Volume 37 (2025)
Edited by Valerie Johnson & Renée Ward

Assistant Editors
Lorena Alessandrini & Wendy Vencel

The Place of the Middle in *The Green Knight*

Rob Brown
Independent Scholar

Towards the climax of David Lowery's 2021 *The Green Knight*,[1] Dev Patel's Gawain, trembling with fear and under the axe, begs of Ralph Ineson's arboreal Green Knight, "Is this really all there is?" With an implacability perfectly suited to such an imposing figure, the Green Knight re-joins, "What else ought there be?"[2] Gawain's question, born of existential confusion in the face of imminent death, is one that could just as easily be imagined emerging from the mouth of a small child refusing to sleep at the end of their bedtime story. It is a question that seeks to allay closure, to challenge the very notion of a totalizing ending.

In its unflinching spareness, the Green Knight's response is emblematic of the canniness with which Lowery embraces his medieval source's focus on the power of story to affect the formation and deformation of individual subjectivity. At base, answering a question with a question beautifully enacts the narrative reflexivity that suffuses not only the late-fourteenth-century alliterative masterpiece *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* but also Lowery's cinematic reimagining.

This moment, in turn, triggers one of the most striking sequences of the entire film, a montage tracing the trajectory of Gawain's life following his flight from the Green Knight's axe. This dialogue-free passage moves steadily through several decades of life via a concatenation of brief vignettes. A short-film-within-a-film, this passage forestalls the closure of the larger narrative while simultaneously intensifying the links in Lowery's story between narrative and life, story and truth, decision and consequence. At its close, the film turns back to re-engage with narrative, moving from the stuff of its ending—death—to recapitulate the stuff of its middle—life. *The Green Knight*, indeed, is a film entirely preoccupied with its middles, a preoccupation which it shares with its source material in particular and with medieval romance in general.

In the interest, then, of keeping "middles" to the fore, I will briefly outline some important ways in which this film works to highlight the importance of delay, repetition, encirclement, and "middleness." To begin with, we should consider one of the most important decisions made during the adaptation from medieval poem to modern screenplay. In laying out his plot, Lowery chose to take the spaces *between* the lines of the poem and expand them to fill up a good deal of the run-time of his film.

---

[1] *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021).
[2] *The Green Knight*, 1:47:11-20.

In Fitt 2 (lines 691-739) of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet roughly sketches Gawain's journey out from Arthur's court, summarizing the various *aventures* which precede his arrival at Lord Bertilak's estate, wherein the majority of the poem happens:

> So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez
> Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.
> Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez and with wolues als,
> Sumwhyle wyth wodwos þat woned in þe knarrez,
> Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,
> And etaynez þat hym anelede of þe heȝe felle.
>
> So many wonders befell him in the hills,
> It would be tedious to recount the least part of them.
> Sometimes he fights dragons, and wolves as well,
> Sometimes with wild men who dwelt among the crags;
> Both with bulls and with bears, and at other times boars,
> And ogres who chased him across the high fells (Fitt 2, lines 718-23).[3]

Lowery cleverly extrapolates a good deal of his film's substance from these narrative lacunae, these textual in-betweens, to engender new active centers of cinematic interest. Yet as he enlarges the detail and narrative significance of Gawain's journey, Lowery also deflates the high-romance content to which the poet gestures. We exchange, for example, the "mony meruayl" of dragons, wolves, wild men, bulls, bears, and boars for the more prosaic predations of Barry Keoghan's unnerving Scavenger and his accomplices, who rob Gawain and leave him for dead. Similarly, we are presented with the "etaynez," giants, in the form of a surreal encounter which, it is heavily implied, is the direct result of the desperate consumption of a handful of mushrooms.

Reimaging the marvels of high romance in this way, Lowery suspends the disbelief of his audience only momentarily before offering them the optional "out" of a more grounded explanation. This expansion of the source's narrative material and deflation of its tenor, far from undermining the potency of the medieval romance, offers a highly original kind of medievalism that respects the alterity of its forebear while seeking to reach back towards it by evoking the kind of knowing humor that the poem certainly would have offered to its first readers. Thus, Lowery brings his narrative to stand somewhere between

[3] All Middle English quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 207-300; modern English quotations are taken from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. and trans. James Winny (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1992).

his twenty-first century audience and that of the Middle English poem, placing it into a middle space whence it can partake productively of both the past and present, the mundane and the fantastical.

The act of foregrounding these kinds of middleness is, therefore, a powerful act of creative reappropriation. Historically the "middle" in "medieval"—that is, the element "medium," dwelling within the Latin *medium aevum*—carried implicitly pejorative connotations, positing, as it does, the entire period from roughly the fifth to the sixteenth centuries as an inhumane and obscurantist in-between time separating the European classical from the European renaissance eras. While this view of the medieval has largely fallen out of favor in academic thought, popular perception still often conceives of the medieval period as the "dark ages," a time of unstructured, lawless incivility and violence. This deployment of the medieval was brilliantly elucidated by, among many others, Carolyn Dinshaw in *Getting Medieval* (1999).[4] Yet these ostensibly medieval forms of violence remain strikingly visible within productions of the medieval fantastic such as—to name perhaps the most well-known examples of recent years—HBO's wildly successful *Game of Thrones* and its subsequent prequel *House of the Dragon*, both of which revel in their putatively "medieval" brutality.[5]

Lowery's film too is unquestionably a "medieval fantasy," as the director himself has made clear;[6] yet, vitally, it takes the indeterminacy and openness that usually accompany

[4] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). See also Umberto Eco, "Dreaming the Middle Ages," in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (London: Pan Books, 1987), 61-72, and Renée R. Trilling, "Medievalism and Its Discontents," *postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 216–24, on the "disturbing nostalgia" of modern fantasies of the medieval. For an alternative view, see Steve Guthrie, "Time Travel, Pulp Fictions, and Changing Attitudes Toward the Middle Ages: Why You Can't Get Renaissance on Somebody's Ass," in *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, ed. Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 99–111.

[5] David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, creators, *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-19); Ryan Condal and George R. R. Martin, creators, *House of the Dragon* (HBO, 2022). Perhaps the most obvious example of the use of the medieval as a cover for a seemingly compulsive reimagining of historical violence is the frequent portrayals of sexual violence for which *Game of Thrones* became infamous. See, for example, Paul B. Sturtevant, "Was Sexual Abuse Normal in the Middle Ages?," *The Public Medievalist*, May 28, 2015, accessed May 2022, https://publicmedievalist.com/got-rape-and-middle-ages/ and David Barnett, "George RR Martin Defends Game of Thrones Rape as Portraying Reality of War," *The Guardian*, June 4, 2015, accessed May 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/04/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-rape-reality-of-war.

[6] "'The Green Knight' Director Breaks Down the Green Knight's Introduction Scene, *Vanity Fair*, August 16, 2021, accessed May 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/video/watch/notes-on-a-scene-the-green-knight-director-breaks-down-a-scene, 0:00:25-40. In this video, produced for *Vanity Fair*, Lowery notes the important influence of medieval fantasies from his childhood such as Ron Howard's 1984 *Willow* and John Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur*.

popular conceptions of the medieval and self-consciously deploys that openness to draw the medieval *towards* rather than *away from* a twenty-first century audience. Lowery places his Gawain into a middle which offers newly rich potential for narrative meaning within an otherwise familiar generic environment. Rather than utilizing the medieval as a position from which to shock, disgust, or alienate, he offers his audience a model of the medieval which, while undoubtedly dark and violent, is nonetheless reflective of a more nuanced and ultimately more knowable pastness.

As David Matthews reminds us in his delineation of the term "middle" in relation to the development of attitudes, both scholarly and general, to the idea of the medieval,

> . . . periodizing adjectives do not simply describe, but impute a character to the period in question. Nevertheless, these adjectives can also become neutral and inert, with long use. This, I would suggest, has happened with the "middling" character of our period. Today, "middle" is no longer truly pejorative. Indeed, in some quarters, it is almost a badge of honor. To be "in the middle;" after all, could be thought of as being at the heart of the matter, in the thick of things . . .[7]

Lowery's Gawain is thus perhaps more "modern" than a general audience might expect from a "medieval" protagonist; as Richard Brody has perceptively argued, "Lowery revises a legend, in style and in substance, in order to evoke a way of telling different stories, and of telling stories differently. He takes the risk of perpetuating a deluded gospel of evil, or of seeming to do so, in a daring effort to dramatize a world in desperate need of artistic redemption."[8] Through Gawain's leap into the middle, into "the thick of things," this difference is realized. Indeed, from the moment Gawain makes his fateful choice to jump across the round table to stand, sword in hand, at the center of its circumference, "the thick of things" becomes for him something of a default position.

It is also important that Lowery reconfigures the status of his protagonist. The Gawain of the poem is, at the opening of the piece, already a knight of some renown. Lowery's Gawain, however, is an unproven youth who, despite family connections to the throne, has yet to make his mark. This point is brought home when, at the Christmas feast, the King asks Gawain to tell him "A tale of yourself, so that I might know thee."[9] Gawain is

---

[7] David Matthews, "Middle," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 141-48, 147.

[8] Richard Brody, "'The Green Knight,' Reviewed: David Lowery's Boldly Modern Revision of a Medieval Legend," *The New Yorker*, August 3, 2021, accessed May 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/the-green-knight-reviewed-david-lowerys-boldly-modern-revision-of-a-medieval-legend.

[9] *The Green Knight*, 0:11:46.

forced to decline, saying "I have none to tell, King."[10] Vitally, the Queen then interjects, "Yet. You have none to tell yet."[11] This "Yet" echoed by Gawain, signals to the audience that this will be a tale about an individual's growth, a bildungsroman of sorts.[12] The importance of Gawain's positionality, then, cannot be overstated; his movement into and within the middles of the tale becomes the means by which his trial and his concomitant personal growth is performed.

Thenceforth, Gawain remains surrounded spatially, thematically, and textually. As Frank Kermode reminds us, via a quotation from Edmund Spenser, it is in "the middest" of things where life and narrative ultimately happen:

> Men, like poets, rush "into the middest," *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths.[13]

It is here, "at the heart of the matter," that the necessarily unstable and hence always-developing nature of Gawain himself persists. Indeed, in placing Gawain quite literally "into the middest" of his film, Lowery parallels the idea of the narrative "End" and the figure of death from the very outset. Conceived of in this manner, this death-defying middle becomes symbolically and hence narratively pluripotent. As Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles have remarked in the introduction to their edited volume,

> The middle . . . gestures to a rich and various range of meanings, including *continuity, development, center, hub, digression, transition, deviation, disjunction, rupture, crisis, turning point, crossing, intersection, node, meantime, error, wandering,* and *interruption*. The middle points us to such crucial phenomena as changes and processes, ebbs and flows, hubs and breaks. And, most of all, it points us to the tough, imperfect, anxious, exciting experience of having decidedly left our beginnings behind, while never quite knowing what will happen to us in the end.[14]

---

[10] *The Green Knight*, 0:12:06.
[11] *The Green Knight*, 0:12:12.
[12] *The Green Knight*, 0:12:18.
[13] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.
[14] Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles, "Introduction," in *Narrative Middles: Navigating the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, ed. Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011), 1-21, 3.

The “middleness” of *The Green Knight* carries within it a great many of these meanings. Gawain’s wanderings, digressions, errors, and crises all take place within and around an abundance of encircled middles.

The interlocking network of lines that make up the symbol of the pentangle sits, as it does in the poem, upon the boss of Gawain’s shield. The pentangle in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* bears a heavy burden of significance, containing an entangled geometry of religion, philosophy, and chivalric ideology. For Lowery, however, it is but one enclosing structure within many. In addition to its place as a circle-within-a-circle on Gawain’s shield, it is noticeably incorporated into the tiling of the floor of the hall that houses the round table where Gawain confronts the Green Knight. It also hangs noticeably around the King’s neck in the form of a heavy pendant.

In addition to the pentangle, circular forms abound: the circle made up of Gawain’s mother and sisters where the spell that summons the Green Knight is cast generates the initiating action of the story; the circle of green wax that seals the letter presented to the King is broken by the Queen, jarring the onlookers and heightening the tension stirred up by the Green Knight’s presence; the rotating wheel of the seasons within the puppet show tells—and foretells—the fate of Gawain; Gawain tosses a coin carelessly to the Scavenger; the circular lens of the Lady’s full-room camera obscura is the aperture through which Gawain apprehends his own *true* image, inverted in photographic form; and the encircling fabric of the green girdle becomes central to Gawain’s final moments. These circles all cleverly foreground both the enclosed nature of Gawain’s personal becoming as well as the recursive and implicitly cyclical nature of his quest and of the exercise of romance chivalry itself.

Perhaps even more importantly, the circle permeates not just the physical make-up of Lowery’s medieval world but the very movement of the camera as it repeatedly highlights for the viewer the importance of the middle space, the passage between, as a kind of narrative hinge. Following Gawain’s capture at the hands of the Scavenger, for example, the camera performs a striking feat of silent storytelling. The image pans around horizontally from the bound figure of Gawain, returning slowly to its original position where we see only skeletal remains, prognosticating an ignominious death. Yet the camera pauses only momentarily before swinging back in the opposite direction, returning once more to its starting point, presenting us now with the still-living form of Gawain who, having seemingly intimated his gruesome end along with us, proceeds to struggle free of his bonds.

There immediately follows a scene that features a wholly new encounter inspired by the poet’s brief mention of the passing of the “Holy Hede” (Fitt 2, line 700) during Gawain’s

travels. The “Meeting with St. Winifred” stages an interaction between Gawain and the ghost of a seventh-century Welsh virgin martyr. Tasked with recovering the ghostly saint’s decapitated skull from a dark pool, Gawain finds himself pulled suddenly and violently beneath the surface of the water. As Gawain is submerged, the camera inverts itself repeatedly, vertiginously destabilizing our notion of up and down and overlaying the depths of the water with a half-glimpsed field of galaxies and other astral bodies, placing Gawain into a terrifying in-between space of absolute openness which is only broken as he finally touches the bare bone of Winifred’s skull, thereby reorientating both himself and the viewer.

This rotary motion of the camera is seen yet again during the film’s “Interlude.” Appearing precisely at the film’s temporal “middle,” this second almost dialogue-free passage begins with the appearance of a title card at one hour and four minutes. The “Interlude” features some of the film’s most striking imagery: the appearance of the red fox, Gawain’s “trip” during a viridian lightning storm, and, most memorably, the gentle singing giants with whom Gawain attempts, unsuccessfully, to hitch a ride.

As the “Interlude” ends, the camera rotates again—this time in a sickeningly slow tilt around its horizontal axis—as the distant figure of Gawain walks away from us across a barren landscape. This motion slowly turns the narrative space upside down, implicitly upending any hope of Gawain ever finding firm footing. Later still, we will see this rotation mirrored once more as the camera turns to right the inverted photo-portrait of Gawain. In this instance, rather than destabilizing both protagonist and viewer, the camera’s movement brings into focus Gawain’s path to self-recognition; it is a powerful moment, beautifully communicated through a deliberate *re*orientation via *dis*orientation.

Each of these moments illustrates an instance of challenge for Gawain. These are narrative middles which act like thresholds, occupying the space between one room and the next, between outside and inside. It is into these middles, lovingly circumscribed by the camera’s arc, that Gawain moves; and it is within these in-betweens that he is gifted the potentialities necessary for change. The camera turns like the wheel of the seasons, like the green girdle or the circle of the pentangle. These circles surround and turn about their middles, and it is the person of Gawain, the malleable subjectivity of the protagonist, which remains enclosed within.

These middles thus emerge as the central concern of the narrative even as it is subsumed within the larger cycles of history and tale that Lowery weaves through the fabric of the film. Indeed, in one of his most subtle nods to his source material, the opening scene of the film pays court to the opening lines of the poem (Fitt 1, lines 1-19). This opening looks back to the events of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* and to a restatement of the popular myth

of the foundation of Britain by the exiled descendent of Aeneas, and thereby connects the events of the poem with a larger cultural cycle of history, drawing a line from the moment of composition through the time of Arthur to the deeper past of a dimly viewed antiquity.

In response to these lines, Lowery presents the viewer with an opening sequence wherein we glimpse medieval outbuildings gradually bursting into flames beyond a high stone wall. After a moment, a man and a woman emerge hurriedly through a small gate in the wall and we hear sounds of conflict off-camera and a single male voice screaming, “Helen! Helen!” The camera pulls back through a narrow window in a thick stone wall, past dripping water suggestive of a ticking clock—an impression emphasized by the pizzicato strings of the accompanying score—and on down to the sleeping form of Gawain who is himself immediately awoken by a bucket of water flung into his face by his lover, Essel, who laconically intones “Christ is born.”[15] This compressed series of images nods in muted fashion towards the events of the *Iliad* initiated by the kidnapping of Helen of Troy, as outlined in the opening lines of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while moving the viewer from pseudo-classical allusion through the sounds of the passing of time in the dripping water on into the present world of the protagonist.

To move finally, then, from the film’s opening moments to its close, the wordless montage of Gawain’s life that follows his flight from the Green Knight is reminiscent of Martin Scorsese’s 1988 film adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis’s novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1955). In both film and novel, Christ reneges on his crucifixion and lives a full life with Mary Magdalene, but finally comes to regret his decision and begs for the chance to go back and make the ultimate sacrifice on the cross.[16] Yet unlike Kazantzakis’s Christ, who must finally reject the fantasy of a joyful family life, Lowery’s Gawain is shown an existence shadowed by shame, loss, and defeat.

What Gawain must refuse, then, is life itself—a long middle passage filled with possibility—accepting his death at the hands of the Green Knight. Interestingly, in an earlier draft of Lowery’s screenplay, the film ends as follows:

> GAWAIN (cont'd)
> Now I'm ready.
>
> He sets the girdle beside him on the mossy chapel floor,
> and then lowers his head for the last time.

[15] *The Green Knight*, 0:01:21-03:09.

[16] Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. Peter Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960); *The Last Temptation of Chris*, directed by Martin Scorsese (Testament Productions, 1988).

The axe comes down.

The game is complete.

CUT TO BLACK[17]

This finale would doubtless have provided an unequivocal closure: game, life, and film all ending together. However, this is not the conclusion on which Lowery finally settled. For, as the poet reminds us, "A ȝere ȝernes ful ȝerne and ȝeldez neuer lyke; / Þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden" ["A year passes swiftly, never bringing the same; / Beginning and ending seldom take the same form"] (Fitt 2, lines 498-99) and Lowery, much like the poet, allows Gawain to continue living, thereby frustrating any clear resolution. His continued existence, rather than his beheading, proffers a more radical openness and the potential for this end to be seen as just another middle along a much longer narrative timeline.

Indeed, this view of the end is reinforced by Lowery's use of the now-ubiquitous mechanism of the post-credits sequence. As the end credits fade to black, we see the crown formerly worn by the King (and by Gawain during his imagined future) picked up and put on playfully by an unidentified young girl. This deliberately ambiguous image of inheritance and continuity gestures towards a future that promises something other than the finality of narrative cessation.

This ending, which contravenes death, also recalls Peter Brooks' fascinating reading of "plot" through a Freudian Lens, presenting a model of narrative where "It is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading. Any narrative, that is, wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of the text: to recapture us in its doomed energies."[18] For Brooks, the ending that pushes us back towards the middle seeks to bog us down in its "doomed energies," thus denying us, in Freud's figuration, the "quiescence of the inorganic world."[19] Yet for both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its twenty-first-century cinematic adaptation, the energies of the middle are far from turgid or arbitrary. Instead, it is the mobile and malleable expanses of the narrative middle which present the seemingly limitless possibility for growth, surprise, and change. It is the middle that ultimately guarantees that the "forme," or "beginning," will never match up perfectly to the "fynisment," or "ending."

---

[17] David Lowery, *The Green Knight (2021) Screenplay*, accessed May 2022, https://8flix.com/scripts/film/the-green-knight-2021-screenplay/, 74.

[18] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 109-10.

[19] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 107.

As Lowery's Green Knight bends to a now resolute Gawain, he playfully draws his finger across the youth's exposed neck and almost chuckles, "Off with your head!" or, as is implied by the timing and tenor of Ineson's delivery, "Off you go, with your head still attached!"[20] This highly situational pun seems to offer an alternative response to Gawain's terrified question, "Is this really all there is?" For, as the movie implies, within the world of romance, both in its medieval formulation and in its modern adaptations, the end is *never* "all there is"; we can always turn back and choose to dwell, unstably if productively, in the middle.

[20] Lowery, *The Green Knight*, 2:03:13.