poet-compiler of the *Geste*—although what they say is often undermined by what they do.

Robin Hood generally refuses to allow his men to eat until they have had an adventure and brought a "guest" to dinner. Sections of the story deal with the kidnapping or coercion of cooks and cellarers, and, of course, Robin's men always subject their "guests" to a feast at their home under the greenwood tree.³¹ The *Geste* is preoccupied with the ethics of companionship and the polite consumption of food, as well as the way violence is mediated by feasting. Ultimately, the poem subverts the politics of feasting, creating a complex work of social literature that in many ways undermines the audience's expectations and, perhaps, the poet-compiler's intentions.

At the very beginning of the poem, the tone is set when Robin refuses to allow his band of men to eat until he should have "some bolde baron / Or some vnketh gest" [some bold baron or some uncouth guest] at his table.³² Many have rightly pointed out that this is a direct echo, and probably a parody, of King Arthur's habit of refusing to allow anyone to eat until "hym deuised were / Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale" [until someone told an unknown tale of some

²⁷ See Greg Walker, "The Cultural Work of Early Drama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 75-98, especially 79-82.

²⁸ Legendary subjects as guild-performed narratives have the power to threaten and insult (i.e., Saint George in Norwich); see McRee, "Unity or Division?," 199-200.

²⁹ Walker, "The Cultural Work of Early Drama," 82.

³⁰ See Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*: "The virtues celebrated in courtly romance ... have been conserved, imitated, and appropriated by the urban merchant and artisan classes, who are the producers and consumers of the Robin Hood poems," 136. See also Ohlgren, "Edwardus redivivus," 28.

³¹ J.B. Bessinger, Jr., "The Gest of Robin Hood Revisited," in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Thomas Knight (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), notes the sheer quantity of feasts: "a series of feasts and mockfeasts (forced entertainments, 68, 247, or occasions when a visitor is not fed, 102ff, 156ff) that punctuate or dramatize the chief encounters of the story," 39.

³² For this essay I am using the Wynkyn de Worde edition of *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* (ca. 1506) in Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425 to ca. 1600*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 428 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013), 94, lines 23-24. All further citations from the *Geste* are from this edited version.

adventure].”³³ Robin Hood takes this irritating habit to the farthest extreme, refusing to allow anyone to eat until he has heard *three masses and* found someone to join him at his meal.³⁴ Moreover, he appears to follow this strict schedule every day, not only on holidays, like the “childish” King Arthur of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1390). This excessive ritual emphasizes the absurdity of Robin’s mealtime obsession—it not only calls out Arthurian romance; it also winks at the self-conscious religious theatricality of guild ritual, with its processions from the mass two-by-two, its blessing of the feast, and its paraliturgical machinery. A sardonic humor inheres in Robin Hood’s need to hear three masses a day; this behavior calls out the guildhall’s “emulation of the ecclesiastical drama of the liturgy,” as explored by Gervase Rosser.³⁵ This complex parodical moment—at the very beginning of the poem—sets the stage for the rest of the action by highlighting and complicating the ethics of feasting. It is telling that Robin Hood appears to have beaten the greatest British king at his own game—and he has trumped the guild system’s ritualistic religiosity as well.³⁶ Robin Hood will repeatedly prove to be the best-mannered host of all time in this tale, showing up all manner of distinguished guests in flamboyant fashion. This flamboyance is fundamentally aggressive and predatory in a way that, hopefully, guild feasts were not.

This parody may be relevant in a guild context where hierarchy and display are of paramount importance—and can even overshadow charity and justice. As Heather Swanson argues thus:

The brawls over precedence that occurred during public processions demonstrated that people were acutely aware of this hierarchy and anxious to define their status against their nearest rivals. But there could be no mistaking that mercers had infinitely more status than carpenters, and drapers far more than weavers. Nor could there be any mistaking that guilds overwhelmingly catered for the respectable and excluded the very poor.³⁷

Guilds spent much time and money jostling energetically with one another—performing their worldliness and power in a way that would prove theirs to be the best organization in town.³⁸ They also jostled internally, but in an emphatically more controlled, even stylized, way. It seems it was particularly bad to make a display of animus within the space of the guildhall, as Giles notes: “It was considered particularly offensive if the member ‘fall at debate with any man of his feliship

³³ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., ed. and rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), 3, lines 92-93. For a full exploration of this theme, see Aisling Byrne, “Arthur’s Refusal to Eat: Ritual and Control in the Romance Feast,” *Journal of Medieval History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 62-74.

³⁴ See Ohlgren’s discussion in *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 152.

³⁵ Gervase Rosser, “Roles in Life: The Drama of the Medieval Guilds,” in *REED in Review: Essays in Celebration of the First Twenty-Five Years*, ed. Audrey Douglas and Sally-Beth Maclean (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 148.

³⁶ The ritual display of religiosity appears repeatedly in the guild records. Gervase Rosser, “Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England,” *Journal of British Studies* 33, no. 4 (1994), 430-46, describes one particularly intriguing example, where “A Lincoln fraternity of the Assumption, begun in 1373, opened three barrels of ale in the course of its drinking: at the breaking of the first, the guild’s ordinances were read aloud; at the second, intercession was offered for the dead; and at the third, the Virgin was appealed to on behalf of the living,” 435.

³⁷ Swanson, *Medieval British Towns*, 131.

³⁸ See McRee, “Unity or Division?,” 192 on the procession and the wearing of livery as a show of strength and unity.

in the maister presence, constables beyng in the Trinite hall, or call hyme fals, or lye him in violence.”³⁹ Guilds tended to have very strict rules about comportment and behavior meant to preserve their organization’s dignity.⁴⁰ So does Robin Hood—but his emulation of King Arthur is funny and extreme, and perhaps it parodies the similarly aspirational guild members enjoying a night out at one of the most glorious events of their year.

In this context, much of the competition between guilds seems likely to be a channeling of internal aggressions towards an external foe; similarly, the aggression simmering below the surface among members of Robin’s band is a prominent feature of many of the medieval poems. It is apparent in the first few lines of the *Geste*, as Robin and his men argue about when and how to eat. In Robin and Little John’s escalating archery game in *Robin Hood and the Monk* (ca. 1463), it is telling that the men often turn toward the highway and away from their “fused” homosocial bands in these cases to halt their internal fraction.⁴¹ One wonders if the guildhall feast and play offered after the fraught moment of election, when the fraternity was potentially divided by political competition, served a similar purpose—to redirect energies towards a display of solidarity and commensality, in mirrored mimesis.⁴²

Luckily for Robin’s long-suffering men, a guest does show up, a kindly knight, Sir Richard at the Lee, who cries when he is forced to dine with Robin although he answers cordially enough, following the strict rules dictated by an invitation:

I graunte he sayd with you to wende.
 My brethern all thre
 My purpose was to haue deyned to day
 At blythe or dankastere
 Forthe than went that gentyll knyght
 With a care full chere
 The teres out of his eyen ran
 And fell downe by his lere⁴³

³⁹ Giles, “Medieval Guildhalls,” 136.

⁴⁰ McRee, “Unity or Division?” 194-95.

⁴¹ Alexander L. Kaufman, “Nietzsche’s Herd and the Individual: The Construction of Alterity in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*,” in *Robin Hood in Greenwood Stood: Alterity and Context in the English Outlaw Tradition*, ed. Stephen Knight (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 31-46.

⁴² Consider, for example, this description of the typical sequence of formal events: “Before 1454–1455, the whole fraternity, including the “Bachelors” (those having passed apprenticeship and free of the city but not in the Livery, that elite portion of the guild who had expanded trading rights), elected the master and wardens. After this time, the new officers were elected by the outgoing master and wardens alone, with the help after 1471 of the Council or Court of Assistants, a self-elected body of five to seven members. The outgoing officers then presented the successors to the whole corporate body for approval. The master and wardens held office only for one year and could only serve every five years. As noted in the Drapers’ grant of arms in 1439, the fraternity met once a year on the Monday following the feast of the Assumption of the most blessed Virgin in mid-August ‘to commemorate their ... corporation’ and ‘to review, change, elect, and institute a new Master and New Wardens.’ This yearly gathering of the corporation and the election of its officers was an elaborate and important event. As in a noble household, the feast was punctuated by revels, including mixed entertainments that could involve music, dancing, and, in the Drapers case, a play.” Appleford, “Performance in Households and Merchant Halls,” 6.

⁴³ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 96-97, lines 104-111.

[“I submit to go with you, my three brothers,” he said; “but my purpose had been to dine today at Blythe or Doncaster.” That gentle knight then went ahead with a careworn expression. The tears ran out of his eyes and fell down his cheek.]

After the knight has been brought to the lodge door and greeted courteously by Robin, who takes off his own hood and genuflects to his social superior, welcoming him into his domain, the two prepare to eat. He and Robyn “wasshed togyder and wyped bothe” [both washed and dried their hands together]⁴⁴ in a humorously gentrified gesture during this rustic abduction. The handwashing in the *Geste* likely echoed the kind of formal handwashing performed in the guildhall before and after the feast, and the audience would likely have laughed at the mirroring.⁴⁵ An amusing detail is the presence of laundered napkins in the outlaw’s “lodge.” As Henisch notes, a clean napkin was absolutely *de rigeur* for any show of gentility: “only those beyond the pale, peasants and barbarians, could be comfortable without it.”⁴⁶ The knight and the outlaw sit down to a magnificent spread, complete with napkins, and presumably, a tablecloth, and begin to eat. This is careful status-signaling on the part of the poet-compiler. And the subsequent dinner is equally majestic:

Brede and wyne they had ynough
 And nombles of the dere
 Swannes and fesautes they had full good
 And foules of the reuere
 There fayled neuer so lytell a byrde
 That euer was bred on brere⁴⁷

[They had plenty of bread, wine, and sweetbreads of venison. They had delicious swans, pheasants, and waterfowl. There wasn’t a single little bird missing (from the table) that eve grew up in a hedge.]

This is a feast fit for a king, a calculated display designed as much for intimidation as for entertainment.⁴⁸ Accordingly, the feast makes the knight insecure about his own social role. He thanks Robin and politely returns the invitation, but carefully couches it in equivocal language: “If I come agayne Robyn / Here by this countre,” [“If I come here again, Robin, to this area”] he says—and we get the feeling he intends pointedly to avoid this region in the future—“As good a dyner I shall the make / As thou hast made to me” [As good a dinner I shall make for you as you

⁴⁴ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 97, line 124.

⁴⁵ Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 167.

⁴⁶ Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 148.

⁴⁷ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 97, lines 126-131.

⁴⁸ See Lux’s discussion of this feast as fit for guild members and even princes in “Food and Feasting,” 85. Also see Robert Epstein’s “Eating Their Words: Food and Text in the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2006): 360 for their discussion on the role of extravagant food at Lancastrian royal feasts: “Clearly, the food at the banquet, in its abundance and extravagance, forms a part of the royal performance, and its purposes are in large part political. Like the spectacle that surrounds it, the banquet advertises, at a crucial moment for the dynasty, the splendor of the monarch and by extension also the resources and power of the monarchy. A king’s liberality in public display, the royal virtue known as ‘magnificence’ is an exhibition of the depth of his resources and therefore of the sufficiency of his wealth and power.” The greenwood outlaws are echoing and emulating this aggressive display of splendor. See also Mark Truesdale, “Robin Hood’s Poached Feasting in Context: Poor Knights, Disguised Kings, and Romance Parody in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*,” in *Food and Feast in Premodern Outlaw Tales*, ed. Melissa Ridley Elmes and Kristin Boviard-Abbo, “Outlaws in Literature, History, and Culture 8 (New York: Routledge: 2021), especially 148-149.

made for me.]⁴⁹ Then, of course, the other shoe drops and the outlaws demand money from the knight (this is possibly an echo of the fees charged for guild dinners), who proves to have none, having spent it all on a prodigal son. The outlaws take pity on him and lend him enough money to pay back the abbot, who lent him some a year ago and eagerly waits for the knight to default so he can seize all his property. This lending and veiled threatening within the polite context of the feast would have been familiar to guild members, as others have observed. Members of rival guilds would attend one another's feasts to settle disputes.⁵⁰ Internal conflicts—debts, grievances, and unresolved disputes—as well, were expected to be actively resolved at feasts. Smoldering tensions could certainly be part of the experience of commensality within a fraternal context.

This motif of the feast under duress is repeated throughout the *Geste*: the sheriff, monk, and even King Edward are all courteously escorted to the outlaw's hideout, treated with exaggerated respect and courtliness, then hit up for cash (the threat of sudden violence—a hallmark of earlier outlaw feasts—is ever-present). The Robin of the *Geste* may be a gangster and a yeoman, but he is upwardly mobile. He has attained kingly status in his own microcosm, and when anyone else enters his world—even King Edward—he is subject to Robin's imperious hospitality.

A feast is the ultimate celebration of companionship in the medieval world, but Robin's feasts, for all their courtliness, are always a bit *off* because the threat of violence, robbery, and even death lurks underneath all the revelry.⁵¹ One does not have to look far in Robin Hood scholarship to find analyses of the carnivalesque element in these rymes, so I will not rework the argument here.⁵² What is important to note for the sake of my analysis is the way that feasting highlights interpersonal and social tensions better than almost any social setting can. The *Geste*'s feasts are uniformly predatory affairs, and, if read within the hypothetical context of guildhall performance, they uncomfortably explore the real tensions inherent in guild life.

Guild feasts could potentially subvert the “hierarchical and ... masculinist order that the authorities—particularly the keepers of administrative records—imposed on an otherwise amorphous collection of craftspeople.”⁵³ The cheerful rapaciousness of the outlaw also mirrors and parodies the ambivalent charity of the guilds: “The status of the guild would be made explicit in the kind of feasting that it could provide for its members—the importance of eating together to articulate a sense of community cannot be overemphasised. Rather more was spent on this aspect of fraternal life than on alms for poorer members.”⁵⁴ Similarly, and famously, Robin Hood's band

⁴⁹ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 97, lines 136-139.

⁵⁰ Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 159.

⁵¹ Stephen Knight analyzes the “sense of heroic menace” lurking in the early ballads and in proverbs: “a similarly eerie proverb is simply ‘Good even, good Robin Hood,’ which suggests that the speaker is being polite to someone when he has no choice; Joseph Ritson explained the situation as ‘civility extorted by fear.’” See Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 6-7.

⁵² A good place to start is, of course, Peter Stallybrass, “‘Drunk with the Cup of Liberty’: Robin Hood, the Carnivalesque, and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England,” in *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, Essays in Literature and Society (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 45-76.

⁵³ Fitzgerald, *Drama of Masculinity*, 21.

⁵⁴ “Nevertheless, there was a recognition of charitable obligations, spelled out clearly by the York carpenters’ fraternity, who promised help at the rate of 4d a week to members who were unable to work because of the ‘misfortunes of this world,’ though whether guild funds could sustain this kind of support to many hapless carpenters for any length of time must be doubtful.” Swanson, *Medieval British Towns*, 129.

do not do a very good job of serving the poor in the early poems, and their acts of charity are generally aimed at people of higher social status, like the *Geste*'s knight.⁵⁵ It is interesting to compare this fiction to guilds' charitable efforts to include the poor and needy in their festivities. Some guilds actively invited the poor to join them at feasts; others let in the hungry when they had finished their festivities; and most collected alms.⁵⁶ Would Robin Hood's "charity" in feasting with the knight be something with which they would identify?

At this point, it may be instructive to consider another guild play as an analogue to the *Geste*. Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler discuss some French guild plays that deal with "economic transgressions," each resolving "a potential challenge to the hegemony of the patriarchic guild system." Below, I cite their discussion of the guild play *Pierre le Changeur*, which was performed for a Parisian goldsmith's guild in 1378:

Pierre is, at the beginning of the play, a dreadful miser who cannot stand the sight of a pauper, an attitude antithetical to the principle of charity institutionalized in the form of the confraternity. One day, enraged at finding paupers begging at his door, he hurls a loaf of bread at them, for want of another projectile. When Pierre becomes ill and is near death, this angry action, misleadingly represented by Pierre's guardian angel to Notre Dame as a charitable act, saves him from damnation. Given a reprieve from death and damnation, Pierre divests himself of all his wealth in favor of the poor. It is particularly significant that Pierre is a moneychanger, exercising one of the more favored *metiers*, dealing in gold and other valuable materials as did the goldsmiths watching the play.⁵⁷

This play draws the audience's attention to the occupational hazard of their particular job—miserliness—and then offers an instructive model for course-correction.⁵⁸ Is Robin's behavior in acting as a money lender instructively good mercantile behavior, or is he perceived as simultaneously toadying up to and preying on his knightly victim? How would the audience have perceived his actions?

Another problematic example of moneylending in the *Geste* is the interwoven story of the miracle of the Virgin Mary, an interpolation that makes the guild's enjoyment of the outlaw cycle acceptable to the guilds' mission to educate Christians in appropriate behavior and offer a forum for worship and moral and spiritual improvement. However, the drama of danger enacted in all the fyttes—which turns Mary into the guarantor of a loan in a gangster-like scenario—does much to undermine the basic piety of the miracles of the Virgin. The outlaw material pushes away from order and peace, towards violence and chaos. The Virgin-as-banker is a parodic motif—and

⁵⁵ See Richard Firth Green, "Violence in the Early Robin Hood Poems," in *'A Great Effusion of Blood'? Interpreting Medieval Violence*, ed. Mark Douglas Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, and Oren Falk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 268–86.

⁵⁶ Rosser, "Going to the Fraternity Feast," 436–37, 444. See also Ohlgren, "Edwardus Redivivus," 21.

⁵⁷ Clark and Sponsler, "Queer Play," 327.

⁵⁸ "The spectators were seeing a play about a man in whom they would have recognized, if not themselves, at the very least a *confrère*. This less than exemplary brother could also have been perceived as a rival, not only by moneychangers in the audience, but also by goldsmiths, for these two groups had a long-running rivalry over the right to change money," Clark and Sponsler, "Queer Play," 328.

perhaps, again, parodied the guilds' Marian piety.⁵⁹ After all, don't they also use their ostentatious religiosity to drum up money and prestige?

The poem's obsession with manners, feasting, and proper behavior (and their underlying structures of violence) is bookended in two thematically related episodes. When the knight receives Robin's loan, he heads to the abbey to repay the usurious abbot (who is, according to the sarcastic porter, at dinner "for loue of thee," ["for the love of you"] in the company of all the corrupt officials who will gain from the knight's expected loss).⁶⁰ The abbot, in sharp contrast to Robin Hood, gives the knight no falsely courteous welcome, nor does he stand on ceremony. Instead, he rudely continues to eat his feast without even inviting the knight to sit (a guild audience would be horrified!). The knight minds his manners even when confronted with treachery and kneels before the abbot, but the abbot follows no similar social code. Instead of greeting the knight in kind, he immediately demands money: "Hast thou brought my pay" ["Have you brought my money?"].⁶¹ Again, considered within the loveday context of a fraternal feast, his lack of tact and his laying bare of the economic obligation that binds him to his victim might appall this audience, one imagines. The abbot then rubs in the cronyism of his feast to the exclusion of the knight by calling, "Syr Justyce drynke to me."⁶² After a lengthy exchange, the knight eventually reproves the abbot for his rudeness: "To suffre a knyght to knele so longe / Thou canst no curteysye" ["you know no courtesy if you allow a knight to kneel for so long"].⁶³ This statement, besides being decidedly tongue-in-cheek, could serve to showcase the educational/aspirational aspects of guild membership, and to educate the members in (admittedly somewhat intuitive) good behavior: don't be rude like the abbot. But this education is complicated in a second episode.⁶⁴

The knight's reprimand of the abbot for his manners is echoed later in the *Geste* when Robin and his men waylay a rich monk, invite him to dinner, and then "charge" him for it by taking everything he has. The monk is indignant about their bad manners:

By our lady than sayd the monke
That were no curteysye
To bydde a man to dyner
And syth hym bete and bynde⁶⁵

["By Our Lady," said the monk, "It is no courtesy to invite a man to dinner and then beat and bind him."]

Here again, the monk takes exception not only to Robin's stealing his money, but also to his poor courtesy in "inviting" him to dinner, then beating him and charging him for it. This is a conscious

⁵⁹ But see Clark and Sponsler, "Queer Play," who note, "[i]n the Marian miracle plays, transgression served ultimately to affirm the status quo and thus to legitimize the economic hegemony of the closed and fiercely competitive guilds and confraternities of the late medieval city," 337.

⁶⁰ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 105, line 392.

⁶¹ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 105, line 408.

⁶² Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 106, line 412.

⁶³ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 107, line 455-56.

⁶⁴ See Hoffman, "Guildhall Minstrelsy," 126, for a possible staging of this dramatic scene. I would add that if this were performed by actors, this section would become a sort of *mise en abyme*, with players performing before a fictional feasting fraternity, while the real-life one looked on.

⁶⁵ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 123, lines 1107-9.

parody of guildhall feast practices, where those attending were charged an entry fee while those absent were fined.⁶⁶ In the monk's mind, Robin has broken a taboo by carelessly disregarding the rules of etiquette; it is, in fact, quite impolite to invite a man to dinner and then beat him up. The monk's pointed observation cuts through the courtly veneer Robin and his men have been at such pains to maintain and exposes their game for what it is. It may do the same for its audience, especially since they just "learned" this lesson a few fyttes before.

Little John exhibits poor behavior in fyttre three, where he robs his temporary master, the sheriff, and sleeps in overlong in direct contradiction of guild orders as noted in the following example from London in the survey of 1389:

If any man be of good estate and use him to lie long in bed, and at rising of his bed he will not work to win his sustenance and keep his house, and go to the tavern, to the wine, to the ale, to wrestling, to shooting, and in this manner fall poor and lose his chattels in his default, [then] for succour and trust for to be helped of the fraternity, that man shall never have good nor help of the company, neither in his life nor at his death, but he shall be put off for evermore of this company.⁶⁷

What kind of role is he modelling? Is he, like an allegorical figure of vice in a morality play, performing exaggerated "bad behavior" and thus acknowledging but correcting overworked guild members' desires to sleep in once in a while? Or is his laziness and treachery obtuse or even demonic, even if it is directed at the villainous sheriff?

Waking up and going on the hunt for some food, Little John is confronted by an imperious butler,

Good syr stuarde I praye the
Gyue me to dyne sayd lytell Johan
It is longe for grene lefe . Fastynge so longe to be
Therefore I pray þe stuarde my dyner gyue þou me
Shalt thou neuer ete ne drynke sayd the stuarde
Tyll my lorde be come to towne⁶⁸

[“Good sir steward, I beg you to feed me something,” said Little John. “It is a long time for Greenleaf (Little John’s alias) to fast, so I ask you to give me my dinner!” “You shall never eat nor drink until my lord comes back to town,” replied the steward.]

After breaking the steward's back nearly in two for his presumption in telling Little John what he can and cannot do, Little John then heads to the kitchen where the "bold and hardy" cook challenges him. Cooks are famously irritable in late medieval literature, and this one is no exception.⁶⁹ Little John is testy too, and they fight, and when each meets his match in the other, they then ally themselves against the Sheriff. The poet-compiler's attitude towards the cook is one of (tongue-in-cheek) admiration, for the servant is "A stoute man and a bolde"⁷⁰ [A stout and a

⁶⁶ Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 161.

⁶⁷ Rosser, "Roles in Life," 147.

⁶⁸ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 111-12, lines 616-621.

⁶⁹ Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 59-64.

⁷⁰ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 112, line 639.

bold man]. The cook certainly rules the roost, for after all, as Henisch notes, medieval cooks knew they were “indispensable, a magician with the power to make each day a hell or heaven for his master.”⁷¹ In this episode, we see another figure of power co-opted into the outlaw’s world through the power-dynamics of food and fellowship. This complex fantasy includes both the wish-fulfillment of beating up the tyrant behind the scenes *and* of stealing a good cook from a competing organization. The performance in the guildhall probably added another level of drama when the audience participants identified the fictional cook with the real one who was ruling the kitchen while they consumed the Robin Hood drama.

The hall as a porous space for performance could have offered a rich opportunity for social satire, as Little John’s alliance with the cook would have been staged in front of the screens at the end of the hall opposite the dais, from which both players and servers would emerge—the servants’ entrance so to speak. This close parallel with the real-life activities of cooks and servers, busily cleaning up the remains of the guild feast or preparing another course, would add spice and hilarity to this scene. The real guild silver and plate *was* tantalizingly close. Moreover, the fantasy of beating up the pretentious butler certainly upends the “element of formality” so prominent in guild feasts.⁷² And the performers would certainly not hesitate to draw attention to these parallels; medieval players do not “attempt to disregard their surroundings: on the contrary, they draw attention to them.”⁷³

One wonders whether a look at his new alliance with the cook, and the new partners’ audacious robbery of

the syluer vessel
And all that they myght get
Peces masars and spones⁷⁴

[The silver vessel and all that they might get: dishes, drinking bowles, and spoons.] might also have extra significance in a guild context. Certainly, acquiring and maintaining the tools of feasting—silverware, plates, candlesticks, etc.—was a matter of great importance to guild members, and part of their subscription fees went to the fund to support this maintenance of the items that conferred dignity and prestige on their festive gatherings.⁷⁵ Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to just steal them from a competing (and unpopular) organization, like Little John glibly does in cahoots with the Sherriff’s cook? In all medieval great houses, including guildhalls, “valuable

⁷¹ Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 70.

⁷² Rosser, “Going to the Fraternity Feast,” 432.

⁷³ Twycross, “Medieval English Plays,” 60.

⁷⁴ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 114, lines 683-85.

⁷⁵ Giles: “The status of the guild elite was also emphasized through their use of elaborate napery and eating vessels for the feast, such as the dishes, saucers, tablecloths and towels listed as the contents of a ‘greite arke’ in Trinity hall in 1488 (YMA, 96). Account rolls of 1493 also refer to payments for pewter ‘dublers, dishis, et salceres’ (YMA, 84). Two old Minute Books of the tailors’ transcribed by Camidge (MTA 2/2) also list a variety of diaper and table cloths, flagons, ‘puder [pewter], driblows’, as well as a considerable quantity of plate, and a number of wine bowls, some of which may have dated to the fifteenth century. A note at the end of an inventory from 1488 that ‘master Steffallay changed all the wessells before wrettyn in hys tyme att meclems [Michaelmas]’ (YMA, 87) suggests that successive Masters competed to provide these moveable aspects of material culture,” “Medieval Guildhalls,” 133. See also Rosser, “Going to the Fraternity Feast,” 439.

tableware was kept under lock and key.”⁷⁶ Spoons were apparently a particular temptation for even the most genteel of guests. Guests occasionally would slip them up their sleeve before leaving; “disillusioned stewards liked to sweep the spoons from the table after the main course and count their stock before the guests had flown.”⁷⁷ Perhaps wardens of guilds were not free of this temptation; the wardens of the Drapers had to take an oath to give an accurate (“Juste perfect and true”) account of all the guild’s assets: fines, fees, and “spoon silver.”⁷⁸ Whatever the humor and topicality of the situation depicted in this fyttre, by stealing the cook, stealing the silver, beating up the butler, and sleeping in long past the time to wake, Little John is undermining the sheriff’s corrupt authority, but still, he is also breaking the guilds’ sacred rules.

The story of Little John’s theft reaches its climax when he craftily lures his “maister” to the greenwood, only to be beaten and bound by the outlaws. Audiences likely gleefully enjoyed the Sheriff’s feast under duress with his outlaw hosts—fed magnificently off his own silver:

I make myn a vowe to godsayd lytell Johan
 Mayster ye be to blame
 I was mysserued of my dynere
 Whan I was with you at hame
 Soone he was to super sette
 And serued with syluer whyte
 And whan the sheryf se his vessell
 For sorowe he myght not ete ⁷⁹

[“I swear to God, Master, you are to blame,” said Little John; “I was not served my dinner when I was with you at home.” Soon the sheriff was seated at supper and served with polished silver. When the sheriff saw his silver service, he could not eat for sorrow.]

The Sheriff’s gloomy response—he is beyond words with dismay at seeing his own wealth and status appropriated—is counteracted by Robin’s rapacious cheerfulness. Robin performs the role of a “good host,” saying all the right things such as, “Make glad chere,”⁸⁰ while stripping the sheriff of all the markers of identity and status, reducing him to a state of bare life. This goes beyond rubbing it in while pretending to be hospitable. It is true that Robin shows mercy by declining to smite off the treacherous sheriff’s head at the end of the meal, but somehow, the Sheriff finds the outlaws’ “hospitality” worse than death:

Or I here a nother nyght sayd the sheryf
 Robyn nowe I praye the
 Smyte of my hede rather to morne
 And I for gyue it the
 Lete me go then sayd the sheryf ⁸¹

⁷⁶ Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 172.

⁷⁷ Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 181.

⁷⁸ Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 159.

⁷⁹ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 115, lines 741-48.

⁸⁰ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 116, line 769.

⁸¹ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 116-17, lines 781-85.

["Before I should stay here another night," said the sheriff, "I'd rather you strike off my head tomorrow, Robin, I beg you—I'd forgive you. Let me go!"]

The outlaws' performance of restrained but real violence through the feasting motif is a very powerful element of the *Geste's* action, and its impact on its audience must be fully considered.

The final example of feasting in the poem centers on King Edward's visit in disguise to Robin's camp. The king, exceedingly put out by the outlaws' wholesale slaughter of his deer, decides to infiltrate the camp to get a handle on the situation. When Edward claims he is an agent of the king, Robin Hood extends an open invitation to his guest to eat with him and his men. The audience recognizes the irony of this invitation: the meal Robin will serve the king consists of his own poached game! Robin Hood then summons his men and they come immediately, standing in a military row. The King is impressed—and perhaps a little scared by—this display of martial organization:

Here is a wonder semely syght
 Me thynkethby goddes pyne
 His men are more at his byddyng
 Then my men be at myn⁸²

["Here's a wonderfully seemly sight, I think to myself by God's suffering; his men are more at his command than my men are at mine!"]

At this moment the king is entirely in Robin's power; surrounded by the most rigorously trained soldiers he has seen. The king has been shown up by Robin's nobility and courtesy, much as the knight was earlier. Again, the act of dining is a set-piece that explores the tensions of the power situation—Robin provides the king with dinner and entertainment that challenges his sovereignty and power. It is a display that makes the king realize that he would be better off keeping Robin as an ally than making him an enemy. Guilds often invited members of the nobility to feasts in part as an attempt to draw them into their network of obligation.⁸³ In this way, Robin Hood's reversal of the power dynamic between his outlaw army and the king of England reads as wish-fulfillment fantasy that speaks to guildmembers' fantasies of entertaining and impressing a king. The fantasy continues as they put on a grand dinner, serving their monarch themselves:

Full hastily was theyr dyner I dyght
 And therto gan they gone
 They serued our kynge with al theyr myght
 Both Robyn and lytell Johan
 A none before our kynge was set
 The fatte venyson
 The good whytebrede the good rede wyne
 And thereto the fyne ale and browne⁸⁴

⁸² Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 139, lines 1543-46.

⁸³ Rosser, "Going to the Fraternity Feast," 444.

⁸⁴ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 139, lines 1547-54.

[Their dinner was prepared quickly and they went to dine. Both Robin and Little John served the king with all their might. Soon the fat venison was set before the king, along with the good white bread, the good red wine, and the fine and brown ale.]

Nevertheless, despite the impromptu courtliness of the meal, the joke is again on the king as he is served his own venison. Robin never gives up the upper hand, even in this display of dutiful servility.

The power and danger of the outlaws in these final scenes of supposed reconciliation are echoed by the guilds themselves in their grand “ridings” where guildsmen in livery, entertainers, and masquers would move en masse through the town. These ridings could and certainly did at times have a bullying quality.⁸⁵ And sure enough, in the *Geste* the king’s alliance with the outlaws is celebrated in a grand riding into the town—with the king dressed in the livery of Robin’s men. Again, one must ask: is this what Hoffman would call healthy self-parody or something else? In general, the aggression shown in the king-in-disguise section might have been more piquant than could have been comfortable. For as Meg Twycross acknowledges, “Any play dealing with power and its abuses, either by the protagonist or his advisers is potentially political.”⁸⁶ Would audiences see the irony of their wish made manifest on stage—as the cumly king and the outlaws process towards and through town (just as they did), scaring everyone in their way. Their display of power and unity thus crosses the line into bullying:

All the people of Notyngham
 They stode and be helde
 They sawe nothyng but mantels of grene
 That couered all the felde
 Than euery man to other gan say
 I drede our kynge be slone
 Come Robyn hode to the towne I wys
 On lyue he lefte neuer one
 Full hastily they be gan to fle
 Both yemen and knaues
 And olde wyues that might euyll goo⁸⁷

[All the people of Nottingham stood still and beheld them. They saw nothing but coats of green covering the whole field. Then everyone said to the other—I fear our king has been slain! If Robin comes to town, he might leave no one alive! In a panic they began to flee, both yeomen and knaves, and even old ladies who had trouble moving.]

The townspeople are legitimately terrified to see all these men in green storm their town, and the humor is ugly: even old women must hobble away as quickly as possible. Perhaps this last example of the violence lurking under the surface of the festivities and feasts in the *Geste* is the most

⁸⁵ On this bullying quality of the guilds and ridings, see McRee, “Unity or Division?,” and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, 173-74.

⁸⁶ Twycross, “Medieval English Plays,” 67.

⁸⁷ Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 143-44, lines 1687-98.

impressive because it is the cruelest to the innocent and helpless. We must pay close attention to the ramifications of its performance at a feast of brotherly love.

The Robin Hood material was not just performed in the guildhall; it infused late medieval festive life in many ways. But this short exploration of the ramifications of a guildhall performance shows us that the poet-compiler of the tales included in the *Geste* was using the outlaw material to think about manners, nobility, and power through the theme of feasting. Whether he knew that the unruly violence of feasts in the outlaw material would undermine and critique the pomp and ceremony of the guild's feasts is anyone's guess, but I like to imagine this compiler as a master craftsman who was manipulating his material to make a powerfully subversive work of art.

To conclude, I want to respond to two of the scholars who have framed our reading of the intersection between guild culture and Robin Hood material. First, Dean Hoffman noted that [t]he temporary and disingenuous playing out of a recusant fantasy through this poem by the Drapers' initiates and their mentors can thus be seen to solidify and reinstate the group identity of a fundamentally law-abiding audience, one whose participation in the cycle of work and entertainment promotes an essentially conservative agenda of respectable and materially prosperous middle-class citizenship.⁸⁸

Second, Thomas Ohlgren noted that the *Geste* records a moment of a "change in consciousness" from the courtly-knightly ideology of adventure to a new mercantile self-awareness (and self-fashioning), where the virtues—martial prowess, active risk-taking, solidarity, patriotism, and largesse—previously embodied in the landed nobility have been conserved, imitated, and adapted by the urban merchant classes, who are the producers and consumers of the early poems and plays of Robin Hood.⁸⁹

These assessments are both insightful and helpful in placing the context and the purpose of the *Geste*, but I argue that some of the violence in the poem goes beyond mere subversion and contained carnival, and if we consider the long life of the outlaw material, which has a surprising continuity, this is more like a permanent subversion or even opposition, not a brief escape that then reinforces existing power structures. I argue that the violent, parodically predatory contexts of the outlaws' feasts—so prominent in early material—cannot be ignored when we look at the *Geste*. Even though it was likely performed in a context of fraternal conviviality and protocol, and actual violence does not erupt in the *Geste*'s feasts unlike many other outlaw narratives in the English tradition, the feasts are still dangerous affairs. While others have argued that the carnivalesque qualities inherent in the poem serve only to ultimately reify the conservative worldview of the intended audience, the bloodthirstiness and violence of this poem's outlaw heritage cannot be ignored. The result is a poem that may try hard to smile, but instead bares its teeth.

⁸⁸ Hoffman, "Guildhall Minstrelsy," 132.

⁸⁹ Ohlgren, "Edwardus redivivus," 28.

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