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The Servants of Chivalry? Dwarfs and Porters in Malory and the Middle English

Gawain Romances

Megan G. Leitch

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the ways in which dwarfs and porters are sources of information, and often, more specifically, of ethical advice and/or judgement. As masculine, non-chivalric servants, dwarfs and porters are important to Arthurian epistemology—to what and how Arthurian knights, and readers of Arthurian romances, know—and not always in a comfortable way.

Dwarfs and porters occupy the margins of Middle English Arthurian romance, relaying messages, holding horses (or stealing them), and opening gates (or controlling them). These often nameless figures act as servants or sidekicks for knights and lords, helping and hindering passage through the landscape of chivalric endeavor. Given their supporting roles—without the primacy of aristocratic protagonist or love interest, and lacking the cultural authority of other minor characters such as hermits—dwarfs and porters have rarely been addressed in their own right. However, this essay contends that such bit-part or marginal characters have a lot to tell us about how Arthurian romance works, and that the manner of their ‘telling’—in the foregrounding of the *voices* of dwarfs and porters—

contributes to the polyphonic definition of Arthurian chivalry. This essay explores the ways in which dwarfs and porters are sources of information, and often, more specifically, of ethical advice and/or judgment. Dwarfs and porters, that is, are important to Arthurian epistemology—to what and how Arthurian knights, and readers of Arthurian romances, know—and not always in a comfortable way.

In Arthurian studies, dwarfs, especially the dwarfs of the Middle English tradition, have usually received short shrift. Earlier generations of critics sought to establish the ‘Celtic’ origins of dwarfs in French Arthurian literature, for instance in the philological studies of R. S. Loomis and Vernon Harward, but they have rarely been addressed more recently.¹ Thus, dwarfs have sometimes been dismissed as Celtic vestiges or passive objects, and have at other times simply been seen as beneath critical attention. But for me, the dwarf question is not ‘where do they come from,’ but rather, ‘what are they doing?’ While Arthurian texts do not themselves question or explain the provenance of dwarfs, dwarfs are deployed to ask questions or offer explanations: for characters, and for readers. Dwarfs, that is, offer knights advice and admonitions as well as assistance; they chastise or challenge knights at least as often as they dutifully follow orders. The first section of this essay will focus on the active agency of dwarfs in Middle English Arthurian romance in order to explore their implications for chivalric identity.

Like dwarfs, the porters of Middle English Arthurian literature are servants who play a more active and vocal role than their share of critical attention might suggest. Arthurian porters are primarily gatekeepers:² as the first characters that a travelling knight or group encounters when approaching a castle, porters request or demand that knights reveal their identities, and determine whether characters’ conduct and/or identity warrants entry. In their role of determining whether travellers warrant passage from threshold to hearth, porters often display a capacity for judgement and for forthright opinion based on experience, and offer

their interlocutors a test of courtesy. Porters are ‘liminal’ characters not least in the literal sense (since the English word ‘liminal’ originating in the late nineteenth century, is derived from the Latin word ‘limen,’ meaning ‘threshold’);³ and, as the second section of this essay will examine, they mediate movement across symbolic thresholds as well as literal ones.

Reading dwarfs and porters together further illuminates the ways in which they subvert the social hierarchy by ‘talking back’ to knights.⁴ When a dwarf or porter has power over a knight, and uses that power to question, challenge or mock his identity or actions, some power is redistributed to the Arthurian ‘people’—in a way that is perhaps more promising than commoners’ other infrequent appearances, such as the battlefield robbers in the final battle between Arthur and Mordred in Malory’s *Morte*. Through the actions and speech of dwarfs and porters, that is, Middle English Arthurian chivalry not infrequently emerges as a collaborative and potentially class-inclusive production. In the three estates model, the idealized tripartite division of medieval society is an ostensibly symbiotic arrangement for everyone’s benefit, but power and privilege are evidently distributed unequally between the first estate (the clergy: those who pray), the second estate (the aristocracy: those who fight), and the third estate (the laborers: those who work). If we can posit an Arthurian-specific hierarchized tripartite division of the ‘estates’ or classes it might describe the interrelations of hermits (those who pray), knights (those who fight), and dwarfs and porters (those who work).⁵ Often employed in the direct service of lords or knights, dwarfs and porters are not as lowly as peasants; however, unlike scions of the aristocracy who serve as squires (or even kitchen boys) before they rise to knighthood,⁶ upward social mobility is not really a possibility for dwarfs and porters. Dwarfs and porters may serve in the capacity of squires, but unlike proper squires (the lower echelons of the aristocracy), they do not normally progress to knighthood. They instead represent a category of servants who are the upper echelons of the laborers, ‘those who work.’ Their labor is not a stage in their own

development, but it contributes to the development of their masters—the knights. As non-clerical, non-chivalric (or *unchivalric*) male servants, dwarfs and porters speak from a different viewpoint than that of knights, hermits, or women. From their perspective of non-chivalric masculinity, dwarfs and porters contribute to and qualify the chivalry of Arthurian knights in ways that others cannot. They represent not those whom Arthurian knights have to respect, serve, save or love (such as clerics, magicians and women), but rather those who serve knights, and to whom knights are most similar (and whose positions they might occupy were it not for a particular combination of wealth and prowess). Dwarfs and porters are thus figures from whom knights must strive to differentiate themselves—though, tellingly, they do not always succeed.

While some of the roles filled by dwarfs and porters also pertain to French Arthurian romances or to non-Arthurian romances, this essay will explore differences as well as continuities that suggest a certain cultural specificity to the agency of these Middle English Arthurian liminal characters. Indeed, the Middle English texts in which dwarfs and porters feature most prominently are Gawain romances which do not have French sources—*The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, *The Greene Knight*, *King Arthur and King Cornwall*—or center around an unknown relative of Gawain's, such as his younger brother in Malory's 'The Tale of Gareth' or his illegitimate son in *Lybeaus Desconus*.⁷ In two further examples, in Tale I of Malory's *Morte Darthur* and in the Prose *Merlin*, Gawain is the Arthurian knight who has a close encounter with a dwarf. As scholars such as Thomas Hahn and Sarah Rae Lindsay have shown, what unites the Gawain romances as a thematic group is not merely the fact that Gawain figures in them, but more so, their concern with courtesy.⁸ That courtesy is paramount in these romances accounts for Gawain's frequent starring role when dwarfs and porters appear (or for dwarfs and porters' frequent appearances when Gawain is on the scene), since these servants are themselves often

present to instruct about, or offer a test of, courtesy in particular. How knights behave towards servants is in some ways more revealing of the knights' courtesy than how they behave towards their equals; and servants can instruct about and act as tests of chivalric values such as courtesy without themselves having to act according to those values. Thus, where Hahn writes of Gawain's role in the Gawain romances that 'one might even think of him almost as a narrative function,'⁹ so too might we see dwarfs and porters as narrative functions, albeit less-studied ones. Rather than dismissing them as doorposts or doormats, we can recognize the ways in which these diegetically and socially liminal characters offer challenges that shape both the literal and the metaphorical thresholds of chivalry.

'Than seyde his dwarff': Belittlement and the Voice from Below

Perhaps the most familiar dwarf in Middle English Arthurian literature is the dwarf who accompanies Malory's Gareth on his adventures in Tale IV of the *Morte Darthur*. Gareth's nameless dwarf serves as a sort of messenger, herald and squire rolled into one: he holds his master's horse, helps him out, and gives him counsel. That is, at least until Lyonesse's brother Gringamour, under the cover of darkness, sneaks up on Gareth and dwarf when they are sleeping, and 'com styllly stalkyng behynde the dwarff and plucked hym faste undir his arme and so rode his way with hym untyll his owne castell.'¹⁰ Gareth's response to having his dwarf nicked from under his nose is to show up outside Gringamour's castle furiously brandishing his sword, where we are told that he:

cryed alowde that all the castell myght hyre: 'Thou traytour knyght, sir
Gryngamoure! delyver me my dwarff agayne, or by the fayth that I owghe to
God and to the hygh Ordre of Knyghthode I shall do the all the harme that may
lye in my power!'¹¹

We might ask why Gareth is so upset here: what motivates his outrage? Indeed, what criticism there is of this event has focused on Gareth's reaction and what this says about the nature of chivalry in Malory's *Arthurian*. Emily Rebekah Huber has read Gareth's dwarf as a vital chivalric accoutrement: an Arthurian knight, she suggests, needs his horse, his armor, his sword, and his dwarf; and losing one of these, especially through someone acting underhandedly, is both a threat to Gareth's status and a betrayal of the chivalric code.¹² Huber primarily views Gareth's dwarf as what she terms 'part of the paraphernalia of chivalry' and as a 'passive object,' enacting a 'feminized role' through which 'Gareth's own masculinity is emphasized.'¹³ This is a productive reading; however, I am interested in further exploring what the dwarf is doing—this dwarf, and also the understudied dwarfs elsewhere in Malory and other Middle English Arthurian romances. What can we gain by viewing dwarfs as subjects as well as as objects? Reading Gareth's dwarf alongside other dwarfs in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, as well as in other romances such as *Lybeaus Desconus*, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, and the *Prose Merlin*, allows a more expansive view of dwarfish agency.

It is the fact that Gareth's dwarf holds the secret to his master's concealed identity, and is willing to reveal it, that prompts Lyonesse to request that the dwarf be kidnapped. The dwarf is both valuable and vulnerable because of his knowledge, and because he is not bound to behave like a knight. The standoff leading to the theft of the dwarf has come about because Gareth refused to tell Lyonesse his name and lineage when asked, and Lyonesse refused to invite Gareth into her castle despite his victory over her besieging oppressor the Red Knight of the Red Lands. Yet the dwarf, when captured, acts not in accordance with his master's stated wishes, but rather according to his own ideas of what Gareth's (and his own) best interests might be. That is, when Gringamour and Lyonesse ask the dwarf, he makes no attempt to keep his master's secrets:

‘As for that,’ seyde the dwarff, ‘I feare nat gretly to telle his name and of what kynne he is commyn of. Wete you well, he is a kynges son and a quenys, and his fadir hyght kynge Lot of Orkeney, and his modir is sistir to Kyng Arthure, and he is brother to the good knyghte sir Gawayne, and his name is sir Gareth of Orkenay.’¹⁴

Gareth’s dwarf is forthright in speaking his mind to his superiors. Later, the dwarf again acts to reveal Gareth’s identity, this time even more independently. Gareth uses a magic ring to disguise himself in a tournament, because Gareth does not want anyone to know who he is, but the dwarf takes away the ring and puts an end to the disguise:

Than seyde his dwarff, ‘Take me your rynge, that ye lose hit nat whyle that ye drynke.’ And so whan he had drunkyn he gate on hys helme, and egerly toke his horse and rode into the felde, and leffte his rynge with his dwarff: for the dwarf was glad the rynge was frome hym, for than he wyste well he sholde be knowyn.¹⁵

Here, the dwarf deceives his master; once again, however, the dwarf’s potentially dishonorable act enhances Gareth’s honor. As a result of the dwarf’s unchivalric agency, the prowess Gareth has shown in the tournament is known (to King Arthur and all the other onlookers) to be, in fact, *Gareth’s* prowess. Gareth’s dwarf is not bound to behave according to the laws or ideals of chivalry, but nonetheless speaks to those laws and ideals. Other Arthurian dwarfs do this too: by offering warnings or prophetic revelations, or by registering their own outrage at being objectified or victimized, they contribute in a dialogic way to chivalric ethics—to the ethics that other characters, the knights rather than the dwarfs, are supposed to espouse. Dwarfs speak to the importance of knightly identity and worship; of the link between noble lineage and noble actions; and of not acting underhandedly.

In the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Libeaus Desconus*, the Fair Unknown protagonist accepts a quest and company from a maiden and a dwarf.¹⁶ Unlike Gareth's dwarf, this dwarf has a name, Wyndeleyne (conveniently rhyming with 'Gingelein,' the given name of the Fair Unknown, and 'Elyn,' the name of the maiden), and he has a reputation of his own: 'wyde sprong his fame' for music, banter, and other civilized accomplishments.¹⁷ While it has been suggested that this courtliness subverts the usual type or trope of a romance dwarf,¹⁸ nonetheless, like Gareth's dwarf, Wyndeleyne acts as a servant for his protagonist:

The dwerffe was hys squyre,
And servyd fere and nere
Of all that myster was.¹⁹

Again like Gareth's dwarf, Wyndeleyne repeatedly speaks to reveal his master's identity or to establish his chivalric worth:

The duerfe and meyd Elyn
Went with Libeus, I wene,
Unto Syr Otys castell.
Sche and the duerfe bedene
Told of Syr Libeus dedys kene:
[...]
The lord was glad and blyth,
[...]
That sych an herdy knyght
Schuld wyne in fyght
Hys lady feyre and hend.²⁰

In addition to this sort of publicizing of Lybeaus's deeds and status to win him worship and support, Wyndeleyne also aids his master in defeating other knights:

The knyght hym mercy gan crye;

Syr Libeus sykerly

Held hym fast adone.

The duerfe, mayster Wyndeleyne,

Toke the stede by the reyn

And lepte in the sadyll aboven.

He rode than with that

To the mey ther sche sate.²¹

Here, when the dwarf intervenes in a chivalric combat to steal the horse of a knight Lybeaus has been fighting, his unchivalric agency results in an enhancement of his master's knightly reputation. This dwarf, then, fulfills a role similar to that of Gareth's dwarf: as a non-chivalric servant, he contributes to the knight's identity and worship in a way that the knight cannot. As when damsels or hermits encourage or reprimand knights on their path towards success, here chivalric deeds and renown are the result of collaboration—in this case, collaboration between classes.

In *Gologras and Gawain*, a dwarf appears not as a protagonist's servant, but as the servant of a lord whom Arthurian knights encounter: when Kay steals from a dwarf at a strange castle, he incurs the dwarf's clamorous wrath. The domesticity of the dwarf in this late fifteenth-century Scots romance is especially pronounced: he is a cook, and what Kay steals is, bathetically, a drumstick. However, the dwarf's role here in condemning a lack of chivalrous and courteous conduct is emphasized:

Ane duergh braydit about, besily and bane,

Small birdis on broche be ane bright fyre.

Schir Kay ruschit to the roist, and reft fra the swane,

Lightly claught, throu lust, the lym fra the lyre.

To feid hym of that fyne fude the freik was full fane.

Than dynnyt the duergh, in angir and yre,

With raris, quhil the rude hall reirdit agane.

With that come girdand in greif ane woundir grym sire.²²

The loudness and unmistakability of the dwarf's voice in response to this breach of courtesy fills two whole lines, as his 'raris' resound through the hall. This clamor, in turn, brings the dwarf's master to chastise Kay. The dwarf's voice, then, acts both as judgement in itself, and as the harbinger of punishment for transgressive, discourteous behavior. Like Gareth's dwarf, although this dwarf cook is 'done unto' by a knight, he also, and significantly, talks back. This portrayal of a dwarf as explicitly voicing judgement or offering revelations with respect to courtesy and proper knightly conduct or identity recurs elsewhere.

Returning to Malory, we can also see Arthurian dwarfs' wider role in challenging or commenting upon chivalric conduct. For instance, in 'The Book of Sir Tristram,' a dwarf tells his master who has just been beaten by Launcelot:

'Sir,' seyde the dwarff, 'hit is nat youre worshyp to hurte hym, for he ys a man oute of his wytte; and doute ye nat he hath bene a man of grete worshyp, and for som hartely sorow that he hath takyn he ys fallyn madde. And mesemyth,' seyde the dwarff, 'that he resembelyth muche unto Sir Launcelot, for hym I sawe at the turnemente of Lonzep.'²³

In this episode, the dwarf is first trounced by Launcelot, and because, once defeated, 'the dwarff cryede helpe' (644.13), his master arrives to be equally defeated. Thus, the dwarf's prominent voice summons his chivalric master in a way that parallels the agency of the physically ineffective but voluble dwarf in *Gologras and Gawain*. More importantly, here as

elsewhere in the *Morte* and other Middle English Arthurian literature, a dwarf speaks (in this case to his master) as the reproving voice of authority about what is (and is not) ‘worshipful.’ The dwarf passes judgement and offers advice on the ethics of interpersonal conduct and on the worship (and sanity) of knights in ways that, like dwarfs’ role in promoting recognition, mould knights’ identities.

Dwarfs sometimes reveal the truth not only retrospectively but also prospectively, as when a prophetic dwarf tells Malory’s Balin off for rashly slaying the Irish knight Lanceor. The dwarf first asks for the facts:

The meane whyle as they talked there com a dwarff frome the cité of Camelot on horseback as much as he myght, and founde the dede bodyes, wherefore he made grete dole and pulled oute hys heyre for sorowe and seyde, ‘Which of you too knyghtes have done this dede?’

‘Whereby askist thou?’ seyde Balan.

‘For *I wolde wete*,’ seyde the dwarff.²⁴

Here, the dwarf foregrounds his status as a subject and an epistemological agent: *he* wants to know. When the dwarf’s desire for knowledge is satisfied, he speaks authoritatively—despite his lowly status—about the consequences of Balin’s actions:

‘Alas!’ seyde the dwarff, ‘thou hast done grete damage unto thyselff. For thys knyght that ys here dede was one of the moste valyauntis men that lyved. And truste well, Balyne, the kynne of thys knyght woll chase you thorow the worlde tylle they have slayne you.’²⁵

This dwarf, then, both asks for information (about ethical conduct), and dispenses information (about events, intentions, and future chivalric fault lines).²⁶ He plays an epistemological role in both directions, eliciting and exposing knowledge with an ethical edge. Thus, dwarfs shape what, how, and why characters and readers know; dwarfs—as

active agents—are fundamental to some of the ways in which Middle English Arthurian knights and their texts negotiate matters of recognition, responsibility, and truth. In offering ethical pronouncements and prophecies, dwarfs shape the expectations of chivalric behavior.

Some of these forms of agency and judgement in relation to chivalric figures that pertain to Middle English Arthurian dwarfs can certainly apply to French Arthurian dwarfs as well.²⁷ However, there are some divergences as well as continuities; Middle English dwarfs tend to be either more informative or more friendly, if not both. Many of Malory's dwarfs (and the dwarfish enchantments of Evadem and Gawain in the Prose *Merlin*) derive from medieval French tradition of course, but while arguments have been made for a lost French source for Malory's Tale of Gareth, more convincing is the idea that Malory either had an English source or did not have a direct source for this tale at all.²⁸ Ad Putter has commented that 'dwarfs are usually bad omens in Arthurian literature,'²⁹ but perhaps we can be more specific, as well as recognising the extent to which not all dwarfs, and perhaps especially not all *Middle English* Arthurian dwarfs, fit this stereotype. The archetypal medieval French dwarf is perhaps the dwarf who offers Lancelot a lift in his cart in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, resulting in Lancelot's public shame: 'the vile, low-born dwarf would give him no information; instead he said: "If you want to get into this cart I'm driving, by tomorrow you'll know what has become of the queen."' ³⁰ Unlike many dwarfs in Middle English romances such as Malory's *Morte Darthur* or *Libeaus Desconus*, this dwarf uses his voice to withhold information rather than to either elicit or deliver it. Moreover, Malory dispenses with this dwarf; Malory's Launcelot instead appropriates a cart from two carters in 'a charyote that cam thydir to feche wood.'³¹ While Malory readily retains the dwarfs he finds in his sources elsewhere in the *Morte* – or, indeed, creates them, as may be the case with Gareth's dwarf – here, Malory's transmutation of a dwarf into carters is suggestive: this dwarf who is both hostile and un-informative does not fit with the roles dwarfs tend to

assume in Middle English Arthurian literature. As we have seen, Middle English dwarfs are helpers perhaps as often as they are hostile figures or revealers of dire consequences. The bellowing dwarf in *Gologras and Gawain* is certainly a bad omen for Kay, and the dwarf who reveals chivalric fault lines to Balin explains the bad omen that Balin's killing of the Irish knight constitutes; however, Lybeaus's dwarf, like Gareth's, has a more constructive influence. What unites these dwarfs is the prominence of their voices, and their ability to act with relative freedom from—and to comment upon—the strictures of the chivalric code. As male servants to knights, dwarfs represent a form of non-chivalric masculinity that supports the crossing of chivalric thresholds or liminal states, such as by steering Gareth and Libeaus towards maturity, a knightly reputation, and a wife; dwarfs also define the thresholds of chivalry by speaking to or offering warnings about (proper) chivalric conduct. Porters, similarly marginal figures and servants, also help to define the thresholds of chivalry, especially in relation to courtesy.

‘ready was ther a proud porter’: The Enemy at the Gates?

Porters are, as it were, the ‘doorposts’ of medieval romance; they are functionaries ‘holding up’ the action (whether by supporting it, or by blocking it) at the point of a threshold. Porters mediate the ethics and epistemology of chivalry in ways that partially parallel dwarfs, and, as the examples below will show, their performances are often far from wooden. Whereas Malory's *Morte* is aligned with other Middle English Arthurian romances in a partially insular-specific representation of dwarfish agency, the remit for porters is not as large in Malory's mainly French-derived representations as it is in other Middle English Arthurian literature, especially the Gawain romances. A scene that punctuates many insular Arthurian romances, constituting a sort of motif or convention in itself, is the confrontation at the gates with a porter who might be hostile and haughty, or at least wary and interrogative. Through

dialogue with the porter, approaching knight(s) must prove their qualifications for entry; the porter reports to the lord within the castle, has a conversation with the lord about the would-be visitors, and then returns to his station at the gate to facilitate access.³² Noble roots are not normally enough for an invitation to enter: courtesy is usually one of the knights' main qualifications for access, and the porters, significantly, are the arbiters of courtesy.

An instance of this conventional yet meaningful exchange between knight(s) and porter occurs in the c.1400 tail-rhyme *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. In this Middle English Arthurian romance that is centrally concerned with testing the temperament of Gawain, Baldwin, and Kay, these three of Arthur's knights demonstrate their courtesy, or lack thereof, in a series of tests at the Carl's castle. When they reach the Carl's castle, the knights encounter the porter, who:

axid what they wolde.

Then sayd Gawen curttesly,
'We beseche the lorde of herbory,
The good lord of this holde.'

The portter answerd hem agayn,
'Your message wold I do full fayn;
And ye have harme, thanke hyt not me.
Ye be so fayr, lyme and lythe,
And therto comly, glad therwytt,
That cemmely hyt ys to see.'³³

How the knights respond to the check or challenge that the porter provides here is in fact the first of the tests of their courtesy that the Carl's castle offers. Gawain's courteous speech,

eliciting a propitious and praising response from the porter, is contrasted with Kay's rudeness:

'Portter,' sayde Key, 'let be thy care;

[...]

But thou wolt on our message gon,

The kyngus keyis woll we tane

And draw hem doun cleyn.'

The portter sayde, 'So mot I thryfe,

Ther be not thre knyghttus alyve

That dorst do hit, I wene.'³⁴

The text also foregrounds the porter's report on the supplicants to his lord:

The portter went into the hall;

Wytt his Lord he mett wyttall,

That hardy was and bolde.

'Carl of Carllhyll, God loke the!

At the yatt be barnnus thre,

Semley armus to welde:

To knyghttus of Arterys in,

A beschope, and no mor men,

Sertayn, as they me tolde.'

Then sayd the Carle, 'Be Sent Myghell,

That tythingus lykyth me ryght well.

Seyth thei this way wolde.'³⁵

While Kay's discourtesy does not foreclose the possibility of access in this case, it does cast him in a negative light. This is an ethical encounter as well as a plot-driven one, and it

establishes a pattern to be repeated in the tests that follow, in which only Gawain will be acclaimed as a chivalric exemplar. In the version of this scene in the later Percy Folio version of this narrative, *The Carle of Carlisle*, the emphasis remains on interrogation, identity, courtesy, and praise where appropriate. Gawain again speaks and acts ‘curteouslye’ in contrast to ‘the crabbed knight Sir Kay,’ who threatens the porter with bodily harm.³⁶ Here, Gawain’s courtesy, and his rescuing of the situation from Kay’s rudeness, earns the porter’s compliance, and the porter’s report to the Carl then earns them all entry (ll. 159-72). The ethical and epistemological implications of this encounter with a porter are also present in other Gawain romances such as *The Greene Knight* and *King Arthur and King Cornwall*.

The role of the porter’s judgement is even more prominent in the tail-rhyme romance *The Greene Knight*, surviving in the c.1650 Percy Folio Manuscript, but first written around the end of the fifteenth century. In *The Greene Knight*, the scene in which the Green Knight bursts into Arthur’s court unannounced in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is rewritten to include a somewhat more measured entrance via an encounter with a porter.³⁷ When the Green Knight arrives outside Carlisle in the tail-rhyme version, Arthur’s porter interrogates him:

When he into that place came,
The porter thought him a marvelous groome.
He saith, ‘Sir, wither wold yee?’
Hee said, ‘I am a venterous knight,
And of your King wold have sight,
And other lords that heere bee.’

Noe word to him the porter spake,
But left him standing att the gate,

And went forth, as I weene,
And kneeled downe before the King,
Saith, 'In lifes dayes old or younge,
Such a sight I have not seene!

'For yonder att your gates right,'
He saith, "Heer is a venterous knight.
All his vesture is greene!'
Then spake the King, proudest in all,
Saith, 'Bring him into the hall.
Let us see what hee doth meane.'³⁸

As Jonathan Nicholls has pointed out, one of the effects of this more sedate entrance is that it allows the Green Knight—or Sir Bredbeddle, as he is called in this sometimes humorous redaction of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—to display courtesy.³⁹ Certainly, both Sir Bredbeddle's patient waiting for the porter to give him access, and his announcement that 'of your King' he 'wold have sight,' are more polite than the Green Knight erupting into Arthur's hall and demanding to be told the whereabouts of 'þe governour of þis gyng' as though he cannot recognise Arthur as king despite the latter's central place on the dais.⁴⁰ However, it is also worth observing that perhaps Bredbeddle is more polite than his earlier counterpart because he is confronted with a porter who controls access to the castle: that is, any knight faced with a closed gate and a gatekeeper must answer the gatekeeper's challenge in such a way as to satisfy the porter (and/or the lord within with whom the porter confers) that he is worthy of admittance. Thus, the porter has a measure of authority here, and he deploys it to elicit some information as to the would-be intruder's identity and purpose. In addition to being an arbiter of access—a figure of judgement in a way that partially parallels

the role of Arthurian dwarfs—this porter is given a perhaps surprising degree of interiority, as the reader’s impression of *this* Green Knight is formed not by the awe of all of Arthur’s courtiers, but rather by the fact that ‘*the porter thought him a marvelous groome*’ and reports to the king that ‘In lifes dayes old or younge, / Such a sight I have not seene!’ Here, the porter’s judgement is valued due to his experience: his work itself is grounds for authority, regardless of his low class.

This idea of a porter’s authority over, and ability to judge, chivalric figures deriving from experience as well as from control of a particular threshold is also emphasised in *King Arthur and King Cornwall*. When Arthur and his knights arrive at the ‘palace gate’ of the King of Cornwall,⁴¹ they are met by an ostentatiously dressed porter:

Soe ready was ther a proud porter,
And met him soone therat.
Shooes of gold the porter had on,
And all his other rayment was unto the same.
‘Now, by my faith,’ saies noble King Arthur,
‘Yonder is a minion swaine.’

Then bespake noble King Arthur,
These were the words says hee:
‘Come hither, thou proud porter,
I pray thee come hither to me.

‘I have two poore rings of my finger,
The better of them Ile give to thee:
Tell who may be Lord of this castle,’ he sayes,

‘Or who is Lord in this cuntry?’

‘Cornewall King,’ the porter sayes;

‘There is none soe rich as hee.’⁴²

After Arthur requests entry and lodging, the porter reports to his lord. However, due to the lacunae in the Percy Folio Manuscript—since this text was damaged by seventeenth-century chambermaids using the outside column of many pages of the manuscript to start fires before the manuscript was rescued—most of this report is lost. The porter’s opening autobiography, however, suggests that this report would have followed the convention of deploying the porter’s experience to underpin his judgement of the new arrivals:

Then forth has gone this proud porter,

As fast as he cold hye;

And when he came befor Cornewall King,

He kneeled downe on his knee.

Sayes, ‘I have beene porterman at thy gate

This thirty winter and three . . .’⁴³

The next section of the text is lost, but it seems likely that it proceeds to compare Arthur’s and his companions’ behavior or identity to everything that the porter has seen in his aforementioned thirty-three years at the gates. This form of chivalric identity construction through a porter’s experience and perception is also found elsewhere in medieval insular literature, as when the porter in *The Greene Knight* declares that ‘In lifes dayes old or younge’ he has not seen anything similar.⁴⁴ Thus, like their dwarfish counterparts, in the Gawain romances porters carry and request knowledge in ways that make them good judges of character and of courtesy or chivalric ethics. Although they are servants, part of the function of dwarfs and porters is to judge knights’ success or failure in embodying chivalric virtues.

However, Malory's porters, unlike those of the Gawain romances, are more often endangered obstacles than figures of testing and judgement. Where dwarfs deal out violence to knights as well as being the recipients of violence, porters—at least in the *Morte Darthur* and its French sources, as well as in other *non-Arthurian* romances—are more often unambiguously on the receiving end of violent blows. Alongside Gareth's abducted dwarf, the dwarf cook from whom Kay steals, and the dwarf defeated alongside his master by Launcelot as discussed above, there are dwarfs who deal blows of their own, such as when Launcelot needs to be taught a lesson in the Grail Quest and a dwarf comes and raps him on the sword arm that he is, inappropriately, about to use.⁴⁵ Being a porter, however, can be a rather more dangerous occupation than that of a dwarf; porters are sometimes killed in action, especially by Launcelot, who slays at least two in the *Morte Darthur*. For instance, when 'a passyng foule carle' tries to prevent Launcelot from crossing a bridge by striking at him 'with a grete club shodde with iron,' Launcelot 'clave his hede unto the pappys,' only to be informed by the inhabitants of the next village that he has 'slayne the chyeff porter of oure castell.'⁴⁶ Here, porters are passive victims of action rather than agents in their own right; this ill-fortuned passivity reflects the representation of porters in the French Arthurian romances on which Malory drew, and is paralleled in non-Arthurian English romances such as the mid-fifteenth-century anonymous prose *Siege of Thebes*,⁴⁷ but is a stark contrast to the agency and authority of porters in Middle English Arthurian literature of insular origin. The Gawain romances suggest an insular specificity to porters along the same lines as the Middle English specificity of dwarfs by offering a heightened emphasis on ethics and epistemology. Moreover, as discussed further in the following section, these porters carry some of the same subversive (yet also, ultimately, conservative) implications as dwarfs do, in the ways that they can hold up and interrogate knights, but then usually proceed to validate them.

The Arthurian Third Estate: Threats and Thresholds

The challenge provided by dwarfs and porters is in some ways paralleled by hermits in Grail Quest narratives. However, modern critics (like the knights about whom they write) are more attuned to thinking of hermits as voices of knowledge and ethical judgement; hermits are, moreover, underpinned by religious authority, just as Merlin's ability to inform and judge is shaped by magic and by divine and diabolical omniscience. Dwarfs and porters lack these forms of supernatural or cultural authority, of course, but they have generic authority instead; their epistemic role is to offer and solicit knowledge not in a way that parallels divine knowledge, but rather, narratological knowledge, at times displaying a sort of diegetic omniscience. The fact that there are hardly any dwarfs or porters in Malory's Grail Quest,⁴⁸ but these figures populate much of the rest of the *Morte Darthur* and other Middle English Arthurian romances, supports the idea that they—and particularly dwarfs—are in some ways the secular counterpart of hermits' role in ethical admonition and (sometimes prophetic) omniscience. Where hermits are imbued with divine or exegetical knowledge, and dwarfs seem to have narratologically prophetic knowledge, porters know things through weight of experience and witnessing. More promisingly from the perspective of class-consciousness, then, porters' work is itself the qualification for their authority and agency. In this way, members of the otherwise-silent Arthurian third estate have some 'say' about the sociopolitical structures in which they live.

Porters and dwarfs perform similar supportive yet challenging roles, occupy similarly low positions on the social ladder, and, as mentioned earlier, do not have much possibility of upward social mobility.⁴⁹ However, unlike porters, who operate at a fixed point, in opposition to protagonists, dwarfs are physically mobile: they can accompany knights, they can imitate knights, and they can challenge through interchange as well as opposition. That is, in addition to their challenging speech, dwarfs sometimes *are* knights, or act like knights, in ways that

threaten chivalric identity by interrogating the ideology that posits knightly superiority on the basis of innate nobility. For instance, early in Malory's *Morte*, Gawain witnesses a duel between a knight and a dwarf for the affections of a lady:

they sawe a knyght on the other syde of the launde all armed save the hede. And on the other syde there com a dwarff on horsebak all armed save the hede, with a grete mowthe and a shorte nose. And whan the dwarff com nyghe he seyde, 'Where is this lady sholde mete us here?' And therewithall she com forth oute of the woode. And than they began to stryve for the lady, for the knyght seyde he wolde have hir and the dwarff seyde he wolde have hir.⁵⁰

When combat cannot decide a winner between knight and dwarf, the dwarf suggests they put the matter to the arbitration of a passing knight, who happens to be Gawain. Gawain judges that the lady should choose:

And whan she was sette betwene hem bothe she lefte the knyght and went to the dwarff. And than the dwarff toke hir up and wente his way syngyng, and the knyght wente his way with grete mournyng.⁵¹

Here, the nameless knight is shamed when a lady prefers the dwarf, 'grete mowthe and [...] shorte nose' and all, to the knight's more normative embodiment of chivalric masculinity. The lady's choice seems contrary to expectations; where chivalric qualities such as prowess, honor, and good looks are supposed to be innate and to help knights to preferment, with the ladies as well as with their lords, here the lady in question does not subscribe to this value system. This brief episode is a microcosmic inset to the larger episode in the course of which it takes place: Gawain acts as judge in the dwarf's and knight's quarrel over the lady en route to encountering Sir Pelleas's vain attempts to win the love of the haughty lady Ettard by performing impressive feats of arms and repeatedly demonstrating his devotion and honorability as a suitor. Gawain dishonorably woos Ettard when he promised to win her for

the true knight Pelleas, and Ettard—inscrutably, like the lady who chooses the dwarf—prefers Gawain to the devoted Pelleas. This Gawain is evidently not the perfect paragon of courtesy that he often is in the Middle English Gawain romances; here, as often in Malory's *Morte*, Gawain's character is 'truculent, vindictive, and restless,' due to the influence of the French romances on which Malory drew.⁵² Nonetheless, the actions of both dwarf and Gawain offer lessons about courtesy and honor here as such figures do elsewhere: the knight who loses out to someone decidedly beneath him (a dwarf) is shamed, and presumably ought to have striven to be a better knight to avoid such a fate; whereas for Pelleas, the knight who tried as hard as any could and was a perfect paragon in deeds and devotion, a higher reward is in store, as the Lady of the Lake takes him as her lover. The Lady of the Lake also uses her magic to arrange for Ettard to die of belated and now-unrequited love for Pelleas: ladies may choose not to respect the chivalric system of ascribing and rewarding value, but the consequences for divergent choices may be dire.

While being thrown over for a dwarf is certainly shaming and degrading for a knight, being turned into a dwarf is worse, and that is what happens in the Prose *Merlin*, first to the knight Evadem, and then to Gawain himself. Merlin reports to his master Blaise how a young Evadem is enchanted into dwarfish stature for nine years for refusing to love a lady with magical powers:

tolde hym also of the litill duerfe how the damesell hadde hym brought to court, and how the kynge hadde made hym knyght. 'But thus moche,' seide Merlin, 'I shall telle yow, he is a grete gentilman, and is no duerf by nature, but thus hath a damesell hym myshapen whan he was xiij yere of age, for that he wolde not graunte hir his love, and he was than the feirest creature of the worlde; and for the sorowe that the damesell hadde a-raied she hym in soche wise that now is the

lothliest creature and of most dispite; and fro hens ix wikes shall cesse the terme that the damesell sette.’⁵³

Evidently, it is never wise to scorn a sorceress; in his dwarf form, Evadem is said to be ‘the lothliest creature and of most dispite.’ Being belittled, physically as well as verbally, is shameful for a knight. Intriguingly, while, as I have been addressing, dwarfs—genuine dwarfs—tend to be quite vocal, Evadem is instead characterized by silence: when Evadem and his maiden come to Arthur’s court, the maiden speaks on her beloved’s behalf to lay claim his aristocratic pedigree and to request that King Arthur ‘make hym knyght.’⁵⁴ It seems that the shame that accompanies being downgraded from normal knight to servant-shaped dwarf limits a knight’s rhetorical self-determination.

Shortly afterwards in the narrative of the Prose *Merlin*, Gawain—for failing to greet a lady courteously—is cursed to assume the shape of the next person he sees, which, unluckily for him, happens to be Evadem. Gawain shrinks:

Whan that sir Gawein was passed the duerf knyght, and the damesell wele a two bowe draught, a-noon he felte that the sleeves of his hauberk passed fer of lengthe ouer his hondes, and also the lengthe of his hauberk henge down benethe his feet, and his legges were waxen so short that thei passed not the skirtes of the sadill; [...] and [he] a-raied hym in the beste wise he myght, so wroth and angry, that he hadde leuer to be deed than on lyve; and after that he lepte vp and rode forth his wey, and cursed the day and the hour that euer he entred in to that quest, for shamed he was and dishonoured.⁵⁵

Here, Gawain, like Evadem before him, becomes deformed for a lack of courtesy towards a lady. Gawain’s loss of physical stature is a loss of chivalric stature, as well: he feels ‘shamed [...] and dishonoured.’ Both Evadem and Gawain, when in dwarf form, are able to be decent fighters, as Evadem knocks ‘to grounde’ a ‘knyght horse and man,’⁵⁶ and when Gawain is a

dwarf, ‘many oon he mette that *grete shame* and grete reproves hym seiden; and neuertheles he dide many prowesses, ffor though he were a duerf and mysshapen he hadde not loste his strengthe, neithir his hardinesse, and many a knyght he conquered.’⁵⁷ This shame and dishonor, then, suggests that the status of a dwarf is an abject one compared to that of a normal (and normatively-proportioned) knight. Dwarf knights are ridiculed as well as shamed: when dwarf-Gawain tries to explain his story to a maiden and some knights, both Gawain and his listeners disparage him, as he says “‘I am the moste lothly creature of dispite that is in the worlde, and in this foreste it me be-fill viij monethes passed;” and whan the damesell and the knyghtes hym vndirstode thei be-gonne to laugh.’⁵⁸ However, if short, loathly, misshapen dwarfs are able to demonstrate prowess equal to that of tall, handsome knights, or if a lady can prefer a dwarf to a knight, then dwarfs are presumably being ridiculed and shamed for their non-noble appearance and birth alone. Dwarfs, as adult males, can do everything else a knight can do, but without the societal status or respect. If good genes are (sometimes) all that separate a knight from those who are, literally and socially, beneath them, then the foundation of chivalric or aristocratic superiority is shaky.

Thus, by thwarting knights or diminishing them, as well as by speaking out to aggrandize their knights’ deeds, dwarfs both contribute to the formation of chivalric identity, and qualify its assumptions. Whereas both porters and dwarfs challenge the chivalric virtues of individual knights, dwarfs sometimes further challenge the very basis of what the chivalric classes value about themselves: the grounds on which they lay claim to superiority over others. In their unchivalric interventions and subversive implications, Arthurian dwarfs operate in ways that are suggestive of Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogism, and, sometimes, carnival. Indeed, Bakhtin mentions dwarfs as one of the medieval world’s many ‘humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture’: these include ‘folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the

clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody.’⁵⁹ For Bakhtin, carnival exists outside of the control of official (hierarchical) culture, and can disobey, parody or interrogate the norms of Church and state. While Bakhtin does not himself analyse medieval literature, he locates the origins of his idea of the carnivalesque in medieval festivities and medieval laughter: ‘carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages.’⁶⁰ Dialogism, on the other hand, entails interanimation; it ‘implies genuine exchange of ideas between different people or different kinds of ideas.’⁶¹ Dialogue, then, ‘occurs when the ideological assumptions of one language are challenged by (in parody) or engaged with (in polyphony) the different ideologies that make different kinds of language possible.’⁶² Both parody and polyphony mark the agency of dwarfs.

Dwarfs’ imitations of knights are sometimes parodic, as when a dwarf seems to win the love of a lady. Moreover, in the Prose *Merlin*, dwarfs are what knights are transformed into for bad behavior, and the way in which Bakhtin bases his ideas of carnival (partly) in medieval laughter resonates with the way in which laughter or ridicule is directed toward Evadem and Gawain when they are forced to take the form of dwarfs. When Evadem’s maiden asks Arthur to make him a knight, ‘than alle thei that were in the paleis be-gonne to laugh bothe oon and other’, and when Gawain tries to assert that he is wrongly in dwarf form, a group of knights and a lady similarly ‘be-gonne to laugh.’⁶³ This diegetic laughter is subversive and widespread, but perhaps not as inclusive as carnival laughter at its truest: as Bakhtin writes,

Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants.

The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this

laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.⁶⁴

Readers seem invited to participate in such laughter, and perhaps also to laugh when a dwarf imitates a knight to fight for a lady (and is preferred to the knight, by that lady) or when dwarfs rise above their station and disrupt social hierarchy by telling knights off. However, Gawain does not laugh when transformed into a knight or when the object of others' laughter: the undermining of chivalry, for such a knight, is too serious a matter to joke about.

Arthurian dwarfs use their voices and their relative independence to question or destabilize the status quo or the ideology that underpins it. In addition, dwarfs often partially embody the grotesque realism that Bakhtin suggests can ridicule and/or revitalize the social system.⁶⁵ That is, while the occasional dwarf, such as Wyndeleyne, is described as attractive, most are not, and texts often linger on their ugliness: for instance, the dwarf who acts as a messenger between Malory's Morgan le Fay and her lover Accolon is described as having 'a grete mowthe and a flatte nose,'⁶⁶ and Evadem is described as:

a dwerf, the moste contirfet and foulest that eny hadde sein, ffor he was deformed, and his browes reade and rowe, and his berde reade and longe, that henge down to his breste, and his heir was grete and blakke, and foule medled, and his sholdres high and courbe, and a grete bonche on his bakke be-hinde and a-nother be-fore a-gein the breste, and his handes were grete, and his fynGRES short, and his legges short, and his chyne longe and sharpe.⁶⁷

The grotesque figuration of the dwarfs who instruct or get the better of knights further emphasizes the unexpectedness of their relative control over lofty chivalric ideals, as well as the superficiality of a system that can privilege a pretty exterior over prowess or wisdom.

Yet when dwarfs subversively trump, reproach, or resemble knights, in the end they more often serve to uphold orthodoxy rather than undermining it. Perhaps, instead of being

type-cast as ‘bad omens,’ dwarfs can be understood as part of the polyphonic yet ultimately conservative definition of chivalry in Arthurian texts; from a divergent standpoint, the voices of the dwarfs and porters reflect on, and help to regulate, chivalric identity. They work with, as well as for, the chivalric classes. Dwarfs’ carnivalesque intrusions, then, usually fold back to produce chivalric improvement, just as porters, while a possible check on protagonists’ progress, usually offer them validation. It is when Arthurian knights approach physical and/or metaphorical thresholds that they encounter liminal figures such as dwarfs or porters.⁶⁸ Male servants offer a foundational contrast and qualification to knightly endeavor, just as ladies, hermits and magicians do. The roles of these servants are more prominent and challenging in Middle English (Gawain) romances than in earlier French romances, suggesting that the insular context and late composition and circulation of the Gawain romances may have been more conducive to class-consciousness than earlier continental contexts for Arthurian romance. If porters have been sidelined as the doorposts of Arthurian romance, perhaps dwarfs have been seen as the doormats. Yet these liminal characters—in these encounters, these ‘threshold’ moments—can be more powerful than knights. Sometimes through imparting information and admonitions or reproaches (after all, as Foucault points out, knowledge is power), and sometimes through eliciting information, controlling or denying access, dwarfs and porters mediate progress either to new spaces, or to new stages of development.

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Notes

1 R. S. Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), pp. 79—85 and 139—45; Vernon Harward, *The Dwarfs of Arthurian Romance and Celtic Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1958).

2 However, an Arthurian porter does occasionally serve in the more modern capacity of a postman or person with whom one can leave a parcel, as when Balin and Balan capture King Royns of North Wales and bring him to Arthur's gates, where they 'delyverde hym to the porters, and charged hem with hym': Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P. J. C. Field, 2 vols (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013), I, p. 59.15—16. All italics are mine unless otherwise stated.

3 *OED*, 'liminal', senses 1, 2, and 3.

4 The ways in which dwarfs and porters 'talk back' resonates with the dimension of class-consciousness in Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and (in part) carnival, as the final section of this essay will address.

5 Just as, in medieval estates literature, women were sometimes treated as a separate, fourth estate, so women can be considered a fourth estate in the class system of Arthurian literature, including liminal women who, like Malory's Lynet in *The Tale of Gareth*, use their voices (and their magic) in potentially carnivalesque ways: Melanie McGarrahan Gibson, 'Lyonet, Lunete, and Laudine: Carnavalesque Arthurian Women,' in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001), pp. 213—27.

6 On the initially inclusive-seeming but ultimately conservative implications of aristocratic or Fair Unknown characters acting in servant roles, see Dhira B. Mahoney, ‘Malory’s *Tale of Gareth* and the Comedy of Class,’ in *The Arthurian Yearbook, I*, ed. Keith Busby (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 165—93, and Helen Phillips, ‘Bewmaynes: The Threat from the Kitchen,’ *Arthurian Literature* XXVIII (2011): 39—55.

7 Malory’s ‘Tale of Sir Gareth,’ while not a Gawain romance per se, can, like *Libeaus Desconus*, be considered apposite with them, due to family ties and shared concerns with courtesy; Gawain, of course, features in the ‘Tale of Sir Gareth’ as Gareth’s ally and (inadvertent) opponent. See, for instance, Arnold Sanders, ‘Sir Gareth and the “Unfair Unknown”’: Malory’s Use of the Gawain Romances,’ *Arthuriana* 16.1 (2006): 34—46.

8 Thomas Hahn, ‘Introduction,’ in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 1—35 (pp. 2—7); Sarah Rae Lindsay, ‘Questioning Chivalry in the Middle English Gawain Romances’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2011), pp. 11—13. Lindsay argues that the relative ‘lateness’ of the Gawain romances—mainly composed in the late fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries—suggests a context for the way in which they question the relationship between chivalry and violence and reflect shifting social values through a preference for a more courtly form of chivalry.

9 Thomas Hahn, ‘Introduction,’ in *Sir Gawain*, p. 24.

10 Malory, *Morte Darthur*, p. 256.24—26.

11 Malory, *Morte Darthur*, p. 258.8—12.

12 Emily Rebekkah Huber, “‘Delyver Me My Dwarf!’” Gareth’s Dwarf and Chivalric Identity,’ *Arthuriana* 16.2 (2006): 49—53.

13 Huber, ‘Gareth’s Dwarf and Chivalric Identity,’ pp. 51—52.

14 *Morte Darthur*, p. 257.20—24.

15 *Morte Darthur*, p. 276.27—31.

16 Despite the fact that the protagonist's name is a French literalisation of the term 'Fair Unknown' that encapsulates the type of romance hero he is, *Lybeaus Desconus* circulated in England as an English romance from the mid-fourteenth century. See George Shuffelton, *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), p. 471; *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. Eve Salisbury and James Weldon (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013). There is a possibility that *Lybeaus Desconus* was written by Thomas Chestre, but the evidence is slight.

17 *Libeaus Desconus*, in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, ed. George Shuffelton (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), l. 146.

18 Penny Simons, 'The Squire, the Dwarf, and the Damsel in Distress: Minor Characters in *Le Bel Inconnu?*,' *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 32.1 (1996): 27—36. Simons focuses on the thirteenth-century Old French version of this narrative, but since the Middle English *Libeaus Desconus* is closely related to it, perhaps through a shared source, the point about the courtliness of this dwarf applies to the Middle English version as well.

19 *Libeaus Desconus*, ll. 478—80.

20 *Libeaus Desconus*, ll. 1260—74; see, similarly, ll. 1740—48.

21 *Libeaus Desconus*, ll. 504—11.

22 *Gologras and Gawain*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), ll. 79—86; emphasis mine.

23 *Morte Darthur*, p. 645.7—12.

24 *Morte Darthur*, p. 55.34—56.5.

25 *Morte Darthur*, p. 56.11—56.18.

26 Even though this retribution does not come to pass within the narrative, the dwarf presumably articulates an accurate picture of the blood feud fault lines engendered; Lancelot's

kin (including his father, the king of Ireland) would have tracked down Balin if Balin and Balan did not have the misfortune to kill each other first.

27 As, indeed, the blurry line at times dividing knights from dwarfs or suggesting their intimate relationship is also visible in French romance: for instance, in Chrétien de Troyes's 'Erec and Enide', Bilis, lord of dwarfs and king of the Antipodes, is said to be both 'a dwarf and full brother of Bliant. Bilis was the smallest of all the dwarves, and Bliant his brother the largest of all the knights in the kingdom by half a foot or a full hand-breadth': 'Erec and Enide,' in *Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 61 [37—122]. For Vernon Harward, Bilis and Bliant are to be traced to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Belinus and Brennius, who in turn 'are ultimately derived from Beli and Bran, two old Welsh gods euhemerized into kings of Britain' (*The Dwarfs*, p. 37). Whether or not Bilis is to be connected to an 'earlier tradition in which the Welsh identify the underground kingdom of the dwarfs with the Antipodean land' (Harward, *The Dwarfs*, p. 39), it is worth noting that the Old Norse dwarfs who live underground and are renowned for their craftsmanship (as made famous by J. R. R. Tolkien) belong to a quite separate tradition: see Andy Orchard, 'Dwarfs,' in *Cassell's Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Cassell, 1997), p. 93, and John Lindow, 'Dwarfs,' in *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 99—101.

28 Eugène Vinaver's presumption of a French source has been superseded by arguments for an English source based on vocabulary and syntax: Eugène Vinaver, *Commentary*, in *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 3rd edn, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), III, pp. 1427—34; P. J. C. Field, 'The Source of Malory's *Tale of Gareth*,' in *Aspects of Malory*, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981), pp. 57—70; Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library: The Sources of the 'Morte*

Darthur' (Cambridge: Brewer, 2008). However, given that there is no extant source but there are partial analogues in other romances (both insular and continental), Malory may have composed his own tale by drawing upon his familiarity with romance more loosely.

29 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 83.

30 'The Knight of the Cart,' in *Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances*, pp. 207—94 (p. 211). Another example of a hostile, information-denying dwarf in French romance is the 'despicable dwarf' who, 'full of evil', strikes both Guinevere's maiden and Erec in turn when they are seeking to discover the identity of the dwarf's knightly master: 'Erec and Enide,' p. 39.

31 Malory, *Morte Darthur*, p. 847.27—28.

32 When Gareth is conspicuously denied access to Lyonesse's castle after he has defeated the Red Knight of the Red Lands, it is not a porter but rather Lyonesse herself who speaks up to refuse Gareth entry and to give him instructions on what he must do in order to return worthy of crossing the threshold and winning her hand in marriage. Although Arthurian porters rarely ultimately deny access to the knights whose travels are narrated, texts often deploy an awareness that the porters *could* deny access in order to invoke the need for travellers to prove their worth.

33 *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ll. 183—89.

34 *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, ll. 199—210.

35 *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, ll. 211—22.

36 *The Carle of Carlisle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ll. 134—58.

37 By contrast, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is when Gawain arrives at Hautdesert that a porter mediates access: here, Gawain courteously asks for shelter from 'a porter pure

plesaunt,’ who seems authorized to speak for the lord of the castle: ‘quop̄ the porter, “and purely I trowee / þat 3e be, wy3e, welcum to won quyle yow lykez”’: J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, rev. Norman Davis (1925; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), ll. 808 and 813—4.

38 *The Greene Knight*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ll. 91—108.

39 Jonathan W. Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: A Study of Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 118.

40 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 225.

41 *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, l. 39.

42 *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, ll. 40—55.

43 *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, ll. 72—77.

44 There are other examples of this in medieval Welsh Arthurian literature, which also foregrounds the role of the porter or gatekeeper, most famously in the figure of Glewlwyd Gafaelfawr (or ‘Brave Grey Mighty Grasp’). This porter appears as part of Arthur’s opposition in ‘What Man is Gatekeeper?’ (extant in the mid-thirteenth-century Black Book of Carmarthen, but composed earlier), controlling access to a fortress outside of which Arthur and his men present themselves seeking entry. Glewlwyd also recurs as Arthur’s chief gatekeeper—who has minion gatekeepers of his own—in ‘The Lady of the Well,’ ‘Geraint son of Erbin,’ and ‘How Culhwch Won Olwen’: see Sioned Davies, in *The Mabinogion*, trans. Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 253—54. In ‘How Culhwch Won Olwen’ (c.1100) for instance, the exchange between Culwch and Glewlwyd occupies about two full pages of the modern translation: Culwch seeks entry, and Glewlwyd initially denies it on the basis of Arthur’s custom or law, causing Culhwch to threaten both to bring dishonor to Arthur and Glewlwyd and to curse the court’s women with miscarriage or infertility if he is not admitted that day. Glewlwyd’s subsequent report to Arthur (leading to

Culhwch's admittance as requested) features an autobiography emphasizing Glewlwyd's age and experience, detailing a life in which he has travelled to places as far-flung as India, Greece and Norway and taken part in or witnessed many battles and duels and 'fair kingly men,' all of which lends greater credence to Glewlwyd's superlative when he declares of Culhwch that 'I never in my life saw a man as handsome as the one who is at the entrance to the gate this very moment' ('How Culhwch Won Olwen,' in *The Mabinogion*, pp. 179—213 (p. 182)). Perhaps this parallels the partially-lost autobiographical statement of the 'proud porter' in *King Arthur and King Cornwall*.

45 See note 48.

46 Malory, *Morte Darthur*, p. 206.23—35. A similar porter-cide occurs later, in 'The Knight of the Cart,' when Launcelot reaches Meleagaunt's castle and 'bare the gate wyde opyn upon the porter, and smote hym undir the ere wyth hys gauntelot, that hys nekke braste in too pecis' (*Morte Darthur*, p. 849.4—6). Gaheris also wrestles with a porter in order to free Sir Tarquin's prisoners, but this porter seems to escape with his life: 'Sir Gaherys threw the porter unto the grounde and toke the keyes frome hym, and hastely he opynde the preson dore' (*Morte Darthur*, p. 204.11—12).

47 See Friedrich W.D. Brie, ed., 'Zwei mittelenglische Prosaromane: *The Sege of Thebes* und *The Sege of Troy*,' *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 130 (1913): 47—52 and 269—85 (48). This is not paralleled in the prose *Thebes*' source, Lydgate's c.1422 *Siege of Thebes*.

48 The two dwarfish exceptions are a dwarf who, with a knight, tells Galahad, Perceval and Bors to halt (p. 768.34), and a dwarf who attacks Launcelot when he is approaching Corbenic and intending to defend himself against the guardian lions with earthly prowess: 'Than sette he honde to his swerde and drew hit. So there cam a dwarff suddeynly and smote hym on the arme so sore that the swerde felle oute of his honde' (p. 772.23—773.1). Here, however, the

authoritative voice that accompanies the dwarf's physical reproach is *not* the dwarf's, but rather 'a voice' (p. 773.2), one of the disembodied voices of religious insight that pervade the Grail Quest, here blaming Launcelot for 'trust[ing] thou more on thy harneyse than in thy Maker' (p. 773.3); dwarfs are better at providing comments or admonitions upon secular chivalry than spiritual chivalry.

49 Though the courtliness of the dwarf Wyndeley in *Libeaus Desconnus*, and the rich array of the proud porter in *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, do show that these servants can sometimes imitate the behavior and appearance of their superiors.

50 *Morte Darthur*, p. 129.13—20.

51 *Morte Darthur*, p. 129.32—35.

52 Hahn, 'Introduction,' in *Sir Gawain*, pp. 6—7.

53 *Merlin, or The Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley, Part III, EETS OS 36 (London: Paul, Trench, and Trübner, 1899), p. 679.

54 *Prose Merlin*, p. 636.

55 *Prose Merlin*, pp. 691—92.

56 *Prose Merlin*, p. 683.

57 *Prose Merlin*, p. 692.

58 *Prose Merlin*, p. 696.

59 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 8. There are surviving records of court dwarfs in the later Middle Ages (see Harward, *The Dwarfs*, pp. 21—27); Arthurian dwarfs do not have to be direct representations of such actual dwarfs in order to act as reminders of the reality of dwarfs as comic figures in medieval society.

60 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 4. More recently, medievalists have demonstrated the wider applicability of Bakhtin's concepts of carnivalesque, polyphony, heteroglossia and so

forth to medieval prose, poetry, and manuscript marginalia: see *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

61 Thomas J. Farrell, 'Introduction: Bakhtin, Liminality, and Medieval Literature,' in *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices*, pp. 1—14 (p. 3).

62 Farrell, 'Introduction,' p. 4. For Bakhtin, the idea of polyphony involves 'the authorial instantiation of unprivileged, divergent world views in [...] characters [which] arises naturally from this multiplicity and interaction of genuine subjects: the authorial voice can claim no ultimate authority over' these subjects: Farrell, 'Introduction,' p. 2.

63 Prose *Merlin*, pp. 636 and 696. Arthurian dwarfs' function of inviting subversive laughter (at or about chivalry) is in some ways paralleled by jester knights such as Malory's Dinadan and Dagonet; however, such figures are knights themselves, rather than commenting upon chivalry from without or below.

64 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 11—12.

65 In Bakhtin's words, 'The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity' (*Rabelais and His World*, pp. 19—20).

66 Malory, *Morte Darthur*, p. 109.33—34.

67 Prose *Merlin*, p. 635.

68 While invoking Bakhtin's theories to probe what Arthurian bit-part characters are doing at the thresholds of chivalric endeavor, it is useful to include Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, which theorizes the significance of thresholds. As Bakhtin explains, a chronotope is the particular configuration of time and space that characterizes a literary text or type, and more particularly, 'the chronotope of threshold' is 'the chronotope of *crisis* and *break* in a life. The word "threshold" itself already has a metaphorical meaning in everyday usage (together with

its literal meaning), and is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold). In literature, the chronotope of the threshold is always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes openly but more often implicitly': M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84—258 (pp. 84 and 248). This seems a useful lens for thinking about the shifting economy of agency, ethics, and knowledge in the time and space in which Arthurian knights encounter dwarfs and porters.