Food, Sovereignty, and Social Order in *Havelok the Dane*

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[T]he daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes the effort painful is not danger but its relentless repetition.¹

I. THE GENRE OF LABOR

As Hannah Arendt suggests in the above passage, there is a generic problem inherent to the story of the struggle of the working class. In myths humans labor heroically against nature and find victory and glory in their efforts. Even when a hero performs a seemingly ordinary act—for example, cleaning out a stable or competing in a swimming contest—the stakes become magnified far beyond what any other person could expect to achieve. For everyone else, there is only a “relentless repetition” of the struggle against decay and chaos, an interminable battle to maintain life itself. The circularity of labor, which must immediately reincorporate some part of what it produces in order to continue working, forestalls the question of heroism as much as its grinding endlessness overflows narrative bounds. To be recognized as extraordinary, a hero must wrest surplus into his possession, a feat that demonstrates excellence among others. In the narrative of productive labor, there are few of the remainders—wealth, honor, or glory—that allow a tale to be pushed toward climax, conclusion, and repose. Labor power as material phenomenon or human condition exists beyond the horizon of aristocratic genres, like tragedy, epic, and romance, and this exclusivity renders these literary forms unable to represent the actual source of the political power they celebrate.

The romance of *Havelok* (ca. 1295) is an experiment in generic frontiers, an attempt to look into the vanishing point that is the unrepresentable space of labor. It is a narrative profoundly concerned with the human body’s distressing vulnerability in a world of sweat and hunger. It is a story pitched at the grand scale of international political maneuvering, of dynas-

ties and usurpation, of invasion and restoration that nonetheless characterizes its own themes in a decidedly more local context, describing itself as a story of “Hw he weren born and hw fedde” (l. 2987). 2 Such a homely assessment seems overly modest for such a rich, complex, and magnificent tale, yet it is literally true. In charting the course from Havelok’s exile in infancy, youth of toil, and ultimate reclamation of his inheritance, the romance never stops watching his body, and his efforts to sustain himself during his exile stand in for the more standard set of adventures of the knight-errant. Havelok is a conspicuously physical hero, remarkable not only for his great size and strength, but for a physicality bound up in the quotidian, in the “rele[i]ntless repetition” of daily struggle for sustenance.

The story of Havelok operates on a continuum between deprivation and labor at one end, and superabundance and effortless acquisition at the other. Havelok’s life moves between these extremes in a relationship intelligible mostly through the consumption of food. The conspicuous presence of eating in Havelok is not an attempt to court the tastes of middle-class readers; rather, food is vital to the romance’s inquiry into political theory. Havelok has long fascinated and puzzled readers with the wealth and realism of its portrayal of working-class life and its apparent lack of traditional romance topoi. It is unique in its disregard of the courtly world of tournaments and quests, a generic panoply that “never pretend[s] to give an accurate picture of life in their times.” 3 Instead, the first thousand lines of Havelok abound with details of working-class life and economic conditions, and create, explicitly, a “rags-to-riches” journey for Havelok. As he climbs the social ladder, we see fish, meat, and bread produced and exchanged, starvation lingering a step away from plenty, and unemployed boys knocking each other down in order to gain work.

This emphasis on the quotidian in a genre otherwise known for its fantasies of courtly life has led to serious misgivings about the author, audience, and purpose of Havelok. Many critics have argued that the homely details of the story could not possibly have appealed to a genteel audience, and therefore found it inconceivable that the poem could have originated anywhere else than outside the aristocracy. 4 But as Susan Crane reminds

2. Havelok, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987). All citations of the poem are taken from this edition. Italicics and brackets have been removed for ease of reading, but otherwise spelling has been maintained.
4. The preeminent expression of this sentiment is Derek Pearsall’s: “The manner of the poem is rough, but the handling of the story bears witness at every point to deliberate purpose, and Havelok has a claim, if any English romance has, to be regarded as the genuine expression of popular consciousness” (“The Development of Middle English Romance,” Medieval Studies, 27 [1965], 99; repr. in Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches, ed. Derek Brewer [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988], p. 19). For the lineage of the
us, “our only evidence of the story’s transmission prior to its appearance in Havelok the Dane finds it within the circles of power,” and the more courtly versions also contain antecedents of the same homely details. Furthermore, the source of the English nobility’s political power was economic, not military—as a consequence, there would have been a great deal of interest in and familiarity with the common objects and practices of everyday life that create and maintain power. The implications of the nobility’s interest in the operations of their own households are explored in the work of D. Vance Smith, who argues that romances are deeply invested in economic questions such as surplus and exchange, and that they reflect this interest in narrative and symbolic choices as they adapt Continental romances to English. Havelok presents an interesting case within Smith’s paradigm: the poem explicitly imagines economic relations rather than wrapping them in symbolic language. The overt, material representation of food in Havelok is central to its purpose, and it is only through food practices that the author can most effectively explore the fundamental connection between the individual laborer and the body politic, as incarnated by its ruler.

In voyaging from the incipient sovereignty of his infancy (the suprasomatic quality that overflows Havelok’s body through his blazing mouth) to the utter servility of his youth, Havelok observes firsthand how the material wealth of the land is produced, exchanged, and altered through the labor power of his rightful subjects. Recent critics have explored Havelok’s inclusive perspective of society as the precocious ideological stirrings of the modern English nation-state. Without refuting this idea, I argue that the story’s integrated and inclusive view of social order explores a more argument for and against middle-class production, I see no need to duplicate Christopher Stuart’s excellent summary in his article “Havelok the Dane and Edward I in the 1290s,” Studies in Philology, 93 (1996), 349–50. Interestingly, none of these arguments addresses the provenance of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 108, the sole witness to the romance of Havelok, choosing instead to determine an audience by characterizing the relative appeal of poetic features, categorizing these features as “high” or “low” literature. Michael Faletra makes a highly persuasive refutation of the populism of Havelok, mobilizing postcolonial ideas of nationhood to understand the protonationalism of the story (“The Ends of Romance: Dreaming the Nation in the Middle English Havelok,” Exemplaria, 17 (2005), 347–80). My own opinion is that the socioeconomic interests of Havelok should be considered as evidence of the artistic integrity of the story—and its political sophistication—rather than a distressing example of the inferior tastes of an English vernacular reader.

5. Crane, Insular Romance (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), p. 43. The story of Havelok is found at the start of Geoffrei Gaimar’s L’Estoire des Engleis (ca. 1150), a chronicle written for Constance fitz Gilbert, an Anglo-Norman noblewoman of Lincolnshire. The only other extant analogue is the Anglo-Norman Lai d’Aveloc (1150–1200).


fundamental problem of political theory: the definition of sovereignty, the ineffable right to assemble a political body to rule. The Havelok poet attempts to represent the moment when subordination is transformed into sovereignty, to discover the act that distinguishes one from the other. Havelok recognizes that the same action that characterizes all humans despite their position in society—eating—also distinguishes an overlord from his many servants. Georges Bataille, exploring the definition of sovereignty in The Accursed Share, makes a similar observation:

What distinguishes sovereignty is the consumption of wealth, as against labor and servitude, which produce wealth without consuming it. The sovereign individual *consumes and doesn’t labor*, whereas at the antipodes of sovereignty the slave and the man without means labor and reduce their consumption to the necessities, to the products without which they could neither subsist nor labor.⁹

The sovereign is distinguished by his ability to “truly enjoy the products of this world,”¹⁰ that is, by consuming what others produce. He never has to experience labor himself, but exists in a state of absolute leisure and enjoyment. His pleasure is not limited by the pain or effort of expending himself in order to produce the objects of his delectation (since to offer up one’s own labor power would expose oneself to the consumption of someone else—and as soon as that possibility exists, one no longer can be recognized as sovereign). The world of sovereignty is not just conspicuously engaged with surplus—as “life beyond need,” it is surplus itself.¹¹ This privileged location of consumption sits in fundamental opposition to the antipodean world of “necessities” and “subsistence,” but is hardly separable from it.¹² The terms that Bataille sets forth are extremely useful to illuminate Havelok’s transition between the highest and lowest positions

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¹¹. Surplus is directly related to the exceptionality, an idea that forms the core of Carl Schmitt’s classic (1934) definition of sovereignty: “Sovereign is he that decides on the exception” (*Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985], p. 5). This powerful and paradoxical statement is revisited and elaborated in Georgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 15–29 and passim. Bataille is responding to Schmitt, though he does not name him directly, in the third part of *The Accursed Share*. Where the exception is a legal, juridical problem mystified by political mythology for Schmitt, Bataille engages sovereignty as an economic condition made mythological.

¹². While Bataille speaks here of a general practice of consumption, as an economic act often posited in opposition, or at least complementary, to production, it should be remembered that consumption in this sense bears a metonymic relationship with the physical act of eating.
in society. In the wake of dynastic and legal failure, represented in the
text by the usurpations of the wicked noblemen Godrich and Godard,
the rebuilding of social order must begin at its most fundamental level,
with the simple act of feeding a hungry child.

II. FOOD IN THE BODY POLITIC

The English king Athelwold, a description of whose reign opens the poem,
offers a paradigm for the ideal relation between food and political author-
ity. The narrator’s extended encomium (ll. 27–105) portrays him as a
bountiful provider, creating laws that are just and appropriately enforced
and roads that are safe from robbers, and giving protection to the poor
and helpless. The poem pointedly lingers on Athelwold’s guardianship
of his people’s nutrition. His strength holds off invaders and prevents the
people from starving due to warfare: “Was non so bold louerd to Rome / Pat
durste upon his londe bringhe / Hunger ne here—wicke þinghe” (ll. 64–66). His virtues are hardly limited to the military; they are matched
and even exceeded by his largesse towards his people:

Hauede he non so god brede
Ne on his bord non so god shrede
Pat he ne wolde þor-wit fede
Poure þat on fote yede (ll. 97–101)

This description of the king’s generosity comes near the end of nineteen
lines that repeat a single rhyme, praising Athelwold’s readiness to fight
his opponents and his obedience to the church. His culinary charity is
another form of kingly magnificence, which expresses both his strength
and his holiness, an act of charity that is simultaneously a conspicuous
display of wealth and power. Feasting upon the best of his people’s prod-
ucts, which he does not produce himself, he can afford to redistribute the
leftovers to the needy of his kingdom. His generosity is only enhanced
by the excellence of the food he is willing to send out as alms. Athelwold
dines in a manner that enforces his claim to rule his nation, but with the
happy result that all have enough to eat.

This vision of peace and plenty, the nutritional process of good rule in
England, is imperiled by Athelwold’s impending death without an adult
heir, a situation that will be repeated in Denmark with Havelok’s father
Birkabeyn.13 Both kings attempt to ensure that their kingdoms will be

13. I read the abbreviated account of Denmark’s political situation as an effort to show
the two countries as twinned entities, equivalent legal bodies, with Birkabeyn’s Denmark
more or less possessing all of those qualities evinced by Athelwold’s England. However,
this interpretation is questioned by Robert Rouse, who suggests that Denmark is a “legal
vacuum,” and the effect of Havelok’s rule over both countries is to import an English form
safe and their heirs provided for until they come to their majority, but Athelwold’s own inability to eat in his final sickness (l. 146) is a sign that a chain of sufficiency has been broken. Despite the kings’ laudable attempts to create a legally binding consensus to ensure the continuity of their realms, deprivation will soon follow. The betrayal of their regents’ oaths is not long in coming, and both Godrich and Godard manifest the renunciation of their vows with acts that deprive the heirs of food: they will “greten ofte sore / Bolpe for hunger and for kold” (ll. 415–16). The implications of tyrannical rule go beyond mere starvation, as displayed by the bloody actions of Birkabeyn’s usurper, Godard. Having imprisoned the king’s children in a tower and arrived to check on their misery, he receives a precocious request for increased maintenance from the three-year-old Havelok:

“For us huncreth swiþe sore,”
Seyden he, “he wolden more:
We ne haue to hete, ne we ne haue
Her inne neþþer knith ne knaue
Þat yeveþ us drinke ne no mete,
Haluendel þat we moun ete—
Wo is us þat we weren born!
Wielaweþ! nis it no korn
Þat men micte maken of bred?
Ws hungreth —we aren ney ded!” (ll. 455–64)

The tiny child and heir appears to know exactly, though intuitively, what he and his sisters are entitled to under the agreement their father made with Godard. In his grammatically convoluted concluding statement, “Nis it no korn / Þat men micte maken of bred,” Havelok recognizes the intimate connection between sustenance and service that is required to preserve them as figures of authority. Godard, in response, carves Havelok’s sisters “al to grotes” (l. 472), into little pieces of flesh, and by doing so provides a terrifyingly literal response to Havelok’s request for food. The horrifying opportunity for cannibalism not only shocks the audience with Godard’s monstrosity; it also illuminates the paradox of sovereignty: that it can never be self-sustaining. Havelok can no more feed upon his sisters’ flesh than his royal identity can allow him to make his own food.

Godard’s cruel bargain with the fisherman Grim, to kill Havelok in exchange for his family’s manumission, appears to be the final step in the dreary collapse of society. Instead it results in restoration and the reintroduction of food into political life. The fisherman’s cold determination to perform his end of the exchange is shattered by the miraculous of legal golden age into the less developed partner (The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005], pp. 104–5).
Food, Sovereignty, and Social Order

revelation of the young Havelok’s heritage. The bright light that flames from the boy’s mouth announces that Havelok’s tiny body is both helpless child and imperiled polity, the twinned person of kingship. The light, and its supplementary “kynemerk”—a cross-shaped birthmark of red gold (as it will be described)—reminds Grim and his wife Leue that the true source of sovereignty is not yet destroyed. The blazing mouth of lordship itself, and the hope it betokens, demands that his subjects give him food, and so the couple perform a pledge of loyalty that centers on the nutritional: “Louerd, we sholen þe wel fede / Til þat þu cone riden on stede” (ll. 622–23). Kneeling in their hovel, Grim and Leue’s words are the first step toward reestablishing an ideal system of loyalty and hierarchy, binding themselves to an agreement that revives the former society out of its broken pieces. Overwhelmed by the awesome display of birthright, they renounce the false bargains of Godard and perform a declaration of servitude. The term of this new state of thralldom is highly specific: Grim and Leue swear to feed Havelok until he is old enough to ride and wield weaponry and perform the functions of knight and king.

Just as Havelok’s birthright becomes conspicuous in a miraculous flash of light, so his first meal is remarkable in its quantity and quality:

“Well is me þat þu mayth hete!
Goddoth!” quath Leue, “Y shal þe fete
Bred an checse, butere and milk,
Pastees and flaunes - al with suilk
Shole we sone þe wel fede,
Louerd, in þis mikel nede.” (ll. 642–47)

The catalogue of dishes given here is surprisingly varied: the food that the fisherman and his wife make spontaneously produces an entire bakery case in response to the miraculous opportunities afforded by Havelok’s glowing mouth. Although cheese, bread, and milk probably formed the bulk of the peasant diet at the best of times, there is an element of luxury

14. The locus classicus for this idea remains Ernst Kantorowicz’s groundbreaking study *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957). Although he analyzes the similarity between the iconography of Christ and Otto II seated in majesty (see Chap. III, esp. pp. 61–66), there is no mention of a flaming mouth as a sign of sovereignty.

15. Havelok’s blazing mouth as a sign of kingship is unique among other English romances, with the only parallel scene found in the legend of Piers Tolle, from the Life of St. John the Almoner and retold in Robert Mannyng’s penitential manual, *Handlyng Synne* (1305), who transforms himself from a miser to a man of saintry charity and is seen by a beggar as having a mouth blazing with light (ed. F. J. Furnivall, 2 vols., EETS o.s., 119 and 123 [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1901–3], ll. 5575–946). It may also be intended to recall the fiery mouths of the Apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), a symbol of divine presence communicable beyond language. Mannyng was a Lincolnshire writer flourishing at the same time as the Havelok poet, and whose *Chronicle* contains a version of the Havelok-legend based on the *Estoire des Engleis*. 
in the other items Leue provides. The baked dishes, the “pastees” and “flaunes,” are food items that would exceed the capabilities of the average peasant house to make. Since most cooking was performed with an open fire or hearth, very few peasant homes would have had facilities for baking. Therefore, pasties and flans would have to be purchased from a baker or cookshop, an expenditure that is unlikely given the late hour and Grim’s abject social position. Leue’s provision is more than enough for Havelok’s needs, but sufficiency is not the point here. Havelok’s nascent kingship spontaneously produces marvelous excess, food that can potentially support a “life beyond utility.” Bataille states that this type of life is precisely the realm of the sovereign, of “the enjoyment of possibilities that utility doesn’t justify (utility being that whose end is productive activity).” The pasties and flans appear at Havelok’s first meal because they represent a kind of surplus expenditure that a plate of salted herring would not. Grim is a fisherman, and the presence of fish in this context would indicate nothing more than a balanced account, a household completely sufficient in itself. But at this moment, Havelok’s presence causes Grim and Leue to suddenly, magnificently exceed the capacity of their own possessions—just as the freedom and reward for fostering the true heir will outstrip what was offered by the usurping regent.

The manner in which Havelok eats Grim’s provender further exposes the intimate connection between eating and nobility: “Anon he bigan to ete / Grundlike, and was ful blipe” (ll. 651–52). The adverb “grund-

16. Thorold Rogers romantically affirms that English peasants lived in a “coarse plenty” (Six Centuries of Work and Wages [London: Sonnenschein, 1884], p. 63), while Stephen Mennell suggests more “monotonous” choices available to the working poor (All Manners of Food [Oxford: Blackwell, 1985], pp. 40–44). Regardless of the amounts posited between these two extremes, the average peasant probably ate very little meat, as most domestic animals were more valuable and productive while alive, and hunting was reserved for the landed classes. Peasants would have largely depended on milk and eggs, or fish, for their intake of animal protein. Christopher Dyer suggests that at the best of times only the most prosperous of peasant families (in fourteenth-century southern England) could have afforded to purchase fresh meat and prepared foods (“Did the Peasants Really Starve in Medieval England?” in Food and Eating in Medieval Europe, ed. Martha Carlin and Joel Rosenthal [London: Hambledon, 1998], pp. 59–60).

17. This dish is not exactly the same as the baked custard dish that we are used to eating, but instead a type of pie or cake. The cookery book known as the Diuersa Servicia (ca. 1381) provides a recipe for “Flownys in Lente,” which consists of a pie shell (or “cofyn”) filled with almond milk, rice flour, figs, almonds, and dates (Curte on Inglesch, ed. Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, EETS s.s. 8 [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985], p. 78, recipe no. 86).

18. Massimo Montanari, describing the growth of a “new” cuisine in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, cites the fad for cakes and pies as a development “dependent upon, or at least favoured by, the presence of an oven, and so one that transcended the domestic environment” (The Culture of Food, trans. Carl Ipsen [Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994], p. 66.)

like” describes a meal that is both serious and delightful, pleasurable and desperately needed, nutritional and political. It is derived from “ground” and originating in the sense of the ground as the lowest part, the basis or foundation of an edifice, landmark, or idea. To describe Havelok’s eating as “grundlike” here is to suggest that he acts according to his most fundamental identity; that Havelok affirms himself to be the heir to the kingdom just by eating. The Havelok poet literally grounds sovereign identity in the child-king through a connection to activity upon the earth: the ground that is worked to produce food is the same ground whose possession underwrites nobility. In this context the word communicates the layers of social complexity in the scene, connoting both solemnity and heartiness, and marking Havelok as inherently noble even at a young age. The word “grundlike” will be repeated four more times in the poem, always describing actions involving Ubbe (a Danish nobleman who will become Havelok’s right-hand man), particularly the tone of the oaths he makes to the true king. But the word will never be used to describe Havelok again, indicating that he is at his most noble during this first meal given him by his subordinates.

Havelok’s first meal in the story is much more than simply the start of a chain of meals that structures the romance, relegated to inferior significance due to its desperate circumstances and domestic setting. In the humble abode of Grim and Leue, the political body of Denmark rises again from its foundation, taking root in the very base of its social structure. It is a domestic beginning to a new political entity: the body politic begins anew, restructured by the family meal. Indeed, Havelok’s

20. MED, s.v. “ground,” 1–14. Compare “groundli,” adv. (a) “Strongly, violently, vehemently,” and (b) “exceedingly, thoroughly, completely; fully” to (c) “basically, fundamentally” and “groundli,” adj., meaning (a) “firm, solid,” or (b) “fundamental, thorough, well-grounded, learned.” Smithers, in the glossary to Havelok (p. 190), gives the definition as “(1) solemnly; (2) in good earnest; (3) vigorously,” definitions that I feel remain close to the connotation of ground or foundation inherent in the word.

21. Ubbe demands the people make oaths to serve Havelok on three occasions: at ll. 2012–15, 2267–71, and 2304–10. The final repetition describes Ubbe’s fight with Godrich: “Grundlike here swerdes ut-drownen” (l. 2660), signifying the puissance and vigor of their battle. Again, in all of these instances, the descriptor signifies action according to one’s basic identity: the people swear oaths; noblemen, even villainous ones, draw swords and fight.

22. As Robert Hanning suggests in “Havelok the Dane: Structure, Symbols, Meaning,” Studies in Philology, 64 (1967), 594. My reading proves that there is indeed a great deal of “social ritual” intended in this meal, just as there will be in Havelok’s first meal in the kitchens of Bertram. Hanning’s article is only one of two that explicitly engage the food in Havelok; the other is Dayton Haskin’s “Food, Clothing and Kingship in Havelok,” American Benedictine Review, 24 (1973), 204–13.

23. Julie Nelson Crouch affirms the vital connection between childhood and kingship: “the Middle English Havelok begins and ends with an attention to children that equates their good keeping with the proper, orderly continuation of the kingdom” (“The Vulnerable Hero,” The Chaucer Review, 42 [2008], 334).
first meal becomes an important political lesson in the sovereign’s need for recognition from his subordinates. By subjecting themselves to the child king, Grim and Leue make themselves subjects to Havelok’s authority and submit themselves to the miraculous possibilities that are not their own. Their labor, both in Denmark and after the family’s flight to England, makes sovereignty possible, even if they will never directly benefit from its realization.

III. THE ROMANCE OF VOCATION

Grim’s hurried flight into exile separates Havelok from his inheritance not only by physical, but also by social and economic distance: by moving from Denmark to England, he also moves from a world of perilous recognition to one of anonymity and backbreaking work. In the world of subordination represented by England, food can only be represented through labor and exchange: it no longer appears miraculously in response to need, as had Havelok’s first meal. Grim’s life in England is solely depicted in terms of labor and commodities:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Grim was fishe} & \text{er wipe god,} \\
\text{And mikel cou} & \text{pe on } \text{pe } \text{flod—} \\
\text{Mani god fish } & \text{per-inne he tok,} \\
\text{Bothe with neth and with hok.} & \\
\text{He tok } & \text{pe sturgium and } \text{pe qual,} \\
\text{And } & \text{pe turbut and lax withal;} \\
\text{He tok } & \text{pe sele and } \text{pe hvel—} \\
\text{He spedde ofte wi} & \text{pe wel.} \\
\text{Keling he tok and tumberel,} & \\
\text{Hering and } & \text{pe makerel,} \\
\text{pe butte, } & \text{pe schulle, } \text{pe } \text{porenbake. (ll. 750–60)}
\end{align*}
\]

The so-called “catalogue of fish” is an odd inversion of a traditional feature of epic poetry. Whereas classical epics like the \textit{Iliad} or the \textit{Aeneid} use the catalogue as a way to amplify and embroider descriptions of the power of princes or the magnitude of battles, this one lists commodities as made comprehensible through human labor. The fish are not simply inert parts of the list: they are wrested from the mysterious depths of the sea, a fact emphasized by the repeated phrase “he tok” and the invocation of the tools Grim uses to catch them (“with neth and with hok” [l. 753] “se-weres” [l. 785]). The poem itself depends on Grim’s toils, as the fish can only be named through his efforts, their presence as literary artifacts dependent upon human action. They serve to describe another kind of power: the economic potential of Grim’s skill and knowledge, which can create prosperity from the water. The catalogue is deliberately structured—the fish that head
the list, the sturgeon and whales, were often associated with the nobility, while the last items are the flatfishes that dwell on the bottom of the sea.\textsuperscript{24} The catalogue expresses the abundance of fish around the mouth of the Humber, and ties the representation of food to the application of human labor. The catalogue of fish, as R. M. Liuzza observes, is "not a gratuitous detail; it is the object of Grim’s hard work and the source of his prosperity. Inseparable from material motivation or production, the catalogue of fish is part of a system in which money rather than chivalric honor is the source of value."\textsuperscript{25} Just as honor has no value without another person to recognize it, this commercial system has no coherence without acts of exchange. The fish are commodities in motion, sent forth into time; they have a present and a future, destined for the marketplace, to be bartered and sold, and transformed into some other commodity. The symbolic power of the catalogue of fish lies precisely in its transitory readiness to be exchanged for another plethora of verbal signs and material objects. The next twenty-four lines constitute yet another catalogue, describing the items that Grim and his three sons earn at the marketplace for their fish: the bread, beans, and wheat that form the staples of their diet (ll. 768–71). Their economic status is dramatically enhanced when Grim can catch an especially marketable fish, the lamprey, that can be sold for cash and used to purchase the other commodities, the meat, rope, and finer types of bread that the family needs in order to thrive (ll. 772–85). Nevertheless, whether receiving money or barter for their product, Grim’s family is undeniably subordinate, not just socially but materially as well.

Although the town of Grimsby will be founded around the site of Grim’s earthen house (as related at ll. 734–49), there seem to be no people outside of the family in Havelok’s account of life in England. There are towns and granges, but they are places only, potential markets where commodities come and go. There is a strict materialism about Grimsby, disturbing in its tacit substitution of things for people. The romance here portrays the rise of market relations in what was economically fallow land, revealing the moment when the social relations between humans become expressed through the public action of exchange.\textsuperscript{26} Though the narrative has not yet

\textsuperscript{24} The simple categorization of the fish that come between the head and foot of the list is rather more complicated. For instance, herring and cod [\textit{keling}] were the most common food fishes of the region and would seem to merit a higher position in the list. Also, several of the fish listed are difficult to identify, as they are either \textit{hapax legomena} [\textit{tumberel}] or possible scribal repetition [\textit{goot to huel}, both meaning ‘whale’].

\textsuperscript{25} Liuzza, “Representation and Readership in the Middle English \textit{Havelok},” JEGP, 93 (1994), 510.

\textsuperscript{26} This world of commerce fits Marx’s description: “It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (\textit{Capital}, trans. Ben Fowkes [New York: Penguin, 1977], I, 165).
reached the lowest moments in the trajectory of Havelok’s servility, this life of market exchange represents a shocking departure from the world of sovereignty and the genres that represent it. In this antipodean world, men do not have ownership over their possessions and to survive by these things is to become subordinated to the process of their exchange.

Even so, the materialism of Grim’s life does not feel that desperate. In fact the family can support the boy king in a manner that more or less befits his noble status, preserving his “life beyond utility.” Havelok continues to eat in a sovereign manner, but he eventually realizes the inequality of the arrangement, and the injustice that these circumstances precipitate:

Havelok was war þat Grim swank sore
For his mete, and he lay at hom—
Pouthe, “Ich am nou no grom!
Jch am wel waxen and wel may eten
More þan euere Grim may geten.
Jch ete more, bi God on liue,
Than Grim an hise children fiue! (ll. 789–95)

At this moment Havelok realizes the hardship in which his own appetite places his family: that his ability to eat more than “Grim an hise children fiue” will eventually outstrip even Grim’s extraordinary resourcefulness. He recognizes that his massive capacity for consumption should be converted into an equally massive potential to perform productive labor. Not only can he bear four times as much fish as his brothers, he can also sell them for silver more easily. Havelok “submit[s] to the useful” in such a way that he estranges himself utterly from his own innate sovereignty, a privileged state that his foster parents have attempted to maintain.

Acknowledging his subordinate condition, Havelok decides to live according to the terms of life in this new world. The boy king, turning his back on his own royal destiny, proclaims, “Swinken Ich wolde for mi mete— / Jt is no shame for to swinken” (ll. 799–800), an affirmation literally bounded by work and toil.

The story of Havelok has become thoroughly imbued in the material world, a place where idealistic motives have no role in inspiring action. In the Lai d’Aveloc, Grim sends Havelok to Lincoln in order to instill his foster son with the social graces his status will require. In the English ver-

27. Bataille, The Accursed Share, III, 198. Havelok is a child during this time, but childhood was usually no exemption from the average working family’s labor.
29. Le Lai d’Aveloc and Gaimar’s Haveloc Episode, ed. Alexander Bell (London: Longmans, 1925), ll. 166–84. This episode does not appear in the Estoire des Engleis. The relationship of food to acquisition of such social graces is very important, as conduct manuals, for example Stans Puer ad Mensam or the “Urbanitatis,” define manners almost entirely by behavior at the table.
tion, however, natural and economic disaster forces action. A great famine shatters the careful balance that Grim has managed to create and forces Havelok to travel to Lincoln to seek employment, clad only in a shirt cut from an old sail. This begins a quest for vocation that is wholly unique to the Middle English Havelok, not appearing in the known analogues of the poem. Whereas other dispossessed noblemen, such as the hero of King Horn, assume a humble disguise in order to further their cause, their day-to-day existence is never dominated by the need to work. In making Havelok actually work, the story reveals an unusual quality of the mundane and sympathy for the lower classes in the representation of the city, and this clarity of perception cuts through the conservative generic expectations of romance or epic narrative. Havelok actually becomes a poor laborer, and as a result the story is transformed from a tragedy—the genre of princes and their inevitable fall—to a sort of desperate realism, a world of arbitrary misfortunes and impoverished people. Havelok does not deserve his hardships any more than the other people on the streets of Lincoln do, and his successes are just as randomly encountered. This drastic reduction in circumstance has the effect of portraying life at its least miraculous and most abject.

On the streets, Havelok reaches the nadir of his relationship with well-fed sovereignty. Now he must confront a world of desperation and death utterly unlike anything encountered by romance’s more martial heroes. Heroes like Beowulf or Roland, for example, often confront the possibility of death, but the perils they face are notable and worthy of narrative: their demise will ultimately unite a textual community. Theirs is a sovereign death, wasteful and glorious, and faced without hesitation. Bataille compares the difference between this experience of death and the one experienced in the subordinate world:

> From the viewpoint of the sovereign man, faintheartedness and the fearful representation of death belong to the world of practice, that is, of subordination. In fact, subordination is always grounded in the alleged need to avoid death. The sovereign world does have an odor of death, but this is for the subordinate man; for the sovereign man, it is the world of practice that smells bad; if it does not smell of death, it smells of anguish; its crowds sweat from the anguish provoked by shadows . . .

If the state of servility, as Bataille describes, is “grounded in the alleged need to avoid death,” then to preserve one’s livelihood, to apply effort to maintain oneself, is the death of sovereignty. Havelok faces utter ignominy in perishing, a nameless death that perpetuates nothing, but he has already died as a sovereign body. And death certainly seems the only

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end to be anticipated from Havelok’s experience in Lincoln. He spends two days without eating and then earns a piece of bread for bearing meat into the Earl of Lincoln’s castle, a job he acquires only by shoving other hopefuls down into the mud (ll. 872–73; 892–95). It is then two more days before the opportunity to work again arrives. There is a painful irony to the transaction, a heart-breaking incommensurability between paucity and plenty: Havelok can carry an entire cartload of food, yet in return he receives only a “ferping wastel,” a tiny piece of bread insignificant in either monetary or nutritional terms. The exchange of labor for food, which Grim had balanced for a time, now only leaves Havelok in arrears. He can never receive enough food to restore the strength he expends to earn it. This is not a romanticized world of a happy working class, nor is the bustle of Lincoln’s streets anything Havelok can enjoy.31 There is nothing here but fear, hardship, and a slow descent into starvation and death.

There is food for Havelok in Lincoln, but it exists in the bounded space of the Earl’s castle, a place from where the administrative apparatus of the sovereign reaches out to bring in more. The household’s open mouth, a conduit constantly cycling in commodities, voraciously consumes food-stuffs as if there were no famine, using all it takes in to perpetuate its display of political and economic power. Having only come into contact with abundance while bearing huge loads of fish in exchange for insufficient pay, Havelok faces an easy choice: to serve in the noble kitchen and live, or die of hunger on the streets outside.

IV. BANQUETS (AND DREAMS) OF POWER

Havelok’s existence in the Earl of Lincoln’s kitchen allows him to survive even as it places him at the site of the production of sovereignty. His employment provides him a valuable lesson about political power though he toils at its abject, filthy root. The lord’s kitchen is where the gastronomic spectacle of the banquet is created, announcing the sovereign power of the lord over his people. The feast feeds the household and replenishes bodies in exchange for loyalty and service, thereby creating and maintaining relationships with other lords and their own retainers. More importantly, the banquet is a demonstration of executive privilege and the right to seize and manipulate commodities, to waste and destroy them as one sees fit.

Havelok’s employment in the kitchen provides a valuable lesson about social power. There is still a great distance between him and noble eating,

though within the walls of Lincoln’s castle he has some connection to the magical process by which sovereign display is created. But Havelok is a minor figure in the kitchen, given the most menial tasks in the symbolic presentation of social power:

Fir and water I wile you fete,  
ße fir blowe and ful wele maken;  
Stickes kan ich breken and kraken,  
And kindlen ful wel a fyr,  
And maken it to brennen shir.  
Ful wel kan ich cleuen shides,  
Eles to turuen of here hides;  
Ful wel kan ich dishes swilen,  
And don al þat ye euere wilen. (ll. 913–21)

He is given only tasks that require him to lift and carry raw materials: wood, water, kindling, and enormous baskets of fish and meat (above as well as ll. 933–41), while receiving only food in exchange. He becomes practically dehumanized while working for Bertram, more beast of burden than man, clad poorly and suffering from his endless labors (ll. 944–67). Here he still must work so that his masters may consume the products of their privilege, but at least he receives enough to eat.

His labors estrange him from any but the most vicarious experience of lordship. The banquet—the end-point of so much labor, the culminating moment of political display—is precisely what is lacking in the account of Havelok’s employment in the kitchen: he suffers (l. 949) but never toils toward any particular social function. Instead he endures an endless process of work upon a feast that he can never attend. If Havelok is to regain his lost sovereignty, then he must rediscover the enjoyment of eating as well as the social performance of the banquet. Havelok must be able to eat once again in a “grundlike” manner: with the satisfaction of hunger accepted as a political necessity by others, a recognition which establishes both the political system and his sovereign identity atop it.

Godrich’s evil plan to disparage his ward Goldeborw, the dispossessed daughter of King Athelwold, by marrying her to the lowly Havelok unexpectedly places the Danish heir back into contact with the possibilities of the sovereign world. Chosen only for the conspicuous gap between his great height and base circumstances, which allows Godrich to fulfill his oath (made at l. 199) to marry Goldeborw only to the “heste” man in England, Havelok nonetheless is empowered by the union to choose a new life for himself and his wife. Aware of the humiliating conditions awaiting his new wife in the kitchens (“Men sholde don his leman shame,” l. 1192), Havelok decides to escape from the kitchens of Lincoln and the servile life that sustains him. The regent’s malicious act immediately redounds
to great good, as Havelok gives up the job that keeps him subordinated to regal power and frees Goldeborw from her imprisonment. Flight from sovereignty’s terrible workshop also places Havelok back into a trajectory where he will be the guest of honor at a banquet—three, in fact, and each of increasing size and importance. These feasts are dramatically different in the way they represent Havelok eating: food and labor become separated from each other as Havelok climbs up the social scale, but as the work disappears so will the means by which food can be represented in the poem. Havelok, the hungriest hero in Middle English literature, will cease eating as he assumes his throne.

The first of these banquets carefully recreates Grim and Leue’s meal for the young Havelok back in Denmark. That first meal was modest and familial though vitally important: the exchange of food restarted the social order broken by Godard’s betrayal. Again, a social order has been broken with Havelok’s renunciation of subservience, and again the family initiates a new order. Having become successful and wealthy in the community named for their foster father, Havelok’s family embraces him with a feast thrown in his honor. The children of Grim reiterate their father’s pledge to serve the Danish heir and place their lives and possessions at his disposal. A homecoming feast follows this pledge of loyalty:

Hwan he þis ioie haueden maked,
Sithen stikes broken and kraked,
And þe fir brouth on brenne,
Ne was þer spared gos ne henne,
Ne þe hende ne þe drake.
Mete he deden plente make—
Ne wantede þere no god mete,
Wyn and ale deden he fete,
And hem made glade and bliþe;
Wesseyl ledden he fele siþe. (ll. 1238–47)

The action of a single person is given up here for verbs in the third person plural: “he” (they) is repeated throughout the passage, but their identity is not entirely clear and not important. The collectivity of the feast is what gives it significance. Havelok at this point is just another member of the family, enjoying their hospitality and sharing their board. The lack of pronoun referents and the use of passive verbs emphasize the lack of actors in this scene, creating the image of faceless servants even as they recall Havelok’s anonymous labors as a scullion (when his duties included tasks like hauling and breaking firewood, ll. 913–21). We remember the hero’s backbreaking labor in the kitchen but are not given the opportunity to identify with anyone else performing that labor. Havelok no longer toils in the kitchen but, ostensibly, on the level of language, neither does anyone else.

The elision of the laborer also operates to conceal Grim’s family’s frantic
sacrifice: they instantly alienate themselves and give up all of their possessions to Havelok. They offer to be given away in marriage or sold as slaves if needed (“Thou mithe us boþe yeue and selle / Thou mayt us boþe selle and yeue,” ll. 1219–20), and the poem describes this chiasmic act of submission as if it were a perfectly natural, unremarkable thing. The account of the foodstuffs given up to their brother’s enjoyment (geese, chickens, ducks, and lots of alcohol) recalls the property that Grim was forced to sell in order to enable his desperate escape from Denmark (ll. 700–3), as well as the catalogues of Grim’s economic activity that supports the family (ll. 750–85). The family’s abandoned resources symbolize their utter sacrifice of a secure future to that promised by Havelok’s ascension, a desire to spend their surplus magnificently to exalt and celebrate their royal foster brother. The abasement of Grim’s family before Havelok marks an important moment in his quest to achieve his lost birthright: they recognize themselves as his rightful subjects and proclaim their submission. But submission does not automatically make Havelok a lord.

To become transformed from kitchen boy to king, Havelok must also recognize himself as the sovereign, the subject to whom everyone else is object. Although he possesses genealogical and theological claims to the throne of Denmark, represented by the birthmark on his shoulder and his illuminated mouth, he has no consciousness of their significance, or has seemingly forgotten his heritage through a lifetime of labor and struggle. The Havelok poet raises the same epistemological question pondered by Bataille: How can sovereignty know itself? Bataille notes:

To know is always to strive, to work; it is always a servile operation, indefinitely resumed, indefinitely repeated. Knowledge is never sovereign: to be sovereign it would have to occur in a moment. But the moment remains outside, short of or beyond, all knowledge.32

Knowledge and sovereignty do not coexist. But sovereignty must know itself in order to achieve identity. This paradox confronts the Havelok poet just as it confronts Bataille, and creates an opportunity for startling innovation in the traditional story of Havelok, allowing the poet to depart dramatically from the story’s extant sources in order to answer this question. In both the Estoire des Engleis and Havelok, the missing information is relayed through a portentous dream. The dream vision in medieval literature represents a type of knowledge that is not governed by reason or logic—it is spontaneous and revelatory, but it is not sovereign knowledge. A dreamer can ascend through the planes of the universe and see the very throne of God, but that experience does not convey sovereign knowledge once it has been analyzed and written down.

Gaimar (and the *Lai d’Aveloc*) avoid the paradox by distancing Havelok from the dream-vision, instead giving the prophetic dream to Argentille (Goldeborw’s counterpart) and placing its interpretation in the hands of a convenient hermit. The vision itself is an ornate pageant of wild animals: a wild bear stalks her and Havelok between the sea and the forest. Pigs and boars come to their aid and fight the bear along with the foxes that accompany him. A great boar then slays the bear and the foxes submit themselves to Havelok. The trees salute Havelok and the sea rises, and finally a pair of lions arrive, killing the remaining beasts but kneeling before Havelok. The flooding woods are then filled with frightful noise and Argentille awakens to see Havelok’s mouth emitting bright light.\textsuperscript{33}

The noise and violence of Gaimar’s scene stands in marked contrast to *Havelok*, where the predominant tone is stunned quiet and youthful innocence, the imagery simple and powerful. The *Havelok* poet adapts the portentous dream from his sources but transforms the convention through the powerful simplicity of the vision he gives Havelok. The dream is a conscious and daring attempt to step outside of overwrought allegory, like that seen in Gaimar, and into a more symbolic, as well as philosophically ambitious, mode of representation. Havelok’s dream provides a glimpse of what sovereign knowledge might look like. The heir to Denmark understands his destiny and birthright without strife or struggle, in a moment that stands in dramatic contrast to the bustle and flurry that have identified Havelok’s life so far.

Havelok can work to achieve many things, but he can never work to attain sovereign knowledge. He needs to experience a revelation that will invert his self-awareness and pull him out of his subordinate circumstances and back to the romance narrative of his lost inheritance. The Grim family’s ritual of remembered allegiance rekindles Havelok’s self-knowledge—and the spending of their labor and the glorious waste of their sacrifice provides the raw material for it to occur. Others work; Havelok is brought to self-recognition. So that night as he sleeps and Goldeborw witnesses the flaming light pouring from his mouth, Havelok experiences a “selkup drem” of sitting atop the tallest hill in Denmark, where he can see the whole world spread out beneath him:

\begin{quote}
Als I sat up-on þat lowe
J bigan Denemark for to awe,
Þe borwes and þe castles stronge;
\end{quote}

And mine armes weren so longe
Pat I fadmede al at ones,
Denemark with mine longe bones.
And þanne Y wolde mine armes drawe
Til me and hom for to haue,
Al þat euere in Denemark liueden
On mine armes faste clyueden;
And þe stronge castles alle
On knes bigunnen for to falle —
Pe keyes fellen at mine fet. (ll. 1292–1304)

The image is one of disarming innocence: a childlike Havelok looks down on the panorama beneath him and amuses himself with the contrast in perspective. Everything else is small but his outstretched arms appear so enormous that he can embrace their entirety (fadmede al at ones). The word “fathom” in this context is rich and complex. It signifies intimate physicality, to embrace or encircle with one’s arms, the enjoyment of close relations to family, friends, and other social equals. But it also is the act of a parent or superior to a child or dependent; it is nurturing and protective, physical reassurance communicated through the tactile awareness of superior size and stature. A fathom is also a measure of height or depth, the space marked between a grown man’s outstretched arms, an extension of the body that makes spaces comprehensible by humanizing distance. There is a cognitive dimension to fathoming as well: one encircles a concept with one’s mind and understands it. So Havelok not only embraces Denmark, he measures it in terms of his own body and comprehends his realm in relation to himself. He experiences his birthright in a “grund-like” manner: his body symbolically united with the earth that forms his rightful inheritance, and he solemnly becomes the corporeal equivalent of the entire country he is destined to rule.

The illusion of scooping up distant castles and towns, however, is not broken when he tries to clutch them to his body—in the dream perspective becomes reality. Havelok recognizes Denmark as his own, and Denemark recognizes him in return. His kingdom returns his embrace as child clings to its parent: “Al þat euere in Denemark liueden / On mine armes faste clyueden” (ll. 1300–1301). The act is somatic and performative, and most importantly, it is consensual. The mutuality and willingness of the parties here surely recalls the absence of consent at earlier stages of the story: Godrich’s authoritarian rule of England (“Al Engelond was of him adrad, / So his þe beste from þe gad,” ll. 278–79) as well as Goldeborw’s forced marriage to Havelok. The people cling to him, and the castles, by kneeling and dropping their keys at his feet, and submit themselves to his protection—an oneiric return to the perfect state constructed by Athelwold at the poem’s beginning. The emphasis is not on the nation
as a single body, but on the individual entities of that nation at the moment that they are incorporated. Arranged spatially below the heir and made common through their shared geography, the different parts of the country of Denmark are formed into a whole by Havelok’s action. By embracing them and being embraced in turn, Havelok becomes aware of his sovereignty. Furthermore, the act of extending and contracting his arms to collect his birthright, as well as the use of several words that signify both height and depth (fadmede; lowe, ‘hill’ or ‘depression’) makes this vision peculiarly Havelok’s. Not only is Havelok destined to climb to power from the depths of the social world, but he has done so through Grim the fisherman’s ability to draw life and meaning from the depths of the ocean. But where Grim used tools and his great skill (mikel coule, l. 751) to win sustenance for his family and attain economic sufficiency, Havelok can gather his birthright with his arms alone—from the breadth of the land rather than the depth of the sea. Without effort or sweat he attains the sovereign knowledge he will need to triumph over his enemies and restore his rightful rule.

The remainder of the story is in some sense an anticlimax after the spectacular dream: Havelok’s victory over his oppressors is a foregone conclusion once he recognizes himself and returns to his homeland. The narrator is doggedly determined, however, to present the entire process of returning to rule, from winning the favor of Ubbe, the local magnate (ll. 1626–714), to a bone-crunching brawl with a gang of thieves (ll. 1767–920) to his recognition by Ubbe as the rightful heir to the throne (ll. 2086–312). Within this account are two more feasts that mark Havelok’s final ascent to power, and these two occasions reveal a startling change in his relation to food: the assumption of his noble identity is also the end of Havelok’s hunger. The first of these final meals occurs on Havelok’s first night in his homeland, when Ubbe is given a fantastically valuable gift, a ring bearing a stone valued at hundred pounds (ll. 1633–34), by the mysterious Havelok and his beautiful wife. The compelling nature of the ring and the apparent nobility of its giver demands that Ubbe provide a gift in return, and so he responds with a gracious invitation to dinner:

Dan ne he were set and bord leyd,
And pe beneysun was seyd,

34. MED, s.v. “loue,” (1) & (3); “loue,” adj. Etymologically, “low” as in “low places” is derived from the ON lage, while the other comes from the AS hlaw, a funerary mound or barrow. There are extant uses of either in texts contemporary with Havelok.

35. A folio is missing from the manuscript at this point in the story, and therefore the rationale for Havelok’s disguise and the circumstances of his encounter with Ubbe are missing. The Estoire and the Lai introduce a magic ring that belonged to Gunter (Birkabeyn’s counterpart in these versions) that gave its wearer invulnerability, which Sigur Estalre (Ubbe) recognizes as belonging to the departed king.
In contrast to the feast with Grim’s family, all mention of dinner preparation is elided except for the setting of the table. This meal is conspicuously a display of political power, an act of a lord’s generosity to a potential retainer. Ubbe demonstrates his economic wherewithal as a lord who can properly feed and care for those in his service. Accordingly the meal is exceedingly noble in its meats: crane, swan, venison, salmon, sturgeon, even the lampreys that represented monetary wealth back in Grimsby. Though power is intended to radiate from Ubbe to his guest, Havelok is spontaneously served the food that fits him best, even when the host does not fully recognize his guest. Decorum seems the most important aspect of the meal: the formality of setting the table for dinner; the “beneysun” said before the meal as much a part of the form as the consumption of the rhyming “ueneysun.” There are still some traces of the servants here though, in the image of the smallest servants (no page so lite, l. 1733) getting their share of the ale going around the table. But while there are dishes on the table and drink to be had, there is no indication of their enjoyment by the guests. In this new world of political maneuvering and sovereign plenty, the feast becomes more of a performance and ritual, and less nutritive in its focus.

Feasting as social ritual is even more important for the banquet Ubbe holds to gather the people of Denmark so they can recognize Havelok as their king. The scene is a literal realization of Havelok’s dream; the stretching out of his arms to his people is revealed to be a call to dinner. But here the transformation of Havelok’s position in the world is revealed, a change signaled by the way that the feast is described. Decorum dominates the event—forty days of spontaneous merry-making on the occasion of Havelok’s coronation, its participants curiously unconcerned about the usurping regent still at large. Furthermore, the visceral representations of food that were so important in previous feasts are at this moment almost an afterthought. There are many entertainments for the guests, comprised of both high- and low-brow activities, all exhaustively catalogued: jousting, wrestling, stone-throwing, minstrelsy, games of chance, reading of romances, and the baiting of bulls and boars (ll. 2321–32). But the menu is related in a few curt lines:
These lines do little more than note the presence of food and wine, and to assure their oceanic amounts. We do not read how merrily or heartily the guests consumed this food, nor are we given invocations of wassailing and toasting that followed each of the two previous feasts.

At such a triumphant moment plenitude is the only criterion. The overflowing board of Athelwold is reconstituted in the final moments of the poem by Havelok’s plenteous regal fare, promising a return to sufficiency and a smoothly run government for the whole of Denmark and England.

V. CONCLUSION

The final moments of Havelok promise a banquet of good rule to come but never actually include the feast. Food remains in a state of suspension between exchange and enjoyment: we are assured of plenty but never see that abundance in use. After the feast with Grim’s children, Havelok is never again shown eating, and after Denmark recognizes its true king, no one seems to eat. Even the wicked Godard invokes in vain the meals he provided his retainers: “Jch haue you fed and yet shal fede— / Helpe me nu in þis nede” (ll. 2421–22). His promises of food can do nothing to stem the tide of Havelok’s conquest. A final banquet is held after England has been liberated and Godrich punished, but it passes in a mere three lines (ll. 2949–51); suddenly the event is of little imaginative interest, an afterthought to the triumphal rush of the romance to its conclusion. The fullness of the legend itself has squeezed out all other images of plenty. Even Havelok’s own enormous and overabundant body, once defined by its boundless capacity for mighty labor, has been subsumed into the status of a figurehead. As the unchallenged ruler of England and Denmark he is transformed into an even larger body, the living symbol of political power.

The disappearance of eating in a story where it has previously been so important is vexing, especially when the narrator will finally insist that this story originates in the account of “Hw he weren born and hw fedde” (l. 2987). This bald statement seemingly grounds the entire international drama in simple acts of nurture, in moments of eating that would be unexceptional except for Havelok’s royal birth. The duality suggested in this line, however, indicates that there is something more important to the story than just consumption. It proposes that sovereignty func-
tions as both a synchronic fact of lineage and a diachronic practice of recognition. If sovereignty is distinguished by its claim to consume what it does not produce, it does not follow that simply eating is enough to demonstrate political power. In untangling the strands of epistemology and economics that are woven together in the problem of political power, Bataille argues for the need of recognition by those that are ruled. Traditional sovereignty, he states, “also presupposes that the masses see the sovereign as the subject of whom they are the object.” Some other person or persons must objectify themselves and make their labor available for the sovereign’s consumption. Someone must feed the royal child in order for him to grow up to be a king. The act of nurture that follows recognition is the common denominator in the progression of the five meals I have followed through *Havelok*: every time a person recognizes their obligation to the boy king, whether consciously or not, they feed him and nurture him. Recognition followed by food allows Havelok to be revealed as “grundlike”—solemn, noble, foundational—just as he was as a tiny child on the floor of Grim and Leue’s hovel (l. 652). This is also why his blazing mouth is always observed in close proximity to not just food but to those with the means to act upon the light’s bright promises. Lack of recognition, or else a refusal to recognize, as is evident in the horrors of Godard or the brutality of the streets of Lincoln, results in starvation. Each time the scene of a meal is repeated, the circle of recognition is extended until it encompasses the entire land that Havelok is destined to rule. If recognition by others, by the people, by the subjects of one’s rule, results in the production of food, then what the sovereign is truly hungry for is that recognition. By the time that Havelok has conquered both Denmark and England, there is nothing left for which to hunger: two nations recognize his right over them and will labor hereafter to satisfy his every need.

At this level, the story demands to be read conservatively: the romance is perfectly reparative and the violations of the social order it celebrates are seamlessly restored as soon as born heirs regain their rightful place. Such a reading would accord with the generic expectations of romance, which usually portray an aristocratic hero’s quest for self-realization that will enable the perfect possession of his birthright. According to this model, Havelok’s journey through the working world reveals the mechanisms by which the power he is entitled to wield is produced and distributed, a revelation that brings him into full self-consciousness of what that power

means and how to use it. The distribution of power, and the food that attends upon it, is uneven by nature, but so long as the proper figurehead stands atop the system, the apparent inequities in the social world are revealed as harmonious and necessary.

To view Havelok, however, as just a story of traditional political systems that operate in perfect harmony is to smooth over the disturbing implications of the degradation and tortuous work experienced by the hero at his lowest moments. His travail is terribly real within the story, the injustice of his compelled servitude the equal of even the worst crimes committed against him by Godard. Havelok thoroughly experiences the burden that faces humanity in the postlapsarian world: he must “do [his] mete to þigge / And ofte in sorwe and pine ligge” (ll. 1374–75). The genre of romance is notable for the automatic satisfaction of its heroes’ bodily needs; invisible servants generate sustenance that is consumed without being any more visible. Havelok violates this expectation by making nutrition itself the object of a quest. The story weaves together food, servitude, and pain in order to elevate quotidian needs into a heroic pursuit. But this pursuit is not in itself heroic: labor is circular, and a body that has earned its bread through sweat will be hungry again soon. Havelok may obtain a surplus that allows him rest and conclusion, but the vast majority of laborers will never find either. To represent labor as heroic in the romance of Havelok is to bestow that same dignity upon all those that suffer and starve around the dispossessed heir. Havelok’s travails reveal the deep injustice in the political and economic systems the poem claims to celebrate, inequities that only radical change may redress. Havelok’s victory lies primarily in its ability to consolidate aristocratic power away from its extended and deeply sympathetic view of the working classes.

The suffering necessary to create sovereignty, and the compassion this pain invokes, create an uncomfortable remainder in the story. The need to repress this surplus sympathy perhaps explains the ultimate disappearance of food from the field of representation. Havelok eats as much as he can as he struggles toward his inheritance, but once he has achieved it, any focus on his food is indecorous, a distressing reminder of irresolvable injustices. The status quo that is restored with Havelok’s reign is ideologically reciprocal, but this reciprocity can only hold true on the largest scale: portraying what the true king eats recalls Havelok’s own harrowing existence as a starving laborer. It reminds us that those laborers are still starving and serving in order to bring food to the tables of the powerful. The kitchen still transmutes subordinate labor into sovereign life, still grinds and stamps and strains. It can only be hoped that
the appetites of those it serves are moderate in their demands. *Havelok*, though essentially a conservative text, has raised provocative questions about sovereignty and sufficiency that trouble the reestablishment of an ideal political system, calling attention to inequities of appetite, labor, and deprivation that differentiate highest from lowest, even as it yearns for a golden age of proportionality that preserves the best features of that economic system.
Abstract  A consensus has developed that the ideology of Havelok the Dane is feudal and conservative, intended to present, in its likable protagonist, an apologia for kingly prerogative. Following those scholars who link the poem’s goals more closely to the reign of Edward I, this paper argues that Havelok’s insatiable hunger—and his sweet-tempered concern for the expenses it imposes on those who have fostered him—is a recognizable apologia for the royal prerogative of “purveyance,” the king’s right to buy or borrow at will from his subjects of all ranks foodstuffs and other provisions for the royal household. At the time scholars believe Havelok was written (Smithers: lxiv–lxxiii), this prerogative stirred a dangerous rancor in England, as the needs of the royal household were folded into the larger demands of simultaneous wars in Scotland and France. Purveyance was not established or reviewed by Parliament and was seen as arbitrary and oppressive. Refigured as Havelok’s preternatural hunger it was something spontaneous and rather funny, and the sincerity of Havelok’s efforts to make his providers whole by his own hard work suggest a response to the irritated demand of English subjects that their king “puisse vivre de soen.” The conservative message of the poem moves somewhat past the feudal to the “royalist” ideology of a centralizing monarchy.

Keywords  Havelok · Edward II · Purveyance · Monarchy · Parliament · Denmark · Scotland · Remonstrances of 1297

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A substantial consensus has developed among students of *Havelok the Dane* that its origins and underlying ideology are royalist and conservative, intended to present, in its likable protagonist, a vindication of kingly prerogative. Following the suggestion of some scholars, notably Christopher Stuart (1996), who link the poem’s goals more specifically to the reign and interests of Edward I, the present paper will argue that Havelok’s insatiable hunger—like his sweet-tempered concern for the expenses it imposes on those who have fostered him—is a recognizable living argument for the royal prerogative of “purveyance”, the king’s right to buy or borrow at will from his subjects of all ranks foodstuffs and other provisions for the royal household. At precisely the time scholars believe *Havelok* was written (Smithers: lxiv–lxxiii), this prerogative was a source of potentially dangerous rancor in England, as the needs of the royal household were folded into the much larger demands of simultaneous wars in France and Scotland.

Purveyance, or prise-taking, originated as a royal prerogative intended to support the needs of the royal household alone. Through it, the King was able to pre-empt goods and services with deferred payment at a price he named. It was not authorized and defined by law, as were taxes levied in consultation with Parliament. It was not allocated to the population by assessment of property as a measure of ability to pay. And so, not unreasonably, it was regarded by many as arbitrary and oppressive. The situation was aggravated when the King extended its application from the needs of the royal household to the much greater needs of royal military policy. This had happened under Henry II, who used purveyance to feed his armies during the Irish expedition of 1171, but it was under Edward I that the policy attained a scale that provoked popular unrest and the search for parliamentary remedies that would not succeed materially until well into the fourteenth century. In a very useful article, Jones (1975) reported that between 1296 and 1306 Edward financed simultaneous wars in Scotland and France by ‘eleven large scale, multi-county purveyances’, establishing this ‘as a routine logistical and financial device’. This reflected a ‘royalization’ of the army—as distinct from the feudal model of incorporating separate manorial forces—and a centralization of power, as Edward set up ‘district supply depots… throughout the English countryside to expedite the transshipment of goods’ and levied a non-Parliamentary tax theoretically applicable to the entire kingdom (302, 303). The burden, imposed by what Jones called ‘a huge and hungry royal household’ (304), was compounded by separate purveyances on behalf of the queen and the royal children and by multiple instances of corruption. All of this was happening in the period of 1295–1310, identified by G. V. Smithers, as the period in which *Havelok* was written, and I would argue that purveyance is refigured genially in Havelok’s preternatural hunger. In him purveyance comes across as something spontaneous and

1 In addition to Stuart’s analysis, the political alignment of the poem has been variously defined. Halverson (1971) argued that the poem addressed a non-noble audience, even emerging ‘from the lower levels, the peasant stratum’ (150). Hirsch (1977) countered, claiming that it tells ‘us not so much what the lower classes thought of the upper, as what the upper classes liked to think the lower classes thought of them’ (343); Crane (1986) saw a noble audience implied in the poem’s interest in land and personal title. Levine (1992) argued against a lower class audience because elements of decorum that distress us—the poem’s violence, for example—cannot be shown to have had the same effect on the upper classes of its time. Staines (1976: 602–23) narrowed the focus from nobility to the king himself, and is discussed in more detail later in this article. I cite the *Havelok* text of Smithers, with consultation of Skeat where noted.
rather funny—he just cannot help it—and the sincerity and energy of Havelok’s efforts
to make his providers whole by his own hard work suggest a response to the irritated
demand of English subjects that their king ‘puisse vivre de soen’, (‘could live on his own
resources’). Magically, satisfying Havelok’s hunger is not just a draw upon the plenty of
the countryside and the coastal waters of England, but a source of that same plenty,
suggesting the identity of the king’s body and its sustenance with that of the nation.
Moreover, the argument for this claim embodied in its story talks more or less over the
heads of the feudal nobility to the productive commoners whose praiseworthy industry
feeds their king.

As far as the written record is concerned, Havelok is an invention of the twelfth
century. Sometime between 1135 and 1140, Geoffrey Gaimar (Gaimar 1960; cf.
Smithers 1987: 16–23) inserts an episode about Havelok into his Anglo-Norman verse
chronicle L’Estoire des Engleis, a work otherwise mainly based on the Old French
Brut of Wace. Geoffrey associates him with imagined Anglo-Danish relations under
King Arthur. Havelok is said to have reigned as King of England from 475 to 495, with
his Queen Argentille (who is Goldboru in Havelok the Dane). Another version of the
Havelok story in Old French, the Lai d’Haveloc (1190–1220), appears in one of four
manuscripts of the Estoire and is evidently meant to replace Geoffrey’s episode, which
this manuscript lacks. Other versions of the story transport Havelok to the later ninth
century, in the period of actual Danish invasions of the East Midlands. Among these
may be oral traditions preceding Gaimar that surface fitfully in an early fourteenth-
century account, perhaps written in Yorkshire and known as Castleford’s Chronicle.
There we learn of a non-historical King Birkbainseson of the Danes who conquered
Lindesey, vindicated a claim to the crown by right of marriage, and drove out the dukes
of Cornwall, who had an unlawful claim on Mercia or part of it. As the Chronicle’s
director Caroline D. Eckhart points out, this brief episode supplies two elements of the
English Havelok, the name Birkebain for the invader’s father (whom the twelfth-
century French sources call ‘Gunther’), and the association of important contestants
for the English crown with Cornwall. The episode is ‘precisely the final part of the
story of Havelok the Dane’. A motive for moving Havelok to the era of Anglo-Saxon
kings may have been to legitimate the claim of Cnut, a Dane, to be king of England, by
linking him to a predecessor, named Havelock, who, though dispossessed by a
treachery regent, was by right king of Denmark. This Havelok married a British or
English woman (variously named) who, though herself dispossessed, was by right a
queen of England. In the earliest versions the insistence on the rightfulness of the
claims points to a goal of propaganda on behalf of Cnut, and propaganda of some sort
remains a feature of the tradition. The unnamed author of our poem locates Havelok
and his bride Goldegurgh in the ninth century, but he fills the story with named
characters and local color that breathe the life of the late thirteenth century.

The author follows several of his predecessors in opening his story with parallel
accounts of the two children, Goldeburgh in England and then Havelok in Denmark,

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2 Ordinances of 1311, cited by Jones: 308.
4 Eckhardt (2001: 7), citing Wells (1916: 13) on the Havelok legend’s support of the ‘concern of the
Danes to justify their rule in the island’.
and of how they lose their royal fathers and are imprisoned by corrupt regents. In Havelok’s case his nemesis is the darkly cruel Godard, who imprisons Havelok and his two sisters and almost starves them. So Havelok’s hunger has an origin with which we must sympathize, especially when Godard visits the children’s prison chamber, and Havelok, begging for relief,

Kam him ageyn, on knes him sette,
And Godard ful feyre he [thorn]er grette.
And Godard seyde ‘Wat is yw?
Hwi grete ye and goulen now?’
‘For us hungreth swiðe sore’ –
Seyden he, ‘we⁵ welden more:
We ne haue to hete, ne we ne have
Her-inne neyber knith ne knave
Pat yeueth us drinken ne no mete
Haluendel þat we moun ete –
Wo is us þat we weren born!
Weilawei! nis it no korn
Þat men micte maken of bred?
Ws hungreth—we aren ney ded!’

Surely Roy Liuzza is not alone in hearing in these lines an anticipation of Oliver Twist’s plea for ‘more’. As he also remarks, ‘Food in Havelok, in both its presence and its absence, marks the interdependence of bourgeois realism and sentiment’ (Liuzza 1994: 513). The pathos of a child’s starvation is reiterated in every line of Havelok’s plea, rising to a climax in a cry for the absent ‘korn/Þat men micte maken of bred’. Like death itself, food joins king and commons, aligning their sentiments on behalf of a hungry child who will become a hungry monarch. It is, deeply disguised, an emotional argument for purveyance, and its force is only amplified when, in response, Godard slits the throats of Havelok’s sisters, dismembers them, and then turns to do the same to Havelok. But the boy king dissuades him with a shrewdly worded promise never to contest his claim on the crown. So, instead, Godard turns Havelok over to a local fisher named Grim, evidently bound to him in serfhood, with orders to drown him in the North Sea.

That last turn in the scene initiates the theme of the sacredness of the King’s body. Godard is capable of the greatest cruelty, and yet he shrinks from piercing Havelok’s flesh. Partly, this is a response to something irresistibly good (and, as I will argue, royal) about the boy that comes out in his speech and that disarms Godard’s pure evil. Partly, it is an aversion to the idea of shedding the royal blood. His alternate course puts him at two removes from such a sacrilege, first, by authorizing the serf-fisherman Grim as his agent and, second, by specifying a death that avoids the shedding of Havelok’s blood.

⁵ I follow Skeat and Sisam here in supplying ‘we’ rather than Smithers’s ‘he’ (i.e., ‘they’) for a missing word in the manuscript. Doing so makes the direct discourse begin here rather than in the following line as in Smithers.
The goodness of Havelok is unique in the story, because he is a king. Christopher Stuart has argued convincingly that although ‘the poet portrays Havelok as the wisest, strongest, and bravest of soldiers, his authority comes not from his merits but from God himself’, a radically royalist position that the romance advances consistently. Grim, Goldeboro, and Ubbe, Havelok’s principal allies, do not commit themselves to him ‘before they see the divine signs that indicate his authority’, the royal birthmark and the light emanating from his mouth as he sleeps (358). I would adjust this argument in a way that I do not think fundamentally alters it. Havelok’s goodness is itself another sign of his authority, because, unlike that of the other good characters who become his benefactors, his goodness is untainted by consideration of himself first. That quality is itself spiritual and exclusively kingly. The author’s revelation of it to us, his audience, completes and deepens what Goldeboro and Ubbe learned. His good but fallible allies, rather like Doubting Thomas, require, and are satisfied by, the signs that miraculously appear in his body. In response to the birthmark and the light from his mouth, each in their turn—Grim, Goldboru, and the Danish seneschal Ubbe—allied themselves with him with motives whose impurity nevertheless separates them from him. Grim sees in him a likelier path to manumission than that offered by Godard. Goldboru, forced into a marriage with him by her oppressive regent, sees the light (literally) and falls in love with the future king whom she had spurned as a peasant and who, as she now dreams prophetically, can restore her to the throne. Ubbe initially needs a bribe, and, like Grim, sees in the light from Havelok’s mouth the advancement of his own position in Denmark. Only Havelok’s benevolence is disinterested, placing the happiness of his supporters before his own. That is what a king does. And what do his supporters do in response? They feed him, they do so plentifully, and their plenty returns to them.

This return of plenty is shown most vividly in the case of Grim. Having settled in Lincolnshire, in a town whose later name of ‘Grimsby’ will be legendarily traced to him, Grim and his three sons become very successful fishermen. This point is driven home by a favorite device of the poem, an exuberant catalogue of food Grim pulls from the sea:

He tok þe sturgiun and þe qual,
And þe turbut and lax withal;
He tok þe sele and þe hwel –
He spedde ofte swiþe wel.
Keling he tok and tumberel,
Hering and þe makerel,
Þe bute, þe schulle, þe þornebake.
Gode paniers dede he make,
On til him, and oþer þrinne
Til hise sones, to beren fishe inne,
Vp o londe to selle and fonge –
Forbar he neyþer tun ne gronge
Þat he ne to-yede with his ware.

(754–66)
There is more in the same vein in lines that follow. The value that the poem recognizes in Grim—one that aligns him in the story with Havelok, whose life he spared and now supports—is his industrious productivity. The individually named fish, the baskets that carry them, and sheer hustle of selling or swapping them occupies a place in this poem that is held only by battle-pieces in aristocratic romances.

What drives this productivity, in part, is the presence of Havelok in Grim’s household. We learn a few lines later that Havelok has grown up for the 12 years of Grim’s rising prosperity without having to share in the family’s toil. His coming to manhood is signaled by an awareness of what a burden he has been and a resolution to put things right. At home alone, he exhorts himself:

‘Ich am nou no grom!
Jch am wel waxen, and wel may eten
More þan euere Grim may geten.
Jch ete more, bi God on liue,
Than Grim an hise children fiue!
Jt ne may nouth ben thus longe
Goddot, Y wile with þem gange
For to leren sum god to gete.
Swinken Ich wolde for mi mete -
Jt is no shame for to swinken!
Þe man þat may wel eten and drinken
Þar nouth ne haue but on swink long –
To liggen at hom it is ful strong’.
(791–802)

Many readers of the poem have been struck by the open-hearted assertion that it is no shame to labor—that not to do so, in fact, stinks (‘is ful strong’)—spoken by a youth preternaturally marked for kingship. It goes against the well-known aristocratic snobbism about manual labor that prevails in romance. It is an example of the poem tending to talk over the heads of the feudal nobility to the productive commoners who actually feed the king. Havelock identifies with this group and, indeed, takes his place in its ranks, and he does so out of an altruistic concern for the burden that his six-times-normal hunger places upon them. That marks him as a king as surely as does the light from his mouth. The warmth radiating from this good-natured naïf is clearly intended to reconcile the poem’s audience to paying their taxes.

Shortly thereafter, a famine comes to Grim’s part of Lincolnshire, and he sends Havelok off to find work in the town of Lincoln, because the local fishery and economy will no longer support him. Soon, with his prodigious deliveries of fish (lovingly specified again), he wins the confidence of the chief cook in the kitchen of Goldeboru’s wicked regent, the Earl of Cornwall. The cook’s offer of employment is expressed with a significant reference to feeding Havelok:

6 In a note on lines 825–828, Smithers (1987: 114–115) notes two famines recorded in The Chronicle of Bury St. Edmunds 1212–1301 (Ed. A. Gransden, Nelson, 1964), one in 1258 and one in 1294. The second was nationwide and would be a recent event in the time the poem was written. ‘It would have been in character for the author of Hav. to bring in this sort of event form real life’.
The food you eat is well invested, he says, and so is the hire that you get. Havelok immediately responds: Forget about the hire; just give me enough to eat! (910–912). In doing so he brings the focus back to his hunger, and to purveyance.

This focus on hunger and purveyance is strikingly renewed by the sons of the now-deceased Grim, when Havelok and Goldboru escape from Goodrich and seek their protection in Grimsby:

We hauen, louerd, alle gode —
Hors, and neth, and ship on flode,
Gold and siluer, and michel auchte,
Pat Grim ure fader us bitawchte.
Gold and siluer and oper fe
Bad he us bitaken þe.
We hauen sheep, we hauen swin;
Bileue her, louerd, and al be þin!
Þou shalt ben louerd, þou shalt ben syre
And we sholen seruen þe and hire;....
Ne was þer spared gos ne henne,
Ne þe hende ne þe drake.
Mete he deden plente make —
Ne wantede þere no god mete.
Wyn and ale deden he fete
And made hem glade and bliþe;
Wesseyl ledden he fele siþe.

(1222–31, 1241–47)

All of this merry purveyance takes on a political dimension when, that very night, Goldboru first sees the light coming from Havelock’s mouth and has the prophetic dream of his winning back his crown and hers. When the sun rises, Grim’s sons are enlisted for the foray into Denmark, and their plenty becomes a provision of war. The food Havelok eats has been their investment in a military adventure that brings just kingship to two countries.

The notion that Havelok embodies an ideal of kingship that is immediately pertinent to the time of its first readers has been central to modern criticism of the poem. One of its earlier formulations, that of David Staines, remains one its most persuasive, despite the dissent that has developed with its central thesis, a dissent in which my own argument participates. This thesis is stated in Staines’s title and subtitle: ‘Havelock the Dane [is a] Thirteenth-Century Handbook for Princes’ (Staines 1976). Staines sees in the poem a handbook that admonishes the king, proposing norms embodied in the generous spirit of the poem’s protagonist, who is both peasant and king. Its anonymous author is a representative—a tribune, one
might say—of loyal and worthy peasants and tradesmen. On their behalf he says to Edward, ‘This is what we long for and deserve in a king’. Havelok is thus an aspirational example for the King, presented to him on behalf of his common subjects. Staines clinches his argument with the observation of Havelok’s physical similarity to Edward, referring to Ubbe’s first impression of him, ‘Hw he was wel of bones made/Brod in þe sholdres, ful wel schaped/Picke in þe brest, of bodi long’ (1647–49; Staines 1976: 621), and to how he ‘towers over his peers’ at Lincoln:

Pan was Hauelok bi þe shuldren more
Pan þe mest þat þer kam….
Hauelok stod ouer hem als a mast.
Als he was heie, al[s] he was long
He was bope stark and strong…
(983–984, 987–989)

Staines notes that Edward was called ‘Longshanks’ because of his unusual height, described by Nicholas Trivet as having a ‘a fine figure, of tall stature’, in which ‘he towered head and shoulders over the common people’ with a breast that ‘projected forward from the stomach’ (‘Elegantis erat formae, staturae procerae… ab humero et supra communi populo praeeminabat… pectus ventri praeeminabat’). Staines is surely right in his contention that ‘the romancer may have intended his portrait of the ideal to be a reflection of and a compliment to his own monarch’ (622). The question that arises is what motivates this compliment. Is it meant to sweeten an admonishment to rise to an ideal not yet attained, a rhetorical gesture of captatio benevolentiae to ‘the king of a real country where Havelok’s prelapsarian perfection can never reach its complete realization’ (621)? Or is it an affirmation, presenting a beleaguered king with a congenial avatar, encouraging Edward to see in Havelok’s radiant benevolence a reflection of his own true nature and that of the honest working folk of England, and, as a corollary, admonishing his querulous subjects in the upper echelons of the nobility and the church to set aside their self-interest and acknowledge the light streaming from his mouth?

My argument has favored the second interpretation, the affirmation, and it has found its basis in the poem’s seizing on one of the central irritants in the controversy that attended the financing of Edward’s wars. Purveyance or the prise, refigured as Havelok’s great hunger, becomes an exercise in largesse, creating the bounty on which it feeds, and tracing its origins to the pathos of the maliciously enforced starvation of a royal child. It is in childhood’s helpless hunger that king and commons find the sentimental solidarity that Liuzza identifies in the symbol of food. There is every reason, of course, to think that this solidarity is imaginary. Indeed, the prizes of foodstuffs and of seed grain forced many peasants off their land and aroused anxiety among the nobility about the security of their rental incomes and about the danger of a general uprising (Maddicott 1975).

During the 1290s, Edward planned a military expedition to Flanders where he would join a coalition with its ruler and others in attacking France from its east, with the goal of reinstating his claim on Gascony in its west. This policy was one that

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many English barons and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Winchelsey, opposed as a war of English aggression in the transparent guise of a war of English self-defense. To make things worse, it was undertaken as a Scottish uprising remained unsettled. Financing this campaign brought the pressure of accelerating purveyances, including several attempted seizures of all the country’s wool for sale abroad by the Crown, a policy move only realized fractionally and replaced by heavy taxes on wool sales; it brought more conventional taxes on fractions of lay and clerical wealth; and it brought musters of men for service, with the eligibility for knighthood, measured in wealth in freehold, marked down quickly from £40 to £20.

The Church under Winchelsey, with support from Pope Boniface VIII, refused to grant the taxes demanded by Edward, who retaliated by putting clerical holdings and persons outside the protection of the law. A group of barons lead by Roger Bigod, earl of Norfolk and Marshal of England, and Humphrey de Bohun, earl of Hereford and Constable of England, refused to muster their portion of the army, citing technical deficiencies in the summons and questioning their obligation to serve outside of England. Edward deprived both of them of their national offices, and eventually divided his opponents, maneuvering Winchelsey into the role of mediator between him and the barons. Edward could draw upon the fact that these challenges to the Crown were undertaken with misgivings rather than with any revolutionary goal. His opponents were caught between a regard for the prerogatives of the Crown as essential to domestic order and an injured sense of their encroachments on their own prerogatives and on the patience of the suffering commons. Both sentiments can be found in the ‘Remonstrances’ (sometimes called ‘Monstrances’) of late July, 1297, drawn up by the nobility in Anglo-Norman French that would give it a wider readership than Latin.8

The opening paragraph, a ‘preamble’ in the analysis of Edwards (1943), adopts a conciliatory tone presenting its ‘arguments’ in a context of humble acknowledgment of the King’s claims upon them:

These are the arguments that the archbishops, bishops, counts, barons and all the commons of the land present to our lord the king, and they humbly pray, as to their lord, that these [grievances] be understood, redressed, and corrected, to the honour of God, of the holy church, and of himself, and for the salvation of all his people and of the land.

Near the end of this preamble the plaintiffs assure the king that they they desire his honor and safety, ‘as they should desire it’. But their emphasis up to this point on the burden of taxation that ‘weighs down’ the clergy, the nobles, and the commons is unrelenting. It reaches a kind of climax in the enumeration of the demands of Edward’s purveyance, for they ‘have not the power’ to answer Edward’s demands, even if justified, ‘because they have been so weighed down by diverse taxes and targeted levies (‘eydes’) and requisitions of wheat, oats, malt, wool, hides, cows, salted meat, with not a penny paid by which they might support and sustain

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themselves’. The catalogue surely echoes the itemized lists of the purveyance demands presented to them. (And as we have seen, it is echoed in turn, and in a transvalued sense, in the catalogues of food gladly pressed upon Havelok). The Remonstrances implicitly turn back on Edward the argument he had made that he was the one taking on burdens, that he was risking his life on behalf of the well-being of the common good, taking steps as he was bound to do as king, in response to strict necessity in the face of an imminent threat from France on England’s (not merely Edward’s) claims on Gascony. The Remonstrances argue instead, that the true threat to the common good was already upon them in the crushing burden of taxes that have rendered his people unable to support their king despite the good will that they have for him.9

Edward’s response on 12 August 1297 makes concessions (that he would back out of in 1305, with the help of Pope Clement V),10 but does so in a tone of hurt bafflement over the failure of his subjects to see and appreciate the regard for their welfare that motivated all his actions, including the taxation of which they complained. He deflects rumors that he has seen and rejected the Remonstrances, which he refers to rather distantly as ‘certain articles in support of the common good of the people and realm’, and he assures all that ‘the king knows nothing [of these] because no one showed them to him or caused them to be shown to him’. He knows of their contents to the extent that they include ‘certain burdens that the king has laid upon his realm, and what they are he knows quite well, such as targeted levies, which he has requested many times, revenue he was compelled to raise because of the wars that have been waged against him in Gascony, in Wales, in Scotland, and elsewhere, from which he could defend neither himself nor his realm without help from his good people…’. He assures his people that he ‘grieves… that he has so weighed down and tormented them’ asking their consideration that he has not ‘expended these revenues on… lands or tenements or castles or towns, but on defending himself and themselves and all of the realm’. He assures them that ‘if God grants that he ever return from his journey’, he has ‘determination and a great desire to compensate them in accord with the will of God and the satisfaction of his people, to the extent of his duty’. His effusion in this promise is tempered in the end by the parameters he finds in God’s will and his own (who else’s?) estimate of his duty. This was Edward’s standard procedure in the commitments he made to his restive subjects. But he begins with the implicit claim of his ‘if’ clause on his plaintiffs. His return is not guaranteed; it is at risk and rests upon the will of God, something his plaintiffs cannot say of their condition. The point is restated when he writes that his son Edward will undertake the same policy of compensation ‘if it

9 I am following the arguments of Harriss (1975: 59–63) and Burt (2013: 182–185). Both argue for a substantive rather than merely procedural basis for the Remonstrances’ opposition to Edward’s policy in its claim of necessity.

10 He promised to reaffirm the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest, though in 1299 he truncated the latter by omitting its commitment to a process of surveying the Royal Forests to determine which portions of them should be released to common use; see Prestwich (1972: 264; 1997: 520). He also made some concessions to a greater role for the consent of the realm in the establishment of taxes. He did this reluctantly because of his jealous regard for the prerogatives of the royal person, and on 29 December 1305 he got Pope Clement V to absolve him from his sworn commitments under the ‘Confirmations of the Charters and the Charter of the Forest’ of 1297. See Prestwich (1997: 547–548).
happens that he should never return…’ (Prestwich 1980, no. 111: 479. My translation).

It is the response of a king confident in his generosity and concerned that his subjects arrive at a clearer understanding of it. He acts not on his own behalf but on theirs, and this is part of what separates and designates him as a king. How pleasing, in this most stressful passage of his reign, to imagine a realm in which the warm glow of his benevolent smile shines back on him from the faces of nobles, clergy, and commons, as they gladly hand him ‘wheat, oats, malt, wool, hides, cows, salted meat’ and find themselves strengthened as they do so by the plenty that is in their power to give. Paradoxically, they find themselves sustained by his prodigious hunger. That imagined realm is England sometime in the past, when history and an endorsing mythology are pleasingly difficult to disentangle, an England distant and yet also very close, thriving under Havelok the Dane, a sweet-tempered giant whose prodigious hunger calls forth the astonishing variety of its plenty.

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