In modern society, Martha Stewart and Miss Manners are authorities in
the social amenities of community gatherings, and they promote their ideas in
television programs and books. But in the Middle Ages, elegant behavior is
illustrated in the Middle English poem, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in
detailed account of a holiday celebration at King Arthur’s castle. In this text,
the idea of courtesy is shown as the foremost attribute of a knight, and King
Arthur is introduced as the "most courteous of all" (26) rulers. In a mealtime
setting, the lives and customs of "[t]he most noble knights known under
Christ" (51) are displayed, and courteous behavior is established as the
hallmark of knighthood. By showcasing the common experience of eating, the
narrator reveals the significance of courtesy in courtly life and discloses the
customs of this era. Indeed, the sequence, kind, and presentation of foods at
the feast provide a framework for the courteous demeanor in this adventurous
tale.

When the feast begins, servants enter with great fanfare as "the first course
comes, with clamor of trumpets" (116) into the hall. Tables overflow with
"dishes rare" (121), exotic, and plentiful. In fact, food is so abundant "[t]hat
scarce was there space to set before" (123) diners. The sumptuous fare and
opulent surroundings distinguish this event from an everyday dinner and
reinforce the idea that courtesy requires specific utensils, table coverings, and
demeanor. Formal presentation of the repast indicates a high regard for guests
because it is delivered on "service of silver" (124), typically associated with
special occasions. Further, the narrator specifies the meal is served "on
cloth" (125) as befits a formal occasion.

Along with the decor, the superior quality of food and drink plays a
prominent role in the idea of courtesy because the finest provisions are
generally reserved for special occasions. The narrator describes "[g]ood beer
and bright wine" (129) as standard beverages for the event. Likewise, guests
feasted on "dainties . . . [and] dishes rare" (121) served in elegant fashion.
The superb caliber of the fare reflects a conscious effort to favor guests in
gracious style.

The idea of courtesy is further developed in the action of the work. That
King "Arthur would not eat till all were served" (85) distinguishes him as a
polite host. Also, prior to the meal, guests congregate to celebrate, then
"washed, . . . went to their seats" (72) and began eating. Knights are seated
according to their rank while King Arthur "stands in state" (103) and surveys
the gathering. Music fills the hall as the "noise of new drums and the noble
pipes" (118) provide a fitting backdrop for the gaiety. Similarly, the service is
impeccable and reflects the noble breeding and gentility of the host. The
narrator asserts "no tittle was wanting" (131) at the holiday feast where guests
rest at their ease while "dainties were dealt out" (121) before them.

A holiday feast is an appropriate setting to highlight the idea of courtesy.
Special foods are prepared and the finest cutlery and linens are used. Like
King Arthur, modern hosts strive to provide a "table of trifles fair" (108) and
congenial surroundings for their guests. In this work, the narrator connects the
idea of courtesy through a vivid portrayal of a feast "fittingly served" (114) to an elite party. In this way, the common experience of dining is elevated to a feast fit for kings.

**Work Cited**