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Interior and Exterior Journeys: Simulacrum in *The Green Knight* (2021)[1]

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David Lowery's 2021 film *The Green Knight* challenges the expectations of medievalists and audiences familiar with his adapted text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*)[2] with a decidedly medieval reworking of his source material. The broad category of medieval (and postmedieval) Arthurian literature is practically defined by its efforts at adaptation, retelling many of the same stories over and over in new and refreshing ways for a variety of audiences. Just as the anonymous author of *Peredur ab Efrawg* resituates Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* into a Welsh context, so too does Lowery place emphasis on the Welsh aspects of *SGGK*. The 2021 film also reimagines the temporal setting of the story, featuring an aged Arthurian court, which highlights the youthful exuberance of Gawain as a newly made knight exploring the demands of chivalry and his own ambitions for the fame he has already garnered in the poem. Lowery maintains the essence of the narrative while taking it apart and adding to it facets of several other medieval texts. This practice of fragmentation, while not uncommon in the broad body of medieval Arthurian literature, is a kind of neomedievalism, which Lauryn S. Mayer defines as a practice "that takes earlier medievalist texts (history, popular culture representations, conventions, tropes, and the like), fragments them, and playfully repurposes those fragments, all in the process of calling attention to the created nature of any representation of the past."[3] As a concept distinguished from medievalism, its broad umbrella parent, neomedievalism takes up the challenge of critiquing the constructed nature of medievalism by drawing attention to its own practice of fragmentation and the intentional effects such moves cause. This essay will unpack the effects of Lowery's neomedievalist moves through an exploration of the film's uncanny *simulacra* within a broader context of the history of 'Green Knight' analogues.

Neomedievalism is a form of simulacrum particularly concerned with the impossibility of recreating the medieval world. The term neomedievalism was coined by Umberto Eco and explored through a study of hyperreality.[4] Eco contemplates the modern condition as

[1] I am grateful to my writing group, Sarah Banschbach Valles and Kenna Neitch, for reading early drafts of this essay. Their invaluable input helped to shape the final version.
[2] Quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).
[3] Lauryn S. Mayer, "Simulacrum," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 223-30, 224.
[4] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986).

one so concerned with the reality of the past that our reconstructions of it cease to have any basis in historical fact and instead become a simulacrum. He describes, for example, the Hearst Castle in California, which was cobbled together from "bits and pieces" of medieval European structures, which were "complemented . . . with bold imitations, not bothering to distinguish the genuine from the copy."[5] Eco assesses the strange product of these combinations in this way:

> The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something, and hence the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by *horror vacui*, that is here achieved.[6]

The Hearst Castle is a reproduction without an original, a recombination of pieces of real structures with no context to unite them into a single signifying whole. The castle is a simulacrum—a neomedievalist interpretation of supposedly medieval aesthetics. In his seminal essay, "Plato and Simulacrum," Gilles Deleuze articulates simulacra in this way:

> If we say of the simulacrum that it is a copy of a copy, an endlessly degraded icon, an infinitely slackened resemblance, we miss the essential point: the difference in nature between simulacrum and copy, the aspect through which they form the two halves of a division. The copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image without resemblance. The catechism, so fully inspired by Platonism, has familiarized us with this notion. God made man in His own image and to resemble Him, but through sin, man has lost the resemblance while retaining the image. Having lost a moral existence in order to enter into an aesthetic one, we have become simulacra.[7]

In other words, man has lost an essence of the divine—man as simulacrum is not a copy, but a hollow image. The simulacrum is an effect, which, in Deleuze's example, is a distinct loss resulting from corruption of the soul. Mayer, however, posits that "the simulacrum is neither real nor copy, but an image that has become truth in its own right; its value depends solely on its being in circulation."[8] This definition is a more optimistic approach to simulacrum, exploring the ways in which an effect is truth—something genuinely felt, though not a mimetic representation of an original. The Hearst Castle is a prime example

[5] Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 22.
[6] Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 23.
[7] Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and Simulacrum," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 27 (1983): 45-56, 48.
[8] Mayer, "Simulacrum," 226.

of such an effect; it is neither the real nor a copy. The collage effect of miscellaneous fragments of medieval structures as well as the connective tissue of new decorative elements produces something altogether new with its own truth. Mayer reaches her interpretation through engagement with Eco and Jean Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality and the hyperreal—a mode by which the consumerist dissemination of images (such as film) no longer commodifies a resemblance or imitation of reality, but instead alternate realities with no referent but themselves.[9] Mayer continues, "Confronted by hyperreality, we become unable to tell the difference between reality and simulation; or rather this difference becomes ultimately irrelevant."[10] The simulacrum is neither original nor copy (or copy of a copy), and yet maintains its own existence as a disruptive force in that hierarchy of mimetic signs. We may witness the simulacrum, I argue, as an experience replicated and fragmented—as a kind of synecdochic simulation of an experience in a text that takes on a meaning outside of the text. Like Deleuze's example of the catechism, the simulation of experience is neither model nor copy; instead, the essence is lost or deferred. In the case of Lowery's *The Green Knight*, an uncanny simulacrum of anxiety for the audience simulates Gawain's fears while distancing itself from the motivation and essence of Gawain's experience in *SGGK*. This moment occurs in the film as Gawain's adventures in the Wirral are artificially prolonged, diverging from the source material to such an extent that one wonders when *or if* Gawain will reach Hautdesert. Our anxieties arrive in the same moment as a reaction to expectations too long deferred for an audience intimately familiar with *SGGK*.

However, this concept of neomedievalism (repurposed fragments that produce something new while drawing attention to its own artificiality) is not new. Both medieval and postmedieval Arthuriana, particularly popular romances, often performed this work of neomedievalist moves to produce something new. The seventeenth-century manuscript known as the Percy Folio[11] includes several Arthurian romances, including three that feature Sir Gawain and an 'exchange of blows' game.[12] Scholars have grouped these tales into the broad category of 'popular romances', which Nicola McDonald calls the "pulp fiction of medieval England" because it is:

> fast-paced and formulaic; it markets itself unabashedly as genre fiction; it is comparatively cheap and, in performance, ephemeral; it has a sensationalist

[9] Mayer, "Simulacrum," 226. Here Mayer draws upon Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984), 1-42.

[10] Mayer, "Simulacrum," 225.

[11] London, British Library, Additional MS 27879.

[12] All three romances are included in Thomas Hahn, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

> taste for sex and violence; and it seems content to reproduce the easy certainties of sexist, racist and other bigoted ideologies.[13]

That one manuscript should contain three such romances, all considered analogues of *SGGK*, suggests the relative popularity of both Gawain and his adventures in near-beheadings. Further, a letter from Robert Laneham from 1575 describes a certain Captain Cox, who performs a "Sir Gawyn" story at the Kenilworth entertainments for Queen Elizabeth I.[14] Like the oral storytelling form of medieval and early modern performers, the medium of film presents a distinct challenge for fully realizing the interiority and themes of a complex work like *SGGK*. Oral-form storytellers pare down the narrative to its action and rely upon techniques such as narration, repetition, and direct explanation of motives from the characters themselves. For example, in *The Greene Knight*, a late fifteenth-century popular romance and analogue of *SGGK*, the narrative begins with the titular character declaring:

> Soe mote I thee,
> To Arthurs court will I mee hye
> For to praise [his mother-in-law] right,
> And to prove Gawaines points three –
> And that be true that men tell me,
> By Mary most of might.[15]

> So I say to thee,
> To Arthur's court will I myself hurry
> For to praise [his mother-in-law] soundly
> And to prove Gawain's three points —
> And that be true that men tell me,
> By Mary most of might.

The Green Knight, Sir Bredbeddle, declares his intentions outright and the narrator even explains that his mother-in-law will use witchcraft to transform him into the distinctive green figure. This simplification of the familiar plotline from *SGGK* makes legible for a

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[13] Nicola McDonald, "A Polemical Introduction," *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (NY: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1-21, 1.

[14] Robert Laneham, *A Letter Whearin Part of the Entertainment Vntoo the Queenz Maiesty at Killingwoorth Castl in Warwik Sheer in this Soomerz Progress 1575 is Signified / from a Freend Officer Attendant in Coourt Vntoo Hiz Freend a Citizen and Merchaunt of London* (London: 1575). Accessed via Early English Books Online, October 6, 2022, https://www.proquest.com/books/letter-whearin-part-entertainment-vntoo-queenz/docview/2240919230/se-2.

[15] Anonymous, *The Greene Knight*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, lines 67-72.

listening audience critical parts of the narrative while shifting focus from the interior world of Gawain's fears to the basic components of the "exchange of blows" trope.[16]

While the *SGGK* analogues of popular romance exteriorize the thoughts and motivations of the characters with direct speech acts, Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021)[17] often relies instead on silence. The film is punctuated with moments of quiet much as the poem itself can be punctuated by its bobs.[18] Just as the popular romance analogues make genre-specific changes for aural reception, Lowery manipulates time and space in the film, resulting in a rich neomedievalist patchwork of fragments from a variety of medieval texts (often Welsh) and modern aesthetics. This recombination of the pieces produces a simulation of anxiety for the audience with no horizontal referent. Instead of a kind of copy, this meta-anxiety in audience reception is a simulacrum of Gawain's own experience traversing the Wirral. Unlike the Gawain of *SGGK*, whose anxieties are bound up in worries about keeping his promise to the Green Knight and the spiritual concerns implicated in meeting his death, the film builds anxiety for the narrative progression and the extent to which Lowery will include Hautdesert and its lessons for Gawain. The sensation—the anxiety, the worry—is a replication of Gawain's experience, but the essences of those sensations—honor/death/sin and narrative fidelity—are different. Indeed, the depiction of Gawain's fears also loses that core interiority of the poem. Instead, we witness Gawain's worries bound up in physical suffering and a desire to simply find respite.

For Lowery's film, this effort encapsulates a shift away from the nature of the poem's narrative, stepping away from *SGGK*'s interior journey and moving instead to a visually compelling exterior one. The central conflict for the Gawain of *SGGK* is the discordance between his faith and his courtly reputation. Like the other poems in the manuscript, *SGGK* examines concerns about faith, sin, and the ramifications of worldly existence.[19]

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[16] While *SGGK* juxtaposes conventional gestures at orality with more heavily literary features that suggest it was meant to be read, *The Greene Knight* and similar analogues from the popular romance genre appear either meant for oral recitation or may have been written down to preserve the tales from oral performance. See Hahn's Introduction to *The Greene Knight* in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, 309-12. See also my recent article on performance and orality in the Gawain romances: Sarah J. Sprouse, "Performance Issues: A Ludic History of the Gawain Romances," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 5, no. 6 (2025), 1-23.

[17] *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021).

[18] An important part of *SGGK*'s form is its bob-and-wheel structure. After each strophe, there appears a short, single-stress line called the bob, followed by a four-line, rhyming wheel. For more on the significance of this structure and the unusual placement of the bobs in the singular manuscript witness, see: Julie Nelson Couch and Kimberly K. Bell, *Gaming the Medieval English Text: "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and the Cotton Nero AX/2 Manuscript* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2025).

[19] London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.x. Some recent work on the interiority of *SGGK* include: Patrick Outhwaite, "Sir Gawain's Penitential Development from Attrition to Contrition," *The Chaucer Review* 56, no. 2 (2021): 153-70; Ewa Slojka, "Obligation, Marvel, and Passion in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The*

The Gawain of *The Green Knight* is similarly concerned with his reputation as a knight and his entrance into the world of the court; however, the matters of faith and sin are eschewed in favor of the more visually direct problems of cowardice and bravery. Lowery's film adaptation seems unconcerned with the deeply religious contexts of the poem and its manuscript. Indeed, Lowery seems uninterested in a faithful adaptation. Instead, he produces a neomedieval masterpiece that inhabits the worlds of 1980s pulp horror film, hybrid British Arthuriana, the medieval *vitae* of saints, and the recollections of medieval historians such as Gildas and Nennius.

This neomedievalist practice of fragmentation and rearranging in *The Green Knight* produces an uneasy tension in the viewing experience for those familiar with the poem. That tension is a simulacrum of the anxieties of the protagonist during his adventures in the Wirral. Like Gawain's fear that he may not find relief in the form of a safe place to rest, we are uncertain when *or if* he will arrive at Hautdesert. Thus, the problem is one of temporality in the film. We, as an audience, enter into a familiar narrative with a shifted chronology and repurposed elements from other medieval texts, which cultivates disorientation.

The 2021 film deliberately plays with temporality and the generally received chronology of Arthuriana. We are introduced to a long-established court—Arthur and Guinevere appear quite old, as do the many knights attending the Christmas feast. Arthur's gravelly voice quavers with advanced age as he asks a young Gawain to join him at the high table. By contrast, *SGGK* features a young, untested court with an Arthur who is "childgered" [boyish], with "ȝonge blod" [young blood] and "brayn wylde" [wild brain, i.e., impatience] (lines 86, 89). This revised chronology in the court centers Gawain as the youthful knight to be tested rather than the Arthurian court needing to prove itself with Gawain as its proxy. In other words, Lowery keeps the focus completely on Gawain, which is further emphasized by the directorial choice to make Morgan[20] not only well-known to the court, but also to situate her as Gawain's mother. Morgan is, of course, mother to Gawain and a host of brothers in other romances, including particularly Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, though this is not the case in the world of *SGGK*.[21] The immediate effect is a patchwork tableau of Arthurian tropes and chronologies, which places the film in common company with the popular romances of the later Middle Ages, including the three Gawain romances of the Percy Folio.

Mediaeval Journal 6, no. 2 (2016): 81-109; Phillipa Hardman, "Gawain's Practice of Piety in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medium Aevum* 68, no. 2 (1999): 247-67.

[20] Morgan is a prominent figure in Arthurian literature. She is sometimes Arthur's half-sister by his mother, Igraine, and sometimes also Gawain's mother. Most often this figure is split into Morgan le Fay, a queen of Avalon, and Morgause, Gawain's mother and the wife of King Lot.

[21] Sir Thomas Malory, "Sir Gareth of Orkney," *Le Morte Darthur: The Definitive Original Text*, ed. P. J. C. Field (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 245, lines 30-4.

Lowery artificially compresses, collapses, and expands time in *The Green Knight* in ways that emphasize the exterior, rather than the interior, journey of Gawain. While the preparation for his journey to the Green Chapel is no more than ten minutes of the film (and 178 lines of the poem), the journey itself (82 lines of *SGGK*) expands out to 38 minutes of screen time. In an article for *Vanity Fair*, Joanna Robinson writes: "The anonymous Gawain poet gave Lowery something of a gift in the form of just a few lines they used to *yada-yada* over much of Gawain's journey."[22] Lowery acknowledges his step away from the source material, stating, "I didn't have the balance of the poem in my mind, and so I'd reached the lines you mentioned that have one reference to Holy Head or mention of giants or ogres, depending on the translation you read—and I think there's serpents and great battles."[23] Lowery did not have the "balance of the poem" in mind, which I interpret as the structural pacing of the narrative. Inspired by popular fantasy films of the 1980s, Lowery explains that he wanted to explore the harrowing journey at greater length.

This expansion of the journey necessitates additional material, which Lowery finds in other medieval texts including the Welsh *vita* of Sant Gwenfrewi, the *Historia Brittonum*, and possibly even Laȝamon's *Brut*.[24] These encounters with Gwenfrewi and a Saxon scavenger wandering the desolated fields of the battle of Badon disrupt the temporality of the narrative both in terms of length of the journey and historical chronologies. Gwenfrewi lived in seventh-century Wales and the Badon battle is an early, important battle for King Arthur. At Badon, Arthur leads the charge to defeat Saxon invaders and consolidate the territory of his British kingdom. Geoffrey of Monmouth reports that Arthur slew 470 men, hence the visual desolation in Lowery's film.[25] This patchwork incorporation of other narrative elements also reinforces the spatiality of Gawain's journey. We are reminded of the Welsh origins of Arthuriana in more politically contentious ways than *SGGK* suggests, as well as the location of the Wirral.[26] This directorial choice fits together decapitation iconography (Gwenfrewi), a reminder of Arthur's older age, and a startling reference to the giants said to have populated Britain

[22] Joanna Robinson, "Director David Lowery on *The Green Knight*'s Eerie Influences," *Vanity Fair*, July 16, 2021, accessed May 9, 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/07/the-green-knight-david-lowery-preview-dev-patel-willow-influences. Italics are my emphasis.
[23] Robinson, "Director David Lowery on *The Green Knight*'s Eerie Influences."
[24] William Jenkins Rees, *Lives of the Cambro British Saints* (London: The Welsh MSS. Society, 1853), at 198-209; David Dumville, ed., *The Historia Brittonum: The Chartres Recension, vol. 2* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988); G. L. Brook & R. F. Leslie, ed., *Layamon: Brut*, 2 vols (London: Early English Text Society, 1979), 250, 277, 1963–78.
[25] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. Neil Wright (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 1985).
[26] David K. Coley, "Diaspora, Neighborhood, Empire: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Exemplaria* 32, no. 3 (2020): 206-28.

at the time of its founding into an expansive, exterior exploration of Gawain's adventures that comprise so few lines.

The significance of this reconfiguration of the circumstances of both setting and Gawain's journey through the Wirral is the simulacrum—the meta-anxiety inculcated in the audience. An audience familiar with the poem experiences a narrative tension akin to Gawain's own as we wonder when (or if) the young knight will actually reach Hautdesert. This is a case of familiarity forcing disorientation. *SGGK* expends much of its time examining Gawain's inner world, teasing out the important lessons bound up in the central image of the manuscript—the pearl of great price. Hautdesert is a critically important setting for Gawain's journey and the spiritual edification of the poem's readers.[27] On each of the three mornings Gawain spends in bed with Bertilak's wife, we see him attempting to resist temptations for the sake of not just his reputation, but also for his own salvation. During the third encounter, the narrator notes that "[Gawain] cared for his courtaysye, lest craþayn he were, / And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde make synne / And be traytor to þat tolke [Bertilak] þat þat telde aȝt" ([Gawain] cared for his virtue, lest he be considered a churl, / And [he cared] more for his guilt if he should sin / And be a traitor to that man [Bertilak] who had treated him well) (lines 1773-5). Gawain is fearful here that he might fall into sin as well as betray his host. The wheel that precedes these lines notes that Mary should watch out for her imperiled knight: "Gret perile bitwene hem stod / Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne" (Great peril between them stood, / Unless Mary mind her knight) (lines 1769-70). These moments of heightened concern disappear in Lowery's film, which places greater emphasis on the visually striking concept of beheading through repetition of the imagery with figures such as Gwenfrewi, the puppet show prior to Gawain's departure that caricaturizes the beheadings of both the Green Knight and Gawain, and the visual emphasis placed on Gawain's neck. Such repetition creates foreboding that stretches across the length of Gawain's journey. However, it is the substantial length of the journey that cultivates discomfort for the audience.

This building tension is felt in the world of the poem by Gawain. In his desperation to find shelter and hear Christmas mass, Sir Gawain kneels down to pray to Mary, but "Nade he sayned himself, segge, bot thrye, / Ere he was ware in the wode of a won in a mote" (He hadn't crossed himself but three times, this knight, / Before he became aware of a castle in the woods in a moat) (lines 763-4). The gleaming castle of Hautdesert, seemingly out of a dream, suddenly appears to Gawain's great relief. Just before that arrival, Gawain "rode in his prayere / And cryed for his mysdede. / He sayned hym in syþes sere" (prayed as he rode / And cried for his sins. / He crossed himself several times) (lines 759-61). We

[27] Cecilia A. Hatt, *God and the Gawain-Poet: Theology and Genre in Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (D. S. Brewer, NY: 2015); Sarah Stanbury, "Space and Visual Hermeneutics in the "Gawain"-Poet," *The Chaucer Review* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1987): 476-89.

see Gawain experiencing great fear at the prospect of failing his quest. The Pearl-poet grants his knight a brief, but significant, moment of catharsis when Hautdesert finally comes into view. As readers, we do not experience the same level of relief because the long journey was only briefly described. The appearance of Hautdesert in the film is immediately preceded by a tumbling of the camera—the world spirals, sending the sky to the bottom of the frame before it is reoriented.[28] Then the screen goes dark. Gawain sees the fox that has become his strange companion on the journey (a visual reference to the hunted fox in *SGGK*) and then he spies the castle in the distance. He does not fall to his knees until he passes the threshold into the interior of the castle, and his relief is expressed as a physical respite from the harsh climate of the wintery wilderness. The stark contrasts of color and light emphasize Gawain's exposed neck, recalling both Gwenfrewi's beheading earlier in the film and Gawain's own fated mission. The emphasis is exterior, physical. Gawain does not pray. He is not seeking the mass and priest to whom he can confess his sins. This visual depiction of Gawain's relief resembles the emotion in the poem, but it has lost the essential component of faith. This moment is an expression of Deleuze's simulacrum.

Lowery's effort to tease out and fabricate a series of adventures leaves an audience familiar with the poem in a state of meta-anxiety. We feel what Gawain feels as we wonder when he will finally reach the castle, this site where so much of the narrative transpires. Finally, the castle comes into view an hour and fourteen minutes into the film, producing a rush of catharsis for the audience. This strange sensation is simultaneously unrepresented by an encounter with the source material and yet also represented in the poem as Gawain's emotion—incredible relief after a long, dangerous journey. However, again, that sensation has lost the critical element of Gawain's faith and concern for his spiritual salvation. Instead, the relief is a product of our concern for narrative pacing. The sensation carries the resemblance, but not the substance. It is not a replication of the poem, but a subversion of the boundaries between reality and representation. This is a case of simulacrum as an effect, unintentional as it may be. Lowery calls attention to the nature of the film as a creation—a combination of a series of fragments from the poem itself, pop culture, and medievalism. To paraphrase Mayer, this is a playful repurposing of those fragments that makes visible its nature as something created rather than copied.[29]

[28] *The Green Knight*, at 1:14:00.
[29] Mayer, "Simulacrum," 224.