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**Essel and the Lady:**
**Troubadourian Duality in David Lowery's *The Green Knight***

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In her essay "Troubadour," Elizabeth Fay defines the Victorian Romantic conception of the medieval minstrel as made up of dualities: self and other, poet and narrator, presence and absence, "free" and "enslaved," sublimated and transcendent.[1] He is at once the "deceitful rake" and also the "emotionally frustrated troubadour" whose works evoke a "pleasing melancholy" that is at once "externally oriented and internally obsessed."[2] This Romantic conception has greatly influenced our own modern one, perhaps most evidently in the personage of the knight errant, a medievalist figure that Fay points out is also associated with the troubadour. If, as Fay notes, "chivalry came to stand in for medieval culture," then the troubadours' most influential invention, *fin'amor*, came to stand in for chivalry.[3] The seeming contradictions of the Romantic knight, who must be at once poetic lover and courageous fighter, serve to further underscore the dualities of the troubadour. Though transmuted into nineteenth-century thought, these dualities were inherent to the troubadour lyrics themselves wherein distinctions between subject and object were blurred.[4]

This duality of subject-object can be seen highlighted, as well, in David Lowery's 2021 film *The Green Knight*. As writer and director, Lowery's provocative creative choices include casting actor Alicia Vikander in dual roles: as the prostitute Essel and as the mysterious figure listed in the credits simply as "The Lady." This dual casting naturally allows for relations to be drawn between the two characters, and, in this article, I examine Lowery's artistic decision through the lens of Fay's essay. She describes the troubadour as a figure through which nineteenth-century Romantics understood the ideals of *fin'amor*, or courtly love, and if this definition of troubadour applies to the main character Gawain, then, as I will argue, the women portrayed by Vikander together represent, if not troubadour, then *trobairitz*.

Fay highlights the dual, seemingly contradictory roles attributed to the troubadours as perceived through the lens of Romantic medievalism. On the one hand, they were considered as "free agents" in their perambulations from court to court. On the other, they

[1] Elizabeth Fay, "Troubadour," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 255-63, 256.
[2] Fay, "Troubadour," 256, 259.
[3] Fay, "Troubadour," 255.
[4] See particularly Sarah Kay, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 97.

were not free but "enslaved," specifically by their devotion to their lady. In *The Green Knight*, both features can be seen in the character of Gawain: his knight errancy mirrors the "free agency" of the troubadours, yet he is "enslaved" to the image of the woman he left behind. Both roles, free agent and slave, are linked to Vikander's characters: free agency in that Gawain has relationships with supposedly two different women (reinforced, in a vision of an imaginary future, by his abandonment of the prostitute once she gives birth for a more appropriate bride), and enslavement in that he cannot escape her (her image follows him from the start of his quest in Essel, to near its end in the Lady, and, at its climax, back to Essel, as seen in that imaginary future).

Like Gawain at the beginning of the film, the Romantic troubadour was a rakish figure. According to Fay, he was "unbeholden to a patron" yet "enmeshed in . . . transgressive passions," though not without scruples: while "a deceitful rake and social menace," he was also "politically compromised and emotionally frustrated."[5] The character of Gawain is both of these things. He spends his time drinking and enjoying the company of prostitutes and is apparently disinterested in courtly life, which is of concern to both his mother and his uncle, King Arthur. Frustrated with his listlessness, his mother casts a spell to summon the Green Knight and test her son's prowess. Overly eager to prove himself, Gawain slays the Green Knight despite Arthur's admonition to "remember it is only a game," thus sending him on a quest which will determine the rest of the film.[6] Gawain's hubris stems from his efforts to reconcile the two opposing forces of his character: lover and fighter. This tension is made explicit in the "exchange of winnings" at the Lord's castle, where Gawain is torn between his duty to the Lady as courtly lover and his feudal duty to her husband, his host, as knight and guest.

However, one would be remiss to identify these dualities solely with Gawain. The same two characteristics of the troubadour can be seen in the two characters portrayed by Vikander: while "enslaved" by their feelings for Gawain (as well as by societal limitations imposed on their gender), their portrayal by the same actress mimics the peripatetic nature of the troubadour's (or knight errant's) free agency. Simultaneously left behind at the start of Gawain's journey and awaiting him near its end, she can exist in two places at once. This idea is reminiscent of the convention of *fin'amor* known as the *amor de lonh*, or faraway love, whereby distance renders the troubadour's beloved inaccessible to him.[7]

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[5] Fay gives the character Willoughby from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and the poet John Keats as examples, respectively. See "Troubadour," 256.

[6] *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021), 0:19:54.

[7] The expression "*amor de lonh*" was coined by the troubadour Jaufre Rudel and, as a convention of courtly love, serves as an obstacle to the consummation of the troubadour's desire. See, for example, Linda Paterson, "*Fin'amor* and the development of the courtly *canso*," in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 28-46, 37. See also Moshe

Though separated geographically, the troubadour and his beloved are connected spiritually, as the troubadour carries the image of the *domna*, or lady,[8] in his heart, as can be seen explicitly in an illumination from troubadour *chansonnier* N.[9] In this thirteenth-century image, the illustrator has juxtaposed the face of the *domna* over the chest of (presumably) the troubadour Folquet de Marselha, as if her image were inscribed within his heart. Though she is far from him, he holds her near. The reverse is also true: Another convention of *fin'amor* holds that the troubadour leaves his heart behind when he leaves his *domna*. He too can thus exist in two places at once.[10] The perambulatory nature of the troubadour is that of the knight errant, represented by the dual roles of Essel and the Lady: the troubadour leaves his heart behind, but how can he exist without it? He carries his beloved's image with him—as seen in the illustration from *chansonnier* N as well as in the Lady's attempts to capture Gawain's image in her "very queer painting."[11] Essel, too, draws attention to this convention when, on the eve of Gawain's departure, she asks, "Do you still fancy me? Do I make you happy?. . . Even though I'm here and you're there?"[12]

The paradoxical relationship between *domna* and troubadour informed the Romantic imaginary. Fay points, for example, to Mary Robinson as an example of a woman poet who drew on the *trobairitz*, the women troubadours, as "a gendered model for voicing these same concerns while also emphasizing the difficulties that sexual power relations bring to the mix."[13] Unlike the *domna*, the *trobairitz* must actively pursue their lover's attention: Castelloza, for example, sings of feelings of abandonment and the Comtessa de Dia of downright betrayal. What they lack, and what they thus seek, is "a determining voice in how the relationship is conducted."[14] Indeed, many scholars have commented on "the loss of voice, social alienation, and female loss of agency in sexual relations" in

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Lazar, "*Fin'amor*," in *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, ed. F. R. P. Akehurst and Judith M. Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 61-100, 73.

[8] Glynnis Cropp defines "*domna*" as "le terme employé dans la poésie courtoise pour designer toute femme qui appartient au milieu aristocratique, et en particulier la dame aimée" ("the term used in courtly poetry to designate every woman belonging to the aristocratic milieu and, in particular, the beloved lady"). See *Le Vocabulaire Courtois des Troubadours de l'Époque Classique* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1975), 24. Translations from French are my own.

[9] Morgan Library, MS M.819 fol. 59r; digital copy available at The Morgan Library and Museum, last accessed August 18, 2025, https://www.themorgan.org/collection/chansonnier-provenccal/147160/123. The illustration accompanies Folquet de Marselha's verse, "Quins el cor port dona vostra faichon" ("For in my heart I carry, lady, your image" [literally "face"]). Transcription and translation mine.

[10] At the start of Gawain's quest, Essel asks him to give her his heart. Near its end, the Lady gifts to him a heart-shaped manuscript.

[11] *The Green Knight*, 1:21:46-1:21:49.

[12] *The Green Knight*, 0:38:12-0:38:27.

[13] Fay, "Troubadour," 256.

[14] Meg Bogin, *The Women Troubadours* (New York: Norton, 1980), 72.

regard to the "troubadourian beloved."[15] Tilde Sankovitch notes that these women are "situated clearly in a female rather than a male trajectory into and through the unfamiliar, and potentially dangerous, domain of poetic composition,"[16] while Sarah Kay rhetorically asks, "How easy would it be for a woman to write from within a masculine role?"[17]

The same is true of Vikander's characters. They are both rendered voiceless at the end of the film: seen completing her "queer painting"[18] of Gawain, the Lady's communication is limited to her art (much like the *trobairitz* themselves), while Essel is last seen (in a hypothetical future) deprived of her voice, robbed of her son, and powerless to prevent it.[19] Like the *trobairitz*, Essel and the Lady's efforts to (pro)create are constrained by a male-dominated society: by Gawain, who watches as Essel's newborn child is ripped from her arms, supposedly on his orders, and who qualifies the Lady's painting as "queer."[20] These women seeking a place in the male sphere mimic the *trobairitz*' attempts at *trobar*: to employ a language and form not created for them but for and by men.[21] The futility of this effort can be seen on the eve of Gawain's quest, when Essel, asking for Gawain's love and receiving no answer, answers herself instead, putting the words she would like to hear into Gawain's mouth as she moves his lips with her hand.[22] Even then, she gets no reaction from Gawain.

Yet Essel and the Lady's influence on Gawain cannot be minimized. It is the sexual gratification from Essel that distracts Gawain from his chivalric duties and the sexual shaming of the Lady that pushes him to complete his quest. It would be incorrect,

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[15] Fay, "Troubadour," 256-7. Fay is referencing Mary Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon* (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1796).

[16] Tilde Sankovitch, "The *Trobairitz*," in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 113-26, 116.

[17] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 102.

[18] *The Green Knight*, 1:21:46-9.

[19] The young queen who replaces Essel in Gawain's affections is likewise voiceless, given no dialogue during her time on-screen.

[20] Gawain is shocked by the unconventional portrait that the Lady has made of him, as opposed to the traditional portrait made at the start of the film, celebrating Gawain as the hero who slew the Green Knight. The Lady is clearly aware of the censorship she faces as a woman artist, as she tells Gawain that she has written books and "improved" those of others where she saw fit, but she warns him, "Don't tell anyone this." *The Green Knight*, 0:27:39 and 1:19:15-38.

[21] E. Jane Burns comments on the silencing of the female voice in the courtly love lyric: "Feminist medievalists of the 1980s and 1990s argued this case convincingly, revealing from a number of angles that, if the lady is the putative subject of courtly love, she remains nonetheless subjected to social rules and regulatory systems that privilege heterosexual men as the desiring, speaking, and most visible subjects of amorous exchange." See "Courtly Love: Who Needs It? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition," *Signs* 27, no. 1 (2001): 23-57, 25.

[22] "Why, yes, Essel, I'd like that very much. You may have my ear and my hand and heart. And I will be king and you my queen. You will be my lady, and I'll be your man." *The Green Knight*, 0:39:17-40.

however, to limit these characters to the love act. As Fay warns, Robinson's work "critique[s] the masculinist assumptions underlying the troubadourian beloved—that by holding the power of denial over her lover she dominates the love relation."[23] Kay argues that "the masculine subject is unsure how far he is *subject to* feminine desire,"[24] yet this desire takes place within a masculine sphere and is, by definition, masculine. Indeed, Kay explicitly defines courtly love as exclusively "masculine desire."[25] This is, after all, why the role of the *domna* was created. Fear of a sexually liberated woman underscores much of the masculine discourse around *fin'amor*, the "feminine" serving as a "scapegoat" for the man's own desires.[26] The feminine as temptress excuses masculine weakness. *Fin'amor* thus conceived of a love at once exalting and dangerous, of *domna* and of *femna*.

In the troubadours' construction of *fin'amor*, the *domna* (lady) is made distinctive from the *femna* (woman)—an early version of the Madonna-whore dichotomy.[27] In the troubadour tradition, the *domna* was imbued with certain masculine qualities—the troubadours even using feudal language to figuratively make the *domna* their "lord"—so as to minimize the threat she would otherwise pose as a desirous and depraved *femna*. "The point seems to be to maintain the sexual interest of the man without the threat of an active female sexuality," according to Kay.[28] As the *femna* is rendered voiceless by gendered power dynamics, much as Essel is (twice) abandoned by Gawain, the *domna* represents a third, androgynous gender afforded more agency, such as that wielded by the Lady who tests Gawain's devotion to the ideals of chivalry. Indeed, it is the Lady's attempt to strip Gawain of his identity, accusing him of being "no knight," which motivates him to complete his quest.[29] It is this third gender which allows for the *trobairitz* to enter into the masculine-dominated discourse on courtly love—as both subject (the narrative I) and as object (the

[23] Fay, "Troubadour," 257.
[24] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 99.
[25] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 85.
[26] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 131.
[27] Unlike the aristocratic *domna* (lady), the common *femna* (woman) is not the love object of troubadour lyric. *Femna* can also mean "wife," which *domna* cannot—a clear distinction between the woman who is the object of sexual desire and the woman who fulfils that desire. According to Cropp, *domna* and *femna* are in opposition, and, moreover, *femna* "n'est pas de la langue courtoise" (is not part of courtly language). See Cropp, *Vocabulaire*, 26. Translation from French is my own. This *domna-femna* opposition is reflective of the Madonna-whore dichotomy, a psychological complex according to which men are able to see women either as Madonna (virtuous, chaste, "good") or as whore (sexual, promiscuous, "bad") but not as both. The complex was identified by Sigmund Freud who described it as a man's inability to sustain sexual attraction to a woman with whom he is in a loving relationship: "[w]here such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love." See "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 48-60, 52.
[28] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 96.
[29] *The Green Knight*, 1:34:00.

*amor de lonh*) of their own songs[30]—though, as Kay notes, their identification with the *domna* is not an easy one.[31]

Essel and the Lady's open desire for Gawain flouts the conventions of *fin'amor* whereby a woman must be the recipient of desire without expressing it herself. According to R. Howard Bloch, "The perfection of the love object excludes or prevents her desiring."[32] However, a common feature of troubadour lyric is conflation of subjectivity and objectivity. In order to conform to twelfth-century conventions tightly linked to both gender and desire, the troubadours were of necessity both loving subject and loved object.[33] This constraint was not limited to the troubadours but likewise extended to the *trobairitz*, as Kay points out: "[t]here is no great difference between men and women writers in regard to the alternation between the roles of subject and object of desire."[34] However, that is not to say that men and women troubadours were equal in their emotions, or in their ability to demonstrate them. Kay continues, "Where they do differ is in the quality of the resulting experience. For men . . . it was typically exalting; for women it is more a source of anguish."[35] The anguish experienced by the *trobairitz* was rooted in their limitations as women to express themselves in a language and literary tradition designed by and for men: while ostensibly *femna*, loving subjects, they were required to be *domna*, beloved objects.[36]

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[30] This was true of the Romantic conception of the *trobairitz* as well: as Fay notes, Robinson's "Sappho is imagined as both a love poet and a beloved who speaks her love back." See "Troubadour," 261.

[31] Kay writes, "Yet the 'mixed' gender is by definition exclusive; although it sanctions certain 'female' traits . . others . . . are transplanted from a masculine ethos," and adds, that "[t]heir subjectivity, when it is not annexed, is silenced or oppressed." See *Subjectivity*, 102, 111.

[32] R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 147.

[33] According to Simon Gaunt, "the desire to be seen by the object of desire is often as strong as the desire to see her. One effect of this is that subject / object distinctions are troubled." See "The Look of Love: The Gender of the Gaze in Troubadour Lyric," in *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*, ed. Emma Campbell and Robert Mills (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 79-95, 85. Paul Zumthor likewise claims that the true object of trouvères' (the northern counterpart of the southern troubadours) song is the song itself. See "De la Circularité du Chant," *Poétique: Revue de Théorie et d'Analyse Littéraires* 2 (1970): 129-40. Julia Kristeva, however, argues that the song's object is its own performance. Interestingly, in describing the woman as merely a "pretext" for the troubadour's song, she uses a pair of words that Fay uses to describe the dual nature of the troubadour: she slips "away between restrained *presence* and *absence*." See *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 283 [emphasis mine]). Bloch considers these and other possibilities in "The Love Lyric and the Paradox of Perfection." See *Medieval Misogyny*, 143-64, 152.

[34] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 110.

[35] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 110.

[36] Bloch calls this the "paradox of perfection" in the troubadours' love songs. He analyzes the self-contradictory obsession with virginity that is "lost by embodiment," which he identifies as the source of medieval misogyny. See *Medieval Misogyny*, 143.

Expression of her desire would relegate the *trobairitz* to the role of *femna* while embracing the role of *domna* would effectively invalidate that desire. However, while certainly constrained by a masculine literary tradition, the *trobairitz* were not without agency. Matilda T. Bruckner, for example, says of one particular *trobairitz*, "[t]he Comtessa de Dia is quite adept at playing the roles of both *domna* and poet-lover, passive and active personae as projected by the troubadour poets, in combination with her expressions of desire."[37] According to Kay, the passive "stance is not characteristic of the women's songs. Instead, they expose themselves as agents despite the risk of condemnation."[38] This agency and thus condemnation, whether explicit or implicit, is evident in Lowery's film. As *femna*, Essel must be marked as "other." She must keep her hair short and wear bells on her clothes as markers of her profession—in other words, to show that she is a woman who dares to desire.[39] As *domna*, the Lady is afforded certain qualities typically reserved for men, such as courtliness, artistry, and a certain degree of agency. Yet what power she has is limited to her immediate environs. While Essel is seen in a brothel, in the woods, in the street, in her birthing bed, the Lady is never seen outside the confines of her castle.

As an openly sexual *femna* was not considered an appropriate paramour for the courtly lover, the "threat" of the *domna*'s sexuality was neutralized by projecting masculine qualities onto her. However, in so doing, "the distinctions between self and other, subject and object, individual and social are all to some degree obscured, while the 'threat' of the 'feminine' is not always convincingly evaded."[40] The dual casting of Vikander plays with this blurring of self and other, Gawain's desires reflected back onto him. What he finds most condemning in Essel and the Lady is their sexual openness, which is a self-critique of his own.[41] It is the pursuit of his desires which have impeded his career thus far, and that which he most resents in himself is what he must confront in the personages of Essel and the Lady, made explicit when the Lady presents him with a portrait, an upside-down mirror image of himself.[42] Indeed, "Men see their own gender as based on their sexuality,

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[37] Matilda T. Bruckner, "Fictions of the Female Voice: The Women Troubadours," *Speculum* 67, no. 4 (1992): 865-91, 877.

[38] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 109.

[39] Essel ultimately gives Gawain one of these bells as a token before he embarks on his quest. *The Green Knight*, 0:40:02.

[40] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 91.

[41] Indeed, Bloch contends that the troubadourian obsession for an immaculate *domna* is in fact "a profound wish for identity with the other, for self-identity." See *Medieval Misogyny*, 151.

[42] It is this portrait, now right-side up, which sits in judgment over Gawain as he waits for enemy forces to invade his castle, finally removing his enchanted belt and, symbolically as well as literally, beheading himself.

and find echoes of it in their love object."[43] Thus, while the obscuring of the individual in Essel and the Lady is evident, there is also an obscuring of Gawain's individual desires and those of Essel/the Lady, their mutual desires consistently posing a "threat."

Lowery's choice to cast Vikander in both roles of Essel and the Lady, as both *femna* and *domna*, proposes a solution to what Kay calls the "contradictions" and "inconsistencies" of the *domna*.[44] One such contradiction is the convention of *trobar* whereby "the contrast between the 'feminine' and 'mixed' genders is both affirmed and questioned."[45] The dual casting of Vikander undermines this contrast, suggesting that the distinction between *femna* and *domna* is not easily defined. Together, Essel and the Lady present a commentary on the arbitrary nature of a male-constructed gender system: They are neither *femna* nor *domna* at the same time that they are both *femna* and *domna*. Bloch contests that the medieval conception of the Madonna-whore dichotomy is not a contradiction but rather that the woman is "both at once," "a logical necessity. . .[that traps her] in an ideological entanglement whose ultimate effect is her abstraction from history."[46] However, Vikander's double casting also creates room for a questioning of this "both," the *femna-domna* dichotomy being a male construct into which no one woman easily fits. As Essel and the Lady, Vikander is both the loved object as well as the loving subject. As a non-gender specific subject-object, then, Vikander can be seen perhaps both as troubadour and as *trobairitz*.

In the translation from medieval to medievalism, Fay claims that, for Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, love for the Lady translated into a quest for the sublime.[47] She describes the denial of the lady's love experienced by the troubadour as a "sublime" moment of self-loss. Indeed, Bloch defines the troubadourian desire as a "despoliation of the self."[48] While it is true that Vikander's Essel is denied what she explicitly asks of Gawain—"What will you say if I asked you to make me your lady?"[49]—it is also true that she denies what he offers: "I already have your gold."[50] Likewise, Vikander's Lady is denied by and herself denies Gawain. Her romantic advances initially rejected by Gawain, she then insults him when he submits to them: "You are no knight."[51] Caught between his courtly duty to the Lady and his chivalric duty to the Lord, Gawain fails in his promise to the Lord to give to him whatever he has received while in his home. The Lady's taunt thus

[43] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 111.
[44] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 130.
[45] Kay, *Subjectivity*, 95.
[46] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 164.
[47] Fay, "Troubadour," 259.
[48] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 145.
[49] *The Green Knight*, 0:38:34-0:38:36.
[50] *The Green Knight*, 0:38:46-0:38:48.
[51] *The Green Knight*, 1:34:00.

serves to deny him half of his dual identity. However, his failure to gratify her desires also denies him the other half.

In *The Green Knight*, then, it is Vikander as *domna-femna* who is both denying and denied. She is *domna* who denies Gawain (both his desire and his purpose, limiting her sexuality to manual stimulation, serving as a test which Gawain fails), and she is also *femna* who is denied (denied the love and acknowledgement of Gawain, who abandons her in favor of his quest, which could also be seen as a test that he has failed). According to Bloch, the traditions of *fin'amor* concede that "the sine qua non of loving. . .is that one not be loved in return."[52] While at first blush it may seem evident to identify Gawain with the figure of the troubadourian lover as defined above, in light of Bloch's assertion, the better candidate would certainly prove to be Essel and the Lady: prostitute and noble, love object and loving subject, *trobairitz* and troubadour. As *femna-domna*, subject-object, denier-denied, the conflation of Vikander's characters sublimely "loses herself" in becoming someone else, through her transformation from Essel to the Lady (and back again).

[52] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 151.