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"Green Shall Spread Over All": Transference and *The Green Knight* as Eco-Horror[1]

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In her 2007 book *Greenery*, Gillian Rudd asks her reader, "what if it is Earth, the soil and even, by extension, this planet, that has had enough of mankind, that jumped up bit of clay, and finally, after years of endurance and suffering, simply reclaims him, re-absorbs and thus eradicates him?"[2] This question is given an answer by a bandit who appears halfway through *The Green Knight* and walks with Gawain on a battlefield covered with long-dead soldiers, of whom he says, "Nature'll do its trick—she'll suck them in and tuck them tight."[3]

The horror and inevitability of bodily decay is never far from the medieval literary consciousness, and consequently it is never far from *The Green Knight*. The film uses the thematic and narrative contours of the memento mori and its concern with the physical process of decay to create a work of contemporary eco-horror, a genre that similarly has at its center the fear of being consumed by nature and turned, over time, into something else. One example of this is a circular shot just after Gawain is robbed by that bandit and left for dead, which leaves from Gawain's struggling body in the winter woods and transitions to spring blossoms poking up through the forest floor and a shining bare skull in the place of his head. In another scene shortly after, Gawain eats some mushrooms, wipes his hand on his face, and then watches as his hand grows over with mold, which soon reveals itself to be a hallucination. These scenes showcase the speculative ability of decay—its ability to show what could have been and what will be, eventually. They also demonstrate that a large part of *The Green Knight*'s success comes from its understanding that eco-horror as a contemporary genre is an ideal venue for processing medieval attitudes about death and decay, and for relaying them naturally and compellingly to a medieval audience.

The film's interest in capturing processes of decay and change overlaps significantly with the medieval device of the memento mori, which is similarly aware of decay's speculative possibilities. Memento mori, or "remember you must die," is a trope designed to help readers reflect on their own impermanence and the importance of God's grace, one that appears in different forms across medieval literature. John Lydgate's *Dance of Death* reminds its readers of their earthliness with a question directed to "yee folkes harde-hertid as a stone" ("You folks hard-hearted as a stone") asking "Where is your witt, wher is your

[1] *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021), 1:27:37.
[2] Gillian Rudd, *Greenery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 27.
[3] *The Green Knight*, 0:42:45-50.

providence / To see aforn the sodeine violence / of cruel Dethe [?]" ("Where is your wit, where is your foresight / to see before you the sudden violence / of cruel Death?") (lines 1, 5-6).[4] Others connect mortality and nature even more directly, as in *A Disputation Between the Body and the Worms*, which offers decay as a source of nourishment as well as an opportunity for reflection on impermanence: "In þis wrechid warld here ar þai þe apon," the worms say; "Now þi lyfe is gone, with vs may þou not stryfe / Þou art bot as erthe and as þinge to noght gone" ("In this wretched world here where they are upon / Now thy life is gone, you may not quarrel with us / thou art but as earth and as something gone to nothing") (lines 143-5).[5]

Whether structured as a hypothetical question to the reader—what will you do when decay comes for you?—or as a demonstration of what bodies and souls look like after death has taken its toll, the memento mori is interested in offering a glimpse of the potential future that can be of some spiritual use to those experiencing it. Medieval death poetry more broadly incorporates what Megan Cook and Elizaveta Strakhov call a "mental 'image-text'" of decomposition, arranged body part by body part, "compelling the reader to imagine a set of visualizations organized around a single, central idea" which could include "[the] decomposing human body," but also "the transience of human attachment to possessions, rules and regulations, and social rank, or consider embodied encounters with death by personifying death into a real figure, capable of dialogue that describes and justifies its actions."[6] This impulse to categorize and explain a mysterious natural process through its concrete, observable effects on parts of the body ends up sounding like the inverse of medieval love poetry about the component parts of a beautiful subject: it "is the attempted taxonomization and ordering of the ineffable experience of dying."[7]

The Green Knight's own "image-texts" of decomposition are abundant. Everything in Camelot closes the gap between youth and age, from Gawain's own maturation over the course of his quest to the castle's aging court and crumbling foundations. Arthur and Guinevere, in contrast to the poem's rulers of "yonge blod" (young blood) and "brayne wylde" (wild brain) (Fitt 1, line 89) are aging and frail, unable to take on the quest to which Gawain is ultimately resigned.[8] Visions of nature overtaking bodies and foundations

[4] John Lydgate, "A Dance of Death," in *John Lydgate's Dance of Death and Related Works*, ed. Megan L. Cook and Elizaveta Strakhov (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2019). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[5] Jenny Rebecca Rytting, "A Disputacioun Betwyx Þe Body and Wormes: A Translation," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Study* 31, no. 1 (2000): 217-32, 224.

[6] Megan L. Cook and Elizaveta Strakhov, "Introduction" to *John Lydgate's Dance of Death and Related Works*, 3.

[7] Cook and Strakhov, "Introduction," 3.

[8] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, and Patience*, ed. J. J. Anderson (London: Everyman Books, 1996), 167-277.

appear throughout, both visually, as in Gawain's hypothetical skeletonization, or through description, as when Alicia Vikander's Lady says that vines and leaves will eventually overtake the walls of the castle she, Gawain, and Bertilak inhabit, literally covering them over: "Green is what is left when ardor fades, when passion dies, when we die, too."[9]

This use of vivid imagery of nature overcoming bodies and structures, and the use of such overcoming to provide a speculative imagination of the future, is a trend shared by a significant and growing genre in modern film and fiction: eco-horror. Eco-horror is a subgenre of horror that focuses on the breakdown of humanity's relationship to nature, whether through climate collapse or through nature literally fighting back against humanity. It intersects with what has been called the "new weird," a genre that emerged in the 1990s among novelists usually writing in horror or science fiction. This is based, in turn, on the "weird fiction" of the pulp scene in the 1930s, which deals with situations or individuals that defy the laws of nature or wander into an unfamiliar setting, with science replacing the supernatural as a primary source of horror. The new weird is "a re-enquiry into approaches and issues raised by the New Wave [in science fiction] of the 1960s—bringing along all of that movement's associated influences—but in this case primarily from the perspective of The Weird rather than science fiction or fantasy."[10] In its synthesis of horror and speculative fiction with the weird, new weird fiction allows us a glimpse into kinds of behavior that are radically unfamiliar to us: "norms that we, as humans bound by inherited logics and patterns of behavior, cannot intuit or inhabit."[11] Whether it is viewed as a subgenre or outgrowth of horror, or simply an accessory to it, the new weird provides a prerogative to take non-human norms seriously as a way of organizing alternate understandings of the world.

While the genres of eco-horror and the new weird overlap significantly, they have some crucial differences. Eco-horror is a genre in which "environmental natures inform plot and aesthetics and . . . become figured as the source of horror."[12] The new weird is characterized, in contrast, not by horror at the naturally different, but by interest in that difference for its own sake: "Unlike certain types of horror, the emphasis [in the new weird] is not on the terror or the horror, the emphasis is on this beautiful unknown thing that may

[9] *The Green Knight*, 1:27:08-15.

[10] Jeff Vandermeer and Ann Vandermeer, "The Weird: An Introduction," *The Weird Fiction Review*, May 6, 2012, accessed September 1, 2024, https://weirdfictionreview.com/2012/05/the-weird-an-introduction/. The authors define the Weird in this essay as fiction interested in an "understanding of the world beyond the mundane" in which characters encounter a world unfamiliar to them and to the reader.

[11] Ben Robertson, "Introduction," in *None of this is Normal* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 2.

[12] Anna Krauthamer, "Would That The Earth Could Stop Us," *Public Books*, June 6 2022, accessed September 1, 2024. https://www.publicbooks.org/ecohorror-gaia-in-the-earth/#fnref-48693-1.

be monstrous but that isn't automatically considered deadly or horrific."[13] Determining which of these genres *The Green Knight* belongs to is, in some senses, a question of individual interpretation: is the film's relationship to nature one of horror, or one of reserved wonder? The answer is at times both: the film's use of visual aesthetics of creeping greenery and overgrown skeletons, walls, and graves situates it firmly in the new weird's concern with human perspectives, and human life, being overtaken by nature's. In moments of terror—Gawain's hand becoming overgrown with mold, or his body turning into a skeleton—this overcoming seems more like eco-horror, emphasizing the threatening parts of nature's relationship to the human body. It seems clear, then, that in addition to the film's other touchstones, which include "eco-anxiety,"[14] medieval romance, and adventure story, we can add both these contemporary genres. Describing *The Green Knight* as a work of speculative eco-horror that frequently ventures into the territory of the new weird allows for a better understanding of how the film utilizes contemporary genres to relay its medieval source material, which has resonances to both genres and similarly deals with the violation of established human norms.

These norms can, of course, also be a source of tension. Films like *The Feast* (2021), *Annihilation* (a 2018 adaptation of Jeff Vandermeer's 2014 new weird novel of the same name), and *Antlers* (2021) have in recent memory provided visions of solitary individuals fighting against a planet bound to destroy them. *The Green Knight*'s orientation towards nature is a little less antagonistic than some of these other adaptations, but Gawain is still being pursued by nature, though in the very end he ceases his flight from it. Framed through the lens of the new weird, Gawain is transitioning from a life organized around human norms to one organized around nature's norms, which require him to surrender his life in the process.

The Green Knight is successful in applying these contemporary genres to a retelling of a medieval story (and, by extension, translating that story for its modern audience) precisely because it is aware of the commonalities between the two. Eco-horror and new weird fiction share speculative fiction's concerns about transience and relationships to nature, which parallels medieval speculations about the body after death (particularly within the memento mori tradition and its predictions about the future of bodies and souls). All of these align with *The Green Knight*'s fascination with what results from resisting the processes of nature. It communicates medieval attitudes about death and decay by

[13] Jeff Vandermeer, "Weird and New Weirder: An Interview with Jeff Vandermeer," interview by Emily Wendstrom, *Book Riot*, September 12, 2018, accessed September 1, 2024, https://bookriot.com/jeff-vandermeer-interview/.

[14] Kalden Dhatsenpa, "'The Green Knight,' Apocalyptic Anxiety and the New Avatars of Climate Change," *Canadian Dimension*, August 25, 2021, accessed September 1, 2024, https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/the-green-knight-apocalyptic-anxiety-and-the-new-avatars-of-climate-change.

situating itself as a work of eco-horror, successfully communicating the original poem's depiction of relationships between humans and nature through the conventions of a modern genre with a similar interest in decay and the potential for nature to overtake human bodies, architecture, and systems of explaining the world.

The film is fully aware of the ties between its speculative eco-horror and the medieval texts and philosophical ideas it is working from, and emphasizes them not just in its visuals, but in its plot structure. In *The Green Knight*, decay not only reminds characters of their future but opens up other futures. The dramatic alternate paths the movie takes viewers down are only made possible because of different forms of decay—of will, of courage, of time, and of literal flesh. The most significant of these alternate paths is of course Gawain's refusal of the Green Knight's challenge and the aftermath of that decision. Rather than ending with Gawain's return to Camelot, as the poem does, the film ends with "an extended, desaturated montage, births and deaths [that] plague an aged-up Gawain who, like an idiot, has gotten everything he's ever wanted."[15] This Gawain, of course, is partially the Gawain of the poem, who does not reveal his green sash, and who returns to Camelot to a celebration he cannot fully participate in. We never see beyond that in the poem, but the movie pushes further, speculating about what the life of a knight who has gone back on his personal honor would look like. Gawain returns to Camelot and becomes king, engenders a child with his former lover but ultimately gives her up in order to marry royalty; he then watches his son die in a battle he himself lives through before ultimately losing his own head and his kingdom as well. The loss is total.

This version of Gawain, the movie posits, is not only dangerous to those around him because he lacks honor, but because he resists the pull of the earth and the natural rhythms others are content to live within. As the Lady has already told us, escape from creeping mortality is impossible, as is escape from one's deferred responsibilities to others, to oneself, and to the earth. As the poem's Gawain notes, "'For man may hyden his harme bot unhap ne may hit, / For ther hit ones is tachched twynne wil hit never" ("For man may hide his guilt but may not undo it, / for once it is attached it will never be parted") (Fitt 4, lines 2511-12).[16] The movie's speculative unwinding reminds viewers that resistance is often the easiest way to avoid decay in the moment, but to consign yourself to stagnancy forever. The real horror in *The Green Knight* is growing complacent, having things remain the same, and forgetting that changeability is always right behind you. When we snap back to the present, Gawain removes his sash and announces "I'm ready

[15] Jacob Oller, "*The Green Knight*, Failure, and Green, Green Growth," *Paste Magazine*, August 6, 2021, accessed September 1, 2024, https://www.pastemagazine.com/movies/the-green-knight-failure-growth-montage.

[16] Translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* here belong to Anderson.

now," offering an alternate model: acceptance of mortality and decay, and via the Green Knight's axe, full surrender to the earth.[17]

In the film, as in the wider genre of eco-horror, no way exists to avoid nature's forward press: green overcomes all, no matter what. Consigning yourself to this fact, like the seasons, like the game, is something all the film's characters but Gawain seem able to do, at least until the last moment. The credits are interrupted by a still shot of the forest floor, suggesting that his personal reabsorption is complete, and his story closed. Opting out of the process, no matter his choice, is impossible. Perhaps this is the comfort on the other side of eco-horror: the choice has been made for us; in fact, the choice never really existed. As disturbing as the change from human body into soil and plant matter is, it is revelatory, too. There is joy in letting plants climb over the walls, in ceasing to clear the weeds away. It is not despite its medieval source, but because of it, that the film is able to create a thematically consistent eco-anxiety film that explores decay's potential as a speculative narrative device. By identifying this medieval mentality that rot, decay, and earth conquer all, and the speculative ability these processes have to allow for alternate plots and differentiated futures, *The Green Knight* successfully creates contemporary eco-horror out of the soil of its source, and allows for the possibility of peace, and even joy, springing from change.

[17] *The Green Knight*, 2:03:35.