Volume 37 (2025)
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St. Winifred's Ghost and the Imagined Medieval of *The Green Knight*

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About fifty-five minutes into David Lowery's 2021 film, *The Green Knight*, a subtitle indicates that the lonely and travel-weary Gawain (Dev Patel) will encounter St. Winifred (Erin Kellyman)—or her ghost, as he later surmises. For the next ten minutes, Gawain engages in conversation, confusion, and wonder with and about this ghostly companion. The scene stands out as an important piece in understanding how the modern movie interprets and presents *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its medieval world. It is likewise a reimagining of the story of St. Winifred and of her shrine at Holywell. The emphatic use of the St. Winifred myth and the particulars of its adaptation here represent a thematic intervention, to be sure, but also an interpretive guide to specific plot decisions. The final version of Winifred is headless—not whole and restored to life in order to move into a holy life as in her legend. The spring similarly confounds, as it is not healing or reparative, but rather a plunge to further horror and shame. Gawain becomes a failed St. Beuno, unable to restore Winifred's head and thus prismatically shifting her narrative down several alternate paths. Winifred becomes a ghost. This ghost-ness, I think, tells us much about this reconstruction of the poem.[1]

The reference to St. Winifred is passing, at best, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Indeed, it is more of a quick glance. The poem's second fitt details Gawain's preparations for his journey to find the Green Chapel, his departure, his travels, and his eventual arrival at Hautdesert. The itinerary begins with some specific geographical markers, notably England (Logres) and Northern Wales:

> Now ridez þis renk þurȝ þe ryalme of Logres,
> Sir Gauan, on Godez halue, þaȝ hym no gomen þoȝt.
> Oft leudlez alone he lengez on nyȝtez
> Þer he fonde noȝt hym byfore þe fare þat he lyked.
> Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frythez and dounez,
> Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp,
> Til þat he neȝed ful neghe into þe Norþe Walez.
> Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez,

[1] After this essay was accepted and in production, Kevin Harty published an excellent article on the appearance of Winifred *in The Green Knight*—too late for me to engage it here. See Kevin J. Harty, "Spoiling the Sport, Upping the Ante, and Calling His Bluff: Why St. Winifred Appears in David Lowery's 2021 Film *The Green Knight*," *Studies in Medievalism XXXII: Medievalism in Play*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2023), 11–20.

And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez,
Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale; wonde þer bot lyte
Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.[2]

Now rides this knight through the realm of Logres,
Sir Gawain, on God's side, though it seemed to him no pleasure.
Often friendless he spends his nights
Where he finds nothing before him of fare that he liked.
He had no companion but his horse by the woods and the hills,
Nor no man but God on the way with whom to talk,
Until he neared full nigh into North Wales.
All the isles of Anglesey he holds on his left,
And fares over the fords and the forelands,
Over at the Holy Head, until he had again the bank
In the wilderness of the Wirral; remained there but little
Whom either God or man with good heart loved.

Most relevant for this discussion is the inclusion of "þe Holy Hede," a reference that has proven a bit obtuse for scholars.[3] As early as 1907, R. W. Chambers argues, "Ought we not to read 'Holywell' for 'Holyhead'?"[4] Chambers thus identifies it as a reference to the home of St. Winifred and her well shrine. However, later scholars continued to go back and forth, finding this connection "altogether too fanciful," in the case of Norman Davis.[5] J. S. Ryan finds the connection with Holywell and St. Winifred too interesting not to explore further.[6] Lowery seems to agree, as in his redaction it undoubtedly becomes Holywell, or at least a hazy version of Holywell, and a direct reference to St. Winifred. Lowery indulges in this association and develops a ten-minute scene from the slight gesture toward St. Winifred provided in the medieval poem. In their review of the movie, Susan Aronstein and Taran Drummond praise how Lowery "delicate[ly] dance[s] between repudiation of and homage to his medieval source," and argue that the movie "continually

[2] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed., ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967 [1925]), Fitt 2, lines 691–702. All translations from the Middle English are my own.

[3] J. S. Ryan provides an overview of the scholarly tradition through the mid-1980s, in "Sir Gawain and St Winifred: Hagiography and Miracle in West Mercia," *Parergon* 4 (1986): 49–64, 52–3.

[4] R. W. Chambers, "'Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight,' Lines 697–702," *The Modern Language Review* 2, no. 2 (1907): 167.

[5] Norman Davis, "Notes," in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 97-8, n.691 ff.

[6] Ryan, "Sir Gawain and St. Winifred," 53. He is particularly following in the footsteps of Chambers; Sir Israel Gollancz, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 107; and J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 190–4. I certainly agree with Ryan's conclusion.

calls our attention to the process of adaptation."[7] I agree, and I think that the Winifred interpolation exemplifies this strategic approach to adapting and filming this poem.

The story of St. Winifred is intimately tied to the town of Holywell, where she lived and where her shrine still exists; indeed, it is noted as a site of continuous pilgrimage since the seventh century.[8] Like many sanctified women's stories, her tale highlights the value of virginity and chastity. This tale is recounted in two much later texts: Prior Robert Pennant's *Life and Translation of St. Winefride* (c. 1140) and the anonymous *Life of St. Winefride* (c. 12th c., likely the second half; called the *Vita Prima*).[9] While there are differences between these two versions, the general storyline is consistent. As a girl, Winifred was alone in her house and visited by a knight, Caradoc, who wanted to have sex with her. She refuses, and runs away, nearly reaching the local monastery. He reaches and decapitates her (in Prior Robert's telling, after giving her the choice of sacrificing her virginity or her head). Her uncle, St. Beuno, sees what has happened, and curses Caradoc, who dies immediately. Beuno returns Winifred's head to her body and prays for her; she is re-vivified—a miracle—and just a small scar is left on her neck as a memorial to her near-martyrdom. A spring bursts forth in the spot where her head landed (this is the holy well around which her shrine is built), and stones in the vicinity continue to show marks of splattered blood long after. Winifred then takes on a holy life, for which she had already been preparing (indeed, her devotion to Christ provided a prime motivation for rejecting Caradoc's advances), and she eventually becomes abbess at Gwytherin. She lives for a full fifteen years after the beheading. Upon her death, Winifred was originally buried in Gwytherin, but in 1138 her body was translated to a shrine at Shrewsbury Cathedral. Winifred's spring remained a holy site dedicated to her; this spring

[7] Susan Aronstein and Taran Drummond, "David Lowery, *The Green Knight* (Review)," *Arthuriana* 31 no. 3 (2021): 90–2, 91.

[8] See Martin Locker, *Landscapes of Pilgrimage in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 96.

[9] See *Vita Prima Sanctae Wenefredae*, in *Acta Sanctorum*, November 1, vol. 62 of 68, ed. Charles De Smedt, Guillaume Van Hoof, and Joseph De Backer (Paris: Apud Victorem Palme, 1887), 702–5; *Vita Secunda Sanctae Wenefredae et Ejusdem Translatio*, Auctore Roberto Priori Salopensi, in *Acta Sanctorum*, November 1, vol. 62 of 68, ed. Charles De Smedt, Guillaume Van Hoof, and Joseph De Backer (Paris: Apud Victorem Palme, 1887), 708–31. William Caxton also published a translation of the *Vita Secunda*: Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, *The lyf of the holy [and] blessid vyrgyn saynt Wenefryde*, trans. William Caxton (Westminster: William Caxton, 1485) available via Early English Books Online (Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2012), accessed September 10, 2022, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15588.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext. The translations of both can also be found in Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, O.S.B., *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride with an Essay on Winefride's Well-Cult* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), previously published by Peregrina Publishing Co., 2000. See also "The Life of St. Winifred: *Vita St. Wenefrede* from BL Landsdowne MS 436," ed. and trans. James Ryan Gregory, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, Subsidia Series 4 (2016): 1–49, accessed February 16, 2022, https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2033&context=mff.

is credited with myriad healing miracles and has remained a pilgrimage destination, as noted above.

A few details stand out. First of all, Winifred—crucially—both is and is not martyred. She dies to protect her chastity and her faith, but is quickly restored to life and health. According to her legend, then, through a miracle she survives a beheading. Of course, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, both titular characters survive presumed decapitations—the Green Knight quite literally, as he departs King Arthur's court and repatriates his head, and Gawain less literally as he does not receive the fatal blow that he expects upon his arrival at the Green Chapel. What most strikes me about Winifred's legend is that it is decidedly not a ghostly one. She very explicitly returns to life, and lives a productive one at that. This intervention into both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the story of St. Winifred, I argue, invites interrogation, and examining it as a ghostly encounter, or a haunting, has much to tell us.

Sociologist Avery Gordon's theoretical work on haunting provides a helpful framework for understanding and exploring the effects of spotlighting ghostly St. Winifred so emphatically in the middle of *The Green Knight*. Gordon argues that "[w]hat's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely."[10] Gordon's work belongs to the "spectral turn," which dates to at least the early 1990s. This theoretical movement rejects the idea of looking at apparent ghosts as "actual entities, plot devices, and clichés of common parlance," and rather urges that they be interrogated as "conceptual metaphors," which initiate "through a dynamic comparative interaction. . . a discourse, a system of producing knowledge," as María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren explain.[11] According to Gordon, ghosts defamiliarize what we know, or what we think we know, and, in a haunting, "your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future." Furthermore, as Gordon notes, "specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view."[12] This is key: the ghost is a symptom of a problem, a signal that there

[10] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008 [1997]), xvi.

[11] María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities," in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Hauntings in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1–27, 1. On conceptual metaphors, Blanco and Pereen cite Mieke Bal, "Exhibition Practices," *PMLA*, 125, no. 1 (2010): 9–23, 10. Scholars point to Jacques Derrida as the origin of this so-called "spectral turn"; see his discussion of hauntology, first in his *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Knaupf (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), originally published as *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993).

[12] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

is “unresolved social violence.”[13] She argues that the ghost “has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way. . . we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.”[14] Looking at ghosts through this lens—as conceptual metaphors with Gordon’s ideas in mind—invites an examination of the problems that are represented by the reappearing dead and a search for the unsettled past that causes the haunting.

Thinking about *The Green Knight*’s ghostly Winifred as a ghost reveals several unsettled pasts, several issues of social violence, to use Gordon’s words. Most locally in the story, her own past and Gawain’s—and, in particular the intersections of those two pasts—are teeming with unsettled social violence. The key changes that Lowery introduces in this episode to both Winifred’s story and Gawain’s (as presented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) certainly bear this out. Kevin Harty has explained that “[m]edieval film follows the lead of popular culture in what Umberto Eco calls the ‘messing up’ of the Middle Ages ‘in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods.’”[15] While I would not use the term “messing up” myself, the main thrust of this argument, and of Harty’s entire essay—namely that medievalism is a use and creation of the past for very present purposes—remains as true as ever with this film. Nicholas Haydock smartly tells us that the medieval “imaginary is perhaps most glaringly obvious in its breach rather than its observance” of any “Real Middle Ages.”[16] Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman add that their approach is to “examine the point at which the real and the fantasy intertwine and interanimate one another as a means of understanding the ways in which our own historical period has imagined the Middle Ages and the uses to which that imagining has been put.”[17] In this essay, the “real” is found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the various versions of the legend of St. Winifred, all of which already glimpse at an earlier time and create a version for their audiences—a slippery “real” to begin with. A very specific fantasy of the medieval emerges from this scene and its haunting nature.

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[13] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

[14] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

[15] Kevin Harty, “Introduction,” *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films about Medieval Europe*, ed. Kevin Harty (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999), 3–9, 4. Harty is citing Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harvest, 1986), 68.

[16] Nicholas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), 10.

[17] Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 6.

Winifred's story in the movie, or at least what we can glean about her story, certainly resonates quite a bit with the legend. She is beheaded and seemingly re-headed, most importantly. The threat of sexual violation hangs heavy in her interactions with Gawain. There is a spring. In each of these elements, however, there are key differences. The spring does not emerge from the ground upon contact with her chopped off head, for example; rather, it is already there and merely the dumping ground. Excising the Christian context and meaning desacralizes the waters and the story and thus removes the possibility that Gawain's plunge will ultimately have a healing effect or propel him to a positive future. This, like much of his encounter with Winifred, suggests continued struggle lies ahead for Gawain.

Perhaps most important, we are in this redaction less assured of Winifred's re-heading, another key divergence offered by Lowery, and another act of stripping away the explicitly religious aspects of Winifred's tale. The audience, like Gawain, can see that "[her] head is on [her] neck" for most of the scene.[18] Indeed, while so much of the movie is decidedly dimly lit, her head and neck are quite clearly illuminated, and there is no sign of the small scar insistently noted in the legendary versions of her story. The unscathed neck and the later revelation of death without return to life indicate that she is here a ghost. Several physical details also evidence a spectral nature: an ethereal presence created by the lighting choices, her flowing white dress, the misty environs. When she first moves toward him, she seems to levitate and slide rather than take steps like the living. And in her final form, she is but a skeleton with few remaining signs of life. Indeed, Gawain even questions her about this apparent ghostliness, asking "Are you real, or are you a spirit?"[19] His lack of certainty—a symptom of the duality that Tison Pugh sees in Winifred and throughout the film—suggests a ghostly reading.[20] Winifred's response ("What is the difference?"[21]) is outwardly ambiguous, as she refuses to identify as either human or ghost. That ambiguity could be traced back to her legend, where she is beheaded and killed, but brought back to life, or it could be a rejection of the Christian miracle of that legend, for that is what brings her back to life. Without the miracle, without the belief in the miracle, perhaps she is always a ghost. She is quite surely haunting (haunting Gawain, haunting the film, haunting the audience), regardless of what label she assigns herself, though the evidence increasingly leans toward her being a spirit and pushes away the ambiguity that she introduces. Her ghostliness, then, invites viewers to see her as a sign of unsettledness, of social violence. To uncover that, we need to look at how her

[18] *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021), 0:59:07.
[19] *The Green Knight*, 1:00:09.
[20] Tison Pugh, "Seminal Semiotics and Pornographic Displeasures in David Lowery's *The Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* 32, no. 3 (2022): 41–57, particularly 43–7.
[21] *The Green Knight*, 1:00:12.

story intersects with Gawain's and speaks to notions of sexual violation and to his larger quest for his head.

Before unpacking the ways in which Winifred's ghost haunts Gawain and the story, it should be noted that this is not Lowery's first foray into ghost tales. Indeed, he wrote and directed the 2017 film *A Ghost Story*, which depicts a man, C (Casey Affleck), who is killed in a car accident and then returns to the house where he and his wife M (Mara Rooney) lived, first to haunt her, and then to haunt later inhabitants.[22] There is no doubt that C is a ghost, as both the title and his appearance—a man in a sheet with eye holes—remove any ambiguity. C spends the majority of the movie rooted to the home he shared with M, perhaps not so happily, and endeavors unsuccessfully to reach a note that she left in the wall before packing up and leaving the haunted house. He is decidedly unsettled, and his haunting reflects a very local social violence connected to his marriage, though the film does not, in the end, decide for the viewer the exact nature of that unsettledness. Lowery's work on *A Ghost Story* indicates that he is well-versed in how haunting works, how ghosts interact with the world of the living. He is thus primed to engage with the ghost of St. Winifred in *The Green Knight*.

Like C in *A Ghost Story*, Winifred's ghostly presence invites viewers to think about what social ills she symptomizes. The intersection of her story and Gawain's points to issues of sexual violence and the nature of his own beheading exchange. Several details in the film's St. Winifred episode establish a threat of rape (from her perspective, though I think not from the audience's) that seems endemic to Winifred and the broader society. Winifred first comes upon Gawain asleep in her bed, and promptly asks him what he is doing there.[23] Indeed, we hear her ask this before she appears on screen, her airy, disembodied voice calling attention to the dangerous juxtaposition of Gawain and the bed. She repeats the question, "What are you doing in my bed," in earnest after he awakens and the camera has turned to her.[24] A knight—or at least someone that she reads as a knight, as Gawain is crucially not yet a knight in the film—in a woman's bed certainly alludes to sexual activity in general and more specifically evokes Winifred's own painful past encounter. Her physical and verbal response to Gawain's hand reaching toward her neck and face after she has drawn closer reveals her discomfort and even fear of touch. Gawain's reach seems motivated by her apparent ghostliness, but it is read (understandably) as a very human violation, as a trespass of her bodily autonomy. She begins with, "What are you doing?"[25] This question echoes the first words we hear her speak, and thus seems to reject not only this attempt at touch, but also the implications

[22] *A Ghost Story*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2017).
[23] *The Green Knight*, 0:57:09.
[24] *The Green Knight*, 0:57:23.
[25] *The Green Knight*, 0:58:13.

of the bed. After he begins to stammer out an answer, she shifts from question to command and lesson: "Do not touch me. A knight should know better."[26] This injunction recalls (from the poem) and forecasts (later in the film) the lady's queries and teachings about Gawain's behavior in the bedroom, though somewhat inversely.[27] The insistence that a knight should know better serves as an indictment of both Gawain in this moment and Caradoc in Winifred's own story. Winifred later tells the story of would-be rape, indicating that "[a] lord came seeking shelter," but later "sought to lay with [her]."[28] As in the medieval legend, the tale of this encounter ends with the lord beheading her. Like the shift away from explicit Christian references elsewhere in this episode, here the religious significance of Winifred's refusal of her pursuer disappears. The problem is sexual violence qua sexual violence—there need be no vow of chastity to legislate against rape.

Harty has noted that "Winifred's presence in the film is appropriate . . . because of the price she is willing to pay to maintain her chastity (Gawain has already given his away rather cheaply, and will do so again)."[29] He is certainly right to note the likely intentional disjunction in their pasts (and futures) in terms of chastity. But Winifred's story in the film revolves less on chastity than it does in the medieval version of the legend. She focuses more pointedly on the perpetrator and on unwanted sexual advances, and several times in telling the story of her near-rape Winifred associates Gawain with the assailant, even accusing him. She recounts, "A lord came seeking shelter, like thee. Perhaps he was thee. Was he?" Gawain responds with a "No," but Winifred seeks further confirmation: "Are you certain?" she asks him.[30] With each line, Winifred intensifies the connection between the lord in her story and her current interlocutor. She begins with a general similarity, that man was also seeking shelter ("like thee"). Here it is a relatively "safe" association, as it is just about a knight errant, looking for a place to stay. However, it escalates when Winifred suggests that "[p]erhaps it was" Gawain, turning her head in his direction to punctuate it (she had previously been looking into the spring where her severed head can be found). She then asks him point blank, and follows up when he denies it, needing further confirmation, further assurances of her own safety, it seems. With each step, Winifred comes closer to identifying Gawain as her/a rapist. While Gawain was not the rapist, it seems that Winifred's earlier response to the question about

[26] *The Green Knight*, 0:58:17–19.

[27] Harty calls this line "another foreshadowing of the exchanges between Gawain and the Lady of the castle later in the film." See Kevin J. Harty "Notes Towards a Close Reading of David Lowery's 2021 Film *The Green Knight*," *Journal of the International Arthurian Society* 10, no. 1 (2022): 29–51, 43.

[28] *The Green Knight*, 0:59:28–0:59:45.

[29] Kevin J. Harty, "Grappling with the Green Knight: David Lowery's The Green Knight (Review)," *Medievally Speaking*, August 10, 2021, accessed Feb 22, 2022, https://medievallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2021/08/the-green-knight-dir-david-lowery-2021.html. Harty also notes decapitation and the shared theme of exchange.

[30] *The Green Knight*, 0:59:28–0:59:37.

her spectrality reverberates here: what difference does it make? Gawain is a threat, a potential rapist because for Winifred every man—or at least every knight—is. Pointing the finger at Gawain indicts the entire chivalric system from which he comes, the court of King Arthur (presumably, though he is not named). Lowery's redaction here certainly resonates with medieval versions of the Arthurian legend, where Arthur is conceived in rape, where Malory's *Morte Darthur* explicitly includes a proscription against rape in the Pentecostal Oath that provides guidelines for his Round Table knights, and where Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" begins with a knight-rapist who must go on a quest to learn what women want in lieu of other punishments, for example. This Winifred also hints at a systemic vulnerability for women, a fantasy that allows distance and identification. It separates the medieval period from an imagined present of safe and powerful women, but also establishes an identification for today's viewer, as it produces a need—then and now—for men as protectors. The extreme vulnerability of Winifred functions, too, as a contrast to the next lady whom Gawain will encounter. Lady Bertilak asserts herself as a scholar and owns her sexuality; she uses both to control Gawain, making him the vulnerable one.

Attention to sexual violence permeates the film's Holywell/Holyhead episode and sets a tone for understanding Winifred, Gawain, and the story as a whole. This scene likewise invites an intertextual or metatextual reading of Gawain's quest and his own ending. This Winifred ends up headless, and Gawain holds that head (as a skull, as a vivified and talking head, and then again as a skull) in his hands and learns from it. The audience likewise can learn from this disembodied head and the decapitated Winifred. Her final state seems to offer a clue to the ambiguous ending, which implies that the Green Knight does complete the promised (threatened?) decapitation: he swipes a finger over Gawain's neck and says, "Off with your head," with a smile, just before cutting to a title page and then the credits.[31] There is, however, no certainty, as this ending contrasts sharply with the relatively minor scar Gawain receives in the medieval poem—not unlike the legendary St. Winifred's small mark. Lowery himself has said that the ending is intentionally ambiguous: "I wanted to write an ending where his head gets chopped off, and that's a positive thing . . . . That's a happy ending. He faces his fate bravely, and there's honor and integrity in that. But that doesn't mean that he's dead, he's killed. He received the blow that he was dealt, and all is set right within the universe of the film."[32] Winifred's story in the film suggests to me that the Green Knight makes good on his promise. Particularly relevant for my discussion, I think also we can see more unsettled social

[31] *The Green Knight*, 2:04:12. Harty notes that there are three endings to the film, in "Notes Towards a Close Reading," 48–50.

[32] Quoted in Joanna Robinson, "Off With His Head: *The Green Knight*'s Ending, Explained," *Vanity Fair*, July 30, 2021, accessed February 25, 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/07/green-knight-ending-explained-does-he-die-gawain-dev-patel.

violence—for Gawain and the society around him—expressed through this ghostly encounter.

After Gawain has retrieved the skull from the spring, but lost the woman to which it belongs, he goes back to her dwelling and is frightened at what he finds in his hands: Winifred's re-vivified head with a clearly severed neck. He tosses the head away, and it looks at him and speaks, "Now I can see thee. And I will strike thee down with every care I have for thee. The Green Knight is someone you know," with lingering pauses between each sentence long enough to let the view shift to Gawain before returning to the talking head.[33] This is Winifred at her most foreboding. Both her physical presence—just the head—and her words inspire fear and confusion. Aronstein and Drummond note that "introspective and oddly passive, he [Gawain] moves through a dreamlike landscape, seeking meaning in a world that offers stark beauty but little in the way of answers."[34] However, obtuse and hazy as Winifred's final words may be, I think there are some answers to be plumbed from his moment. Indeed, this message is the crux of what this haunting signifies. These words tie together a few opposing ideas: strangeness and familiarity, affection and harm. The Green Knight is both the ultimate stranger (also, of course, strange in appearance) and, as Winifred indicates, not at all a stranger, but rather someone whom Gawain knows. Second, Winifred's words mingle the impending beheading ("strike thee down") with "care" for Gawain—violence and love or nurturing are thus tangled together. In her final moments, Winifred perhaps channels the Green Knight and/or Gawain's own mother, who brings to fruition this test of Gawain and the court as a whole—another slight skewing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Alongside a reading of the medieval poem, these words also proleptically identify the Green Knight as Lord Bertilak, whom Gawain will soon meet. I do not know that these loose ends can be quite tied together—nor do I think that the film wants the audience to be able to make a neat interpretive bow—but these contradictions speak again to trouble. The ghost allows us to see that. This is a society that demands the juxtaposition of the known and the strange, the cared for and the harmed. The very knighthood that Gawain seeks requires him to navigate this unfriendly path, urged on by friends and family (namely his mother, and his aunt/queen and uncle/king) towards sure death.

These final words from Winifred tell us even more when read in conjunction with an early exchange between the two. When asked where he is going, Gawain, a "lost traveler" as he has just called himself, replies, "Home. I'm headed home."[35] In its immediate context, there are several possible readings—surely an intentional move on Lowery's part. Gawain's mention of home could, of course, be the court at which he began his journey

[33] *The Green Knight*, 1:03:06–1:03:17.
[34] Aronstein and Drummond, "David Lowery, *The Green Knight* (Review)," 90.
[35] *The Green Knight*, 0:57:49–0:57:55.

and to which he can dream of returning, though as Harty notes, "if he really is heading home, he has indeed lost his way."[36] It could also be death, the Green Chapel becoming a new home. More metaphorically, he could be sensing that this quest will help him find himself, find his true home, in life or death. It can also serve as a comment on the nature of questing. In medieval romance, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a completed quest includes a return to the start; it is circular and cyclical. Here in conversation with the ghostly Winifred, Gawain cynically rejects that pattern and its medieval origin. In *The Green Knight*, Gawain's is perhaps a more modern quest where the endpoint is something new, but in this case not better, not an achievement.

Taking a wider view of this episode and its haunting nature, this reference to home bears even more meaning. When coupled with the last bit of speech from Winifred in this episode, the tension between friendly and unfriendly, between strange and unstrange can be linked back to Gawain's home and the instability of the life there. Things are decidedly bleak, more like the desolation of John Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur* as the Round Table knights go in search of the grail to save kingdom and king than the fourteenth-century poem's jocular Camelot, which meets the Green Knight at its outset and greets Gawain upon his return.[37] The home that the film's Gawain leaves and later imagines rejoining causes pain to itself and the world around it. Lovers are rejected, and battle rages at the door. Similar to the film's approach to vulnerable women, here, too, there are elements of both distance from and identification with this medieval fantasy. The world of *The Green Knight* offers at once a difficult past that we can leave there and a reflection of a modern world still struggling with the pains and joys of home (individual and societal, local and global) and the inevitability of devastation.

This haunting and the turmoil that it beckons toward lingers for Gawain, echoing throughout much of the film. Indeed, it seems to begin before he reaches Winifred's abode. The fox—a companion and guide of sorts both before and after this episode—bears the same hue as Winifred's hair, a red that stands out on a screen colored mostly with shades of green, blue, and black. This fox seems to prefigure Winifred and then replace her after Gawain retrieves her skull. The same fox leads him to the brink of the Green Chapel near the end of the film, and advises him to turn away. Thus, Winifred's haunting seems ever-present for Gawain. Perhaps the audience, too, remains haunted, identifying with and against the "medieval" trouble of *The Green Knight*.

[36] Harty, "Notes Towards a Close Reading," 43.
[37] *Excalibur*, directed by John Boorman (Orion Pictures, 1981).