Modern adaptations of ancient worldbuilding: Armitage and Lowery’s *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* universes

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The *Sir Gawain* multiverse

A given adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter *Sir Gawain*) may be understood to describe a unique universe — an alternate version of the original text. In this paper we examine the worldbuilding of some of these adaptations, in particular, the 2007 Simon Armitage translation and the 2021 David Lowery film. We suggest that these parallel universes[1] can be compared to one another and endeavour to show that doing so provides insight into each adaptation. We will first illustrate the concept of parallel texts and parallel universes.

Firstly, in textual criticism, we might refer to two given versions of a text, X and Y, as being derived from a source text, Q[2]. These texts are understood to be related to each other genetically, which is to say the information contained in Q is reproduced to some degree in its descendants X and Y — to some degree modified, adapted or recombined. One goal of textual criticism is to recreate the source material to analyse how the text was transmitted over time and in response to various pressures, and in order to understand what its original content and context may have been.

Our parallel worlds or universes deal with the content. Many comic book canons make reference to diegetic alternate universes[3]; the characters

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[1]Even when they might be more appropriately called perpendicular universes.

[2]Borrowing from Biblical textual criticism, we use Q for a hypothetical original text from which later versions are partially or wholly derived; Q is short for German word, 'Quelle' meaning *source* or *origin*.

[3]First seen in DC's *Wonderwoman* #59 (May 1953), in which Wonderwoman's Earth-59 counterpart, Terra Terruna, enlists her help to save her mirror world. Earlier still, Fawcett Comic's *Captain Marvel Adventures* #80 (Jan 1948) features a portal to a world in which surrealist art is reality and the real world is absurd. In both cases, the

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of these alternate universes have their own canon which may conflict with the *original*4; in some cases this is a mirror universe in which characters are somehow reflections, inverses or opposites of their main-canon counterparts (as in the case of *Wonderwoman* #59); in others, archetypes from the main-canon are re-imagined, re-branded or re-arranged (as in the case of the various *Spider-Man* films). This is mirrored in medieval texts in which the same cast of characters (e.g., Arthur, Gawain, Lancelot, Morgan) appear over and over, each time with slightly different backstories, abilities and outcomes[5]

A third illustration is perhaps the most illustrative: In the performing arts, a theatrical play or musical composition is understood to have at least two distinct and incommensurable forms: the manuscript (or sheet music) and the performance. In the former, an author describes a sort of sketch or blueprint for a work of art; in the latter, directors, performers and audience combine to produce a work of art which is undeniably related to the former without being its identity. It is then evident that

source (*aka* Q) ≠ instance (*such as* X *or* Y),

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alternate version is recognised diegetically as a real and valid place.

[4]Sometimes labelled as the *prime*, as in Earth-Prime or Superboy-Prime, this is the archetype version on which all other versions are based.

[5]This raises the question of whether it is more reasonable to refer to each character as an archetype — an instance of which appears in each text — or instead as a plurality of parallel versions, each unique to their text. Clearly both are applicable; in this paper we will argue that the parallel universes approach is a more revealing interpretation in the case of characters whose names are found frequently in other texts. Still, the instantiation-of-an-archetype approach is useful in how it informs an audience's expected perception of certain characters (especially Bertilak and Lady de Hautdesert), the rules that they will follow, and therefore the world around them.

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as can be seen in the example of a source manuscript or partition and the instance of a performance. We would like to suggest that the worldbuilding of *any* instance — that is, the universe described and implied by the utterance or text in question — can be recognised independently of any other instance[6]. For illustrative purposes, we may call the universe described by worldbuilding **W** and its instances $\mathbf{W}_Q$, $\mathbf{W}_X$ and $\mathbf{W}_Y$. Then, since

$$\mathbf{W}_{\text{manuscript}} \neq \mathbf{W}_{\text{performance}}$$

$$\therefore \mathbf{W}_Q \neq \mathbf{W}_X \text{ and } \mathbf{W}_Q \neq \mathbf{W}_Y\ ;$$

it follows then that $\mathbf{W}_x \neq \mathbf{W}_Y$. This is perhaps a(n informally) tautological statement; any two instances will differ for a variety of reasons since adaptation of any type is a mediated process, in which some number of factors interrupt the perfect transmission of information. Given that each of these manuscripts differs from the others, and that each can be understood to describe an internally coherent universe, we find that there are multiple parallel *Sir Gawain* universes. These multiple *Sir Gawain* universes then necessarily give us multiple Gawains — the Gawain of $\mathbf{W}_X$, the Gawain of $\mathbf{W}_Y$, and so on — and by the same logic multiple Arthurs, Ladies de Hautdesert and Green Knights[7]. Attempting to identify the ur-Gawain — the

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[6]This is quite similar to the concept of a *universe of discourse* introduced by George Boole in *An Investigation of the Laws of Thought* (2017) and refined by his students thereafter. The concept of universe or universe of discourse, often written **U**, has subsequently been used in set theory and predicate logic to refer to the contextual class of everything-we-are-talking-about such that 'whatever may be the extent of the field within which all the objects of our discourse are found, that field may properly be termed the universe of discourse' (30).

[7]Michael Reid (2024) describes this multiplicity in the representation of the Green Knight in visual media. We see Bertilak de Hautdesert as an incarnation of the Green Knight archetype which exists in the continuum of story-world universes as a common theme

archetypical form from which all others are derived, more or less faithfully — is a process which is far beyond the reach of this paper[8]. Rather we will focus on comparing the versions of the text which we have; each version, an adaptation — each adaptation, an opportunity for innovation.

We refer to the diegesis of each adaptation as a **universe** (typeset in bold) so that the **Cotton Nero A.x (**the universe of the Middle English text) may be taken as distinct from **Armitage** (the universe of the Armitage text), **Lowery**, etc[9,10]. Some of these universes may necessarily be more similar to one another than others. For practical reasons, we assume that the Middle English text given in MS Cotton Nero A.x is our genetic source text and than all other editions of the Middle English text are descended in some way from it (cf. Tolkien and Gordon 1967; Armitage 2007; Simonin 1300 and so on) such that the universes of these editions will correspond quite closely to the source universe and we will refer to them together as "the Middle English text"; the world they describe as typewritten as **Cotton Nero A.x** except where otherwise noted[11].

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and trope of the period.

[8]Putter and Stokes suggest that the *Gawain* Poet was from Cheshire or somewhere nearby, may have had a past in the minor clergy and that he was likely quite poor (*The Works of the Gawain Poet*).

[9]Rather than the more technical shorthand used above ($\mathbf{W}_n$ and so on) we write the names of each universe in full, typeset in bold so that **Armitage** and **Lowery** refer to the universe of their respective texts.

[10]This is analogous to the **Peter Jackson**-Middle-Earth universe (2001–2003) being distinct from the **Ralph Bakshi**-Middle-Earth universe (1978). We are building on the work of Wolf 2014 and Tolkien 2008 here, while introducing some terminology of our own.

[11]While we consider these texts equivalent for the needs of this paper, they certainly are not identical either; we could talk about the **Cotton Nero A.x**-universe, the **Armitage-**

Cotton Nero A.x vs. Simon Armitage

Simon Armitage's alliterative rendition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2007) is subtitled *A New Verse Translation*, the implication being that the rendered text will be equivalent to the original (to some degree). A reader will expect to have got *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with its plot and characters, its many themes and questions; the reader expects to have experienced the universe of *Sir Gawain*. We might therefore expect that the universe described by such a "translation" will also correspond to a high degree with that of the source text. It is precisely those moments where this correspondence lessens which are of particular interest to us in this paper. Differences in wording — such as omitting, including, or inventing details — modify the world of the translation. We will focus on a few non-exhaustive examples from Armitage's world; as we shall see, the universe it describes, **Armitage**, would not be impossible for a **Cotton Nero A.x** Arthur, Lancelot or Gawain to navigate, given a period of adjustment and culture shock.

The Kings of Britain

Worldbuilding is in part the process of suggesting a fuller story world

Middle English-universe and the **Simonin-Middle English**-universe. Details which we might consider as modifying the worldbuilding of these texts include instances in which emendations or corrections to the text by its editors have worldbuilding implications: implications as to the physical world, social networks or any other mechanics of the edited universe. In a less well-defined way, the presentation of a text — including its medium, lettering, layout, colours, visible age and any other detail which might be interpreted by a reader — has implications for how they interact with and perceive its world (e.g., the illustrations of MS Cotton Nero A.x versus the use of maps in fantasy fiction).

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beyond the specifics of the text at hand, and in particular, relying on the reader's intuition, logical thinking and creativity to fill out elements of the world which the author cannot or does not directly describe. As readers, we naturally read into each sentence we read, attaching significance to events, items, people and dialogue, in order to construct our imagined version of the universe of the text.

In the poem's stage-setting introduction, the Middle English text tells the listener that:

(Brunetti 2009, ll. 25–6)

[…] of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges,
Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle.

The listener understands that Arthur is one of the the kings of Bretaygne, that he ‘bult’ / *dwelt*[12] in that land, and that he was the ‘hendest’ / *most courteous/courtly*. While a modern reader might have an anachronistic image of courtesy (being polite) and only a vague sense of what courtliness entails — ‘un certain nombre de règles liées à la cour’ / *a certain number of rules related to the court* (Simonin 2015, 126) — the Middle English text's original audience would be very familiar with these rules, ‘qui dépasse[nt] la simple politesse’ / *which go beyond simple politeness*. This focus on ‘hendelayk’ / *courtliness* (Brunetti 2009 text and gloss) is central to the text; consequently, it is curious that the concept does not make its first appearance in the Armitage adaptation of these lines:

(Armitage 2007, 25–26)

[12] Glosses are ours except where otherwise noted.

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[The] most regal of rulers in the royal line

was Arthur, who I heard is honored above all[.]

In a story whose character's social value is greatly dependent on *courtesy/courtliness*, it is rather strange to suggest that in the **Armitage**-universe the singular trait which sets Arthur above all kings is his *regalness* (a near perfect synonym for the redundant term, *kingliness*). This is all the more stark a change when we recognise that Gawain, as he begins to wrench the spotlight from his uncle, will spend the rest of this tale playing out the consequences of his own legendary *courtesy* — the trait central to the story — whereas *kingliness* is very much ancillary to the tale.

The universe of the Middle English text tells us in far more neutral terms that 'of Bretaygne kynges, / Ay watz Arthur þe hendest' / *of the kings of Britain, / Indeed Arthur was the most courteous* (ll. 25–6). **Armitage**'s narrator has also heard of Arthur, though rather than being known for his own active role in courtliness the **Armitage** Arthur passively receives more honour than any others[13]. By what right, for what qualites, and in what ways he is honoured we are simply not to know. The Middle English narrator has heard that Arthur is the most courteous of any king found in Britain. The difference between being known for a specific trait and being known for

[13]Grammatically we can also have the problem of the domain of discourse (often written **D**) which is the set of objects from which we select the objects in an utterance (read: what the conversation is about or the context the conversation is set in). This context determines how we understand an utterance. To borrow an example from Klein (1980), *tall* has a different meaning in *Mike is tall* where the **D** is all humans versus when **D** is a group of basketball players. In line 26, it is highly unclear what the **D** is: [*Arthur*] *is honored above all* [*what?*], kings? people? men? nobles? sentient beings? animate entities?

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being the object of — a nebulous and unspecified — honour has implications for the way in which we imagine and fill out the universe of each text.

Additionally, there seems to be a suggestion that the ‘royal line’ of line 25 is an unbroken lineage here, rather than of a series of uncertain successions whether of filial, familial or far more fraught connections. In this way, **Armitage** has a royalist feeling to it, as though Arthur is the most recent of a long straight line. By talking about ‘the royal line’ rather than ‘Bretaygne kynges’ |/ *Britain's kings*, we assume that there *is* a single royal line, which is in some way relevant enough to readers that no other qualification is necessary; it is given as an unquestioned fact. Simon Armitage’s text is interested in more than just the kings of Britain (i.e. a series of leaders), but in providing its world with a dynastic monarchy.

The Christmas court of Camelot

We do not have to look far to find another example of the **Armitage** text's florid poetry finding itself at odds with the Middle English text.[14] In lines 37–40, the king and his entourage are at Camelot for Christmas:

(Brunetti 2009, ll. 37–40)
Þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse
With mony luflych lorde, ledez of þe best,
Rekenly of þe Rounde Table alle þo rich breþer,
With rych reuel oryȝt and rechles merþes.

The king and his many friendly leaders are well-known members of the

[14]Putter (2023) remarks on many more instances, particularly in regards to how **Armitage** fails to render the social particularities of the *Gawain* poet's universe.

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Round Table, their wealth matched by their merriment and revelry. Armitage translates these 'mony luflych lorde, ledez of the best' (l. 38, above) as 'the great and the good of the land' (l. 38, below):

> (Armitage 2007, ll. 37–40)
>
> It was Christmas at Camelot — King Arthur's court,
> where the great and the good of the land had gathered,
> all the righteous lords of the ranks of the Round Table
> quite properly carousing and reveling in pleasure.

While a social system which makes use of empirical recognition of a person's goodness is its own can of worms, the idea given here is that we can equate the lords invited to Camelot with a set of people including most or all of the 'good' people of the land[15]. The *Gawain* poet tells us clearly that these are 'luflych lorde' / *lovely/friendly lords* (Brunetti 2009, l. 38) , and that they are 'ledez of the best' / *the best of leaders*, but only a between-the-lines approach can make the leap to the fawning forms *righteous* or *good* — moreover that they are the very definition of 'the great and the good of the land' (Armitage 2007, l. 38). The worldbuilding described here is, on one hand, simplistically reminiscent of Santa Claus's naughty-or-nice list, and, on the other hand, correlates power with goodness. With Camelot a bastion of goodness, we are

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[15]This can be stated $G = \{ x \mid x \text{ is great} \} \cup \{ x \mid x \text{ is good} \}$; Armitage then suggests that either G is identical to the set of lords $L = \{ y \mid y \text{ is a righteous lord of the Round Table} \}$ or sets G and L are both separately invited to Camelot for this splendid feast. While inviting both is commendable, the implication that the second statement of G (*x* is good) is discoverable is both dubious and inaccurate — it would be a full-time job to simply keep track of which people have been nice in order to send them their invitation (along with a lump of coal for the fire) and which have been naughty so that they might be stricken from the invitation list.

prone to apprehend anything exterior to its domain as occuring in relation, even in opposition, to that goodness.

Looking at the Simonin (2024) translation of the Middle English text to French, we can see better how **Armitage** stands out. Simonin juggles the desire to stick to a close reading text and the desire to render the text fluently and fluidly for modern readers. In the same lines, we see both the number and the kind of people described as being at Camelot are quite different.

(Simonin 2024, ll. 37–43)[16]
Le roi résidait à Camelot pour la Noël, en compagnie
De maints gracieux seigneurs, parmi les meilleurs,
Tous de dignes et nobles frères de la Table Ronde,
Au milieu d'un grand faste et d'une joie insouciante.

We see here that many lordly chiefs and knights, each a member of the Round Table, were with Arthur that Christmas at Camelot. In the Armitage version, the lords are but a part of those who may be understood to have gathered at the Round Table. Unless we are to understand, by apposition, that 'the great and the good of the land' (l. 38) has the same referent as 'all the righteous lords … of the Round Table' (l. 39).

First we feast

Regardless of its composition, the company eventually wants to eat, and so they make their way to the feast hall. The auditory experience here is

[16]The king resided at Camelot for Christmas, in [the] company / of many gracious lords, among the best, / all worthy and noble brothers of the Round Table / amid a grand pomp and an unburdened joy. (ll. 37-40, our gloss)

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highlighted in **Armitage**:

> (ll. 62–3)
>
> And as king and company were coming into the hall
>
> the choir in the chapel fell suddenly quiet,

Armitage's text is particularly clear about a choir (singing mass in the chapel), which falls silent as the great company comes into the hall. The experience of the Middle English text is equally auditory, but does not describe a *choir* directly:

> (Brunetti 2009, ll. 62–3)
>
> Fro þe kyng watz cummen with knyȝtes into þe halle, Þe chauntré of þe chapel cheued to an ende,

Some of these words may be less familiar to modern readers of the text, and so in order to better highlight the starkness of the contrast between the two universes some definitions will be useful. The clause 'Fro þe kyng watz cummen … into þe halle' (l. 62) is an adverbial phrase with a conjunction, 'fro' / *after*, at its head; it functions as an adverb of time, describing when the action in the main clause takes place relative to other events in time. As for the alliterative nouns in line 63, we recognise 'chauntré' as the chanting or singing of mass[17], and 'cheued' as meaning *to happen*, *to come about* or *to come to an end*[18], so the Middle English text quite simply gives us, *After the king came into the hall with his knights / The chanting in the chapel came*

[17]Given as **chaunterīe** in *The Middle English Compendium* (McSparren et al 2000–2018, 1952–2001).

[18]Given as **chẹ̄ven** in *The Middle English Compendium* (McSparren et al 2000–2018, 1952–2001).

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to an end. This is quite different thematically from the scene in **Armitage** in which the music ends abruptly, as though the king's presence triggered its sudden interruption. The chanting of **Cotton Nero A.x** comes to an end at some point after the king and his knights have made their way into the hall; the music here accompanies the king's entrance, rather than being silenced by it.

The shift in focus also describes a world which is different practically. The world of **Cotton Nero A.x** has singers (or chanters), that much is clear, but they are not necessarily organised in the form of a choir. Castle halls, both in Camelot and Hautdesert, are described clearly as being quite near to their respective chapels (cf, ll. 928–942, 1870–85) and one might just as easily suspect the noble churchgoers of participating in the chanting of a learned prayer, as an organised choir ceasing their chant once the audience has left. Importantly, however, such a choir is not ruled out by the Middle English text.

Armitage's text is once again more explicit in the following lines:

> (Armitage 2007, ll. 64–5)
>
> then a chorus erupted from the courtiers and clerks: "Noel,"
> they cheered, then "Noel, Noel,"

whereas the Middle English is once again more ambiguous:

> (Brunetti 2009, ll. 64–5)
>
> Loude crye watz þer kest of clerkez and oþer, Nowel nayted
> onewe, neuened ful ofte;

This ambiguousness might certainly have been less evident to a listener of

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the time, whose lived experience might have filled in the blanks, allowing them to imagine the scene and its unmentioned people (e.g., the courtiers) without needing their mention. **Armitage** does not necessarily have the same luxury, as its intended audience likely has not been to a medieval court. In this sense we find the more active and explicit **Armitage**-universe to be somewhat more didactic, guiding its reader into a medieval world, which a modern reader might otherwise miss out on.

As for the feast itself, the **Armitage**-universe is much closer to its source:

(Armitage 2007, ll. 116–129)

The first course comes in to the fanfare and clamor
of blasting trumpets hung with trembling banners,
then pounding double-drums and dinning pippes,
weird sounds and wails of such warbled wildness
that to hear and feel them made the heart float free.
Flavorsome delicacies of flesh were fetched in
and the freshest of foods, so many in fact
there was scarcely space to present the stews
or to set the soups in the silver bowls on
the cloth.
Each guest received his share
of bread or meat or broth;
a dozen plates per pair—
plus beer or wine, or both!

The music (and musicians) are as present as the smell of the food (and the sight of serving staff bringing it out). Here, the worldbuilding is only meaningfully modified by the 'weird sounds and wails', which suggests that

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the diners would have found these sounds unsettling or disconcerting, which is most certainly not the case. These sounds might sound weird to a modern ear, but in fairness anything from the counterpoint of Baroque chamber music to the vocal performances of Queen or Postmodern Jukebox might sound like weird wailing to a medieval ear.

Arming a knight of the Round Table

(Brunetti 2009, ll. 567–71)

He dowellez þer al þat day, and dressez on þe morn,
Askez erly hys armez, and alle were þay broȝt.
Fyrst a tulé tapit tyȝt ouer þe flet,
And miche watz þe gyld gere þat glent þeralofte;
Þe stif mon steppez þeron, and þe stel hondelez,

We have previously suggested that Gawain's armouring up scene implies the presence of significantly more people than are identified in the text by name or pronoun (Stockler 2023). The passive forms — e.g., ‘ þay ’ / *[his arms]* ; ‘Fyrst a tulé tapit ouer þe flet’ / *First a crimson carpet [over the floor* — of the Middle English text leave unsaid the agents of these actions, implying the presence of some persons capable of dressing him in his fine armour; they first lay out a carpet and setting his gear on it.

(Armitage 2007, ll. 567–71)

He remained all that day and in the morning he dressed,
asked early for his arms and all were produced.
First a rug of rare cloth was unrolled on the floor,
heaped with gear which glimmered and gleamed,
and onto it he stepped to receive his armored suit.

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In **Armitage** the same persons are present, however the usage of the non-finite verb form ('to receive his armored suit') places Gawain squarely in a passive role, unlike the active, tensed verbs of the Middle English text, 'Þe stif mon steppez þeron, and þe stel hondelez' / *The powerful man steps upon [the carpet], and takes up the steel* (l. 571). This places Gawain both as focaliser and as agent, whereas the **Armitage** Gawain waits on others to dress him. This characterises **Cotton Nero A.x** Gawain as having a sense of familiar care for his armour, as though a personal bond existed with his protective layers; **Armitage** Gawain seems to take on the armour as a sign of his rank or class, being more than happy to be served on hand and foot. He receives his armored suit much like any nobleman might receive a fine fitted outfit, with decorum and a sense of pride.

Cotton Nero A.x **vs. David Lowery**

David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021a) purports to be 'a filmed adaptation of the chivalric romance' which it calls *Sir Gawain and… …the Green Knight*[19]. Though many medieval elements are present — some fantastical[20], some anachronistic[21] — the worldbuilding of **Lowery** is

[19]The film is divided into several chapters, most introduced as a continuation of the title … *The Christmas Game* (10:11), *…A Too Quick Year* (25:24), *The Journey Out* (36:06), *…A Kindness* (Lowery 2021a, 41:56), *…A Meeting with St. Winifred* (54:51), *…An Interlude* (1:04:11), *…An Exchange of Winnings* (1:16:22), *…A Beheading at the Green Chapel* (Lowery 2021a, 1:37:10), *The Voyage Home* (1:48:51), and finally *…The Green Knight* (Lowery 2021a, 2:04:17).

[20]While we don't see any woodwoses (unless Lowery has somehow identified them with highway thieves), giants and talking animals are both present in the film. Giants are mentioned in **Cotton Nero A.x** (called 'etaynez' in l. 723), and talking animals are a common theme in medieval tales.

[21]The lighting system of Camelot's court is one which somehow casts sunlight directly down towards the round table, while the table itself is clearly intended to be at latitudes

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significant both in its many departures from that of **Cotton Nero A.x** and in some surprising similarities to its source material. In the following sections we will take glimpse at several scenes from *The Green Knight*, paying attention to how the details of the elements found in each of them have implications for the **Lowery**-universe.

Saxons

On Christmas day, Arthur[22] gives a speech in which he talks about the land around his castle having been shaped by the hands of the knights of the Round Table.

> (Lowery 2021a, 00:13:24–13:54)
>
> You have laid those same hands on the upon our Saxon brethren
> who now in your shadow bow their heads like babes

This reference significantly expands the scope of **Lowery** in terms of its reliance on the whole corpus of Arthurian legend, compared to the universe of the Middle English text — which does not mention the Saxons directly at all[23] and which itself (or an earlier source text) may have

higher than the Tropic of Cancer (currently around 23.43° latitude, whereas Great Britain sits comfortably above 48° latitude); similarly the architecture and interior design of castle Hautdesert is exemplary of a period several hundred years *after* the sub-creation of **Cotton Nero A.x** (Thompson 2014; for more on sub-creation, see Wolf 2014).

[22]Identified as Arthur, Sean Harris's character is called King in the credits; this is typical of the film, which relies on a significant amount of paratextual and metatextual information to construct its meaning. This reliance on extra-diegetic information makes it particularly difficult to describe the **Lowery**-universe as a coherent and — especially — cohesive, whole, however we shall see in our conclusion that there is a reason for this.

[23]Though it mentions the British, French, Danish, and Tharsia (a kingdom even further east) (Brunetti 2009, ll. 13, 14, 77, 1116, 2223; McSparren et al see the *Tars(e*

participated in inspiring much of that subsequent Arthurian *legendarium*. **Lowery** is in this way anachronistic, not because it mentions events that would have been contemporary to the text, but because of how it borrows liberally from other sources.

Enter Green Knight

The scene in which our story's infamous antagonist appears at Camelot's court features a number of notable worldbuilding implications. From the very moment of his appearance we find worldbuilding implications (Lowery 2021a, 00:15:04–15:11)

Figure 1: These soldiers are likely part of a matte painting which Lowery indicates makes up most of the background in this shot (Lowery 2021b), not reacting to the Green Knight's presence because they are simply still pictures meant to fill in background space.

Clearly what we might have taken for four soldiers, standing with pikes near the door, are no such trained or prepared persons: they take no actions and make no movement when the door blows open. They are, for all intents and purposes, decorative. The worldbuilding implications are significant, particularly for the person and character of the royal household.

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An invitation to play

The film's most apparent antagonist, the Green Knight, invites the court of the King to accept a challenge which he does in a most unusual manner, undermining courtly courtesy in several ways. Firstly, the challenge is initially addressed to Arthur, then shifts to address whomsoever accepts the challenge — and then back. This referential incoherence suggests that the challenger is uncertain as to whom they are addressing, undermining their credibility in laying down the challenge and better fits an oral utterance (where the changing referent can be indicated with body language or eye contact) than a written one. Secondly, the challenge is pronounced in a manner far removed from that of the **Cotton Nero A.x**. In the **Lowery**-universe, the Knight hails his challengee as the 'Greatest of Kings' (whether this is flattery or recognition is unclear). In **Cotton Nero A.x** the Green Knight first asks who the 'governour of this gyng' / *leader of this band* even is; he claims to be uncertain which of the merry company is its leader. **Armitage** and the Middle English text are in agreement here:

(Armitage 2007, 224–31 manuscript)

The fyrst word that he warp: "Wher is", he sayd,
"The governour of this gyng? Gladly I wolde
Se that segg in syght, and with hymself speke
raysoun."
To knyghtes he kest his yye,
And reled hym up and doun,
He stemmed and con studie
Quo walt ther most renoun.

(Armitage 2007, 224–31 translation)

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“And who,” he bellows, without breaking breath,
“is governor of this gaggle? I’ll be glad to know.
It’s with him and him alone that I'll have
my say.”
The green man steered his gaze
deep into every eye,
explored each person’s face
to probe for a reply.

While this might seem a trivial difference, there is a significant worldbuilding — i.e., cultural and practical — implication here. In **Cotton Nero A.x** Arthur is clearly not sitting in the throne, and — if we take the Green Knight's stated ignorance to mean that he would not recognise the king — the king is apparently dressed in a way that does not clearly single him out as the king. Modern readers might find it strange that one would not recognise such a famous person as the ‘King of Faërie’ (Tolkien 2008, para. 37), yet there is no particular reason anyone from so far away as the north would know what Arthur looks like. High-fidelity, near-instantaneous imagery (such as the ambrotype-esque portrait featured in Lowery's film) would not be introduced for at least three centuries (Académie des sciences 1839), and the king's visage would not necessarily be clearly identifiable even on coinage as the reducing machine wouldn't be used for that purpose for another two centuries (Hockenhull 2024)[24].

On the other hand, it is also entirely reasonable that the Green Knight had indeed recognised (whether by crown, costume or charisma) the the infamous once-and-future king[25], in which case his feigned ignorance comes

[24]For more on coinage and the reducing machine, see Pollard 1971.
[25]See T.H. White's collection of stories about Arthur (1965).

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off as knightly bravado or as a (potentially) good-humoured putdown. Since the film does not identify the Green Knight with the lord de Hautdesert[26] and seems to suggest that his presence is an almost entirely supernatural occurrence, we *could* argue both ways: 1) that Morgan conjured, invoked or invited the Green Knight and provided him with the necessary knowledge to accomplish his purpose; or 2) that Morgan conjured, invoked or invited a sentient being who has no reason to recognise the king, and by sending a letter alongside him avoids any embarrassment that might otherwise come from getting it wrong. In both cases, however, that would require unnecessarily positing mechanics which are not explicitly described by the film[27]; in fact, in this case the film goes out of the way to avoid drawing any direct causal connexions beyond Morgan's spell-casting and the Green Knight's appearance, and makes some very confusing visual choices which hint at rather complex and complicated magics (at least four versions of the Green Knight's invitation letter are visible on screen).

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[26]The Green Knight and the Lord de Hautdesert are played by Ralph Ineson and Joel Edgerton, respectively. The film makes no attempt to reconcile this departure from the text; the credits roll before the Green Knight would have a chance to reveal his identity.

[27]Particularly as the **Cotton Nero A.x** Green Knight is identified as Bertilak de Hautdesert, and therefore his rumoured violent nature is reasonably observed to be a ruse which Gawain's guide seems to be in on (ll. 1971–4, 2061–155). We can reasonably assume that Bertilak would have left for the Green Chapel at some point whether he left even earlier than Gawain or after (relying on his servant to provide Gawain with a more circuitous route than Bertilak's own), without positing any unnecessary mechanics.

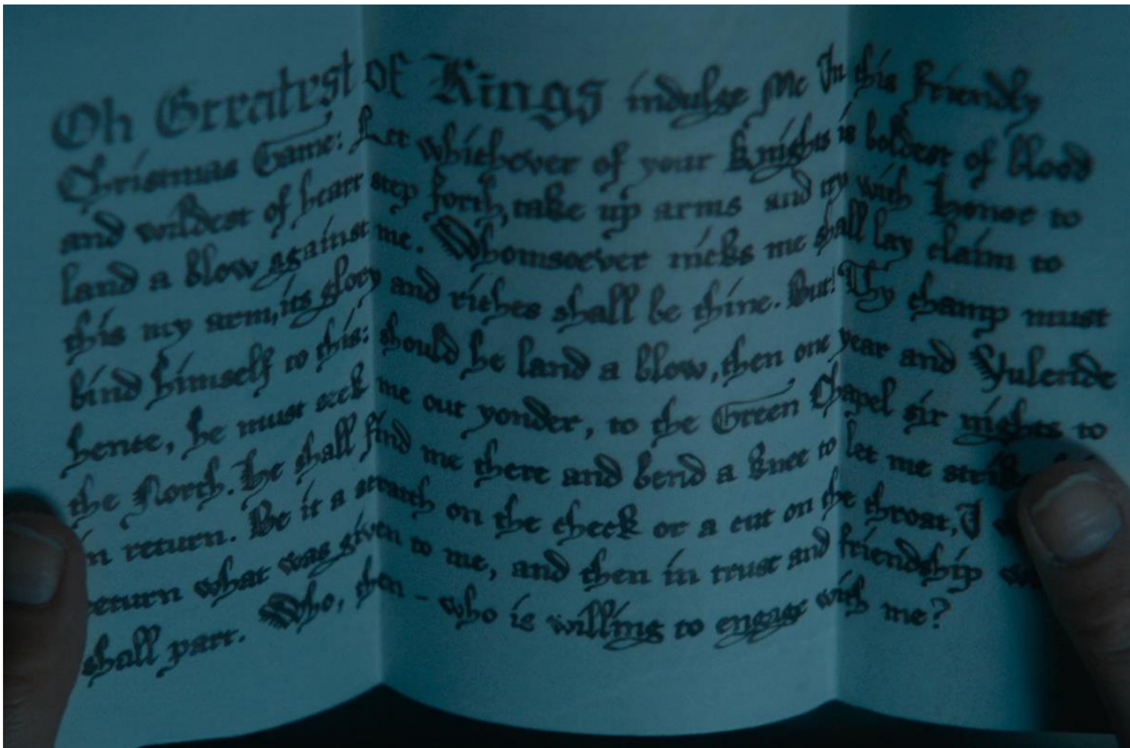
Oh Greatest of Kings indulge me in this friendly
Christmas Game: Let whichever of your knights is boldest of blood
and wildest of heart step forth, take up arms and try with honor to
land a blow against me. Whomsoever nicks me shall lay claim to
this my arm, its glory and riches shall be thine. But! Thy champ must
bind himself to this: should he land a blow, then one year and Yuletide
hence, he must seek me out yonder, to the Green Chapel six nights to
the North. He shall find me there and bend a knee to let me strike
n return. Be it a scratch on the cheek or a cut on the throat, I
eturn what was given to me, and then in trust and friendship
shall part. Who, then - who is willing to engage with me?

Figure 2: The invitation to play a Christmas Game, which reads: ‘Oh Greatest of Kings indulge me in this friendly / Christmas Game: Let whichever of your knights is boldest of blood / and wildest of heart step forth, take up arms and try with honor to / land a blow against me. Whomsoever nicks me shall lay claim to / this my arm, its glory and riches shall be thine. But! Thy champ must / bind himself to this: should he land a blow, then one year and Yuletide / hence, he must seek me out yonder, to the Green Chapel six nights to / the North. He shall find me there and bend a knee to let me strike <him> / <i>n return. Be it a scratch on the cheek or a cut on the throat, I w<ill> / <r>eturn what was given to me, and then in trust and friendship w<e> / shall part. Who, then, who is willing to engage with me?’ (Lowery 2021a, 00:17:12; transcription ours; text in angle brackets is inferred).

Another way in which the **Lowery** knight's behaviour seems to depart from propriety is in what might be interpreted as a spirit-possession of the queen as she reads the letter — (in a modern reading) overriding her personal bodily autonomy and (in a medieval reading) robbing her momentarily from her husband, the king. The initial overlaying of the Green Knight's voice on the queen's at 17:20 simply suggests a third person the queen is speaking for; but a magical or spiritual channeling is signalled at 17:47 when Guinevere's

clouded over eyes leave the page even as she continues to intone the invitation. As she continues reading, the backlit central framing with a low angle (and a low-angle fill light on her face) continues the suggestion of otherworldly activity. At 18:24, as she reaches the end of the message, the channeling ceases and the queen is visibly weakened by the effort. This possession is rather awkward in terms of courtesy; it might be argued that Guinevere chose to read the message of her own accord, and that the king would have been possessed otherwise. However, the letter is clearly worded in such a way that it might only be read aloud *to* the king, not *by* the king. In either case, given that the queen faints after reading the letter in an inhuman voice, an argument exists that the Green Knight had barged into a Christmas dinner under the holly bough of peace and then caused harm to the queen, which is then both insult and injury.

More saliently, the **Lowery** Green Knight lies to Arthur. The king's first reaction, blood boiling from the sight of his queen incapacitated, is to ask if 'this challenge is thine own?' The knight's reply is a very clear nod (with closed eyes for emphasis that he is being honest). Guinevere has her wits about her again, but the tears on her face suggest that she is not unmoved by the situation (possibly her own possession and incapacitation or her husband's admission of physical incapacity in a situation ideally suited to proving his own knightly honour and defending his wife's). If the knight is an apparition of Morgan's, he has no reason to care about propriety and might lie quite freely; yet if the honour to be gained in facing a knight's challenge is predicated on that of the challenger, the challenge is moot.

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The worldbuilding implications are particularly evident in the question of what it means to be a knight, the role of *truth* (given in the Putter and Stokes 2014 to mean 'good faith, integrity') and that of honour. The very concept of knightly 'werkes' / *deeds/tales of knights*, which Putter and Stokes highlight as central to the romance genre[28], is questioned and deconstructed, even further eroding any similarity in the social and cultural constructs common to the two universes.

Figure 3: Lowery 2021a, 38:19–38:39

An empty wilderness

Much has been said of the wilds and the forests of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Camelot of the Middle English text is located in the south

[28]In particular, the Lady de Hautdesert makes (meta-)reference in to the romance genre as being chiefly about these knightly *werkes*: 'For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe kny3tez, / Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkez' / *For to tell of the endeavours of these true knights, / that is the (very) inscribed title and text of their works* (ll. 1514–15, cf. Putter and Stokes 2014, forward). Lowery's deconstruction of this concept in *The Green Knight* ironically distances his film from the genre.

of its own version of Britain, a version complete with its own ‘Norþe Walez’ / *North Wales*, ‘Holy Hede’ / *Holly Head* and more. We have previously suggested (2023) that the Britain of the **Cotton Nero A.x**-universe is larger than the real-life Britain of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, in particular in regards to the presence of wilderness space, yet we may also be informed by the real-life version in how we fill in the gaps as to what is beyond the edges of the frame (Tolkien 2008).

The Britain of **Lowery** is very empty[29]. The open moors and empty hills of the **Lowery**-universe ought to contrast with the timber-harvest and the battlefield scavenging that follow, but instead the worldbuilding is consistent across both. Historically, this emptiness is accurate in that homes and dwellings would not have been distributed across arable land in detached units visible throughout the countryside; instead they would have been grouped together into villages near their villas (or manors) and surrounded by open fields (Shepherd 1956, 104). However, but for a single shepherd and flock of sheep, **Lowery** fails to suggest the presence of any agriculture or farming outside of city walls. The land is unmanaged and the few (apparently) human-built structures which remain outside of Camelot are deserted or in decay[30].

[29]It is Christmastime, one might argue, so fallow fields may grow weeds or nothing at all. Stored harvests, trade and hunting would provide much of the sustenance during the winter. Of these, only hunting is depicted in the film. Yet, as we shall see in the next section, the hunt as depicted is so impractical as to have almost no meaningful implication in the worldbuilding of **Lowery**.

[30]Particularly evident examples include: the ruins and road outside Camelot (Lowery 2021a, 36:34–37:35); the structure in which Gawain meets the ghost of St. Winifred (Lowery 2021a, 54:56–51:04:10); the smoking ruins of the valley from which Gawain

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By suggesting that people live only in cities — that the wilderness is empty and wild — **Lowery** actually ends up resembling the Middle English text more than historical Britain. The 'forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde' / *deep forest, which was wonderfully wild* where hawthorn, hazel and hundreds of oaks grow in a tangled mess, with shaggy, ragged moss strewn about and bare branches full of birds described in lines ll. 741–47 would have been relatively uncommon as in 'the thirteenth century, the forests were coveted as potential arable [and consequently] assarting, the clearing of ground for agricultural use, steadily ate away at the area of woodland' (Birrell 1980)[31]. While clearing out forest to make space for agriculture, pasture and other production, as seen in Figure 3, is historical and period appropriate, the land seen in **Lowery** does not show many signs of that agriculture, pasture or other production[32]. The timber-harvest scene is depicted as though occurring without any clear purpose. We do not see the cut wood being transported for sawing, building, or burning and it is unclear what use will be made of the cleared land.

An unpolitical battlefield

A feudal system of government is implied by the subjugation of the Saxons by the knights of the Round Table (00:13:24–13:54) and the the

first sees giants (Lowery 2021a, 1:09:43–41:10:17); and even Hautdesert castle is remarkably empty (Lowery 2021a, 1:13:42–41:34:32).

[31]The 'wyldrenesse of Wyrale' / *wilderness of Wirral* only ceased to be a managed forest in 1376, closing more than two centuries of royal protection ("Palatinate of Chester: Forest Records" 1286–1503; Stewart-Brown 1935).

[32]In particular, the ridge and furrow pattern of tilled fields well attested in medieval fields (with or without the characteristic S-shape) (Eyre 1955).

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medieval setting (i.e., the presence of knights and castles), yet no other kingdoms or polities are suggested diegetically until the sudden appearance of an unmotivated battlefield scene (00:41:19–45:35). The worldbuilding of **Lowery** suggests Gawain was in no way aware of any conflict at that scale occurring towards the north, and given the scale of the distances (six-days travel according to the invitation in Figure 2), this battle happened relatively close to Camelot for no news to have been passed on. All of this points to an extremely weak kingdom. While Arthur's Christmas speech extols the peace that his knights have brought, the suggestion is that everything outside of Camelot is dead, dying or left to do so. It is unsurprising that **Lowery** Gawain is unaware of this, being generally uninterested in events around him, yet it undermines the medieval setting that clearly organised battles occur under the king's nose while his nephew sets out in their direction with no apparent warning of any kind. The battlefield which Gawain encounters exhibits a centrally organised military both in battle-dress and from the tactics suggested on-screen. At least one combatant, killed by an adversary with many expertly fletched arrows to spare, wore chain-mail armour. While no banners are visible, the unconnected, Czech hedgehog-style *chevaux de frise* are aligned as though to direct or impede cavalry charges.

An improbable hunt

Cotton Nero A.x's Bertilak heads up three hunts, activities which require dozens of identified characters and imply dozens if not hundreds more in the background (Stockler 2023), from the managing of forests and other hunting land, to the stocking and monitoring of hunt animals and

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seasons, to the heavily codified nature of medieval hunts and the culture surrounding it. **Lowery**'s lord seems to hunt for individual pleasure, leaving on a single horse with no apparent hunting apparel (e.g., lances, bows, knives, ropes, etc.). Either he didn't have to go very far to find his intended prey, or he is interested in the sport but not any of the spoils (e.g., the meat, pelts, bones and many other useful by-products). This Bertilak lives in a house which requires a full-time staff to keep up, eating food that seems to appear from nowhere in rooms whose fireplaces and candles apparently light themselves. The Middle English text also fails to clearly identify the actors in some of these cases[33], but we can clearly see the actions they perform and the roles they carry out. **Lowery** seems to take the invisibility of these characters to mean that they simply do not exist, and as such we find Castle Hautdesert impossibly empty, well-kept and apparently inhabited by people who have time to do anything other than chores.

Conclusion

This limited peek at the worldbuilding of Simon Armitage's adaptation of *Sir Gawain* already exposes some significant implications. Some of them, such as the explicit focus on details like the singers of line 63 which are implied by the Middle English text, are significant in how they apply modern assumptions (chapel singing is done by choirs) to the medieval period; others, such as the attitude of Gawain toward being dressed (a passive reception of expected service) or the insistence that Arthur's royal status

[33]E.g., the porter who greets Gawain (ll. 808–14) and the chamberlain outside Gawain's room (ll. 2011–24).

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(being of a royal line and being highly honoured) is his defining quality, are significant in how they suggest that the world of the text is oriented in terms of a particular ideal of monarchic hierarchy. In this way the world of the Middle English text is subtly lost in translation, even as the plot is faithfully passed on.

Many of the difficulties in ascribing coherent worldbuilding to the elements provided by David Lowery's adaptation can be ascribed to the simple fact that unlike Armitage's, its universe is not intended to be internally consistent. Tolkien warned about this when he described sub-creation (i.e., worldbuilding) — name-dropping *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as one of the earliest examples of what he called “fairy-tales” in the process. The problem of this lack of internal consistency in Lowery's *The Green Knight* is that it seems to hesitate between functioning primarily as allegory, in which case the rules which determine the internal mechanics of its universe depend on factors outside that universe, and telling the story of Gawain's Christmas Game, in which a contract is made and then kept. Allegory, much like dream-stories[34], do not need to function internally as stories at all, their purpose is entirely external to their text; the reader's ability to make inferences or rely on their previous understanding of the mechanics as described within the text

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[34]See Tolkien's notes on *Alice in Wonderland* (Tolkien 2008, para. 107): ‘The very root (not only the use) of their “marvels” is satiric, a mockery of unreason; and the “dream” element is not a mere machinery of introduction and ending, but inherent in the action and transitions. […] But to many, as it was to me, *Alice* is presented as a fairy-story and while this misunderstanding lasts, the distaste for the dream-machinery is felt. There is no suggestion of dream in *The Wind in the Willows*. “The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little house.” So it begins, and that correct tone is maintained.’

is not as highly relevant to engaging with allegory.

The application of worldbuilding methodology to these texts is illustrative in analysing the ways and degrees to which two works are similar in their content and implications, and can in particular help make explicit some of the nuances which may otherwise slip through the cracks, making invisible people visible, unspoken assumptions audible and helping to flesh out these stories which have so much more to reveal.

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