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"It's Definitely Green-ish":[1] Co-Disciplinarity, Verdigris, and Vegetal Time in David Lowery's 2021 *The Green Knight*

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Sitting at her hearth, the nameless Lady of David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021) describes the assorted powers of verdigris as her husband and Sir Gawain look on. She muses, "When you go, your footprints will fill with grass. Moss shall cover your tombstone, and as the sun rises, green shall spread over all, in all its shades and hues. This verdigris will overtake your swords and your coins and your battlements and, try as you might, all you hold dear will succumb to it."[2] Both our modern verdigris and its predecessor, the Middle English "verdegrĕce,"[3] refer to the bluish-green patina formed on copper through the process of atmospheric or acidic oxidation. The meaning of verdigris here thus exceeds a simple synonymization with green-ish plant-life; rather, it suggests a state contingent upon the passage of time. It invokes the unfolding of a process that occurs independent of human materials and machinations, or, as Jeffery Jerome Cohen has suggested of stone, of something "surpassing human enframing."[4]

The Lady's "green" monologue subtly engages the concept of vegetal time, defined by philosopher Michael Marder as "the elusive time of plants," which provides a "locus of resistance . . . not measurable in human terms."[5] In his film, Lowery offers his cinematographic experimentations with vegetal time alongside those of human time in ways that more fully realize what Cohen has suggested concerning the original Middle English text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: that it "enmeshes progress-driven human history within cyclical, disanthropocentric possibilities."[6] Cohen observes that the poem populates its settings "full of human action" with glimpses of non-human worlds whose richness lies "away from the knightly action"; importantly, this potential for an

[1] *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (A24, 2021), 0:44:12-4.
[2] *The Green Knight*, 1:27:10-42.
[3] *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), s.v. "verdegrĕce" (n. 1), accessed 23 August 2022, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED50936/track?counter=1&search_id=18886550.
[4] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 8.
[5] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 98, 103.
[6] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Love of Life: Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Close to Home," in *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination*, ed. Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany Jo Werth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 25-58, 25.

"altered view" of time and space is ultimately "ignored" by the poem.[7] I argue that the film presents viewers with possibilities that upset the prescriptiveness of hegemonic "human time" in favor of alternative ways of being that complicate such limited and limiting linear understandings of time.

Jonathan Hsy has discussed the inherent connection between medievalism and alternative modes of time. In his discussion of "co-disciplinarity," Hsy argues that any study of medievalism necessitates "modes of inquiry that sustain *at the very least* two temporal mindsets at once."[8] He explains that co-disciplinarity "allows an individual or a group of people to test the very conventions of academic disciplines and to experiment across diverse modes of artistic production."[9] Hsy's concept of co-disciplinarity thus becomes especially useful for considering vegetal time in *The Green Knight*, as it accounts for both experimentation with multiple temporalities and for a multitude of artistic mediums. A filmic medievalism such as *The Green Knight* is itself already the result of several coalescing temporalities, and it further serves as a medium through which to explore the "disanthropocentric possibilities"[10] of the ephemerality of human life amid the interminable cycles of the natural world.

For Hsy, co-disciplinarity complements the concept of queer time,[11] as they both proactively invite engagement with medievalism in ways that do "*not* simply re-entrench academic disciplines as we know them."[12] As such, I take Hsy's "manifesto outlining unrealized possibilities"[13] and his focus on queer time as an invitation to stretch the boundaries of co-disciplinarity to a space where, similarly to how medievalism invites queer time, vegetal and hegemonic "human time" coalesce and conflict in *The Green*

[7] Cohen, "The Love of Life," 25.

[8] Jonathan Hsy, "Co-Disciplinarity," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 43-51, 43. For more on medievalism and queer time, see: Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Tison Pugh, "Queer Medievalisms: A Case Study of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 210-23; and *Postmodern Poetry and Queer Medievalisms: Time Mechanics*, ed. David Hadbawnik (Boston: Medieval Institute Publications, 2022).

[9] Hsy, "Co-Disciplinarity," 43.

[10] Cohen, "Love of Life," 25.

[11] Jack Halberstam has defined queer time as a "turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death." See Carolyn Dinshaw, et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Round Table Discussion," *GLQ* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 177-95, 182. That is, a turn away from the linear markers of hegemonic "human time."

[12] Hsy, "Co-Disciplinarity," 47.

[13] Hsy, "Co-Disciplinarity," 44.

Knight in a "shared intellectual and creative zone."[14] Importantly, "human time" is not universal, but conceptually bound into systemic racism, ableism, and understandings of queerness. To obscure these valences by invoking a so-called standard "human time" would be to erase the influence of pervasive historic and continuing white supremacy, ableism, anti-queer bias, and other systemic injustices upon these concepts.[15] In addition to work on queer time by queer scholars, disciplinary modes such as "crip time" also regularly disrupt notions of hegemonic "human time." To highlight a recent example, in 2022, the Wellcome Collection featured an exhibition, *Rooted Beings*, which highlighted a commissioned piece by queer DIY punk artist, musician, and filmmaker Sop. In *The Den 3*, Sop explores living through the COVID-19 pandemic as someone who is chronically ill. They write, "Trees understand crip time. My kin, I want to slow down to your rate. Human time is too fast for me. I choose you . . . I pivot to tree time, slowed down, limbs wading through slurry-like air."[16] Thus, creators like Sop explore how crip time can be figured productively alongside vegetal time, engaging the possibilities of their related disciplinary modes as an alternative to "human time" and its hegemonic connotations.

Within the context of the film, the alternative possibilities and timelines provided by vegetal time are clearly upsetting for *The Green Knight*'s human characters. The beginning of the film is characterized by barren, grey castle halls, a fading nameless Arthur-figure, and a sparsely populated Round Table that immediately disrupt and question the supposed-supremacy of the western hegemonic identity markers that operate via "human time."[17] Early in the film, seated at the head of the Round Table, the King and Gawain discuss the notion of greatness:

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[14] Hsy, "Co-Disciplinarity," 43.

[15] In this article, the phrase "human time" always also indicates an inevitable connection to this wide array of systemic injustices. Many of these systems are embodied and perpetuated by the systems of knighthood and chivalry on display in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*) and then imperfectly complicated by *The Green Knight*, which, along with its source material (both in *SGGK* and Arthuriana more widely), engages in complex racial politics of its own that are beyond the scope of the current study; see notes 21 and 23.

[16] Sop, *The Den 3, Part 4*, *Rooted Beings*, The Wellcome Collection, 24 March 2022 – 29 August 2022, accessed 20 August 2025, https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/YaDi9RAAACQA8NS1. You can further connect with Sop's work on their Instagram page, https://www.instagram.com/sop__sop__sop/.

[17] This is especially notable when compared to the poem's characterization of Arthur and his court. The poem's Arthur is "joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered" ("boisterous and bold, a bit boyish at times") (Fitt 1, line 86). In the court, feasts stretch over a fortnight, with "alle þe mete and þe mirþe þat men couþe avyse" ("As merry and mirthful as men could devise") (Fitt 1, line 45). The days are filled with music, "Such glaum ande gle glorious to here" ("glorious, gladsome, and gleeful to hear") (Fitt 1, line 46), and the nights are filled with dancing, such that "Al watz hap vpon heȝe in hallez and chambrez" ("Thus happiness hovered in hall and in room") (Fitt 1, line 48). All Middle English and Modern English translations are from the facing-page edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, ed. Clifford Peterson, Malcolm Andrew, and Ronald A. Waldron, trans. Casey Finch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 209-321. Quotations note Fitt and line number.

The King: I do not know of any man who has not marched up to greet death before his time.
Gawain: Why are you holding me to this light?
The King: Is it wrong to want greatness for you?
Gawain: I fear I am not meant for greatness.[18]

The King conflates greatness with an untimely death, and, in doing so, he creates a prescriptive temporal plan for Gawain's future—one that the young knight resists. Later, when talking to his lover Essel, Gawain echoes the King's prescriptive timeline. When Gawain tells Essel about his plans to depart for the Green Chapel, she says that his plan is "how silly men perish"; when Gawain attempts to provide a corrective using the King's logic—"Or how brave men become great"—Essel asks, "Why greatness? Why is goodness not enough?"[19] We see the characters struggle with the brief timelines of human life, made even shorter should one want to obtain this vague and distinctly human qualifier "great." In these moments, the idea of "great" men is continuously invoked and dismissed in turn, alternatively defined and unsettled by the boundaries and restrictions of human time.

"Greatness" becomes shorthand for the strict adherence to—even the pursuit *of*—the brevity of human time, which, in turn, is contingent upon larger systems of dominant social and cultural identities. For instance, Gawain, played by Dev Patel, is the only knight-of-color in the film. While popular online media venues such as *ScreenRant* laud this choice as one that "updat[es] and improv[es]" the tale,[20] the fact remains that the only Brown knight in the film is forced to carry the burden of parsing "greatness," is pushed by the King to pursue the vague concept and its attendant connotations, and is then reproached by Essel for doing so. As Tirumular (Drew) Narayanan discusses, while the film ostensibly "does not make race matter to the characters and the plot," that does not "immunize the film from racial thought by the audience."[21] Narayanan further writes that the film quickly "moves past" any idea that Gawain's "desire for honor"—the desire to be "great," in my framing—is "a means of social integration that he cannot achieve because of his outsider status."[22] *The Green Knight* retains the poem's original unwinnable game of trading physical blows, but it seemingly inadvertently saddles Gawain with additional "unwinnable

[18] *The Green Knight,* 31:00-31:27.
[19] *The Green Knight*, 35:00-35:12.
[20] Chrishaun Baker, "*The Green Knight*: How Gaiwan's [sic] Race Change Updates & Improves The Story," *ScreenRant*, September 29, 2021, accessed 20 August 2025, https://screenrant.com/green-knight-movie-gawain-race-indian-change-good/.
[21] Tirumular (Drew) Narayanan, "'Why is He Indian?': Missed Opportunities for Discussing Race in David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021)," *Arthuriana* 33, no. 3 (2023): 35-59, 38.
[22] Narayanan, "Why is He Indian?," 42.

games" that incorporate racialized harms and violence enacted on the film's only knight-of-color.[23]

Gawain's troubled consideration of greatness anticipates how he flickers back and forth between the worlds of vegetal and human time, as the film derives tension from the conflicting, melding, and overlapping of non-homogenous timelines. At one point, bandits rob and abandon Gawain, leaving him bound and deserted on the forest floor.[24] The camera deserts Gawain as well, as it undertakes an uncomfortably lengthy, unbroken 360-degree clockwise pan of the forest. When the lens completes its circle and finally settles on the hero again, he is naught but bones. The camera travels over an expanse of forest verdigris, as the Lady might say, filmed in one seemingly continuous shot; the viewer is thus led to believe that they still reside comfortably within a human timeframe, while unbeknownst to them, temporalities have shifted. Such a moment describes how, as Marder writes, "the pulsations of vegetal temporality are often imperceptible to a conscious human observer, because even when they share a physical space, the two beings do not live in the same homogenous time."[25] The viewer does not perceive the passage of time until the camera has completed its circle, alighting upon Gawain's bones where his fleshly body was before; his material state is changed within minutes in the absence of human gaze, or as Cohen might argue, in "spans that transient humans cannot witness."[26] As such, the scene's ability to elicit surprise and unease hinge on the imperceptible operations of vegetal time.

Marder emphasizes that vegetal time "traverses the axis of possibility-impossibility, as opposed to potentiality-actuality."[27] Time here is not linear, not actuality, but possibility. The camera uses a 360-degree horizontal pan to traverse this axis, ferrying the viewer to a new temporal space of possibility. This cinematic decision uses filmic technique to

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[23] *SGGK* and other Arthuriana have elicited a long academic history of writing on race, colonialism, and national identity. For a starting point in this expansive discussion, see for instance: Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) on the intermingling between the Arthurian corpus and the Europe's colonial Crusading project; Lynn Arner, "The Ends of Enchantment: Colonialism and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 48, no. 2 (2006): 79-101, on Welsh colonialism in *SGGK*; John M. Ganim, "Postcolonialism," in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 397–412, for the imperial ethos of *SGGK*; Matthew Vernon and Margaret A. Miller, "Navigating Wonder: The Medieval Geographies of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 4 (2018): 68-89, on the influence of *SGGK's* nationalized identity politics on Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*; Wan-Chuan Kao, "The Fragile Giant," *Arthuriana* 31, no. 2 (2021): 9-39, on the "white liberalism" of *The Buried Giant*, Arthuriana, and medievalism in the university classroom.

[24] *The Green Knight*, 0:50:10.

[25] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 103.

[26] Cohen, *Stone*, 85.

[27] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 98.

literalize Cohen's consideration of how the original Middle English poem gestures toward, but does not fully enact, an enmeshment between knightly conceptualizations of progress and disanthropocentric potential.[28] *The Green Knight*'s camera engages co-disciplinarity by using artistic production to add new temporal mindsets to the film's narrative, and, as such, to convey the concept and possibilities of vegetal time to its fundamentally anthropocentric audience and characters. The audience has seconds to observe Gawain's bones and the single beetle that traverses his jaw before the camera is moving in reverse, the counterclockwise pan literally winding back time within the narrative space. This reverse pan returns the viewer to the still-living Gawain, who lies still, staring fixedly ahead. Has Gawain glimpsed this vegetal temporality, this axis of possibility, along with the viewer? It would seem so, as, after a moment, he struggles fiercely against his bonds, as if to escape this new and unfathomable eco-logic, this greened time that haunts his possible future.

Throughout the film, Gawain continues to feel the weight of human time. By the film's end, as he stares into imminent death at the blade of an axe, his early insistence that "I've got time" crumbles into a despair-filled question for the Green Knight, "Wait, wait! Is this really all there is?"[29] This question launches another of the film's more significant additions to its source material: a journey forward through additional possibilities on Gawain's temporal horizon, should he duck the blade of the Green Knight's axe. Like the 360-pan in the forest, the scene ferries the audience through a montage of Gawain's possible future, where he sees another version of his death, this time in the stark and stony throne room, a death markedly more bloody, devastating, and grey than the one he would face in the Green Chapel. It is this vision, perhaps, that confirms for Gawain the Lady's words at her hearth: "try as you might, all you hold dear will succumb to it."[30] By rendering visual and thematic temporal experimentations that consider vegetal time, the film presses back on anthropocentric, linear, human time scales. What emerges at the end of the film is co-disciplinarity embodied, exemplified by what Hsy calls "cognitive multitasking—a sort of channel-flipping orientation toward time."[31] In this case, however, the sentiment applies not only to the time between the medieval object and the medievalism, but to human time and vegetal time as well.

When Gawain emerges from the possibilities summoned by his flash forward, he has clearly changed: "I'm ready now," Gawain says.[32] Several moments later the film cuts to the closing title screen, without resolution, without the clear denouement that humans are

[28] Cohen, "Love of Life," 25.
[29] *The Green Knight*, 0:03:43 and 1:46:55.
[30] *The Green Knight,* 1:27:38-1:27:42.
[31] Hsy, "Co-Disciplinarity," 43.
[32] *The Green Knight*, 2:03:27.

trained to expect.[33] But throughout, *The Green Knight* has asked its audience to trouble and reconsider the temporalities and linearities they might take for granted. The question is, like Gawain, are we ready to do so?

[33] This recalls Lowery's substitution of the festive court atmosphere of the poem for the grey and barren one of the film. Here, too, Lowery side-steps the comforting denouement that the poem provides upon Gawain's return to Arthur's court, where he returns "al in sounde" ("unscathed") (Fitt 4, line 2489), the court jubilant as the monarchs "kyssez þe knyȝt" ("kissed that fair knight") (Fitt 4, line 2492), and they all gather around to hear him relate stories "of his fare" ("of his quest") (Fitt 4, line 2494).