‘Muance’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and in Lowery’s Film *The Green Knight*

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Abstract: In the realm of medieval music the medieval French word *muance* designates the change from one note to another to go beyond the six notes making up a hexachord. It is also employed in the sense of *mouvance*, namely mutation and transformation. Both meanings offer an enlightening thematic lens through which to interpret *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a perplexing, circuitous romance as well as *The Green Knight*, its film rendering that sheds a light as unexplicit and confusingly prismatic on the essential constructs of chivalry and courtesy – in which the majority of today’s audiences are not necessarily well-versed despite their unabated taste for knights’ tales. This article will attempt to show that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Lowery’s film contain ‘muances’ and semitones, to speak in musical terms, which renew, modify, and update the Arthurian material.

Keywords: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Green Knight*, ‘muance’, ‘mouvance’, mutation, nuance, variation, adaptation

INTRODUCTION

The first entry of ‘muance’ that comes up in the online *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (1330-1500)[1] is ‘change, mutation and replacement’. Several occurrences of the word are found in poems like Guillaume de Machaut’s *Louange des dames* (‘[E]t sa coulour en estrange muance’)[2] as well as in manuals for drapers (‘le muance de 5 s. a 3 ou darrain article fors un’)[3]. The term is also encountered in the negative, as in Philippe

1 *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (1330-1500), version 2023. ATLIF - CNRS & Université de Lorraine. https://www.atlif.fr/dmf (Version février 2024). Endnotes 2 to 7 of this article are all drawn from https://www.atlif.fr/dmf (Version février 2024). (Accessed 15 November 2024.)

2 Guillaume de Machaut, *La louange des dames (L. dames)*, 1377, 194. ‘Helas ! dolens, ma rose est mise en mue / Soudeinnement, dont je suis en doubtance / Que sa douceur et son oudeur ne mue / Et sa coulour en estrange muance.’

3 *Documents relatifs à la draperie de Valenciennes au moyen âge*, [publ. par] Georges Espinas.- Paris : F. Loviton ; Lille : É. Raoust, 1931 (Documents et travaux publiés par la société d'histoire du droit des pays flamands, picards et wallons ; 1) (Drap. Valenc. E.), 1407, 58. ‘Le adition adjoustée ou premier article des ordenances des tisserans, ossi le muance de 5 s. a 3 ou darrain article fors un’.

de Mézières' *Testament* ('sans faire aucune muance.')[4] Mutation and movement are semantically related to the vagaries of time, the volatility and variability of appearances, and the changeability and inconstancy of Fortune: 'Roys Exercés, qui esprouvé / A de Fortune la muance', as Christine de Pizan put it in *Le Livre de Mutacion de Fortune*.[5]

Furthermore, 'muance' happens to have a musical sense denoting 'variation'. In Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*, we read '[D]e muance faire en la fausse game.'[6] Guillaume de Digulleville in *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* writes '[E]st de muances ce chant ci, / Quar de be quarre et de be mol.'[7] Delving into medieval music theory reveals that 'muance' designated the various ways of applying the syllables of the scale to the notes according to the different positions of the two semitones of the octave. In the *Gawain*-poet's time only six of these syllables existed in the system devised in the eleventh century by Benedictine monk Guido of Arezzo[8] (C, D, E, F, G, A / ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la) – a music teaching method known as *solmisation*.[9] As there are seven notes to name in an octave, it was necessary to repeat the name of some note. In the modulation the two semitones were subject to change of place, and there were numerous ways of applying the six syllables to them. These were called 'muances' because the same notes in the half tones kept changing names. Changing the names of the notes was called 'faire la muance.'

4 Philippe de Mézières, *Le Testament* (*Test. G)*, 1392, 314.

5 Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune (M. F., II)*, 1400-1403, 249.

6 Guillaume de Machaut, *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne (J. R. Beh.)*, c.1340, 126.

7 Guillaume de Digulleville, *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*, 1358, 55.

8 Jacques Viret, *Musique médiévale*. (Grez-sur-Loing : Éditions Pardès, 2005), 106. 'Le théoricien Gui d'Arezzo fait évoluer la notation en généralisant l'emploi de la portée, et jette les bases du solfège en inventant la solmisation.'

9 *Ibid*, 117-8. 'Solmisation,' Viret explains, is a 'méthode pédagogique de lecture musicale, à l'origine du solfège, inventée au XIe siècle par Gui d'Arezzzo, de pair avec la notation sur portée. Elle associe une syllabe conventionnelle (provenant de la mélodie de l'hymne à saint Jean-Baptiste UT queant laxis REsonare fibris…) à six notes sur sept de la gamme diatonique : l'hexacorde ut re mi fa sol la. La septième note, mobile (si bécarre ou bémol) est lue soit mi (= si bécarre), soit fa (= si bémol), moyennant transposition de l'hexacorde "naturel" soit à la quinte (hexacorde "dur", "par bécarre"), soit à la quarte (hexacorde "mou", "par bémol") supérieures.'

I intend to show that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* together with its film rendering by Lowery lend themselves to elucidation through the prism of the paronomastic doublet *muance* / *mouvance*.

1 SEMITIONES IN THE MEDIEVAL HEXACHORD

The poem under study contains evidence of the relevance of the 'muance' metaphor in the sense of 'mouvance' synonymous with shift. Indeed, it depicts a knight on the move, 'muant' and engaged in a quest that takes him from his uncle's court to another he never suspected could exist in the midst of an inhospitable wilderness. The unfamiliar court of Hautdesert may be construed as a metamorphosis of Camelot into a heightened version of it, an enchanting and enchanted place of earthly delights where, like Merlin entombed by the wily sorceress Morgan le Fay, Gawain will find himself figuratively encircled by the pact with his host and literally (en)girded by the lady's love token. Rooted in Arthurian anthropology, the tale relates the adventure of Gawain's 'mue' from *the* quintessence of worthiness and virtue to *a* fallible yet highly commendable knight.

Referring to movement and mutation, 'm(o)u(v)ance' fittingly evokes Gawain's journey across North Wales where he lives an alienating yet life-changing experience. It involves displacement (he nearly loses his bearings, and his mind in the film), as well as unsettling 'muances' he constantly has to adjust to; changes in the climate, in the terrain, in the range of perils and strangers on his path – not all of them hostile as suggested in the film's 'Interlude' episode. These diverse 'muances' are conducive to his transformation, of which we may wonder whether it is for the best (transfiguration into an augmented version of the ideal knight) or for the worst (an alteration and adulteration of his former self, the film insinuates in the 'Voyage Home' sequence). The shift from one tone or note to another, be it higher (a sharp) or lower (a flat), on the scale of knightly valiance, rings a bell (like Essel's in *The Green Knight*), resonates with the musical sense of the Old French 'muance.' *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be grasped not so much as an extension to but as an outgrowth of, and a 'muance' in the pre-existing

Arthurian *matière*. Presumably the protagonist's adventure occurs prior to the anarchy following Arthur's decease. It is set in times of order and prosperity, or so it seems in the illuminated tableau of the joyful and lavish Yuletide feasting of Fitt 1. Yet, underneath the surface splendour of Arthur's kingdom a semitone (a flat) can be detected in the allusion to murderous strifes and violence in Fitt 2. 'For werre wrathed hym not so much, that wynter was wors' – 'And the wars were one thing, but winter was worse.' Line 726, the first half-line more precisely, is 'blown up' by Lowery in 'A Kindness.' Hardly has he come out of the wood than Gawain discovers a battlefield strewn with cadavers, a morbid sight that jars with the connotation of generosity and empathy in the new sequence's intertitle, 'A Kindness.'

Gawain's 'm(o)u(v)ance' coalesces with the tale's personification of the mutability of things, looks and beliefs *par excellence*: the Green Knight. In her study of Merlin's *Prophesies* Nathalie Koble borrowed the apposite Old French phrase 'samblance muable' to describe the ambivalent, protean wizard.[10] In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the *Lancelot en prose*'s maleficent Merlin is eclipsed and replaced by his treacherous disciple and cunning lover who perfidiously usurped his powers. Morgan Le Fay typifies, the Green Knight explains (2444-7) diabolical 'muances,' an ability to give shape to mystifying creatures such as him. The plan masterminded by the woman necromancer hellbent on tarnishing the Round Table's renown provides the plot (in both senses of the word), which could be likened to a silk *étoffe* 'trimmed with gold, / exquisitely edged and hemmed by hand' – 'Gered hit was with grene sylke and with golde schaped, / Noght bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngres' (1832-3). The textile image allows to define the 'stuff' of the fine poetic 'muance' entwined and crafted by the *Gawain*-author.[11] The perplexing Galfridian quest conceived by an ingenious English

10 Nathalie Koble, *Les Prophéties de Merlin en prose. Le roman arthurien en éclats*. (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2009), 241.

11 Unsurprisingly, in 'A Too Quick Year' we see Gawain's mother literally weave the girdle, one of the recurrent main threads in the film version.

poet with a sound knowledge of the recognizable tropes of the sources he revisits (French for a large part) constitutes a mutant of a chivalric romance.

The Green Knight is Gawain's nemesis and helper too. A shape-shifter and a trickster from a world in-between, 'un entre-deux mouvant,'[12] he emblematizes the contradictory views and conflicting voices interlaced in the shimmery and lustrous cloth of medieval romance. His features cannot be fixed into one single immutable person – the threatening green intruder? Bertilak? the guide? His voice takes all nuances, including laughter in turn derisive, comforting and disarming (317, 909, 988, 1068, 2295, 2389-90). His laugh bespeaks the thrill of possessing a power that others lack: magic, illusion-making. It also mocks Gawain's incapacity to take a step back (or aside) to call into question intangible rules of honour and loyalty set in stone, edicted to be unconditionally complied with. The challenge the Green Knight lays down at Camelot questions the very purport of chivalric adventure, both as experience and as fiction, implying that the game should not be taken too seriously, and the story should not be read too literally. He incarnates the physical 'muances' Morgan's necromancy has the capacity to produce: a green anamorphosis and (photographic) revelator of Gawain's fear for his life. In Fitts 2 and 3, Gawain is enthralled by a charm, a second game he is to play, this time with his host. The pact consists of an exchange of winnings, the treachery of which lies in the lurking danger of the lady's charms. On the last three days of the year at Hautdesert the tested knight, both honour-bound and spell-bound, finds himself unwittingly caught between kills and kisses, the target of a fool's game. In fact the Green Knight's changeable, 'muante' personality is reminiscent of the de-familiarizing effect of fiction, potentially as bewildering as a magic trick. It is at a late stage, at 2444-70, that the intention behind the ghastly games is clarified: it was all Morgan le Fay's doing. Such justification disappointingly divests the Green Knight / Bertilak / the Hautdesert guide of his unfathomable dimension. In the green enigma to which the poet gives flesh and bones, Lowery saw a 'myth or canto,' the chant and enchantment of a marvel that bewitches

12 *Ibid*., 246.

Gawain and entrances, if not transfixes, the reader/viewer whose sagacity is put to the test along with the protagonist's.

Equally mesmeric and ensnaring is the musical score played by the lady in Fitt 3. It is a prolix flow of 'luf-talkyng' (927), of refined 'dalyaunce' (1529), noticeably shortened in the film where love banter takes the ominous turn of the lady's sibylline elaboration on the Knight's greenness. Many lines (l222-40, 1248-58, 1481-6, 1489-91, 1495-7, 1508-34, 1779-87, 1792-1800), among other cues, evidence her consummate art of courtly discourse that she skillfully deploys to weaken the resistance of the fortress she is assailing, Gawain's certainties and supposedly impregnable moral tenets. As she runs the gamut of the rhetoric of courtesy, she makes an abundant use of 'muances' to break out of the confines of the hexachord of love talk. The lady's musical play compels her prey to bring in now a flat (b-flat, 'bémol'), now a sharp or hash (hash key, 'dièse'), or a natural ('bécarre'). In other words, Gawain has no choice but to go up or down a semitone whenever he strives to parry repeated onslaughts to his chastity and to his courtliness. She says much, leaves him little breathing space whilst he can barely seize a rest, a pause of silence to play back and pay her back in her own tune, so to speak. She resorts to language to contain and constrain Gawain in her little game, which pushes him to re-assert his indefeasible pledge to his green challenger then to Bertilak. The terms of each agreement made throughout the poem are repeatedly voiced, and yet the commitment always comes within an ace of being jeopardized, by the lady especially. Courtesy is part and parcel of the secular world of Arthurian chivalry defined by allegedly unshakeable principles that Gawain adheres to without 'muance,' failing to suspect the untruthfulness of the lady's claim that her belt is a protective talisman. His obsession with the engagement that binds him to the Green Knight and with the exchange of gains he is involved in at Hautdesert prevents him from perceiving 'muances,' a possible way out of the constrictive scope of chivalric and courtly rules in the manner of a musical scale of only six notes.

From a type, a flat knight figure lacking psychological depth, Gawain, like the castle cut from paper of line 802 ('that pared out of papure purely hit semed'), evolves into a pluridimensional 3D character with an interiority as he gradually assays and

assesses a confounding aporia: that of the chivalric and courtly usage and practice, dictate and habitus shaken to its foundations by the Green Knight's dare. The Christmas game started by the intruding USO (unidentified symbolic object),[13] warps and wraps the young hero's certainties in an all-pervasive green hue 'sans aucune muance.' The poet's narrative goal is not so much to instruct or entertain as to offer a different approach to a genre which by the late fourteenth century has mutated into an opaque veneer or semblance dissolved in some verdigris uniformity dimming (in the manner of the film's matte chromatism) the contours of conventional romance. All in all it amounts to what Lowery does to the medieval film genre. The Green Knight personifies mutability in his physical appearance while consistently testing Gawain. In fact, he fulfils a dual actantial role as an opponent (who defies Arthur and his knights) and as an adjuvant in encouraging Gawain to take the necessary distance from chivalry in a salutary *pas de côté*. The 'Voyage Home' sequence closes on the removal of the green belt, a gesture greeted by the Green Knight's praise 'Well done, my brave knight.'[14]

At the Green Chapel Gawain finds himself no longer in the apparent *locus amoenus* of the lord's castle but in a *locus purgatorius* where he expiates his fault in the only genuine confession of the poem. The *un*Christian chapel, the location of his *un*death, materialises an intermediary state of negotiation with a dogma he has sworn to observe uncompromisingly. Such negotiation is ethical, even religious, since at stake is the salvation of his soul, and above all of his good name. The emphasis laid on the irreparably fatalistic view of his 'failing,' the bitter taste of surviving the Green Chapel trial, would prove that he deplores the blemish on his immaculate aura as the icon of Arthurian knighthood more than he does the risk of losing his life. In Fitt 4 his effort to reconcile his guilty conscience with the code of courtesy and chivalry estranges him from Camelot

13 Jane Taylor, "The Fourteenth Century: Context, Text and Intertext," *Poétiques en mouvement pour le Moyen Âge finissant*. (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2020), 90.

14 The cue brings to mind the Green Knight's secret admiration of Gawain's ability to show himself 'brave in his actions' – 'doghty, dredles, deverly ther stondes' at 2334.

where he feels an outsider, if not an outcast, for having 'made muance' beyond the hexachord of the Round Table's ideal which no longer sounds melodious to his ear.

During Gawain's absence the king and his court seem to have been in limbo, their mood unchanged. If the completion of Gawain's quest is validated by his homecoming in the very location of its commencement, he returns not triumphant but in arrested chivalric development instead. No mention whatsoever is made of Arthur's army having suffered – or on the brink of suffering – a fatal military assault unlike what Lowery's Gawain fantasizes in the 'Voyage Home' episode. As in the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, court life in the poem has been transfixed into a freeze during the length of Gawain's peregrination, namely the 'mouvance' and 'muance' of his body and soul. In some helicoidal progression, he has been through a 'm(o)u(v)ance' entailing a heightened awareness of the impermanence of human resolve in face of the mirage of knighthly prowess – the fortitude analysed by Stephen H. Rigby in an article on virtuous and non-virtuous forms of courage in medieval English romance.[15]

Having read or listened to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an Arthurian romance audience would easily infer that the chimera of iconized chivalry is bound to be blown to smithereens by internecine conflict within the kingdom of Logres, as described for instance in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* or in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. It is most likely that following the Green Chapel test Gawain will retire into narrative silence (caused by the shame that eats him up and which he deems irretrievable), and that Arthur

[15] S. H. Rigby, "Worthy but Wise? Virtuous and Non-Virtuous Forms of Courage in the Later Middle Ages," in Matthews David (ed.), *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35. (Saint Louis University in St. Louis, The New Chaucer Society, 2013): 330.'The praise of rulers and warriors such as King Alla [of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*] for being brave and wise, as possessing both *fortitudo* and *sapientia*, was a topos commonly found in ancient, medieval, and renaissance literature. As Geoffroi de Charny said in his Book of Chivalry (c. 1352), knights who lacked moral wisdom would be unlikely to achieve "any great perfection" of martial prowess.' Further on page 331, Rigby takes great care to distinguish bravery from hot-headedness, tension between worthiness and wisdom. He speaks of a 'reference to the Aristotelian idea that even an admirable quality, such as courage, can, if taken to an extreme, be transformed into a vice. Thus, while a knight would be inevitably criticized if he lacked courage, to display so much bravery that he became foolhardy would also be unfitting, with a virtuous–or wise–degree of courage being located between these two negative extremes.'

and his knights will resume their traditional roles. The Arthurian cycle primarily aims to chronicle the King and the Round Table's rise and fall.[16] In that regard, the *Gawain*-poet's peripheral post-cycle contribution constitutes a 'muance.' Gawain's individual quest indeed becomes the focus of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this extrinsic, episodic English romance like an interlude outside of the box of the larger self-consistent Arthurian *continuum*. Anyway, the reader's intertextual culture clues them to what comes next: sooner or later his fellow knights will embark on the truly fatal quest of the Grail…conceivably augured by the Green Knight's Christmas challenge.

In the *Vulgate cycle* Arthur is legitimized as the monarch predestined by birth.[17] His authority established, he founds the Round Table, a symbol of valour and knight-errantry, whereas in the English poem Gawain becomes focus of bravery and daring. The difference is that the poet 'makes muance' in having his hero unwillingly establish an alternative order (a mock order perhaps): that of the green girdle, a substitute emblem of disloyalty for a Round Table doomed for destruction on account of Mordred's future treachery.[18] Gawain embodies one possible inverted image of Mordred. Unlike Arthur's incestuous son and illegitimate heir, he is not a traitor within but a would-be hero without, who has his place in the Arthurian hall of fame. The ending of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* anticipates the demise of Arthur's glory perceptible between the lines, *en creux*. As the poet-narrator remarks in passing in the prologue, twice the kingdom of Britain is destroyed or on the verge of being so: in the past (16-18) then in a near future by Mordred (perhaps hinted at on line 22: 'In mony turned tyme tene that wroghten' – 'causing trouble and torment in turbulent times'). Gawain's adventure stands as a semitone in-between. The 'muance' of his tenuous, almost lethargic, *sotto voce* adventure, devoid of *forte* accents (of Wagner's *Parzival*?), prefigures swings of fortune, malignancy and treason.

16 Jane Taylor, "The Fourteenth Century…," *Poétiques en mouvement,* 81. She resorts to the French terms *enfance*, *grandeur*, and *décadence*.

17 Taylor, "The Fourteenth Century…," *Poétiques en mouvement,* 86.

18 Taylor, "The Fourteenth Century…," 88. 'Destruction', Taylor writes, 'is itself a cyclical process, all the more inevitable in that it is self-induced.' In siring Mordred, she points out, Arthur 'created his own destroyer'. His incest 'sowed the seed of his own end'.

The dim chromatism pervading Lowery's film visually renders the toned down hues that the plot takes on at the end of Fitt 4.

2 MUTATIONS, VARIATIONS, CONTRAPUNTAL EFFECTS

Hearing the Green Knight's revelation, Gawain is beside himself with a bitter rage 'sans nuance,' overwhelmed by an emotional turmoil and a psychological *maelstrom*. At this point he goes through a harrowing inner 'm(o)u(v)ance' that threatens to fragment his self-image as the paragon of chivalry and courtesy. He returns to Camelot no longer the heroic exemplar he used to be in Fitt 2 (633-9) – but was he ever? – after having been made into a target of friendly, empathetic derision. At 2390-4 the Green Knight mocking his overreaction invites to appraise the absurdity of a creed that rules out 'muances.' The poem's ending leaves us perplexed – as does *The Green Knight*'s. Vital in romance is sense that 'there are no more questions to be asked, no more narrative threads left dangling.'[19] Now completion is but a facade. One question is only partly answered: what exactly is required of a knight to be held and hailed as 'trwe' (638), 'That alle prys and prowes and pured thewes / Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is ever' – 'this person famed for prowess and purity, / whose noble skills were sung to the skies' (912-3)? The romance reader's imagination may not be entirely satisfied yet it appreciates and accommodates this treatment of chivalry in semitones, as a mean between absolute worthiness and the wisdom of swerving to avoid the deadly consequence of unnegotiable recklessness. 'As Aristotle had said, to be totally fearless would be a form of madness.'[20]

Gawain's adventure would read as an enchantment, a narrative parenthesis in verse that places the Arthurian 'song' on a lower key in 'une muance de ton, un ton au-dessous.' All things considered, put in perspective with the Arthurian saga the story of Gawain's submission to the Green Knight's conditions seems of little significance. The justification of the test hardly reads relevant, at least convincing, to a twenty-first-century

19 Taylor, "The Fourteenth Century…," 104. Furthermore, it could be observed that that the textile image of the dangling thread comes out as apposite to a text containing graphic evocations of the embroidery craft at its best.

20 Rigby, 'Worthy But Wise?...', *SAC* 45 (2013): 342.

reader but that would be an oversight of the English poet's purport to meet his audience's aesthetic requirements. He caters, one senses, for listeners or readers who never tire of the Arthurian musicality, a music score with the indispensable 'muances' that embellish it. Not content with recording Gawain's' 'gest' with efficacy and accuracy (31-2) the author (and narrator) is keen to suffuse his *matière* with refulgent tones and exquisite rhetorical tinges. The 'muances' and nuances that enrich his narrative is a sensibility and attention to expressiveness, vividness, ekphrastic depictions, and a taste for the list and for amplification, in a nutshell the DNA of his aesthetic signature, the defining features of the 'mouvance' of his work. About the 'chanson de toile' of the thirteenth century, Paul Zumthor speaks of 'la mouvance de l'œuvre,'[21] meaning that, despite variances, texts of a certain category have in common a number of traits –versification elements, a general narrative scheme, a specific lexicon, and a mode of textual composition with its own linking motifs. Although the poet-narrator adopts the pose of the artless narrator (31-6, 690, 718-9, 1144-5, 1991-4, 1008-11), his blatant care for style and for the perfect geometrical design of his pentangle-like text proves the contrary.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight inherits from the dense and variegated Arthurian fountainhead a number of narrative patterns and structuring motifs, reproduced like musical phrases imposing their lines on the story's progression. These musical marks guarantee the dynamism and continuity of the author's style.[22] Motifs are sufficiently stable to be identifiable and yet can be subject to variations. In music a variation designates the repetition of a self-sufficient musical theme, 'but with significant alterations, so that its character and meaning are transformed.'[23] The reader of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* undoubtedly recognizes the motifs of the quest, the wandering, the infrangible agreement, the chase, the binding gift, and the test of courtly propriety and of knightly valour. Drawing upon the musical imagery of variation sheds light on the trope

21 Paul Zumthor. *Essai de poétique médiévale*. (Paris : Seuil, 1972), 164.

22 'Within a piece of music, a motif is the term used to describe a short section with a distinct identity (a complete musical 'idea' or 'thought') that is found throughout, and is characteristic of, the whole composition.' https://www.classical-music.com/features/musical-terms/motif-in-music-meaning. (Accessed 15 November)

23 https://www.classical-music.com/articles/what-are-variations (Accessed 15 November)

of mutable appearance in both the poem and the film. Not unlike Perceval, who in the Grail Quest remains the *nice*,[24] Gawain fails to grasp variations, nuances[25] and alterations in the scope of chivalric conduct. Interpreting the Green Knight's words to the letter in Fitt 1 prevents him from seeing through the lord's semblance and game. He is mindful of the terms of the pact he scrupulously strives to respect but hints are lost on him, too subtle to catch and set him thinking: Bertilak's bushy beard (845) oddly reminiscent of the Green Knight's (182-6), the games he plays with Gawain (981-92, 1105-13, 1635-47), the colour of the lady's girdle (1829-33), Gawain's 'detention' inside the castle since he is never invited to join the host in his chase (1096-1104, 1178-81, 1210-1, 1316-20).

In fact, the only scale Gawain knows of is reduced to a hermeneutic hexachord he is unable to extend with the necessary 'muances' that would enable him to distinguish all the nuances, to take in the full picture. It is significant that in the film he should be at a loss how to interpret the paintings at Hautdesert. In the poem, although Gawain is greeted as 'the fyne fader of nurture' (919), he reveals himself occasionally forgetful of the weight of words, as when he professes total moral obligation to his host (1039-41).[26] Little does he suspect that his vow to be totally beholden to his host, to carry out his every command will put him in a dilemma when he receives the lady's girdle. This deficiency is amplified in the film where Gawain is a young man of few words who makes short sentences and has a defective and lacunary perception of what unfolds and what is said at his hosts'. In Fitt 4 he is perturbed by the gap between the letter ('the Green *Chapel*') and the actual sight which looks like a pre-Christian tumulus. The meaning of the world or word he discovers at the Green Chapel is elusive and fleeting all the more so as it was sketchily mentioned in Fitt 1 by an outlandish half-giant, whose greenness is but a confusing screen through which Gawain cannot see without being led on the wrong track, on a false trail.

24 'Hathel, by heven, thyn askyng is nys' – 'Your request, he countered, is quite insane,' King Arthur indignantly retorts to the Green Knight at 323.

25 https://continuum-hypothesis.com/nuance.php (Accessed 15 November)

26 'And I am, wyye, at your wylle, to worch youre hest, / As I am halden therto, in hyghe and in lowe, / bi right.'– 'Your requests are now this knight's commands. / I am bound by your bidding, no boon is too high / to say.' (Lines 1039-41).

Koble remarks on 'l'altérité de l'espace intermédiaire'.[27] In Gawain's journey to the Chapel, Hautdesert constitutes an otherworldly intermediary space. In the first section of the poem when he spells out the pact with Gawain, not only does the Green Knight sound evasive about the location of the return blow but he also carefully keeps from referring to this topographical hapax (404-9). As a result, in Fitt 2 (763-70) Bertilak's castle seems to pop up providentially as an unanticipated stage in Gawain's perambulation. It represents a 'muance' in the landscape and in his mindscape too – rendered by Lowery in the 'Interlude' sequence. Bertilak's provisional haven indicates that it is time Gawain envisioned the likelihood of a different perspective on his quest. Nonetheless, the comfort, luxury and delights he finds there narrow the scope of his sagacity, impoverished by a lack of 'muance,' which causes him to mistake the illusory shelter from freezing cold and hunger for an unhoped-for *locus amoenus*.

The poet's uncommon, possibly eccentric, light thrown on Arthurian adventure revisits and plays down from a new angle the spirit and spirituality of knighthood fantasized in chivalric romance. It reads as if the *Gawain*-author wished his audience were receptive to the 'muances' to which Arthurian romance is permeable and which it can seamlessly encompass and fluidly process. We are dealing with a poem inviting for detection of 'm(o)u(v)ances' allowing to exceed the limits of the thematic six-note scale of knightly *savoir-faire* and courtly *savoir-être*. It offers a nuanced painting with semitones and gradations. Now these half-tones become predominant in *The Green Knight,* dramatically and visually.

Prima facie, *The Green Knight* taps into the medieval film genre. However, a closer examination exposes undertones, traces of other film categories (the coming-of-age drama, fantasy, horror) along with resonances of today's concerns: struggling to make sense of a world where the line between reality and illusion is 'muante' and fading away, and where responsiveness to ecology and a revision of the gender divide and of women's empowerment could arm us to cope with the current soci(et)al and political challenges.

27 Koble, *Les Prophéties de Merlin*, 250.

In the approach of the anonymous author of the *Prophesies de Merlin* Koble discerns 'autant l'empreinte d'un travail d'émondage que de remodelage, qui tâche de donner à l'œuvre détournée une cohésion textuelle nouvelle.'[28] To some extent, Lowery reshapes and prunes, remodels and hews *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, making 'muances' as he projects onto the screen a literary source that he submits to a variety of mutations. He abridges certain episodes (the three hunts and concurrent seduction scenes) but dilates others ('An Interlude'), or simply adds sequences like 'A Meeting with St. Winifred' and 'The Voyage Home.' In 'An Interlude' a bird's eye view long shot reduces Gawain and the fox to the size of insignificant specks in a vast stretch of wetland. A Dutch angle transitions to a complete topsy turvy shot which signals that the knight, who hardly looks like one anymore, has now reached a point of no return, a watershed in his progress that has virtually transformed him into the tattered pilgrim of hagiographic romance. This staggering camera movement constitutes a dramatic apex and a conspicuously aesthetic *point d'orgue*.

The director of *The Green Knight* opts for a different viewing angle, also a mannerist step aside. In the Green Chapel moment of truth to render the foreboding that petrifies the young man on the brink of decapitation, Lowery interpolates 'The Voyage Home.' It could be described as a 'what if' interruption or *caesura*, a visual breath (*une respiration*), virtually a cinematic bob and wheel dangling from the bulk of the plot. The climax of the confrontation with the Green Knight momentarily freezes the action. At this point we sense that the film director draws upon the vast Arthurian corpus ending on the demise of the Round Table. In a flash Gawain imagines the dreadful aftermath should he default on his pledge. Inserting the uchronic vision is a means for Lowery to foreshadow the darker turn the tradition's Gauvain will take in the latter part of his uncle's reign. This diegetic excrescence unexpectedly contorts the narrative and bends it out of shape, as Gawain does with the lady's green girdle that can be given various forms depending on how it is worn (1830-2, 1851-4, 2030-6, 2358-9, 2376-7, 2429-33, 2485-8, 2509-11, 2516-20). Obliquely, *en creux*, a discrepancy shows between the chronotope of Gawain's

28 *Ibid.*, 119.

present at the Green Chapel and the chronotope he glimpses in his mind's eye in a moment of intense pondering. A half-tone or 'muance' in the plot demarcates the present from the conditional or rather from the hypothetic future conceived of by a still hesitant Gawain in a nerve-racking quandary. 'The Voyage Home,' we realise, was but a visionary diastole and a fleeting moment in the protagonist's conscience.

Interlocking is certainly an apposite denomination for the structure of the film. In the poem's third Fitt the simultaneous hunts and seduction attempts are indicated by self-referential or metatextual formulas such as 'This day wyth this ilk dede thay dryven on this wyse, / Whyle oure luflych lede lys in his bedde, / Gawayn graythely at home, in geres ful ryche / of hewe' – 'So the day was spent in pursuit of this style, / while our lovable young lord had not left his bed, / and, cosseted in costly quilted covers, there he / remained' (1468-71). Lowery's method of narrative interpolation is cross-cutting, also known as intercutting. The cinematic handling of the medieval text conveys an acute awareness of the potential of romance, a hybrid form, to incorporate nuances, remanences of the poet's world (feasting, hunting, courting) alongside a present-day feel of the urgency of nature preservation and of the ongoing changes in viewing gender roles.

The nuances instilled by Lowery are not primarily designed to dynamise the narrative for at times the pace slows down, even pauses in 'A Meeting with St. Winifred,' for instance. The result is a mutant of a film that stands out in the landscape of medieval film for its singularity of style and tone. It is prone to metafilmic incursions and film citations of *Sleepy Hollow* (at the end of 'The Christmas Game'), *The Virgin Spring* and *The Company of Wolves* (in 'A Meeting with St. Winifred'), and *Perceval le Gallois* (in the numerous close shots of Gawain gawking, at sixes and sevens in witnessing supernatural events). Lowery's strategy consists of manipulating and contaminating the original in a peculiar manner that puzzles the audience somewhat out of their depth, not knowing what to make out of an unidentified cinematic object, a UCO which is the outcome of mutations and variations, 'mouvances' and 'muances' of form and content. Lowery gives the text an alternative twist, as the *Gawain*-poet did to sources and analogues that he did not quote.

Evidence of the offbeat approach to medievalism in *The Green Knight* is the treatment of death, the major underlying leitmotiv. In Fitt 2 the eerie landscape, the cold climate, the scarcity of food and lack of comfort in the Wirral wilderness exhaust Gawain. Culminating with the 'hard ysse-ikkles' hanging over his head (732) translated by the 'chandeliers of ice' metaphor in Modern English, the sketchy yet striking topographical depiction prefigures the *un*chapel where Gawain is to meet his fate in accordance with the serious game that he committed himself to play faultlessly. In *The Green Knight* the narrative arc, suffused with greenness, the oxymoronic hue of death and revival, rot and rebirth, displaces, more exactly preposes, the moment of Gawain's putative death. His figurative death comes not as the end but occurs at a much earlier point in 'A Kindness.' Meaningfully Gawain lies tied hand and foot in the heart of the wild untamed greenery. The flash vision of his death in the forest represents a 'muance' which insightfully translates the protagonist's growing angst.

Amongst the great many dissimilarities and divergences from the poem, the words 'not yet' are frequently heard in Gawain's answers to questions posed by Essel, Guinevere, Arthur, or the young thief.[29] The short negative form sounds like a semitone, a flat for that matter, within too narrow a scale of notes. It expresses the incompleteness of a young man deficient in spiritual depth and moral consistency. The poem affirms the exact opposite, which makes this deviation from the original a noticeable alteration, more than a mere 'muance.' Arthur's wastrel of a nephew who spends most of his time wallowing in sin is a far cry (in a 180-degree pan shot distance, so to speak) from 'so worthé as Wawan' – 'one as worthy and well liked as Gawain' (559). It is confirmed in Fitt 2 at the end of the painterly description of his arming: emphasis is laid on the dazzling diamond diadem on his helmet (615-8), the finishing touch to a flattering portrait that metaphorically aggrandizes, almost consecrates, Gawain as the gem of Arthurian chivalry. The same linguistic indeterminacy, a deliberate verbal vagueness expresses this

29 'Not yet' is also a hint at *Excalibur*. In John Boorman's film released in 1981, when several knights swear allegiance to young Arthur who has just pulled the sword, he modestly remarks that he is not a knight yet.

reluctance at naming what is dreaded and what Gawain's 'not yet' betrays. 'Don't waste this,' his mother exhorts him in 'A Too Quick Year.' The deictic 'this' is another occurrence of an essential notion left unsaid, thereby undefined. Lowery's refraction (in the optical sense of the word, as suggested by the *camera obscura* device employed by the lady in 'An Exchange of Winnings') of the poem exploits its hermeneutic grey areas (black holes, at times?), surfs on its 'muances,' thus generating a cinematic poetic of opacity. *'This'* pertains to the indefinite, imprecise language used by most characters in the film, where the essence of what Gawain's quest is about frustratingly fails to be spelled out. It is up to the still immature (anti)hero put to the proof to find out about the virtues he needs to acquire to attain what he both yearns for and fears so much: becoming *Sir* Gawain, behaving as the boldest and noblest knight of all cryptically cited in the film's incipit and in 'The Christmas Game' when the Green Knight's letter is being read by Queen Guinevere in a magic trance.

In 'A Too Quick Year' Gawain's pose for the painting is that of a knightly, virtually kingly, icon, which he is far from being. Lowery's addition of the glorifying portrait of Gawain telescopes the laudatory terms in which the young knight's virtues are extolled in the pentangle excursus (623-65), then at Hautdesert where the courtiers praise his legendary stature (910-4), and also in Fitt 3 when the lady asserts that she knows of his fame as *the* model of courtesy (1226-9). From a 'muance' we move to a *béance*, a gap between Gawain's rakish nature in the film (he has just left the brothel to sit for the painter) and the inflated image of his enhanced self which is anything but true to life. Is Lowery suggesting that Gawain is an impostor or just reminding us of the dual nature of the French texts' Gauvain, the most unflattering portrayal of which is found in the parodic *Chevalier à l'épée*?[30]

30 Corinne Pierreville, "Réminiscences de Chrétien de Troyes dans Le Chevalier à l'épée," in Claude Lachet, textes rassemblés par, L'œuvre de Chrétien de Troyes dans la littérature française. Réminiscences, résurgences et réécritures. Actes du colloque des 23 et 24 mai 1997. (Lyon : Université Jean Moulin, Lyon 3, 1998), 19-32. Middle English romances mainly depict Gawain as the paragon of Arthurian chivalry although the French prose romances somewhat blackened his image, shedding an unfavourable light on him in comparison with more pious heroes, like

In a similar parodic vein, the Guignolesque puppet show opening 'A Too Quick Year' dramatizes a gory execution, a spectacular death in the farcical mode. The fiction-within-the-fiction reminiscent of medieval popular drama is a cinematic *mise en abyme* of Gawain's irrepressible obsession in the poem. Interpolating a puppet performance for a public of commoners may indicate that the story of the young man's dilemma not only enraptures all audiences but also elicits a variety of emotional responses, depending on whether it is read as a serious game darkened by the hovering shadow of death or as laughing matter. It could imply that the representation of the gruesome execution that awaits Gawain actually calls for 'muances' likely to defuse the horror of the beheading without eclipsing the death threat motif. Amidst a multitude of further variants throughout the film this apparently futile and inconsistent detail contributes to making *The Green Knight* an atypical cinematic artefact for a viewer open to a 'not yet,' 'not quite' adaptation, to a film transfiguration in a minor key with a half-title and a confusingly inconclusive denouement.

CONCLUSION

To preserve the stability of his uncle's kingdom and spare the sovereign's life it behooves Gawain, the highest nobleman ranking just below his relative, as the sitting hierarchy confirms (109-15), to take up the challenge in the king's place. In musical terms it translates as a half-tone down, a flat that lowers by a semitone the note that comes after it. If the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens on the loud, ringing lively caroles (43-9 echoed in Fitt 2 at 1020-6 and in Fitt 3 at 1652-6, 1952-7), we soon realise that the music score, metaphorically speaking, 'fait muance.' The narrative strategy resorts to 'muance' to offer an alternate approach to the vast Arthurian material, out of which he creates an original romance, a tuneful counterpoint. The word 'counterpoint' designates the interplay of two or more different melodies: although two or more tunes are played independently, together they form a harmonic structure. The other difficulty deftly overcome by the *Gawain*-poet is his escape from the yoke of the forms and norms

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Lancelot. However, it turns out that, except for the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory, English texts did not discredit his high reputation.

of the Arthurian legacy by means of subtle mutations, variations and contrapuntal effects without turning his back to the genre's *topoi*.

> À l'oreille des hommes des XIIe, XIIIe, XIVe siècles qui furent l'origine, le moyen et le but des textes – auteurs, interprètes, consommateurs –, cette poésie dut apparaître comme un vaste concert de sonorités plaisantes, harmonieuses ou entre elles discordantes, un jeu de voix recouvrant le bruit ordinaire de la vie, et qui s'élève, reflue, reprend, s'amplifie ou s'effrite en appels ou en cris dont aucun n'est tout à fait identifiable. Ainsi comprise, la mouvance instaure un double dialogisme : intérieur à chaque texte, et extérieur à lui, engendré par ses relations avec les autres.

In *La lettre et la voix*, Zumthor underlined the vocality of medieval texts.[31] Alongside the sounds of everyday life, in the contrapuntal relation between poetry and real life, rings the discourse of chivalric romance the *Gawain*-poet's society is steeped in.[32] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains occurrences of textual, semantic and lexical 'muances,' some divided up echoes of other texts which, unfixed, are blown away, dispersed by the turbulences of intervocality, 'les tourbillons de l'intervocalité.'[33]

The poem enters in conversation with the Galfridian tradition, from which the English author collected fragments. Like an expert goldsmith he pieced them together into a collage, a delicately chiselled jewel brightened up by *muances* and shaped to suit the tastes of an audience expecting their perspective to be somehow twisted. The same goes for Lowery twisting the established features of the medieval movie and of what traditionally defines film adaptation.

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[31] Paul Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix*. *De la « littérature » médiévale*. Paris, Seuil, 1987, 162-3.
[32] *Ibid.*, 172.
[33] *Ibid.*, 163.

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