The Fluidity of Monstrous and Chivalrous Identities in *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* and *the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*[1]

Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle ve the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle'de Canavar ve Şövalye Kimliklerinin Geçirgenliği

Ulaş ÖZGÜN[1]

[1]*Arş. Gör. Dr., Tekirdağ Namık Kemal Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Tekirdağ, uozgun@nku.edu.tr,* orcid.org/0000-0003-3565-8059

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the fluid interplay between chivalrous and monstrous identities in Arthurian romances, using a framework drawn from monster studies, theories of evil and harm, performance and postcolonial studies. Monstrosity is not an inherent ontological category but an epistemological one, acquired through repeated use of tangible and intangible signs. These signs affirm the subject's existence within a particular discourse, shaping their identity within that framework. In Arthurian romances, discursive norms are shaped by the regulatory codes of chivalry. Within this framework, monsters are figures whose transgressive actions cause unwarranted harm to chivalry, individuals, or society as a whole. This article examines the permeability of these boundaries in *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* (*c*. 1400) and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (*c*. 1500). It argues that in these stories, knights and their adversaries exist in a fluid state, constantly shifting between chivalrous and monstrous identities based on their actions in confrontations. These encounters highlight how chivalric and monstrous identities are not fixed but are shaped through performative acts. Thus, Arthurian knights risk embodying monstrosity when they engage in behaviors that deviate from, threaten, or harm the core values of the chivalric society they uphold.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Arthur romanslarında şövalye ve canavar kimlikleri arasındaki geçirgen ilişkiyi, canavar çalışmaları, kötülük ve hasar teorileri, performans ve sömürgecilik sonrası çalışmaları gibi çeşitli akademik alanlardan yararlanan metodolojik bir çerçeve kullanarak incelemektedir. Bu statü, doğuştan gelen ontolojik bir kategori değil, tekrar eden somut ve soyut göstergeler yoluyla kazanılan epistemolojik bir kategoridir. Bu göstergeler, öznenin belirli bir söylem içindeki varlığını teyit eder ve kimliğini o çerçeve içinde şekillendirir. Arthur romanslarında, normallik söylemi şövalyelik kurallarını belirleyen yapılarla çerçevelenir. Canavarlar, şövalyeliğe, başkalarına veya genel olarak topluma çeşitli biçimlerde haksız zararlar veren, kurallara aykırı eylemler gerçekleştiren varlıklardır. Makale, bu geçirgenliği *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* (yak. 1400) ve *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (yak. 1500) eserlerinde incelemektedir. Bu hikayelerde şövalyelerin ve düşmanlarının, karşılaşmaları sırasında davranışlarına göre sürekli olarak şövalye ve canavar kimlikler arasında gidip geldiği savunulmaktadır. Bu karşılaşmalar, şövalyelik ve canavar kimliklerin sabit olmadığını, edimsel eylemler aracılığıyla şekillendiğini vurgulamaktadır. Böylece Arthur şövalyeleri, şövalyelik toplumunun köklü değerlerini tehdit eden veya zarar veren davranışlarda bulunduklarında canavar figürlerine dönüşme riski taşır.

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1. Introduction

Monsters, as embodiments of humanity's deepest fears and anxieties, thrive on the boundaries of the unknown – both geographical and conceptual. These uncharted realms are teeming with monstrous figures in a multitude of shapes and forms. Since the earliest periods of history, monsters have played a significant role in shaping human imagination and cultural narratives. Besides hunting animals, monsters in animal hybrid forms adorned the cave walls of Upper Paleolithic settlers in southern France and Spain (Gilmore, 1995, p. 24). Animal hybrids were also feared as adversaries of heroes in the myths and epics of ancient civilizations around the Nile Delta, Fertile Crescent, and Indus Valley. These entities are the primary antagonists of the gods in the foundational myths of Greek and Norse mythologies, often taking the form of giants or titans. They are placed at the edges of the world maps or seas, standing at the threshold of the known world. For instance, the Old Testament monster, Leviathan, is described as "the epitome of all monsters of the sea," terrorizing the uncharted waters "just as, in the same tradition, Behemoth is the epitome of terrestrial monsters" (Williams, 1996, p. 186). Similarly, in the Abrahamic tradition – later conflated with the Hellenistic Alexander tradition from the first century A.D. onwards – the monstrous Gog and Magog are situated at the edge of the known world, beyond the northeastern Caspian Sea. They are said to be securely confined until the end of the world by the walls and iron gates erected by Alexander (Donzel and Schmidt, 2009, pp. 10–12). This fascination with monstrous figures was equally prominent during the Middle Ages, with Britain being no exception. Even a brief survey of the period's cultural legacy reveals the medieval preoccupation with diverse and fantastical bodies. Giants and dragons pervaded literary narratives, humanoid creatures inhabited the margins of manuscripts, and gargoyles and gryphons adorned the architectural landscapes of churches and other structures. Unicorns featured in heraldic symbols, while mythical beasts were engraved into armor and jewelry or woven into tapestries, serving symbolic purposes such as representing courage, ferocity, strength, or majesty.

In earlier medieval narratives, such as the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, Grendel and his mother are depicted as dwelling in a misty swamp outside domestic settlements and beneath a sea cave filled with sea serpents, which similarly underline monsters' placement on the frontiers of civilization. Accordingly, they are presented as "embodiments of evil forces, the implacable enemies of God … [and] as mortal enemies to be destroyed" (Gilmore, 1995, p. 55). The clearest link between their evil and malevolent nature is their physically aberrant dispositions. By the late twelfth century, however, the strict link between malevolence and physical deformity began to weaken. Caroline Walker Bynum describes this shift as "a quite stunning shift of intellectual paradigms" in her book *Metamorphosis and Identity* (2001, p. 25). Hence, the twelfth century marked a period in which an increasing and gradual fascination with transformation emerged, leading to a "proliferation of tales of vampires, fairies, and werewolves" (Bynum, 2001, pp. 25-26). Although Bynum predominantly focuses on Gerald of Wales's travel writings concerning Ireland and Wales, her acknowledgment of this paradigm shift remains essential. This transformation prompted medieval thinkers to entertain the idea that individuals could, either literally or symbolically, take on the characteristics of beasts or angels, thereby diminishing the link between physical difference and monstrosity (Bynum, 2001, pp. 25-26). Another popular example that underlines this preoccupation during the twelfth century is Marie de France. Her lay of *Bisclavret* (*c*. late 12th c.), for instance, explores the dissociation of monstrosity from physical disposition by focusing on the knight Bisclavret, who is trapped in a lupine body due to his treacherous wife. The lay focuses particularly on the tension between human nature and outward form. Hence, with these tales, it is observable that the focus slowly shifted to behavioral immorality and malevolence towards fellow members rather than physical abjection.

Another factor reinforcing this fluid perception of monstrous identity was the medieval understanding that biological markers did not strictly determine community identity. Robert Bartlett emphasizes this view by referencing medieval scholars like Regino of Prüm, who stated that "various nations differ in descent, customs, language, and law" (1993, p. 47). This perspective reveals the perception of communal identity as flexible and capable of change, as customs, language, and law could shift within a single lifetime. New languages could be learned, new legal systems embraced, and new customs adopted (Bartlett, 1993, p. 197). These cultural markers included practices such as social behavior, dining etiquette, hygiene habits, body modifications, clothing, armor, personal adornment, hairstyles, and grooming (Cohen, 1996, p. 17). Even descent or biological traits were seen as mutable, a perception highlighted in the Eucharist ritual, where Christians believed that "the substance of the bread and wine … changed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ" (Macy, 2003, p. 374). This fascination with change and transformation is similarly evident in romances, where characters'

physical appearances can be transformed through miracles or magic. In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*[2] (c. 1500), for instance, bodies revert to their original state when an agreed covenant is fulfilled. This convergence of body and culture illustrates the physical body's malleability, shaped by cultural, religious, and habitual performances.

This fluidity, however, results in a continuous negotiation of power between the normative and the monstrous. Monsters function as a strategic tool for reflecting on diverse nonnormative moral, political, social, religious, and economic perspectives, ultimately serving to marginalize them. Paradoxically, the very effort to define a singular standard of righteousness led to the proliferation of monstrosity, allowing for an expansive range of monstrous possibilities across behavior, culture, customs, language, diet, weaponry, clothing, and so on. The resulting interplay between the "monstrous" other and the normative self unfolds as a continuous negotiation, particularly evident at geographic and conceptual borders. This study focuses on two Arthurian romances, *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*[3] and *The Wedding*, centering around the liminal space of Scotland's northern borders.[4] These sites of cultural difference and interaction between knights and their adversaries provide a valuable lens for analyzing power dynamics, wherein the "other" is cast into an unintelligible realm of monstrosity to reinforce the dominant cultural system's values and objectives. Examining the monster reveals that labeling a particular group as monstrous is ultimately an ineffective means of establishing and securing identity. This inefficacy arises from the constant evolution of the dominant culture's norms, which are influenced by physical, political, cultural, religious, economic, and social factors. Defining normality through the lens of monstrosity establishes a binary that, as Margrit Shildrick (2002) argues, renders identity "dependent on the other for definition, in terms both of meaning and of boundaries" (p. 28). Yet, because the perception of normalcy shifts across time and space, this binary remains unstable and perpetually at risk of collapsing on one another. The monster's reliance on spatial and temporal contexts and its inherent porosity allow it to challenge and obscure rigid distinctions, thereby reinforcing its transgressive role within these constructed boundaries. Consequently, the monster "exposes[s] classificatory boundaries as fragile by always threatening to dissolve the border between other and same, nature and culture, exteriority and interiority" (Uebel, 1996, p. 266). Therefore, those labeled as monstrous others – intended to stay outside – are never permanently excluded, as borders, whether geographical or conceptual, remain susceptible to their transgression. The monster's persistent breaches of these boundaries threaten the self's perceived security and enclosure. As Uebel observes, such "interaction in the contact zone is thus always charged with ambivalence – oscillation or hesitation between extremes of attraction and repulsion, of mastery and anxiety" (2005, p. 41).

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[2] Hereafter *The Wedding*.

[3] Hereafter *Carlisle*.

[4] The Anglo-Scottish border has long served as a site for contestation and a focal point for discussions of cultural materialist alterity and identity in the Middle Ages. Critics have engaged with its complex dynamics, exploring the tensions between the knightly class and marginalized figures. For example, Joseph Taylor examines Carlisle within the framework of both central and border laws, highlighting the "negotiations between lords and kings within and across national lines, and the confused claims of territory at the Anglo-Scottish border" (2017, p. 193). The clash of the monstrous Carl and the knights symbolizes the wider national conflicts between Scotland and England. Similarly, Sarah Lindsay views the romance genre as a reflection of class tensions, emphasizing its appeal to the "gentry and merchant classes" (2015, p. 404). She argues that monstrous Carl's integration to the aristocratic court represents "the possibility of being chivalrous without exercising violence or possessing noble blood" (Lindsay, 2015, p. 404). Similarly, Sean Pollack explores the reconciliation between Carl and the Arthurian world, associating it with the increasing influence of the mercantile class, which subjected "[c]hivalry as a complex set of codes […] under continual negotiation, redefinition, and scrutiny" (2009, p. 18). Likewise, Raluca Radulescu identifies the romance as reflecting "tensions between the aspirations of the lower classes to higher social station" (2019, p. 57). L.C. Ramsey links the imposed equality between socially distinct characters in the romance to "the grace of the superior" (1983, p. 206), while Taco Brandsen views the political resolution at the story's end as a symbol of the mutual respect needed to "restore order" (1997, p. 300). Turning to *The Wedding*, Mary Leech examines how Ragnelle's grotesque body disrupts the norms of chivalric society, representing 'the uncontrolled or the feared aspects of the world outside the societal order' (2007, p. 214). Colleen Donnelly contends that the romance's burlesque elements, combined with Ragnelle's bodily and behavioral excess, express 'blatant disapproval of noble sentiments and literary modes, if not of the nobility altogether' (1997, p. 322). Finally, Sheryl L. Forstre-Grupp explores Dame Ragnelle's agency, arguing that her actions engage with 'contemporary inheritance laws and customs of primogeniture, which … denied female siblings equal rights of inheritance' (2002, p. 107). Dame Ragnelle's union with Gawain, therefore, functions as a strategic means of circumventing these societal restrictions, affirming her agency within medieval society.

In the romance tradition, monstrosity is a phenomenon shaped by liminality, with cross-cultural spaces acting as essential arenas for challenging the otherwise rigid constructs of chivalry and monstrosity. The crossing of boundaries between the known and the unknown by knights and monsters fosters encounters in which monstrosity acts as an ongoing negotiation of power, influencing the formation of both chivalric and monstrous identities. This article argues that *Carlisle* and *The Wedding* illustrate how the fixed traits and behaviors traditionally ascribed to knights and monstrous others become fluid within these contested spaces. These encounters reveal moments when Arthurian knights, by failing to uphold their own chivalric ideals, engage in actions that distance them from their cultural norms, thereby rendering them monstrous themselves. Conversely, their adversaries often display virtues not typically associated with their supposed monstrosity. Monster's ability to disrespect the boundaries is relevant in bringing together the deep chasm between the knights and their purported adversaries in the romances. The dissociation of monstrosity from physical deformity – accompanied by its recurrent association with cultural performances of chivalry or monstrosity – ultimately blurs the distinctions between knights and monsters. This fluid framework offers a deeper understanding of monstrosity and its relationship to evil, violence, and harm. Furthermore, it aligns with the medieval tradition, emerging from the twelfth century onward, of detaching monstrosity from physical divergence, emphasizing instead its performative and instantational dimensions.

2. Monster and the Collapse of the Borders

According to Richard Kearney's definition of the monster, they are "[c]reatures which hang around borders, and disrespect their [the borders'] integrity. They comprise a species of sinister miscreants exiled from the normative categories of the established system" (2002, p. 119). As liminal entities, monsters exist in a state of perpetual traversal, moving freely across both geographical and conceptual boundaries. They do not merely inhabit physical frontiers but also challenge the intellectual and cultural limits of what is deemed humanly possible. Consequently, delineating the precise contours of monstrosity is a complex endeavor that necessitates engagement with various theoretical frameworks addressing the concept of otherness. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock underlines the inherently eclectic nature of monster studies, asserting that it "is itself inevitably a kind of monster – a Frankenstein's creature assembled out of the diverse approaches and perspectives" (2014, p. 2). In conjunction with this perspective, the present study integrates a broad spectrum of scholarly contributions to construct its methodological framework and explore the parameters of monstrosity.

As is intimated, monstrosity is not simply positioned as the opposite of normality; rather, normal is inherently linked with the monstrous and contains traces of monstrosity within itself and vice versa. The interdependent relationship between the two is rooted in the poststructuralist approach to binary oppositions. The poststructuralists challenge the idea that concepts such as self and other are in a hierarchical relationship where one term is privileged over its opposite. Critiquing the inherent dichotomies created by language systems, critical theorists like Jacques Derrida, in the 1960s and 1970s, examined and deconstructed binary oppositions that elevate one term over the other. He introduced the concept of *différance* to contest the privileging of speech over writing, a key component of logocentrism. According to Derrida, *différance* "is a non-concept in that it cannot be defined in terms of oppositional predicates; it is neither this nor that; but rather this and that (e.g., that act of differing and of deferring) without being reducible to a dialectical logic either" (1982, p. 110). This concept encapsulates the idea that meaning is never fully present; instead, it emerges through an interplay of differences between signs (*differing*) and the perpetual postponement of definitive meaning (*deferring*). As Derrida argues, language does not function through fixed, stable meanings but through a system of contrasts in which words gain significance only in relation to other words. Thus, as Bildhauer and Mills (2003) explain, "language constructs meaning through difference, through contrasting one term with its other" (p. 13). However, this differential structure also means that meaning is never absolute, as it is constantly shifting within an endless chain of signifiers. By exposing this instability, *différance* dismantles the binary hierarchies that underpin Western thought, revealing the interdependence of supposedly opposed terms. Thus, poststructuralists contend that privileging one term over the other is not merely unsustainable but fundamentally unstable, as meaning is always relational and deferred. By the same token, the concept of the monster is inherently discursive, encompassing multiple, contingent meanings that emerge through the complex interplay between the monster and the normative self. The monster cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it must always "need[s] social context, a cultural milieu, a value system, or a belief system against which, and within which,

it may be perceived as aberrant" (Strickland, 2003, p. 8). This interdependence aligns with Derrida's notion of *différance*, which posits that meaning is produced through difference and is never fully present or stable. Within this porous framework, the opposition between the monstrous and the normal does not represent a fixed binary but rather a fluid dynamic in which the two terms remain interlocked, continually shaping and destabilizing each other's boundaries.

From a poststructuralist perspective, the binary relationship between chivalry and monstrosity is not only interdependent but also inherently unstable, revealing the fluid boundaries that destabilize their oppositional framework. Chivalry, as Maurice Keen explains, can be described as "an ethos in which martial, aristocratic, and Christian elements were fused together" (1984, p. 15). It served as a sociocultural lifestyle and a moral framework designed to guide knights toward virtuous behavior and societal improvement. Without this guiding code, knights were perceived as prone to sinful or deviant actions. Chivalry thus positioned itself as the normative ideal against which deviation or excess could be identified and labeled as monstrous. Monstrosity, described as excess, deviation, or lack, emerges as the shadow of chivalry – its other yet is simultaneously a reflection of what chivalry suppresses or disavows within itself. This interdependence reveals that monstrosity is not a fixed external category but a discursive construct arising from the normative ideals of chivalry. The very excesses that are projected onto the monstrous other – unrestrained violence, immorality, or divergence from the chivalric code – are latent within the chivalric self. By identifying and excluding these traits as monstrous, the normative self attempts to assert its identity, yet this act of exclusion only underscores the fragility of its boundaries. As such, monstrosity is not an external threat but an internal tension, constantly threatening to collapse the binary distinction between the self and the other. The study's argument that knights themselves embody qualities associated with monstrosity underscores this dynamic. The knights, as paragons of chivalry, are paradoxically implicated in the very behaviors they condemn in their monstrous adversaries. This alignment destabilizes the binary, as the qualities of excess, immorality, or deviation are not exclusive to one side but are shared, revealing the constructed and contingent nature of the opposition. The porousness of the boundary between chivalry and monstrosity highlights the poststructuralist notion that such oppositions are fluid and unstable, with each term constantly crossing into and redefining the other. This fluidity exposes the instability of binary oppositions, revealing that the normative self and the monstrous other are not opposites but mutually constitutive categories.

In traditional readings of medieval romances, monsters are often depicted as forces of disorder that threaten the stability of society, with knights portrayed as heroes who must restore order by defeating them. However, from a poststructuralist perspective, these binaries – such as good versus evil, order versus chaos – are not fixed or inherent but socially constructed and historically contingent. Poststructuralism destabilizes these categories by revealing how they are shaped by power relations, culture, and social context. As Campbell (2004) suggests, monsters "have to be cleared away" or "suppressed" by heroes to restore order (p. 312), but what is deemed "evil" or "harmful" is not universally defined. Instead, it varies according to societal frameworks, which means that a monster's actions, seen as disruptive, might challenge the very norms upheld by knights. Harm-based theories of evil, such as Kekes' (1990) view that "undeserved harm… becomes evil in the absence of moral justification" (p. 59), suggest that what is considered harmful or monstrous is contingent on the consequences of actions and their alignment with societal norms. The chivalric code, often considered an aspirational model for knights, can be understood as a cultural construct that serves specific power interests. From this perspective, knights who deviate from the code through harmful actions become monstrous, not because they violate some objective moral law but because they threaten the stability of the social order created by these norms. As Kekes (1990) argues, "customs, laws, rules, ceremonies, and rituals may be evil in a derivative way if conformity to or participation in them causes much undeserved harm" (p. 48). Furthermore, poststructuralism suggests that monstrosity can be a form of resistance or subversion, as monsters challenge the status quo, revealing the flaws in the systems that define normalcy. Knights themselves, though often portrayed as paragons of virtue, may also become monstrous when they perpetuate harm or uphold oppressive systems under the guise of protecting order. As Haybron (2002) points out, "[t]he motives, intentions, or feelings of the agent count only insofar as they contribute to the suffering of undeserved harms" (pp. 363-364), blurring the line between heroism and monstrosity. Thus, the distinction between heroism and monstrosity becomes blurred, as both are shown to be intertwined with the social and moral frameworks they seek to uphold

or challenge. This perspective encourages a re-examination of how narratives about knights and monsters reflect and reinforce cultural values, power dynamics, and the instability of moral categories.

3. Border Encounters and Monstrous or Chivalrous Performance

Monsters exist at the intersection of the known world and the unknown, freely crossing between realms. Their ontological liminality disrupts stable categories of existence. Monsters' freedom in crossing borders exposes the ontological fragility of the constructed identities, thereby challenging essentialist notions of identity. This challenge is driven by interactions that have the power to redefine identities, facilitating the exchange of both material and immaterial symbols. In romances, knights' ascribed qualities are scrutinized through their performative adherence to socially prescribed roles. These transgressive encounters necessitate contact and engagement with the monstrous other, serving as a critical means of testing and reaffirming chivalric identity. One such location is the forest, which, according to Azime Pekşen Yakar, "is an arena for testing and reaffirming the chivalric prowess of the knight" (2019 pp. 83-84). In *Carlisle* and *The Wedding*, forests serve as critical points of contact where knights and their adversaries can meet. Unknown terrains like forests and wildernesses "imply an absence of culture within them, seeming almost to invite the conqueror's apparently civilizing impulse" (Ingham, 2001, p. 118). Traditionally viewed as hostile, untamed wildernesses that expose knights to danger, forests are often considered dangerous spaces that stand in stark contrast to the safe and enclosed environment of Arthur's court. Naomi Reed Kline (2002) explores the prevailing medieval understanding of nature: "In the Middle Ages, nature was feared; the uncontrollable wilderness or barren loomed frightening against the security of the enclosed" (2003, p. 182). Inglewood, an unexplored forest "located in the middle of the Anglo-Scottish marches" (Jansen, 1995, p. 26), serves as the setting for both *The Wedding* and *Carlisle*. Initially, the woodlands in these texts reinforce a sense of ominous, archetypal primitivity that suggests danger. In *The Wedding*, Sir Gromer ambushes the unarmed Arthur in Inglewood and threatens with death: "Thou [Arthur] hast me done wrong many a yere / And woefully I shall quytte the here;" (lines 54-55). In *Carlisle*, Gawain, Baldwin, and Kay got lost in a dense mist, which causes them to seek refuge at the house of the supposedly monstrous Carl, rather than face the danger of spending the night outdoors (line 151). A closer analysis of these encounters in the forest reveals that woodlands do not function as spaces of fixed identities; rather, they constitute liminal zones where identities remain fluid, multifaceted, and interconnected. Rather than directly challenging the court, the forest contrasts with it, serving as a space of freedom where diversity, rebellion, and reversal can emerge. The place is not simply a setting where the knight comes across monstrosity through figures marked by physical or moral deformity; instead, roles within this space are subject to significant transformations, with the knight himself potentially embodying or performing monstrosity. Consequently, the Arthurian court and the woodlands in *Carlisle* and *The Wedding*, perceived as distinct from one another, are, in fact, permeable. The crossing of these boundaries highlights the instability of binaries, showing that the seemingly separate identities of the knights are closely connected to those deemed monstrous, thus emphasizing the fluid connection between monstrosity and chivalry.

The Wedding starts in the forest of Inglewood, where Sir Gromer ambushes Arthur, driven by a desire for personal revenge. Sir Gromer is initially portrayed as "the traditional monstrous churl by his great strength and by his rude address to King Arthur" (Ramsey, 1983, p. 205). However, Arthur's interaction with Sir Gromer quickly reveals that monstrous behavior is not confined to Sir Gromer alone. Sir Gromer presents himself as a dispossessed knight, claiming that his lands were unjustly seized and granted to Gawain by Arthur (*The Wedding*, lines 55-60). Along with the eventual restoration of Sir Gromer's lands at the end of the romance (*The Wedding*, line 814), Arthur's clear reluctance to acknowledge or address Sir Gromer's grievances, along with Sir Gromer's determination to retaliate by attempting to kill Arthur, all imply that his claims may possess a degree of legitimacy. Warren Brown (2012) provides a detailed examination of the unlawful appropriation of land and property by the church, landowners, and regional lords during the Middle Ages, emphasizing the repercussions of these actions across various literary genres, including romances (Introduction, pp. 1-29). Hence, Legally speaking, the confiscation of land by a king constitutes a violation of an individual's inheritance rights. Despite his sovereignty, Arthur is not in a position to "distribute estates and titles at his whim to whomever he wished …. Beginning in the twelfth century, *ius commune* [common law] protected an individual's rights to hold property, so that a king could not expropriate property arbitrarily" (Forste-Grupp, 2007, p. 109). Therefore, Arthur's behavior is monstrous in its imposition of severe economic hardship on Sir

Gromer by stripping him of his identity, rights, property, and social status without just cause. Consequently, Sir Gromer becomes an outcast, leading him to seek refuge and redefine his identity within the fluid, uncharted spaces of Inglewood's forests.

Furthermore, the woodland serves as the only feasible setting for Sir Gromer to confront Arthur directly, free from external interference or diplomatic constraints. As previously discussed, Inglewood's association with freedom closely aligns with Bhabha's (1994) concept of an "in-between space that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Introduction, p. 5). This interstitial space allows Sir Gromer to execute his plan to kill Arthur. In desperation, Arthur implores Sir Gromer to uphold the knightly tradition of sparing an unarmed opponent, protesting, "Shame thou shalt have to sle me in veneré, / Thou armyd and I clothyd butt in grene, perdé" (*The Wedding*, lines 82-83). He relies on Sir Gromer's adherence to chivalric customs, particularly the expectation of mercy towards a defenseless knight. In response, Sir Gromer offers Arthur an alternative: rather than killing him outright, he grants him a reprieve on the condition that he return within a year with the answer to the question, "whate wemen love best in feld and town" (*The Wedding*, line 90).

Although Arthur initially agrees to keep the covenant secret, he soon reveals his predicament to Gawain (The Wedding, lines 152-172). This breach of his promise demonstrates that when chivalric principles do not serve his interests, Arthur does not hesitate to disregard them. However, verbal commitments hold considerable moral weight, particularly in relation to the chivalric ideal of truthfulness. As Colleen Donnelly (1999) observes, romance narratives frequently incorporate "performative speech acts (promises and warnings) which, by their very utterance, accomplish the very act to which they refer." (p. 330). The term "performative" originates from J.L. Austin's speech act theory, introduced in *How to Do Things with Words* (1955). Austin defines performative utterances as statements that do not merely describe reality but actively shape it – such as "I now pronounce you husband and wife," an utterance that enacts what it declares (Livia and Hall, 1997, p. 11). These utterances derive their meaning from a collectively accepted contextual framework. As Susan Crane explains in her discussion of marriage proclamations, "Proclamation at a wedding marries people not because it is a totally self-generated assertion of will but because it reiterates a convention within a ritual framework that people generally accept as accomplishing marriage" (2012, p. 3). In the medieval world, where illiteracy and oral tradition still encapsulated a large segment of society, verbal bond as a type of performative speech act traditionally bound the relevant parties to one another by virtue of mutual trust. Consequently, any violation of this bond signified either party's alignment with harm and, by extension, monstrosity. Besides the agreement between Arthur and Sir Gromer, two additional covenants are made: Sir Gawain promises to assist Arthur in finding the correct answer (*The Wedding*, lines 186-188); Dame Ragnelle promises to reveal what women most desire if "[t]hou [Arthur] must graunt me a knight to wed: / His name is Sir Gawen. / And such covenaunt I wolle make the" (*The Wedding*, lines 280-282). In her interaction with Arthur, she describes herself as a woman "[t]hat nevere yet begylyd man'" (*The Wedding*, line 320), underscoring her commitment to the virtue of truthfulness. She proves her sincerity by disclosing that women desire sovereignty: "desyren of men above alle maner thyng / To have the sovereynté, withoute lesyng" (*The Wedding*, lines 422-423). Sir Gawain has also vowed to marry Dame Ragnelle, despite the uncertainty surrounding the truth of her answer. Among the four characters, Arthur stands alone in breaking a verbal covenant for personal benefit. His breach of commitment and his admission to Gawain in *The Wedding* cannot be dismissed as a mere narrative device to advance the quest. During Arthur and Gawain's unsuccessful search for the correct answer (*The Wedding*, lines 184–225), Arthur meets Dame Ragnelle in Inglewood, where he accepts her demand that Gawain marry her in exchange for the knowledge he seeks. He does so without first consulting Gawain, revealing his self-serving nature: "'Alas!' he [Arthur] sayd; 'Nowe woo is me / That I shold cause Gawen to wed the, / For he wol be lothe to saye naye" (*The Wedding*, lines 303–305). Arthur acknowledges the ethical significance of breaking a verbal promise, lamenting to Gawain, "Alas! My worshypp [honour] therfor is nowe gone" (*The Wedding*, line 162). These actions highlight Arthur's morally questionable character, rather than simply serving as a plot device. In this context, Inglewood functions as both the origin of Arthur's dilemma and the setting for its resolution, symbolizing both risk and opportunity as a liminal space.

In his exploration of performative acts, Erving Goffman conceptualizes human interactions as performances involving key components such as setting, appearance, manner, and front –"the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (1956, p. 13). This framework broadens the scope of performance, extending it beyond formalized events to the everyday

interactions of individuals. However, Goffman does not imply that individuals are perpetually assuming false personas. Ian Hacking builds upon this idea, emphasizing the complex relationship between the agent and the role they perform, which evolves over time: "Throughout Goffman's work the idea of role is central … The roles are not gliding surfaces that conceal the true person. The roles become aspects of the person, some more owned, some more resented, but always an evolving side of what the person is" (2004, p. 290). In this way, the intersection of performative speech acts and social roles plays a critical role in the formation of identity, not only through external conventions but also as essential components of both individual and collective existence. The knights' deviation from chivalric principles leads them to embody the very qualities they seek to evade. In this context, Inglewood again plays a pivotal role in the *Carlisle*, challenging conventional notions of monstrosity by revealing instances of monstrous behavior among Arthurian knights. At the very beginning of the romance, Arthur and his retinue slaughters "Fyfe hundred der" (*Carlisle*, line 113) in Inglewood during a hunting session. Even by the exaggerated standards of romance, killing so many deer breaches established hunting practices (Pollack, 2016, p. 16). Overhunting becomes a monstrous act, representing an incursion of local landowners' rights and the welfare of the deer population itself (Pollack, 2016, p. 16). Thus, the court's hunting expedition reveals their aggression, unchecked violence, and self-centeredness, rendering them monstrous.

Inglewood also houses the Carl, a figure reputed to be monstrous, whose castle resembles the court of a noble. The Carl's aristocratic setting and sinister reputation encapsulate the duality of the woodland as a space of both danger and complexity. Lost within Inglewood and unable to return, Gawain, Baldwin, and Kay seek shelter in the castle of the Carl. Baldwin warns that the Carl is notorious for beating his guests to death (*Carlisle*, lines 148–150). Through this characterization, Inglewood immediately introduces a sense of danger for the knights. However, as the romance unfolds, the Carl is revealed as a moral man who condemns deceit and values goodwill and honesty – qualities he calls "carllus corttessy" (*Carlisle*, line 278). His straightforward moral code prioritizes honesty over feigned politeness, illustrating the depth and ambiguity of Inglewood's symbolic role in these romances.

Despite the Carl's fearsome reputation, it is Kay, one of the knights, who suggests that if they are not granted entry, they should use the "kyngus keyis" (*Carlisle*, line 203) – a euphemistic expression signifying a forced entry with weapons (Pollack, 2016, p. 17). This threat of using violence to enter a space where they seek shelter is a blatant transgression of courtesy. Such an act would be considered monstrous, as it involves intruding into an area from which they have been deliberately excluded, thereby disrupting the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Kay's suggestion to forcibly enter, invoking royal authority, reflects his misunderstanding of Inglewood as being within Arthur's domain. This misinterpretation implies a sense of entitlement, which he believes justifies the resort to violence in order to breach the castle's defenses: "And yeyf he be never so stoute, / Suche as he brewythe, seche schall he drenke; / He schall be bette that he schall stynke, / And agenst his wyll be thar" (*Carlisle*, lines 157, 161-162). This analysis highlights how actions that result in either harm or benefit function as markers of ethical boundaries, shaping distinctions between inclusion and exclusion, obedience and transgression, vanity and charity, moderation and excess, as well as the broader dichotomy between the acceptable and the prohibited. The ensuing tension emerges from the conflict between opposing forces vying for dominance along these geographical and conceptual borders.

The idea of beauty and physical normalcy also embodies a contested boundary. As Robert Olsen and Karin Olsen (2009) note, medieval perceptions often equated physical deviations from the European human norm with an immediate and overt sign of moral deviance (Introduction, pp. 8-9). However, when compared to the classical and Renaissance periods, medieval perceptions of beauty are characterized by a different emphasis: it is not primarily focused on proportion and harmony. Referring to Aquinas, Umberto Eco (2004) explains that the medieval view of beauty centers on active conformity to the integrity of a thing's form. To illustrate this with an example, Aquinas argues that a crystal hammer would be ugly because "the thing would have appeared unsuited to its proper function" (p. 88). There should be a correspondence between form and function. This is where many of the Arthurian knights in both romances fall short. They place excessive importance on outward appearance without considering the inner qualities or true purpose. This perspective is evident in how many knights react to the physical differences of those outside the Arthurian court in both of the romances. Thus, physical deviations act as a critique of the Arthurian knights' inclination to link monstrous behavior with individuals whose physical traits differ from conventional aesthetic ideals. Traditionally, such ideals have encompassed characteristics like fair skin, symmetrical facial and bodily proportions, and an overall sense of cleanliness.[5]

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[5] Da Soller, C. (2010). *Beauty, evolution, and medieval literature* (pp. 105-106), on qualities of feminine beauty.

In the romances, the knights' initial reactions of fear or revulsion toward the physical differences of the Carl and Dame Ragnelle emphasize their divergence from conventional beauty standards. In *Carlisle*, for instance, during their initial encounter at the Carl's castle, Gawain, Kay, and Baldwin are immediately taken aback by his enormous size. The narrator describes him as "two tayllors yardus a brede...Nine taylloris yerdus he was hyghtht / And therto leggus longe and wyghtht" (*Carlisle*, lines 257, 259-260), emphasizing his overwhelming size. He has a broad face (*Carlisle*, line 250), a large mouth (*Carlisle*, line 253), and legs that are "thycker" (*Carlisle*, line 264), with arms and fingers that are "gret" (*Carlisle*, lines 265-266). The knights observe in astonishment as the Carl drinks from "a cope of golde - / Nine gallons hit gane holde" (Carlisle, lines 292-293). His immense stature evokes a sense of amazement, fear, and intimidation in the knights, as it signifies "superior strength; which translates into the power advantage in confrontations" (Gilmore, 2012, p. 176). The Carl's formidable presence leaves little room for restraint, and his ferocity is further emphasized by the company of wild beasts – a bull, a boar, a bear, and a lion – whose presence heightens the atmosphere of peril (Carlisle, lines 224-236). Radulescu (2013) observes that the depictions of these household animals evoke the Carl's untamed nature: "All of them are bold, ferocious animals, whose descriptions induce terror" (p. 63). The narrator intensifies the sense of dread with the phrase, "He *semyd* a dredfull man" (*Carlisle*, line 249, emphasis added), suggesting that the Carl appears threatening. While he ultimately proves reasonable, his initial portrayal as a formidable figure highlights the tension between his intimidating appearance and his true character.

Physical divergence can also elicit feelings of abhorrence, as demonstrated in the encounter between Arthur and Dame Ragnelle in *The Wedding*. The narrator emphasizes her bodily excess in a manner that appears designed to repel both Arthur and the reader. Dame Ragnelle is depicted with a "red" face (*The Wedding*, line 231) and a "mowithe wyde" (*The Wedding*, line 232); her "yalowe" teeth (*The Wedding*, line 232) protrude from her "lyppes" (*The Wedding*, line 235), and she has a hunch "upon her bak" (*The Wedding*, line 237). Leech (2015) characterizes Ragnelle's physical features as being "misshapen and sagging body of the Bakhtinian grotesque," which reveals "what is usually hidden in the body – its interior – and in so doing challenges the boundaries of the body and the society from which that body emerges" (p. 214). Every aspect of Dame Ragnelle's physical appearance subverts the idealized proportions of feminine beauty traditionally upheld in the romance genre. In stark contrast to the slender, controlled, and seemingly unattainable body of romance heroines, Dame Ragnelle's grotesque form is exaggerated, sagging, and conspicuously displayed. She is described as possessing a "snotyd" nose (The Wedding, line 231), further emphasizing her deviation from conventional aesthetic ideals. "chekys syde as wemens hippes" (*The Wedding*, line 236), and "Hangygn pappys to be an hors lode" (*The Wedding*, line 241). Her transgressive body grants her a unique agency that enables her to challenge patriarchal feudal norms. As Beamer (2018) observes, Dame Ragnelle utilizes "her status as a loathsome creature to bypass assigned gender roles and wields it as a weapon" (p. 43), allowing her to pursue her will, such as marrying Gawain. Her corporeal difference affords her the agency to transcend the conventional role of the damsel in distress, allowing her to redefine notions of femininity on her own terms. This deviation from the norm ultimately enables her to form a union with Gawain, despite her seemingly unappealing appearance.

Noël Carroll (2002) describes this kind of discrepancy or "impurity," which "involves a conflict between two or more standing cultural categories," as "categorical contradictoriness" (p. 137). These contradictions elicit intense emotional responses, including disgust, horror, and fascination, which are evident in Arthur's reactions: "So foulle a Lady as ye ar nowe one / Sawe I nevere in my lyfe on ground gone; I nott whate I do may' (*The Wedding*, lines 306-308). Carroll's idea of "categorical contradictoriness" strongly resonates with Kristeva's (1982) concept of the abject, which she defines as something that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). Positioned between the boundaries of self, or subject, and other, or object, are fragmented parts that were once integral to the subject but have since been cast away. These liminal elements blur the distinctions between what is internal and external, self and other. Dame Ragnelle's dripping nose (*The Wedding*, line 231), protruding yellow teeth (*The Wedding*, lines 232, 235-236), and hunched posture (*The Wedding*, line 237) embody the abject, transgressing the body's normative boundaries. Her abject form thus evokes "great shame" (*The Wedding*, line 515) in Arthur upon her entrance into the court. Moreover, "Alle the contraye had wonder greatt / Fro when she com, that foule unswete;" (*The Wedding*, lines 521-522), and all the ladies "in her bower, / And wept for Sir Gawen" (*The Wedding*, lines 543-544). The court's reaction reveals a shallow association of moral worth with physical attractiveness.

Dame Ragnelle's body encapsulates a blend of cultural symbols. She is initially portrayed riding "a palfray was gay begon, / With gold beset and many a precious stone" (*The Wedding*, lines 246-247). Despite her grotesque appearance, her affluence is hinted at through her wedding dress, which costs more than "thre thowsand mark" (*The Wedding*, line 592) and is "fresher than Dame Gaynour" (line 591). When she introduces herself, she uses the title "Dame Ragnelle" (*The Wedding*, line 319) and calls herself "a Lady" (*The Wedding*, line 317) in her initial encounter with King Arthur. This romance stands out among its peers, as it "is the only one of the three versions in which the hag is named. She is not only named; her station is made known almost immediately" (Donnelly, 2007, p. 328). Her noble lineage and naming, combined with her assertive actions challenging feudal patriarchy, enhance her importance in the poem despite her initial marginalization. Hahn (2014) argues that "[t]hrough her relations with the various male characters – her kinship with Gromer, her compact with Arthur, her union with Gawain – Ragnelle literally holds the poem together, for she is their link with each other" (p. 43). It is Ragnelle who provides Arthur with the solution to his dilemma, ensures her desire to marry Gawain is fulfilled, and reconciles her brother, Sir Gromer, with Arthur's court.

Though Ragnelle claims the status of a lady, her disregard for table manners at her wedding feast shocks the Arthurian court members. Bornstein (1983) provides extensive research on medieval codes of feminine conduct in her book *The Lady in the Tower*. In *Chastoiement des dames* (late 13th century), Robert of Blois instructs women to "not eat or drink too much. … When drinking, she [a woman] should wipe her mouth so as not to get grease on the cup. She should not get her hands greasy" (pp. 59-60). Moderation and refinement are the principal virtues expected during meals. However, Ragnelle's description portrays her repulsively: she has nails "long ynchys thre" (*Carlisle*, line 607), eats with her hands, and has an insatiable appetite, "She ete as moche as six that ther wore; / That mervaylyd many a man … / Therwith she breke her mete ungoodly" (*Carlisle*, lines 605-06, 608). Her grotesque method of consuming meat violates customary etiquette, leading her to dine alone: "Therfore she ete alone" (*Carlisle*, line 609).

Carter (2003) compares Ragnelle's table manners to Chaucer's Prioress, who "exemplified well-performed femininity in her fastidious care [sic] avoidance of morsels falling from her lips, drops on her breast, or grease rings in her drink" (p. 39n30). However, the court's lack of empathy and overt disapproval of Ragnelle's relatively harmless breach of etiquette causes her isolation on her wedding day. In contrast, Gawain distinguishes himself with his careful manners, treating Dame Ragnelle with respect despite her deformed appearance and lack of decorum, which Ragnelle acknowledges: "'For thy sake I wold I were a fayre woman, / For thou art of so good wylle'" (*Carlisle*, lines 537-38). This comment subtly hints at her eventual transformation by the story's end. Thus, the wedding scene functions as a liminal space where the polarities between the Arthurian world and Dame Ragnelle are highlighted. Gawain's actions help bridge the gap between Dame Ragnelle and the Arthurian court, suggesting the possibility of eventual reconciliation between the two.

Likewise, the Carl is depicted as a wealthy, regional, non-noble character, possessing sufficient resources to live opulently like a powerful lord (*Carlisle*, lines 291, 421-22). He is portrayed as an enigmatic and ambivalent figure with contradictory identity markers. Although a giant, he has a wife and daughter who fit the typical depictions of romance heroines. His wife is described with "Her armus small, her mydyll gent, / Her yghen grey, her browus bente; / Of curttessy sche was perfette" (*Carlisle*, lines 364-66), while his daughter is "feyr and bright" (*Carlisle*, line 417). He keeps wild animals on his estate, symbolizing his untamed nature, yet he serves food and drink in gold cups and plates (*Carlisle*, lines 609-10) and has "Trompettys trompid" (*Carlisle*, line 613) before meals, as would befit a noble. He tells Gawain, Kay, and Baldwin that he disdains chivalric courtesy: "For her no corttessy thou schalt have" (*Carlisle*, line 277). Yet he seems to orchestrate an elaborate scheme to become part of the Arthurian court as the lord of "[t]he contré of Carelyle" (*Carlisle*, line 629). His plan involves urging Gawain to spend a night with his daughter (*Carlisle*, lines 475-80), inviting Gawain to marry her (*Carlisle*, line 565), and asking Gawain to bring Arthur to a feast (*Carlisle*, lines 589-90). Furthermore, the Carl's residence near Inglewood and his control over wild animals highlight his dominance over nature in the area, which Arthur unknowingly tries to extend his royal authority over by arranging a hunting expedition at the romance's beginning (*Carlisle*, lines 29-123). However, the power negotiation in this contested space implies that expansion is not as straightforward as it seems: "In the Carl's domain, Arthur's knights find themselves as much prey as hunters" (Taylor, 2003, p. 188).

The Carl meticulously devises tests for the Arthurian knights to assess their moral integrity. The initial test reveals how the identities of monstrous and chivalrous figures can shift based on their choices, whether commendable or detrimental. This test focuses on charity. Following the initial offering of drinks, the knights step outside to check on their horses one by one. Baldwin observes that his horse is caught in the rain while a foal is sheltered. He decides to swap their positions, rationalizing his choice by stating, "'Thow schalt not be fello wytt my palfray / Whyll I am beschope in londe'" (*Carlisle*, lines 305-06). The act of removing the foal simply because it does not deserve to stay next to Baldwin's horse exemplifies his vanity. This action reveals Baldwin's unwarranted disdain and disrespect for the Carl's property. His claim to be a bishop only worsens the situation, as vanity is regarded as one of the gravest sins, particularly for bishops. Furthermore, Baldwin fails to recognize the vanity inherent in his actions, openly admitting to the Carl that he is the one who has displaced the foal (*Carlisle*, line 309). In response, the Carl proclaims, "Therfor a bofett thou schalt have" (*Carlisle*, line 310). Despite Baldwin's protests, citing his status as "a Clarke of ordors hyghe" (*Carlisle*, line 313), he cannot avoid receiving a blow to the head that renders him unconscious (*Carlisle*, lines 316-18).

Similarly, Kay proceeds to force the foal out: "Out att the dor he drof hym out / And on the backe yafe hym a clout" (*Carlisle*, lines 322-23). The Carl immediately appears and labels Kay as "Evyll-taught" (*Carlisle*, line 328), striking him down. The Carl's characterization of the knights as "Evyll-taught" (*Carlisle*, line 328) underscores the socially constructed nature of evil. This epithet also "implies his [the Carl's] frustrations with Arthur as their apparent 'teacher'" (Taylor, 2003, p. 189). The monstrosity exhibited by Baldwin and Kay is rooted in their inflated self-esteem and their blatant disregard for anyone or anything they consider inferior to their social standing. As Lindsay points out, "using chivalry to build beneficial relationships, Kay and Baldwin assume that their noble status excuses them from interacting harmoniously with those outside the noble world. They seem to view themselves as innately chivalrous but under no obligation to exercise that chivalry beyond noble circles" (p. 410). In contrast, Gawain's attitude towards the foal differs significantly from that of his fellow knights. When he notices the foal, Gawain takes a protective and helpful stance. Recognizing that "the foll had stond in rayne" (*Carlisle*, line 346), he brings it into the stable and drapes "his manttell of grene" (*Carlisle*, line 348) over it. His actions do not favor anyone or anything at the expense of others; instead, he adopts an inclusive approach that benefits all.

At this moment, the Carl's understanding of traditional courteous behavior becomes evident as he discreetly observes Gawain and "thankyd hym full curtteslye" (*Carlisle*, line 353) for his thoughtful actions. Baldwin and Kay's supremacist attitudes continue to manifest throughout the feast. Baldwin considers himself the most honorable guest and takes the first seat without invitation, while Kay "sett on the tother syde / Agenst the Carllus wife so full of pryde" (*Carlisle*, line 362). When Kay sits beside the lady of the house, he even lusts after her, lamenting, "'Alas,' thought Kay, 'thou Lady fre, / That thou schuldyst this ipereschde be / Wytt seche a foulle weghtht!'" (*Carlisle*, lines 373-75). This discreet remark reflects his unchecked lechery and blatant disrespect. The monstrosity displayed by Baldwin and Kay is evident in their assumed sense of superiority and disdain for anyone or anything they perceive as beneath them. As Lindsay (2007) states, "using chivalry to build beneficial relationships, Kay and Baldwin assume that their noble status excuses them from interacting harmoniously with those outside the noble world. They seem to view themselves as innately chivalrous but under no obligation to exercise that chivalry beyond noble circles" (p. 410). In contrast, Gawain's attitude towards the foal stands in stark contrast to that of his fellow knights. Gawain takes a protective and helpful stance when he notices the foal. Realizing that "the foll had stond in rayne" (*Carlisle*, line 346), he brings it into the stable and covers it with "his manttell of grene" (*Carlisle*, line 348). His actions do not favor one party at the expense of another; instead, he adopts an inclusive approach that benefits everyone. At this moment, the Carl's awareness of traditional courteous behavior is evident as he quietly observes Gawain and "thankyd hym full curtteslye" (*Carlisle*, line 353) for his considerate actions. Baldwin and Kay's supremacist attitudes continue to be evident throughout the feast. Baldwin assumes himself the most honorable guest and takes the first seat without invitation, while Kay "sett on the tother syde / Agenst the Carllus wife so full of pryde" (*Carlisle*, lines 362). Seated next to the lady of the house, Kay even lusts after her and laments, "'Alas,' thought Key, 'thou Lady fre, / That thou schuldyst this ipereschde be / Wytt seche a foulle weghtht!'" (*Carlisle*, lines 373-75). Kay's discreet remark reveals his unchecked lechery and blatant discourtesy. Irritated by Kay's behavior, the Carl reprimands him: "'Sytt styll, … and eete thy mette / Thow thinkost mor then thou darst speke," (*Carlisle*, lines 376-77). As Taylor observes, at this point, "the Carl equates them [Kay and Baldwin]

with beasts … much as he told his whelps shortly before to 'Ly style, hard yn' (241)" (p. 197). The two knights' indulgence in their base urges exemplifies their monstrosity, contrasting with Gawain's polite conduct as he waits in the hall until invited to the table (*Carlisle*, lines 380-81).

The Carl's second test highlights the relational nature of monstrosity. This test involves obedience to the host, as the Carl asks Gawain to throw a spear at him: "take a sper in thy honde / And at the bottredor goo take thy passe / And hit me evyn in the face;" (*Carlisle*, lines 384-86). Although unusual, Gawain's compliance might seem monstrous due to the potential harm to the Carl. However, as a guest, Gawain should trust his host's reasoning and comply with his request. Wright (2001) praises Gawain's perceptiveness, noting that "Gawain's excellence consists … in his Odyssean ethical relativism, his ability to recognize and adopt whatever code of conduct best suits the circumstances" (p. 657). Gawain is set apart from Baldwin and Kay by his understanding that they face an unfamiliar code of conduct requiring adaptation. In contrast, Baldwin and Kay respond with a rigid adherence to traditional norms, preventing harmonious relations. When Gawain throws the spear, the Carl calmly bows "his hede, that syre, / Tyll he hade geve his dentte" (*Carlisle*, lines 395-96) and thanks Gawain for following his instructions (*Carlisle*, line 401). Thus, Gawain avoids monstrosity in the second test as well. The narrator, however, subtly emphasizes Gawain's eagerness, "Syr Gawenn was a glade mann wytt that" (*Carlisle*, line 391), and the intensity of his throw: "He yafe the ston wall seche a rappe / That the goode sper all tobrake" (*Carlisle*, lines 397-98). Unlike his companions, Gawain channels his inner wildness into the non-harmful action of throwing the spear.

The third test also involves obedience to the host and tests Gawain's virtue of restraint. It takes the form of a classic bedroom temptation scene, though somewhat vulgar and crude. Sir Gawain is "unarmyde" (*Carlisle*, line 452) and is asked to "take my [the Carl's] wife in thi armus tweyne / And kys her in my syghte" (*Carlisle*, lines 455-56). The Carl is fully in control of the situation and appears to take voyeuristic pleasure in it (*Carlisle*, lines 455-68). While Gawain has previously displayed restraint in matters of courtesy, now "the passions of the flesh … are at stake," and he fails noticeably "as he seems to have succumbed to his fleshly desires both in his adoring/lustful gaze at the Carl's wife and subsequent unbridled enthusiasm for the awkward test of getting into bed with her" (Radulescu, 2020, p. 67). Gawain readily accepts the request: "'Syr, thi byddynge schall be doune, / Sertaynly in dede, / Kyll or sley, or laye adoune'" (*Carlisle*, lines 458-60). He completes the third test by obeying the Carl's request but fails to restrain his desire for sexual relations with the Carl's wife. The Carl intervenes, adopting the tone he usually reserves for addressing his animals: "When Gawen wolde have doun the prevey far, / Then seyd the Carle, 'Whoo ther! / That game I the forbade" (*Carlisle*, lines 466-68). In this moment, Gawain, too, is reduced to the status of the Carl's animals due to his brief lapse into animalistic desires. His lust jeopardizes the honor of the Carl's wife, an act that would be monstrous were it not for the Carl's intervention. Nonetheless, the Carl acknowledges Gawain's efforts and, as a consolation, grants him permission to visit his daughter's room, "And play togeydor all this nyght" (*Carlisle*, line 486). According to Taylor (2017), this is "a cannily Arthurian move" on the Carl's part, as "[h]aving baited the knight with sex through his wife, the Carl now hopes Gawain will proffer a new line of carls ripened with the blood of both the borderlands and Arthur's centralized regime" (p. 198). The Carl's eventual entry into Arthurian society validates his scheme and underscores the insignificance of physical divergence in attaining acceptance in the Arthurian court.

The Carl's ultimate integration into Arthurian society is both surprising and noteworthy, as chivalry was traditionally seen as "an ethic [which] was at once Christian and martial and aristocratic. Its elitist social and martial overtones undoubtedly contributed much to its enduring force, at least as much as the Christian sanction that it had acquired in an earlier age" (Keen, 2003, p. 117). Despite his different corporeality and lineage, the Carl's inclusion at the end of the romance signals an alternative perspective on chivalry represented by figures like Ramon Llull. In his famous treatise *Book of the Order of Chivalry* (13th c.), Llull (2015) highlights the performative nature of chivalry, emphasizing that knights should act as instruments of social welfare, beneficence, and justice. Externally, they might be "maid knychtis of þe most persones" or be given the "moost noble beeste / and the beste / the most noble armures" (pp. 18-19). However, "gif þow be wikit, þow art enemy of cheualry and art contrary to his commandmentis & honouris" (p. 18). Llull's treatise aligns with *Carlisle* and *The Wedding* in suggesting that virtuous and worthy behavior is chivalric, while wicked and harmful behavior is monstrous. In this context, Sean Pollack (2009) observes that "[c]hivalry as a complex set of codes was under continual negotiation, redefinition, and scrutiny, but the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in England

saw an increase in literary productions that actually debated the meaning of chivalry" (p. 18). *The Wedding* and *Carlisle* are among these texts, exploring the ancestral relationship through the lens of chivalry and monstrosity as discursive constructs understood through demonstrations of merit and vice. The Carl proposes a moral code that bypasses chivalric courtesy as the central quality for noble social relations. He views courtesy as encouraging pretentiousness, thus negating the virtue of truth, associating it with insincere flattery. He believes flattery is motivated by self-interest. For instance, when the three knights arrive at the Carl's castle, they courteously kneel before him, hoping to secure lodging and avoid offending the reputedly monstrous figure. However, just before this scene, Kay considers attacking the Carl and breaking into his castle without permission: "He schall be bette that he schall stynke, / And agenst his wyll be thar" (*Carlisle*, lines 161-62). Thus, the Carl justifiably dismisses their seemingly graceful gesture as hypocritical, ordering them to "stond upe anon" (*Carlisle*, line 273). To him, courteous behavior is ambiguous due to its potential for deceit and the difficulty of discerning genuine intent. Instead, his conception of courtesy, based on mutual and immediate benefit for both parties, yields beneficial and concrete results. As Lindsay (2015) notes, the Carl adopts this "socially beneficial code of conduct [because] it allows for social mobility and mutually satisfactory relationship for anyone who has a desire … to participate in the chivalrous community" (p. 405). Consequently, the Carl provides the knights with shelter out of necessity, while coincidentally needing it himself to break a curse that can only be lifted through a series of tests. The Carl's admission into the chivalric community represents a mutually beneficial and rational "political bargain between two classes of society, the nobility, and the commoners. It expresses a commitment by each party to respect the other's rights and thereby to restore order" (Brandsen, 1997, p. 299). The harmony between the "monstrous" Carl and the Arthurian court is made possible by the fluid portrayal of identity. Accordingly, the Carl pledges to "forsake my [his] wyckyd lawys; / Ther schall no mo men her be slawe, iwys" (*Carlisle*, lines 541-42).

The Carl's movement across social hierarchies finds a parallel in Ragnelle's journey. Through her connections and personal agency, Ragnelle gains the freedom to defy the restrictive norms of the patriarchal feudal system. Over the course of the romance, she transitions both literally and metaphorically from the margins – Inglewood – to the center – the Arthurian court. This movement highlights the actual permeability of the supposed boundaries of femininity and masculinity, achieved through her actions. In doing so, Ragnelle disrupts the passive gender roles typically ascribed to women in the medieval period. At first glance, her later declaration of obedience might seem contradictory; at the end, Ragnelle vows that she "shal be obaysaunt; / To God above I [she] shalle itt warraunt, / And nevere with you to debate" (*The Wedding*, lines 784-86). However, this is not a surrender but rather a "social bargain" (Ramsey, 1983, p. 207). Similarly, King Arthur restores the lands that Sir Gromer claims were unjustly taken from him (*The Wedding*, lines 814-15), in return for Gromer's loyalty and service as a vassal. Thus, true sovereignty is not about unrestricted freedom but about a balanced respect for different realms of authority and expertise.

4. Conclusion

These romances explore the knights and their alleged adversaries in *Carlisle* and *The Wedding* as being in a fluid state of becoming either monstrous or chivalrous, determined by their borderland encounters. Their affiliation with either category is renegotiated by examining their actions, which may or may not endanger their communities. In *Carlisle* and *The Wedding*, the somatic differences between the knights' adversaries are not presented as the primary indicators of monstrosity. Physical distinctions, which may elicit wonder or revulsion, are instead depicted as failures of the knight's incomplete adherence to chivalric virtues. Rather than reinforcing an association between physical deformity and monstrosity, these romances challenge the Arthurian knights' initial perceptions of physical differences as threatening or repulsive. Encounters between the knights and their foes are examined through the idea of monstrosity. Physical divergence is further downplayed by emphasizing the adaptability of their unusual bodies and by demonstrating how these bodies can be realigned with chivalric ideals. Therefore, monstrosity is better understood as behavioral (non)conformity to chivalric principles, rather than as a matter of physical characteristics. The knights' encounters with their enemies are examined through the lens of monstrosity as performance. It is argued, accordingly, that the traditional traits attributed to the knights and their enemies become porous at the borders, and knights themselves may embody monstrosity when they deviate from the ethical codes meant to regulate their impulses.

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