"That's a very queer painting..." - Queering *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and David Lowery's *The Green Knight*

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Introduction - About using queer theory in the medieval research field, and the relevance of doing so

The term "queering" in the very title of this article might be surprising for some readers, due to its relatively ultra-contemporary connotations. I will dedicate this introductive part to defining some key concepts to explain the "queering" approach in the field of interpretative theory, and why this approach might be particularly well-suited for a poem such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its transmedial adaptation *The Green Knight*.

→ *What are queer studies and queer theory?*

Giving a few keys of understanding about queer theory and queer studies may be useful at this stage. Queer studies derive from the fields of feminist, gender and homosexuality studies to which it owes a lot of methodological and theoretical bases. Any attempt at a genealogy or history of the queer studies field will mention important theorists such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, etc. One of the most succinct and accurate definitions of queer studies can be found in the aptly named *Routledge Queer Studies Reader* of 2012, on p.XVI: "In broad stroke, queer studies is the institutionalization of a new - or at least newly visible - paradigm for thinking about sexuality that emerged simultaneously across academic and activist contexts in the early 1990s".

As the academic discourse developed in the field, it became apparent that queer theory was not to stay confined to the study of sexuality, and could in fact be applied to the study of broader themes, such as social or textual non-normativity, and be a powerful tool to foster self-reflexivity for the interpreter or historian. Indeed, as William Turner puts it in his *Genealogy of Queer Theory* (2000, p.5), "Queer theorists suspect [...] that the scholarly ideal of dispassionate reflection entails a refusal to recognize the multiple ways in which cultural and psychological factors influence what we think and write". This is why, in part, queer theory can be a tool to rethink, reconsider, and linger on previously "well-attested" interpretations or historical events, as it continually requires of the individual working on said interpretations or events to contextualize their own thought process and the ones of researchers that preceded them.

Since the queer studies field deals at its very core with issues of individual positionality, societal changes and evolutions, it is, as Donald Hall put it in the Introduction to the aforementioned *Queer Studies Reader*, "not a stable or hard-edged field of scholarly inquiry"; a fact that might be all the more useful in the case of medieval studies, especially when the period it is concerned with has been the target of many post-medieval (rarely positive) projections and rewritings.

→ *When and how were they applied to medieval studies?*

There was a definite boom of queer medieval studies around the turn of the millenium, even if considerations about homosexuality in the Middle Ages emerged in broader contexts of medieval feminist research, or of research on sexuality and/or homosexuality throughout history before then.

The process of explicitly "queering the Middle Ages" was more formally established after 2000, and notably in *Queering the Middle Ages*, a collection of articles edited by Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger in 2001. According to the introduction to the collection, we can isolate three main directions for the "queering" process.

The first one, centred on sexuality, would be the "recovery of cultural meanings that are lost, obscured, or distorted in work that either ignores questions of sexuality or attends only to hegemonic or heteronormative understandings of it". It is within this direction that one may consider whole systems of societal normalization, as bodies and concepts of gender are intimately linked to the issue of normalized sexuality. The second one is concerned with a "rethinking of canonical literary figures such as Chaucer and mainstream genres such as medieval romance". The last one is directly intending to address the effects of medievalist works or interpretative journeys; "queer medievalism has been concerned to disturb traditional historical understandings of the Middle Ages as either a time of "quiet hierarchies" or of squalid, antimodern disorder".

To these three branches of queer medievalism, I want to add a fourth one, which would be the disruption of our traditional (and rather recent, might I add) understanding of time as linear, divisible, and goal-oriented, to better understand how different temporal paradigms (such as, for instance, the 14th century social and cultural paradigm, and our 21th century paradigm) might interact and dialogue through interpretative theories and adaptations.
While it may seem like the goal of this article might be to pursue the second approach only, it seemed important to me to borrow a bit of each approach, as the object under study does not pertain to one category.

Indeed, no matter the direction of the queering process, the main goal of queer theory is to systematically reassess what we consider as givens and call into question our cognitive biases; and this is something that is quite necessary to do if we wish to work both with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight*.

→ *Why might queer theory be particularly well-fitted to approach Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is an incredibly ambiguous text, which has always generated intense and metatextual discussion. Its very title is a post-medieval "invention", as the poem in British Library MS Cotton Nero A x, like the three works preceding it, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, does not bear a title. The chapters of the present volume are also in themselves a testament to the layers and layers of interpretative possibilities, reflecting the seemingly endless array of interpretative angles that can be adopted to look at the work. Hence, it seems to be no surprise that it is this poem in particular that was chosen by David Lowery for his transmedial 2021 adaptation.

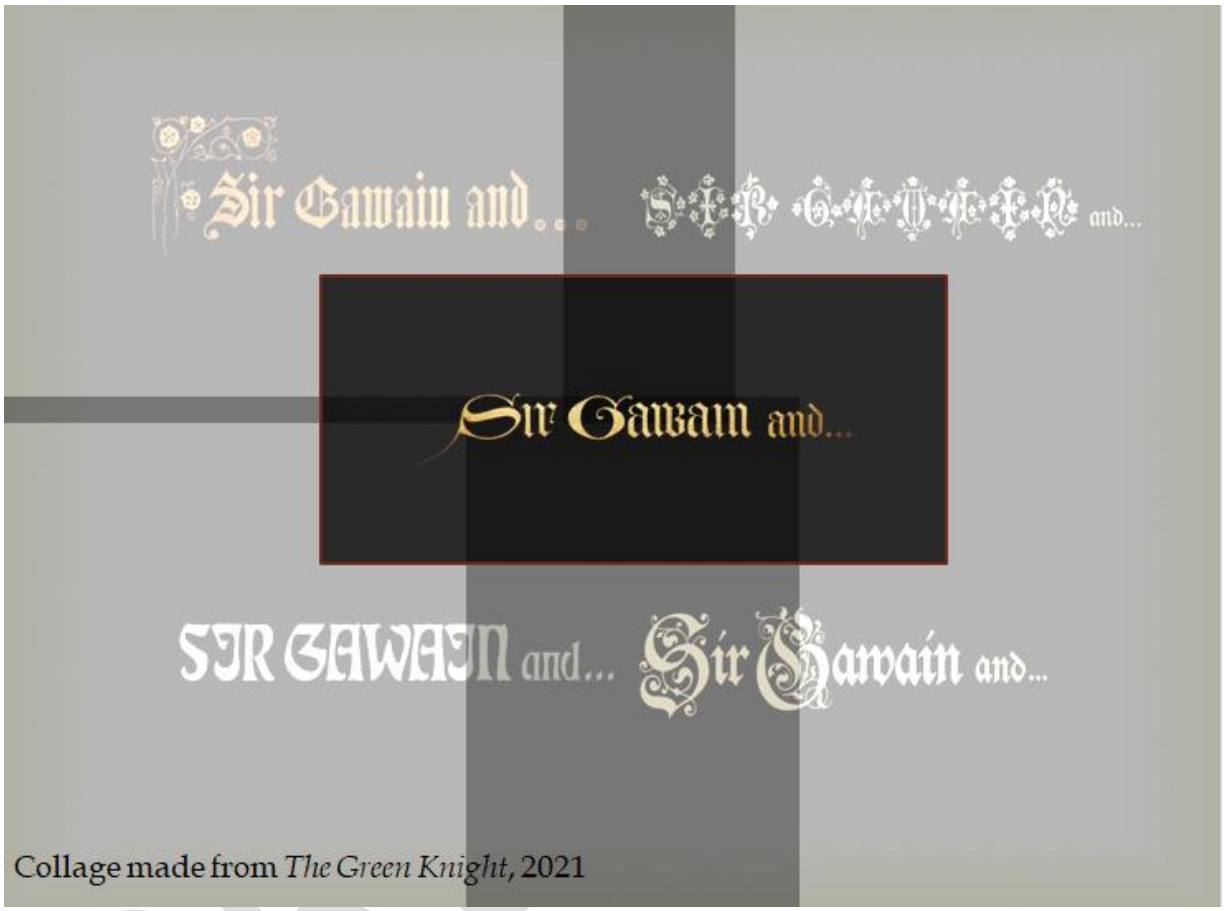


ILLUSTRATION - All the ways the title is written in Lowery's adaptation

In this paper, I wish to underline the interpretative possibilities of queering *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.
While there have been numerous engaging, thought-provoking studies seeking to explain and dissect the concepts of "the margin(s)", "the nonsensical", "the marvellous/miraculous", "the horror/the awe" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight*, I think that queer theory could help us understand these concepts as complementary parts of a rhetoric device that should, in fact, not be understood, nor divided, but rather experienced globally. I want to argue that it is through the superimposition of all these elements that the overall effect of the poem and movie is realized.

Similarly, as queer theory is an interpretative theory which seems to always cultivate a two-way dialogue between the sources/concepts and the interpreter, the interpreter should ideally let themself also be queered by their objects of studies. This is why using queer theory to study work reception is worth doing; especially in the context of the agrégation, as students

endeavour to connect the two works that are also arguably in a queering relationship with one another.

I. Queering the materials; from interpreting inversions and ambiguities to accepting fluidity, circularity

A. Ambiguous, inverted young Gawain

One simple, provocative question could be formulated at this point: is Gawain queer? One simple, provocative answer would be "Yes, he is!" But it is most important to understand that Gawain is not queer (nor "gay") by our contemporary understanding of the term, just because he kisses another man at one point in the poem/movie. Gawain is queer because if we conceptualize queerness as conducting yourself in a way that sets you outside the gender and/or sexual social norms of your time and place, then Gawain cannot be anything but queer. The following section will underline two ways in which Gawain is definitely situated in the paradigm of medieval queerness; firstly, through the ambiguity of his gender status, and secondly, through the inversion of the values that are ascribed to him, especially in the poem.

1. The ambiguity of Gawain's gender status

I would argue that there is a constant violent back-and-forth of Gawain's gender status, which is made visually unmistakeable in the movie, but is also tackled several times in the poem. The term "gender status" is the term that I prefer when talking about gender in the Middle Ages, rather than gender, gender expression, or sex, as the place of an individual in the medieval society was inextricably linked to their status (either as religious or secular, peasant, merchant, noble, warrior, etc) which could define different gender modalities (a man in the clergy and a man in the army, while both being men, experienced their gender so differently due to their status that the gender status distinction seems more pertinent than a strict gender distinction).

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and in *The Green Knight*, the specific gender status to discuss would be the "knight gender status", which entailed several characteristics, such as, obviously, "being a knight", but also "being an adult man", "interacting with and taking part in the occupations of male individuals of the same status", and "upholding chivalric values".

a. Gawain's unrealization as a knight

While in the poem Gawain is never described as "not a knight" (indeed, he already sports a sword, as lines 588-9 exemplify: "Gurde wyth a bront ful sure / With silk sayn umbe his syde", and he does ask for "hys armes" on line 567), the youthfulness of the court and his emphasis on his lack of prowess on lines 356-7 ("Bot for as much as ye ar myn em, I am only to prayse: / No bounté bot your blod I in my bodé knowe") hint at a yet untested knight, eager perhaps to prove himself. The movie takes this a step further and its whole structure is the one of a story of self-becoming, with Gawain repeatedly asserting that he is not a knight "yet", or Queen Guinevere reassuring him that he has no story to tell "yet". The goal of that "Bildungsfilm" is nowhere clearer than at 0:27:43, when an idealized version of Gawain, sword by his side, triumphantly stepping upon the beheaded Green Knight (maybe an indirect

call back to the heroic heraldic figure of the knight that is portrayed in the poem?) is being painted before his departure for Hautdésert.

The Green Knight, 0:27:43 – What a Knight should be

b. Gawain's infantilization

This depiction of Gawain could not be more different to what the character presents himself as, barely five minutes later, as he drunkenly starts a tavern fight before being flung in the mud, dressed in simple linen cloth. The following encounter with King Arthur, who takes it upon himself to clean Gawain's face of the mud, and appears as a doting, old parent, further emphasizes that Gawain is not only not a knight "yet", but that he may also not even be an "adult man" yet. This seems to again be a deliberate choice of Lowery, as King Arthur is described as "almost child-like" in the poem (which is quite in accordance with the relative young appearance of his court) ; perhaps to all the better portray Gawain as an untaught man.

The Green Knight, 0:32:09 – Gawain after a tavern fight, scrubbed clean by King Arthur

c. Gawain with the ladies

This "un-realization" of Gawain's gender status also transpires in his interaction with his female and male peers. While we do find Gawain in the bed of women several times (and especially in the movie), this does not align him with a male figure using this position to assert his gender through heterosexual penetrative relations with the women in the bed. In the poem, he famously resists the sexual temptation of Lady Bertilak, of course, which brings about the famous line "þou art not Gawayn" (l. 2270); in the movie, both Essel and the Lady, two characters that may be considered at times as an allegorical representation of The Woman Other in Gawain's psyche (especially since both characters are played by the same actress) state that Gawain fails in his realization as a knight being able to perform one of the occupations of an adult, secular man. Essel states that Gawain cannot get an erection, while Lady Bertilak, after a sexual encounter/assault which submitted Gawain to her, comments "You are no knight".

Gawain seems to inhabit the same physical space as women frequently, and share their preoccupations or activities. In *The Green Knight*, we see him lying in the bed of St Winifred, in the very same position and physical space as her skeleton, and he then carries out her quest for her (retrieving her skull from the pond). In the poem, Gawain sharing with ladies is a much lighter endeavour ; we find him in leisure with the women at court all day, while the Lord of that very court joins his men for hunts day after day, which is described on lines 1560-1 : "The lede with the ladyes layked all day, / **Bot** the lorde over the londes launced ful ofte", and 1729-32 : "And ye he lad hem bi lag-mon, the lorde and his meyny, / On this maner bi the mountes quyle myd-over-under, / **Whyle the hende knyght at home holsumly slepes** / **Withinne the comly cortynes, on the colde morne**" through parallel constructions that directly oppose each other. The poem is particular in showcasing how much Gawain is at ease among the women at court, notably on lines 1619-1625;

"Til he ser Sir Gawayne
In halle hyl thoght ful longe,
He calde, and he com gayn
His fees ther for to fonge.
The lorde, ful lowde with lote, laghed myry
When he seye Sir Gawayn; with solace he spekes
The goude ladyes were geten, and gedered the meyny"

in which the appearance of Gawain seems to bring about the same joy as the appearance of a charming lady a lord may call upon at his return to his castle.

2. The inversion and distorsions of values ascribed to Gawain

The motive of inversion is arguably at the core of the poem, both with the beheading game and the game of exchanges at Haudésert; I want to linger here on the inversion and transformation of values which are explicitly, in the poem at least, associated with Gawain, and show how these also threaten the stability or realization of Gawain's gender status.
The reader may recall the historicity of the term "inversion" when we situate it in the context of queer studies, as a direct call back to the "figure de l'inverti" on which Foucault expanded in his *History of Sexuality*, a concept which draws on a now outdated psycho-medical understanding of homosexuality as the inversion of sexual identity within an individual.
Analysing "inversions" in a queering interpretative process of Gawain is thus quite significant, in so far as we try, unlike Foucault, to situate said inversions within the medieval historical paradigm.

a. Male virginity and purity

Two of the main values ascribed to Gawain, along with courtesy, are virginity and purity. These are in themselves ambiguous as chivalric values, but their treatment in the poem and its adaptation is particularly worthy of examination.
Gawain the knight, in the poem, expands on his own sexual innocence on lines 1540-1545, through an intricate display of curtesy:

"Bot to take the torvayle to myself to trwluf expoun,
And towche the temes of tyxt and tales of armes
To yow that, I wot wel, weldes more slyght
Of that art, bi the half, or hundreth of seche
As I am other ever schal, in erde ther I leve –
Hit were a folé felefolde, my fre, by my trawthe."

The strength of temptation is rendered all the more threatening by Gawain's inexperience, which brings him to the brink of madness on lines 1658-1660: "Such semblaunt to that segge semly ho made, / Wyth stille stollen countenaunce, that stalworth to plese, / That al forwondered was the wyye, and wroth with hymselven", when he appears at a loss for actions and words as he is faced with the seductive behaviour of Lady Bertilak. Virginity is not, for the knight, strictly synonymous with purity, even though he places himself under the protection of the Mother Virgin herself. On this subject, lines 1768-1791:

"Thay lauced wordes gode,
Much wele then was therinne;
Gret perile bitwene hem stod,
Nif Maré of hir knyght con mynne.
[...]
The knyght sayde: "Be sayn Jon,"
And smethely con he smyle,
"In fayth I welde right non,
Ne non wil welde the quile."

are particularly telling; here Gawain reaffirms that he entertains no relation with women, except for the Virgin Mary, who takes the traditional place of the "Lady" in the courteous relationship (note the possessive used regarding Gawain, "hir knyght"). This in itself might represent a questionable theological inversion; while it was quite frequent to encounter nuns or young maidens described as spouses of Christ, placing the Virgin Mary in the position of the courted Lady (and not in a maternal, protective, or devotional position) might be a testimony of Gawain's arrogantly self-asserted status as the knight of purity (we might remember here that he is the one to command the portrait of Mary to be painted on his shield). In the movie, the inversion and breaking of Gawain's claimed values is made eminently visual, for instance from 0:25:15, a scene in which a total high-angle shot showcases the pentacle engraved on the floor of Camelot's court stained with blood and broken by the irruption of non-geometrical lines made of moss and by the stern, linear silhouette of the Green Knight's axe.

The Green Knight, 0:25:15 – The fractured pentacle; stained in red and green, and the Axe (engraved with the three beasts slayed by Bertilak's hunts)

The very displacement of the pentacle symbol is a clear signal that Lowery, far from completely breaking up with the traditional values ascribed to Gawain, in fact expands on the subtext of the poem. The pentacle, this infinite knot representative of the five, unending strengths of the knight, is both visually broken and replicated in smaller levels and given several, ambiguous meanings. For instance, it first appears on the linen chemise of a rather difficult to identify character (is it Morgan, Gawain's mother? a knight in a close-up?), then is displayed on the chest of the "fully-fledged" knights of Camelot (including King Arthur), and features as a very small umbo on Gawain's shield. By displacing the symbol, Lowery also displaces the values it carries, and instead of making it Gawain's symbol proper, he makes it an ambiguous symbol of a goal that neither Gawain nor the spectator manage to fully identify, as it does not fully function as a reminder of the idea of purity, nor as a symbol of belonging to a social status. Once again, this symbol which should assert Gawain's identity instead carries out the process of obscuring this very identity.

The movie gets even more explicit on Gawain's difficult pursuit of the ideal of purity through the use of cleansing water. Purity indeed in medieval sources is scarcely referred to as such; medieval writers and theologians prefer the term "cleanness", or rely on periphrastic

phrasings such as “without stains”, “without spots”, “without villainy”, etc. The idea of moral and physical purity is thus closely linked to the motive of “washing”; which is an action that is repeated all throughout the movie, as Gawain is frequently shown trying to cleanse himself or drink water. Very significant the scene around the one hour mark in the movie then, when Gawain appears inverted in the water mirror pond of St Winifred, before joining in with the water in an upwards movement (just as he is, in fact, diving into its depths). This “inverted baptism”, heavily infused with womb imagery as the underwater gains a red, bloody tint, does not, cannot result in a rebirth in purity (absence of sin) for Gawain, due to its very setting and execution.

The Green Knight, 1:01:02 – Gawain reflected in water, before retrieving Winifred’s head from the pond

In the poem, too, inverted or displaced mock-religious sacraments offer a critical outlook on Gawain’s owning of his values as a “faithful” and “pure” knight of Mary. In lines 2390-2394 indeed, the Green Knight, a creature of magic, offers absolution to Gawain, in the Green Chapel, a place where religion is overwhelmingly made noticeable by its resounding absence and distortion, displayed via the absence of order in wilderness (which supposes an unordered creation, so by extension an absence of divine intervention) and through the imagination of an evil liturgy (“Here myght aboute mydnyght / The dele his matynnes telle!” l.2187-8). What worth could such an absolution as formulated lines 2390-4 have?

“ ‘I halde hit hardily hole, the harme that I hade;
Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses,
And has the penaunce apert of the poynt of my egge.
I halde the polysed of that plyght and pured as clene
As thou hades never forfeted sythen thou was fyrst borne.’”

The very fact that it is this "absolution" that is fully written out for the reader, and not the numerous others that Gawain has supposedly obtained at mass (before leaving Camelot and before leaving Hautdésert, for instance), suggests that one should be cautious about considering Gawain as the paragon of truthfulness and purity.

b. Adopting the girdle

One of the most remarkable elements to me, in terms of queering, is of course the magic girdle. *The Green Knight* makes no mystery of the highly transcendent and immaterial nature of the girdle, which is weaved by the hands of mystic women, interwoven with magic runes, and is one of the props which keeps appearing and disappearing around Gawain throughout the movie. The girdle of the poem, however, seems a bit more suited to discuss the distortion and inversion of gendered chivalric values. We find it first of course as a gift to Gawain from Lady Bertilak, first described as a "girdel" (l.1829), then all throughout the scene of offering rather as a "lace" (l.1830, l.1851, and, notably, a "luf-lace" a little after, line 1874), a "silke" (l.1846) and "belt" (l.1860 – note that it is only referred to as a belt when it is effectively put on Gawain). On lines 2483-6, the same garment is worn by Gawain like a baldric, in a decidedly knightly manner, as if to bear both his sword and his shame.

"The **hurt** was hole that he hade hent in his nek,
And the **blykkande belt** he bere theraboute,
Abelef as a **bauderyk**, bounden bi his syde,
Loken under his lyfte arme, the lace, with a knot,
In tokenyng he was tane in tech of a faute"

The green girdle is then adopted as a baldric worn by both genders at court, and represents a symbol of honour and belonging, as is described on lines 2513-2520:

"The kyng comfortes the knyght, and alle the court als,
Laghen loude therat, and luflyly acorden,
That **lordes and ladis that longed to the Table**,
Uche burne of the brotherhede, a **bauderyk** schulde have,
A bende abelef hym about, of a bryght grene
(...)
For that was acorded the **renoun** of the Rounde Table,
And **he honoured that hit hade**..."

The girdle in itself becomes a testimony of the instability of values and even perhaps specifically of gendered values in the poem. Nothing, in this poetic game of exchange and inversion, can be surely kept in order, which tends to contradict the ideal of perfection and purity implied by the numerological symbolism of the pentacle, the claimed guidance of the Virgin Mary, and Gawain's golden resplendence and renown which open the gates of Hautdésert for him.

It seems that in the poem at least, there is no long-lasting consequence for Gawain's fault; something that was also foretold in Gawain's behaviour at the court of Hautdésert, especially as he enjoys idleness and love-making with Lady Bertilak. This is most evident in the succession of the actions constituting Gawain's most prominent "sin" (accepting the girdle without informing Lord Bertilak and giving it back to him). His dissimulation of the girdle is hasty, without remorse:

"**When** ho was gon, Sir Gawayn geres hym sone,
Rises and riches hym in araye noble,
Lays up the luf-lace the lady hym raght,
Hid hit ful holdely ther he hit eft fonde." (l.1872-1875).

He then hastens to confession in lines 1876-1884:

"**Sythen** chevely to the chapel choses he the waye,
Prevely aproched to a prest, and prayed hym better,
How his sawle schulde be saved when schuld seye hethen.
There he schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdedes
Of the more and the mynne, and merci beseches,
And of absolucioun he on the segge calles;
And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene
As domesday schulde haf ben dight on the morn."

Just as he hastens to rejoin the ladies of the court to enjoy more merriment on the very next line: "And **sythen** he mace hym as mery among the fre ladyes, / With comlych and alle kynnes joye..." One may argue that Gawain seeking absolution here is somewhat opportunistic, and that there might be a touch of irony or sarcasm from the poet here in having his main knight character, so "faithful" and devoted to Mary, treat confession as a transaction and a short interlude between courtly distractions, so structured by temporal indicators like "when" and "sythen" the whole process is. What adds to this argument is the fact that if Gawain had truly felt absolved of all his sins then, he would not have felt shame in carrying and using the girdle against the Green Knight's strokes; said shame might then have more to do with his failing in his knight gender status than with his failing as a virtuous individual (which might also be an element of explanation for the famous misogynist tirade of Gawain in lines 2411-2428).

As such, both poem and movie converge in that they show that Gawain is, in fact, not what he is set to be. As I have tried to demonstrate, even in the poem Gawain is far from being the perfect knight that can without guilt flaunt his shield and the symbols it carries; there is a heavy contrast between Gawain's "purity" and chivalric values of loyalty and faithfulness, his "renowned" courtesy, and his enjoyment of courtly comfort, his kissing another man's wife with the approval of said man, and, of course, his rather ambiguous use of penitence and confession. Combined with the un-realization of his gender status as a knight, this creates the image of a character whose identity and quest are as ambiguous as the textual and movie supports allowing their (arrested) developments.

B. The performative strength of the "queering rhetorical device" at work in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight*; "That's a very queer painting..."

1. What is this "queering rhetorical device", and what are its manifestations?

If we understand inversions and ambiguities as rhetorical principles rather than things or problems in order to elucidate to understand the poem or the movie, we then come to understand that they are the very elements that allowed both works to elevate themselves as note-worthy cultural productions. I do not wish to consider the aforementioned ambiguities,

inversions and distortions as phenomena in isolation, and in fact want to argue that they constantly interact and create an all-encompassing fluidity and circularity that is the very essence of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, whether we encounter it as a poem, in illustrations, or as movies. These interactions are what I want to refer to as the "queering rhetorical device", of which the most striking manifestations are to be found in movements, duplications/repetitions, superimpositions and obfuscations.

a. Movement and immobility; fluidity at work

When considering movements, it is always interesting to linger first on what is static, and then on how this immobility is breached. For a knight set on a quest, Gawain curiously remains static for long periods of time, such as the one very poetically described at the beginning of Fitt 2, during which Gawain stays at the court of Camelot until All Saint's Day (even though he supposedly started to think about his departure "Til Meghelmas mone" (l.532)). The same process occurs when he stays at Hautdésert, inside the castle, with the ladies, and is persuaded to stay until the very last moment by his host. Gawain's reluctance to movement is also displayed in the movie, for instance in the pace of the movie, which allows for long panoramic shots, or long and slow scenes from a fixed angle (such as when Gawain considers which way to go at the crossroads). Both courts seem also strangely stilted, in different ways; Camelot appears as calcified by the weariness of old age (a stark contrast to the joyous and young court of the poem), while Hautdésert looks so deserted of inhabitants and aesthetic coherence that it gives off the impression of a liminal, unmoving space.

It is thus all the more noticeable when these unmoving settings are disturbed; by the flurry of activity surrounding Gawain in the poem as he gets dressed in his gleaming armour and embroidered garments, or, in *The Green Knight*, when Gawain jumps over the Round Table to fight.

I want to linger on this very brief scene as I find it perfectly echoes Gawain's gender ambiguity. We may argue that in the Middle Ages, immobility was more closely linked to the feminine, while movement was more suited to the masculine; these motives are quite recurrent, especially in the barely veiled reprobation of women choosing to travel (all the more reproved if they chose to travel by their own will) and the exhortation for young girls and women to preserve themselves. Here, we find Gawain unmoving, paralyzed, until he is given a sword (and not any sword, the sword of the King); only then does he jump over the table and throw a would-be deadly stroke to the Green Knight. The symbolism is unmistakeable, especially since it reoccurs in a later scene with Essel, during a dialogue which clearly parallels the use of swords to the use of penises (the very same dialogue which discloses to us that, in the movie at least, Gawain is impotent).

The Green Knight, 0:20:57 – Gawain, armed with Excalibur, jumps over the Round Table

But again, as always, both states of movement and immobility coexist to reinforce the ambiguity and instability of the whole, and Gawain is then cast again in immobility throughout the movie as he stumbles through his identity quest. Interestingly enough, the clearest evidence of this often happens when he is stripped of everything, weapon, armour, food, or in naked vulnerability, such as at 1:14:30, when he spends his first night à Hautdésert, and the character is filmed from a bird's eye view (which is technically impossible within the microcosm of the movie as the room is supposed to have a roof), all the better to reflect his being overpowered by green silk; an ominous foreboding for the following scenes at Hautdésert and the Green Chapel.

The Green Knight, 1:14:33 – Gawain enclosed in a cell of bed curtains

b. Movements of circularity and back-and-forth; distortion of time and possibility

Movements of back-and-forth and circularity also work together with inversions to indicate distortion and superimposition of temporalities. The structure of the poem hints at circularity easily enough; both temporal circularity, with the game of exchange happening on the same day of two separate years, and physical circularity, as the poem ends at the very place it started, in the court of Camelot.

The movie adaptation once again builds on motives prefigured in the poem, making use of the unique possibilities of its medium. It visually showcases the circularity of time through the zooming in and out on a painted wooden wheel of the season (which I find surprisingly alike to the medieval agricultural calendar) in motion. The scenes depicted on the wheel are also moving and changing, hinting at the many twists of the movie, which presents, along with superimposed temporalities, scenes that can be described as being from an alternative timeline and/or reality altogether.

The Green Knight, 0:32:34 – The Wheel of the Season, (probably?) inspired by the medieval agricultural calendar

The Green Knight, 1:12:23 – Rotary camera movement after the encounter with Giants

These twists are consistently introduced via rotating camera moves throughout the movie. As Gawain travels to a place of marginality, his very self undergoes a series of inversions, distortions and duplications. His encounters with St Winifred, or with the Giants, for instance, are filled to the brim with such devices (see above). Alternative timelines are showcased repeatedly, as Gawain is being shown alive, dead, then alive again not once but twice; first in the forest, after his encounter with the battlefield scavenger, then of course in the final scenes of the movie, as we witness the fall of his head on the floor of Camelot before being thrown back to the Green Chapel, before the final strike.

All concurs to bring us to the conclusion that Gawain and his quest, either in the poem or the movie, function as anomalies in the respective microcosms of the works. His return to Camelot is of little consequence in the poem and we may doubt that he returns at all in the movie; as such, we may even wonder if Gawain is at all a fully-realized character in his own canon.

c. Queer, queer Gawain

The Green Knight specifically lingers on this idea, by showing the spectator recurrent portraits of Gawain, which are evident indications of the multiplicity of his identity and call back to my previous arguments about the (arguably failed) construction of his gender status as a knight.

I want to linger on the portrait that is directly identified as "queer" by Gawain in the movie, which is the camera obscura portrait, presenting an inverted version of himself. I consider this portrait to be the culmination of Gawain's queerness, and not only because the term itself is uttered by the character. Nowhere is Gawain depicted as much like himself as on this portrait (with the clothes he is currently wearing, the object he is currently holding), made by a woman sporting the traits of his only lover. It is not surprising then to find that it is this very same painting that features in the final "prolepsis", hanging behind Gawain realized as the strongest knight (the king), but re-inversed; as if to normalize his gender status and identity once and for all.

The Green Knight, 1:20:56 – Camera Obscura technique

The multiplicity and reuse of portraits, of visual ekphrasis, work as an effective queering device which calls everything, from Gawain's identity to the reality of events, into question. This fits nicely with the effect of the poem, which achieves much of the same through the queering of Gawain's clothing and Gawain's physical environment. It is here important to remember that clothes played an extremely important role in the identifying of your (gender) status in the Middle Ages, and were as such heavily regulated. The poet seems to take a specific delight in describing the garments and armours of his characters (not much can quite match the resplendent arrival of the Green Knight in Camelot); in dressing Gawain as a knight with "new" emblems and precious embroidered cloth before his leaving Camelot, the poet effectively identifies him for the readership as a young, perhaps too "shiny" knight. Similarly, when he lingers on his character changing clothes at Hautdésert, he signifies to the audience that Gawain is a creature of comfort, a courtly noble finding ease in the richness and idleness of a pleasant castle; which comes at odds with the grim fate and noble quest the knight is supposed to fulfil soon. Gawain's physical environment also bears the mark of instability, through the irruption of magic and the intervention of the motive of wilderness, a place on the margins of civilization where anything could – theoretically – exists such as giants, dragons, and wild men, which Gawain bravely triumphs over – off "screen", however, as less than 50 lines in Fitt 2 are dedicated to the epic and heroic feats of the knight.

2. A possible metatextual game of debate

This ambiguous, queer poem, always oscillating between humour and chivalric grandeur, perhaps to the effect of mocking such grandeur, may thus have been a catalyst for discourse from its very creation. We may consider that the text was supposed to make its readers/listeners reflect on societal values of the time. This is part of the irretrievable component of the experience of literature in the Middle Ages which was, I believe, a strongly social experience, with texts read aloud to an assembly (wide or not), to which the audience might have been expected to react during and after the reading. For instance, there is a direct meta-reference to the genre/game of Love Debates in the poem itself, on lines 1504-1507:

"The lady loutes adoun
And comlyly kysses his face;
Much speche thay ther expoun
Of druryes greme and grace"

The adjunction of the final "HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE", by a different hand, also suggests that someone, at one point, had an interpretative argument to add to the end of the poem. In such a cultural context, it is no hardship to imagine a possible metatextual playful debate on the themes and ending of the romance between the readers/listeners of the lai, a

debate made all the more lively by the strength of the queering rhetorical device, which generates so many possibilities of diverse interpretations on the story and the main character, effectively ensuring the permanence of the intellectual life of the work.

It is interesting to note that the movie adaptation had the exact same effect of causing much discourse, as the rest of this article will discuss a bit more at length. The fact that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was adapted as a movie in 2021, and that it now features in the agrégation programme, supposes an explosion of the number of interpreters. More interpreters means a renewed multiplicity of interpretations, a process which is in itself worthy of observation since, if we stay true to some principles of queer theory that I have underlined above, each and any interpretation is in essence a performative act which changes the works as much as it changes the interpreter(s).

II. Queering the reception of the materials

I will thus linger in this final part on the reception of the materials, and particularly how we might understand said reception through the queer theory lens.

A] The queering relationship between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight*

Studying or teaching *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight* in tandem emphasizes that there is a definite timeless quality to the original medieval romance/lay; and that it is, in my opinion, linked to the possibility that we are supposed to be altered by our interpretative experience of the works, which can be summed up by the terms "being queered" or "undergoing a process of queering".

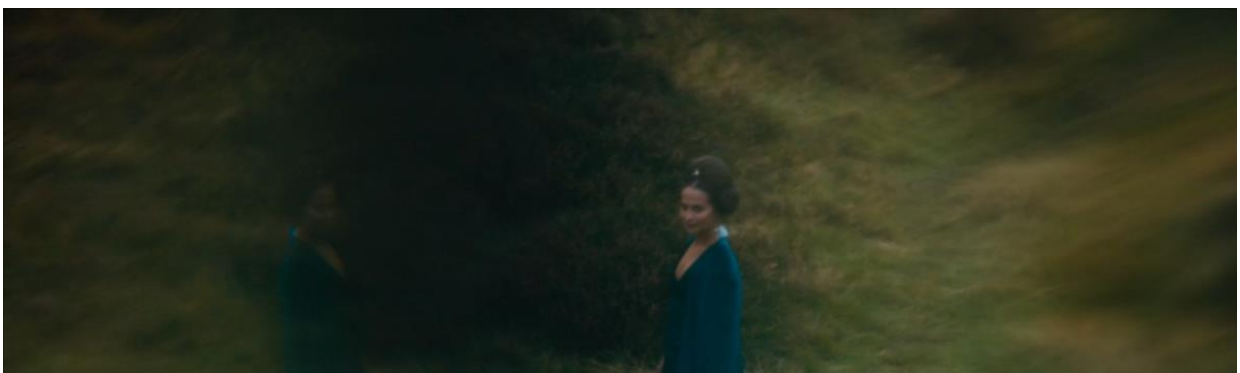
There is no better illustration of this than the queering relationship between the poem and the movie themselves. Watching the movie changes our perspectives on the poem and conversely, reading the poem makes the movie difficult to watch at first, as the very first scenes very firmly state that this adaptation is not to be a "linear visual translation" of the medieval poem. This two-way queering process might be uncomfortable for the interpreter, and in fact I could claim that it should be, that this is precisely what may force stimulating or surprising outlooks and considerations to emerge.

1. Emergence of new meanings through intermedial dialogue; a brief look at Lady Bertilak and female characters in the works

At first look, the movie *The Green Knight* seems kinder with its female characters than the poem it adapts. It offers them more space to be realized as characters; Morgan, for instance, who only appears once as an old lady at Hautdésert and then as a literary device in the Green Knight's final dialogue in the poem, is in the movie given greater agency and identity. In the final "prolepsis", it is the female child of Gawain that is given the role of continuing the royal line, since his male child dies in battle. Essel is an entirely new female character. Lady Bertilak is shown as a literate woman of many talents; she not only reads books, but also copies them, writes them, and builds them. She is the one to spin a particularly elaborated allegory around the colour green in the evening at Hautdésert.

It is through the superimposition of the treatment of female characters in the poem to the one in the movie and through careful examination of the way female characters are utilized in the movie that we are brought to reconsider the power of female agency in *The Green Knight*. I would even go as far as saying that, in a way, it echoes the so-called "misogynist tirade" of the poem which I previously mentioned, although through entirely different courses. Feminine entities in the movie are no stable entities; they are as enmeshed within the queering device as Gawain himself is. This makes of them in effect suspicious, or even scheming characters. Women in *The Green Knight* transcend medium, time (either at the micro level within the movie, or at the macro one within the historical and cultural contexts), and even the plot itself. Lady Bertilak especially, appearing for half a second as the Cotton Nero A.x.f.129 illumination at 1:12:46.5, for a whole scene in what is arguably "her tower" as the master of the camera obscura technique, and all through the scenes set at Haut-Désert as a character that could easily aesthetically fit in movies such as *Star Wars* or *Dune* as a space princess or a Bene Gesserit sister, seems much more powerful and threatening than the Green Knight himself, who is supposedly the great foe Gawain has to face at the end of his quest.

La Tentation de Sir Gawain par Lady Bertilak, Cotton Nero A.x.f.129
The Green Knight, 1:12:46,5



The Green Knight, 1:18:00 – Duplication of Lady Bertilak dressed in blue, reflected in a window

In giving this much prevalence and relevance in the plot to Morgan and Lady Bertilak (or Essel, of whom she is a direct mirror), Lowery (perhaps unintendedly, perhaps not), may have in fact been giving even more weight to poem Gawain's final "Me think me burde be excused" on line 2428; what strategy, what strength could he oppose, indeed, to such powerful women?

Here again, the intermedial dialogue between the poem and the movie must not be thought as a one-way discussion; both works are engaged into a two-way interpretative relationship, which is in essence a queering one as it actively modifies/acts upon ("queers") both works at once; and the proposed interpretation above is but one proposition among many, many more, born out of such a queering interpretative endeavour.

2. Some examples of cultural displacements used by Lowery in his adaptation

In keeping with the queer interpretative theory, we have to consider *The Green Knight* in its own paradigm, and how it was enriched with deliberate or non-deliberate cultural references which did not exist at the time of composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* but might also enter the queering dialogue between the two works.

Lowery's movie bears the weight of the sum of the medievalist representations of the Middle Ages which preceded; it is impossible, for instance, in a cultural world in which movies such as *The Lord of the Rings* or series like *Game of Thrones* exist, to cognitively separate oneself entirely from these representations. The aesthetics of such representations inevitably seep in the work of Lowery, along with some deliberate choices of cultural displacements; this is how I would for instance qualify the display of neo-paganist rituals, like the ones Morgan conducts. Neo-paganism is in essence a coalescing of ill-understood pagan and antique practices into practices that range from spiritual rituals to pseudo-scientific scams. It is clear in the movie that the use of runes on the amulet hidden in the girdle Morgan gives to her son does not follow any historically attested practice, especially since the deciphered runes have no meaning whatsoever. However, it does echo the mystery of realized impossibilities that the concept of wilderness could offer to the medieval mind, and the unseen magic of nature that gives power to this great Green Knight.

Other displacements that may not have been deliberate but enter the queering relationship are the oblique references to traditional Asian culture and Japanese animation, which might be references identified by the writer of this article uniquely because of their own positionality within their cultural paradigm.

The presence of a talking fox (an invention of the movie) immediately calls to mind the Fox Spirit present in several Asian cultures (Chinese, Japanese, Korean), which could be either a benevolent or malevolent entity. The talking fox in *The Green Knight* assumes much of the same ambiguity; he seems a gentle, comforting companion to the lonely and hungry Gawain during his long journey towards the Green Chapel, but turns into the impious and cowardly guide of poem Gawain at the end of the journey, urging the main character to go back to civilization and abandon his quest. Foxes in the medieval period did also carry an ambivalent symbolism; while considered cunning creatures, the poem makes no mystery of how it was usually considered as a beast; one of the lowest, far below the boar and deer that were previously successfully hunted down by Lord Bertilak and his hunting party.

The Green Knight, 1:38:23 – The Talking Fox's Spiritual Advices; a (nine-tailed) Fox Spirit in disguise?

Another distant displacement might be the depiction of the Giants in the movie, which bears striking resemblance to that of Titans in the Japanese animated series *Attack on Titans*. From the fog surrounding the gigantic entities, to the way they enter the story, and the decidedly non-normalized bodies they inhabit, the parallels are solid enough to provoke a strong sentiment of surprise and displacement for the viewer (if said viewer is familiar with the aforementioned reference). A strong sentiment which fosters even more questions and interpretative interrogations on the symbolic meaning of gigantic beings throughout history

and cultures. How exciting then, to realize that through the queering dialogue between works, two seemingly entirely separate temporalities and cultures meet and stimulate new avenues of thinking!

The Green Knight, 1:10:13 – The Giant's Hand falling with a resounding sound effect on the stony hill, accompanied by mystic music, with the figure of the Giant shrouded in fog in the background.

Attack on Titans, 1st episode – The Colossal Titan's Hand before the breach of the wall, falling on the stone of Wall Maria with a similar sound effect, accompanied with a similarly out worldly soundtrack, with the Colossal Titan's face soon revealed through the burning fog.

B] The discussion of homoeroticism, homosexuality, and queerness in the poem, and their transmedial adaptation

1. The metatextual debate in practice

We must always seek to understand how and why contemporary concepts of queerness are projected on medieval works ; as I have previously suggested, one thought-provoking aspect of queer theory is that since it can reassess the very concept of a ”linear” conceptualization of history, it somehow echoes how time was depicted or understood in the Middle Ages as a circular movement or a superimposition of temporalities (this is notably exemplified in the rich architectural programmes of many cathedrals, often situating the birth of Christ on the right of his Crucifixion). This puts into question the very concept of ”anachronism”, which is often met with reprobation or ridicule. It is my belief that when it comes to anachronisms in medievalist productions or academic discourse, there is no practical use in actively erasing or discouraging them, as they become part of the life of the medieval work itself through discourse. I would thus rather encourage both specialists and students to create said discourse, to enrich it, and systematically engage with anachronistic contents or terminologies with the following questions:

1) Who is interpreting and/or using this terminology?
2) Is there any legitimacy in this interpretation, and how can we assess said legitimacy? What is the goal of the interpreter?
3) Is the interpretation in question a testimony or an evidence of a specific cultural phenomenon?

2. The academic discussion

A number of critics have noted, denounced or developed “anachronist queering” of, mainly, the exchange of kisses between Gawain and Bertilak. I have touched upon some of the issues of queering *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but one article which articulates one of the core issues of understanding queerness in the poem stands out to me, with this specific, incisive quote: “What can we make of those kisses, given to Bertilak by Gawain acting like a woman? Gawain acts like a woman. **The structure of identity-gender identity, sexual identity, Christian chivalric identity (which partakes of both gender and sex)**-is threatened in these narrative moments” (Dinshaw, “A Kiss Is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, 1994).

In this article, Carolyn Dinshaw uses contemporary descriptions of the kisses as “homosexual behaviour” to then explain how these very kisses are in fact used to reassert normative heterosexuality, through the analysis of the cultural context and the arguing that the Gawain poet offers no other alternative for Gawain: if the character is to be “whole”, he has to become and assume the “knight gender status” (what I believe is encompassed in the bolded part of the quotation above). This is somehow echoed in *The Green Knight*, in the emphasis on Gawain being unable to fit the heterosexual role of the man with Essel/Lady Bertilak, and holding constant doubts about his identity.

This article represents a practical example of academically engaging with the imposition of contemporary concepts of queerness on a medieval setting, through the careful deconstruction of the definition of concepts taken for granted – such as “gender”, or “homosexual behaviour”. The queer theorist academic interpreter has to be conscious of both the “risks” of the *uninformed* anachronistic imposition of concepts on their source materials, and of the

interpretative possibilities fostered by *informed* anachronistic imposition of concepts. This fine interpretative line allows us to identify what would be quintessentially "queer medieval" (that is to say, what would have been considered as non-normative in the 14th century) and overall, to retrieve more meaning; something that is exemplified in the rest of Dinshaw's article, as she then expands on the consideration of homosexual behaviour in other works of the Gawain-poet.

3. Amateur engagement, and how it can inform our interpretive biases

The terms "uninformed anachronistic imposition" are most important to understand. If *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is still a significant work for queer people nowadays, it is mainly because two men kiss, and the descriptions of said men's bodies, clothing and armours create a feeling of homoeroticism - we can for instance quote the almost sensuous movement of the Green Knight baring his neck to Gawain on lines 417-420: "The grene knyght upon grounde graythely hym dresses: / A littel lut with the hede, the lere he discoveres; / His longe lovelych lokkes he layd over his croun, / Let the naked nec to the note schewe". This is why we have to consider the reception of *The Green Knight* in regard to its treatment of queerness as we understand it contemporarily, while also considering how the "queer medieval" was rendered (or not), to actually *inform* that imposition of concepts of queerness.
Surprisingly maybe, the treatment of queerness we see in the movie actually parallels Dinshaw's thesis of homosexuality being presented as an impossibility in the poem, as homosexuality and non-normative practices such as masturbation, non-married sex, prostitution, are shown as worrying, and sometimes as attacks on movie-Gawain. The three kisses shared by Gawain and Lord Bertilak are reduced to one, uneasy, almost predatory kiss in the forest.

So it is no surprise that while a variety of points of view on the movie's representation of queerness *does* exist, the overwhelmingly majority of reviews of the movie by queer amateur reviewers is negative. There is a definite phenomenon of rewriting medieval and antique tales as queer (or with "explicit", read "contemporary explicit", queerness), which develops along the creation and success of more accessible queer media for all but also sometimes specifically younger audiences.

In this context, it is no wonder that Lowery's adaptation choices were heavily criticized, as they tend to go against the current general tendency outlined above. I encourage students and scholars alike to understand and address these tensions, in order to deconstruct our contemporary interpretative reflexes and to focus, as I've tried to suggest, on the broader and more fertile queering interpretative strategy, which augments the overall meaning instead of underlining "lacking" or "inappropriate" elements in the movie adaptation. One amateur piece in particular actually defends the queerness that is portrayed in *The Green Knight* in a way to closely align with what I have identified as the medieval queer characteristics of Gawain (mainly, his inability, or reluctance, to realize his "knight gender status"). In "'The Green Knight' is the Existential Queer Folk Horror We Need", Jude Ellison Doyle explains in their own, very un-academic words, how the story of an individual clinging to the state of being on the cusp of adulthood, and who actually dies when he finally becomes what he was set to be by society (a knight, a king, a husband, a father) during the final "prolepsis", resonated with their own experiences as a queer and trans person. Somehow, by developing this "unpopular" interpretation of the movie, this amateur interpreter might have stumbled closer to what is quintessentially medievally queer in the character and story of Gawain than many other commentators.

Conclusion

In briefly attempting to queer *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in this article, I wished to follow the same direction that queer medieval studies seem to follow; that is to say, go further than analysing homosexual or homoerotic relationships or contexts in culture and literature.

Queer theory allows us to tackle the strangeness of the poem and its movie adaptation fully, without compromise. Queering the materials means considering the exceptions, the little bumps to normativity, but maybe most of all it means considering the whole process of movement and absence of movement, of fluidity and circularity created by the interaction of inversion and ambiguity, as keys to the meta-effect of the works. Said meta-effect is evident in the constant dialogue between the works and their interpreters, between the works themselves, and between the receptions and perceptions of both works, which is, by definition, a queering dialogue; and so we've come full circle again and can be assured of the ever-lasting vibrancy of academic and amateur discourse about the story of Gawain.

So as a final note, I would like to suggest that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and as a corollary its movie adaptation *The Green Knight*, more than asking questions, may very well be a question in itself; and as I tried to demonstrate, answering that question with anything else than more questions and an active appreciation of the unresolvable might be defeating the whole purpose, value and artistic strength of the works.