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How the Axe Falls: A Retrospective on Thirty-Five Years of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Performance

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In How the Axe Falls:A Retrospective on Thirty-five Years of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Performance

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This retrospective represents a new approach to using historical performance as a tool for understanding medieval narrative performance. The core of the article traces how an individual performer's interaction with a stable medieval text both indicates directions medieval performers may have taken and suggests the limitations imposed by modern performance conventions. The discussion touches on issues of adaptation and translation, variation in troupe composition and audience, expectations of modern audiences, impact of costume choices, and limitations of audio and video recordings as documentation of live performance. Juxtaposing eight performances of a single passage clarifies how performance can transform a text, and how a text can impose a consistent character across a range of performance redactions.

While one of the "popular romances" might seem a better choice for this study, market issues drive performance as much now as in the Middle Ages. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is well known and loved and widely taught, and that is why I have a continuous record of renditions of this romance rather than any other. Despite its "literary" character, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is resilient enough to withstand the exigencies of performance; even more, it twists its way into living analogs, weaving its "lel letteres" around music so that sometimes one strand shows and sometimes another; glimpses of meanings take shape that were invisible on the two-dimensional page.

Medieval Performance of Narrative

The Middle English romances tantalize readers with an illusion of performance, yet we have only manuscript versions where "mirthe and melodye" can only be imagined. Late

medieval narrative is intriguingly situated between oral and written culture. While there is

evidence of oral presentation and in some cases memorized oral transmission, the textual

artifacts are exclusively written.[1] It is not surprising that this body of material has drawn

considerable attention in the last decades from our culture, traditionally so reliant on one-way

textual communication, but now immersed in a world of interactive visual and oral

communication. Like the late Middle Ages, we are poised between written and visual/aural

modes of reception, but in our reliance on recording we have moved far from the fluid realities of

late medieval live performance.

The medieval romances, in fact, bear many similarities to our popular American movie

culture. Many romances portray action-adventure stories, often with a love interest. As in

movies, there is frequently a didactic element, and there is considerable evidence that they were

performed with music. The genre is complex, and boundaries between romance and sermon and

between romance and drama are often ambiguous.[2] We are reminded of the popular grounding

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1. The study of medieval orality builds on the work of Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); and Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) explores issues of performance more fully in similar terms. Key studies treating orality in medieval texts include Alger Nicolaus Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack, eds., *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); and W. F. H. Nicolaisen, ed., *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 112 (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995). The interdisciplinary nature of the topic is evident in works such as Bruce Rosenberg, *Folklore and Literature: Rival Siblings* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). William A. Quinn and Audley S. Hall, *Jongleur: A Modified Theory of Oral Improvisation and its Effects on the Performance and Transmission of Middle English Romance* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982) applied the principles of Parry and Lord to the Middle English romances.

2. Nancy van Deusen, *The Harp and the Soul: Essays in Medieval Music* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press,1989), reminds us that medieval writers did not have terminology to distinguish "drama" from other genres; and Carol Symes, *A Common Stage: Theater and Public*

ofthe genre by its derivation from the Old French *romanz*, the language spoken by the common people, as opposed to the Latin favored by intellectuals.

It is not possible, of course, to experience the original cultural context of medieval narrative, but much can be inferred by extrapolation from interdisciplinary perspectives. There are extensive records of entertainment events throughout Europe that included romance performance.[3] While most scholars agree that the *chanson de geste*, the French predecessor to the romance, was sung, there has been debate about whether late medieval French romances should be sung, recited metrically, or recited in a natural speech rhythm, or whether they should be performed at all.[4]Further, it is unclear how music may have been involved. Although there is extensive evidence that minstrels sang narrative while playing the harp or the vielle, there are very few extant narrative melodies. In most cases when music notation is included in a manuscript, it takes the form of a simple monophonic melody, evidently designed to be varied in

Life in Medieval Arras (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), demonstrates the generic fluidity of medieval texts in a specific situation.

3. John Stevens's comprehensive treatment, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), provides considerable information. Maria Dobozy, *Re-Membering the Present: The Medieval German Poet-Minstrel in Cultural Context* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), uses interdisciplinary approaches to document and explicate the social context of medieval performers. Edmund Bowles, "Musical Instruments at the Medieval Banquet," *Revue Belge de Musicologie* 12 (1958): 41–51; and Constance Bullock-Davies, *Menestrellorum Multitudo: Minstrels at a Royal Feast* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978), and *Register of Royal and Baronial Domestic Minstrels 1272–1327* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986), discuss historically documented feasts involving narrative performance. Joyce Coleman's landmark book, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), provides detailed information about contexts for reading, in particular drawing attention to the importance of prelection.

4. Evelyn Birge Vitz, in *Orality and Performance in Early French Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), argues persuasively that French verse romances were performed, and she offers several models. Sylvia Huot, "Voices and Instruments in Medieval French Secular Music: On the Use of Literary Texts as Evidence for Performance Practice," *Musica Disciplina* 43 (1989): 63–113, provides useful documentation of literary evidence.

response to each new set of words.[5] There is strong evidence that musical performance involved

extensive improvisation and extant documents describe specific ornaments;[6] the paucity of

notated music may suggest that the base melody was too simple to need notation.[7]

The case of the Middle English verse romance is particularly intriguing because it seems

to be the most transitional form. Generally deriving from the earlier French romances,

manuscripts of Middle English romances include no notated music and scant external evidence

of performance.[8] Many of the romances contain frequent and extensive internal references to

performance, such as direct address of a listening audience or first person references to singing.

Early discussion of the romances developed an elaborate theory of performance based

exclusively on these "minstrel tags."[9] Reaction against this literal reading of oral references

ledsome scholars to argue that the romances were not performed at all, that because they were

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5. Maria Coldwell, "Guillaume de Dole and Medieval Romances with Musical Interpolations," *Musica Disciplina* 35 (1981): 54–86, provides a detailed discussion of romances with musical interpolations. The best evidence for applying a melody to a narrative text comes from music theorist Johannes de Grocheio writing in Paris around 1300, Christopher Page, "Johannes de Grocheio on Secular Music: A Corrected Text and a New Translation," *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 2, no. 1 (1993): 17–41.

6. See especially Timothy J. McGee, *The Sound of Medieval Song: Ornamentation and Vocal Style according to the Treatises* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), for specific evidence from medieval documents.

7. See Linda Marie Zaerr, *Performance and the Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), for discussion of music for narrative.

8. Most striking is the 1497 payment to "tua fithelaris that sang Graysteil to the King," Thomas Dickson, et al., ed., *Compota Thesauriorum Regum Scotorum*, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House/Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1877–1978), vol. 1, p. 330.

9. Particularly influential were Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 11 (1936): 88–110; and Albert C. Baugh, "Improvisation in the Middle English Romance," *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 103 (1959): 418–54, and "The Middle English Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation," *Speculum* 42 (1967): 1–31.

derived from earlier French romances, the references to performance were vestigial.[10] At the same time, Derek Pearsall has suggested that some of the romances were "modified in performance-from-memory."[11] Today, the various perspectives have been tempered into tentative agreement that "Romances passed easily from the hands of readers to the memories of minstrels or listeners, and from the oral recitations of minstrels or amateurs back into the writings of scribes."[12]

Our understanding of romance performance has advanced on many fronts. Variants among manuscripts have provided intriguing clues to performance practice.[13] More clarification of the medieval entertainment scene has shed light on the context for the romances.[14] Research

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10. P. R. Coss, "Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England: The Early Romances, Local Society and Robin Hood," *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 35–79, suggested that the minstrel tags were strictly "a literary convention designed to create an atmosphere of lively recitation" (39). W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romances* (London: Longman, 1987); and Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), both argued strongly against a performance model. Andrew Taylor's influential article, "Fragmentation, Corruption, and Minstrel Narration: The Question of the Middle English Romances," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 38–62, described the Middle English romances as "a transitional literature; written for readers, they deliberately evoke an oral heritage" (39).

11. "Middle English Romance and its Audience," in *Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English for Johan Gerritsen*, ed. Mary-Jo Arn and Hanneke Wirtjes (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1985), 37–47 (41).

12. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 13.

13. Murray McGillivray, *Memorization in the Transmission of the Middle English Romances* (New York: Garland, 1990), uses textual variants to argue for memorial transmission of six Middle English romances.

14. John Southworth, *The English Medieval Minstrel* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1989), brings together useful material; and Richard Rastall, "The Minstrels of the English Royal Households, 25 Edward I–1 Henry VIII: An Inventory," *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle* 4 (1967): 1–41, "Minstrelsy, Church and Clergy in Medieval England," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 97 (1970-71): 83–98, "Some English Consort-Groupings of the Late Middle Ages," *Music and Letters* 55, no. 2 (1974): 179–202, and "The Minstrel Court in

on medieval drama in England has increasingly demonstrated the connectivity between drama

and narrative,[15] and this has led to further discussion of the audience for the romances.

Understanding of instruments and their use clarifies how romances may have been

accompanied.[16] Discussion of oral elements continues to be refined and applied specifically to

Middle English romance.[17]

Ethnographic approaches to medieval romances acknowledge the vital significance of

physical presence and gesture. It is here that historical performance becomes important. Once it

has been acknowledged that a medieval text is a written manifestation of a speech act,[18]

Medieval England," *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society* 18, no. 1 (1982): 96–105, has assembled specific documents about English minstrels.

15. The *Records of Early English Drama* series has been invaluable in this respect. For example, William G. Cooke, "*The Tournament of Tottenham*: An Alliterative Poem and an Exeter Performance," *Records of Early English Drama* 11, no. 2 (1986): 2–3, documents a record in which money was "given to players playing in the Castle concerning the tournament of Tottenham (*or possibly* players playing the tournament of Tottenham in the Castle) by order of the mayor." This work survives in textual form only as a narrative poem, but the record implies a dramatic performance. Historical performance has indicated the effectiveness of the poem in this sort of dramatic representation.

16. Notably, Mary Remnant, *English Bowed Instruments from Anglo-Saxon to Tudor Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), combines extensive iconographic evidence with historical documents on the use of medieval bowed instruments; and Christopher Page has edited and made available relevant medieval treatises: "Jerome of Moravia on the *Rubeba* and *Viella*," *The Galpin Society Journal* 32 (1979): 77–98; "Fourteenth-Century Instruments and Tunings: A Treatise by Jean Vaillant? (Berkeley, MS 744),"*The Galpin Society Journal* 33 (1980): 17–35; and "Johannes de Grocheio."

17. See especially Karl Reichl, "Comparative Notes on the Performance of Middle English Popular Romance," *Western Folklore* 62, no. 1 (2003): 63–81.

18. Paul Zumthor has developed terminology applying this concept to medieval literature: "Intertextualité et mouvance," *Littérature* 41 (1981): 8–16; "*Les traditions poétiques*," in *Jeux de mémoire: Aspects de la mnémotechnie médiévale*, ed. Bruno Roy and Paul Zumthor (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1985), 11–21; and "Body and Performance," in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 217–26.

historical performance interacts effectively with historical and textual approaches to texts. In conjunction with performance theory, modern performance can embody some of the possibilities for how medieval texts may have been presented, and it can demonstrate incompatibilities.

Better understanding of the performance context of medieval romances provides insight into the background of our own entertainment culture, and it may also provide options that answer modern entertainment needs. Recent discussion of performance theory indicates that our society is ripe for entertainment that integrates many modes of experience, blurring distinctions between audience and performer, and involving performance in community. Medieval models may be very relevant in a modern performance arena.

Historical Performance

The powerful interaction between performance and written work has been amply illustrated in the area of musicology and Shakespeare studies with wildly divergent performances of individual works. In the area of medieval textual studies, however, where performance has only recently been considered a significant force, the mutability of text in performance has tended to be an assertion rather than a reality informing discussion of potentially performed literary works.

Medieval literary texts are rarely performed because the languages are inaccessible to general audiences. In contrast, medieval music is readily appreciated by non-specialists, even when texts are sung in obscure languages, and Shakespeare's plays, written in modern English, are easily comprehensible. While general audiences often enjoy dramatic performances of Middle English narrative, these performances are challenging rather than relaxing. Performance is further limited because typically only scholars know the languages of medieval texts, and until recently scholars have rarely been performers themselves. In the past, information about

historical performance tended to circulate informally at workshops and through private communication. Now, however, there is a movement to coordinate the work of scholars and performers and an increasing number of scholar/performers.[19]

One of the goals of historical performance of narrative is to apply available information from historical documents, textual studies, analogous situations,[20] theoretical discussions, and any other potential information sources, to construct a historically feasible embodiment of a text. The benefit is a fuller perception of the text. Features invisible in a purely textual form may appear obvious in performance, and possibilities become evident that could not otherwise be imagined.

A number of choices must be made in any performance. While theoretical discussions may allow acceptance of multiple interpretations or multiple performance options, any given performance takes one specific form. No two performances are the same, but any given rendition has only one manifestation. This means that choices are continually made that cannot be proven on historical grounds. For example, while historical evidence does not indicate how a minstrel would have used facial expression, a performer's face will of necessity carry some expression; even a neutral demeanor is a choice, and one that may reflect modern predilections. One of the premises of historical performance is that we always function in our own culture. We can only present modern performances of historical material to modern audiences. Ultimately choices must be determined in the context of what will appeal imaginatively to modern recipients.

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19. Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado, and Marilyn Lawrence, eds., *Performing Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), include articles by performers applying concepts of historical performance to medieval narrative; and two websites, Performing Medieval Narrative Today and Arthurian Legend inPerformance, document a wide range of professional and amateur performances.

20. For example, information about improvisation in music from McGee, *The Sound of Medieval Song* (2003), can in some cases be applied to narrative performance.

Historical performance does not claim to recreate performance as it was in the Middle Ages. There are too many unknowns. Aspects of authenticity have been usefully discussed in the area of musicology,[21]and these principles can be applied to romance performance. What historical performance can do is to reinforce notions of what is possible and in some cases what is impossible. For example, performance can demonstrate that it is possible and can be effective to sing narrative while playing a vielle. Similarly, performance can indicate how medieval minstrels might have approached their material. While there is no notated music in manuscripts of Middle English romance, the structure of the medieval vielle and evidence from musicology suggests that notated music would not have been necessary. The modal framework of the tuning structure allows free improvisation without the distraction of notation.[22]

Performance theory reinforces the concept of historical performance. Certain features characterize all performance, and social context interacts with performance in vital ways. Performers hold their bodies and move in ways not typical of everyday life. The fluid interactions between theater and life provide universal patterns that can be applied to medieval narrative.[23]Similarly, Paul Zumthor's development of the term *mouvance* to discuss variation

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21. See especially Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music: Scholarship, Ideology, Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

22. See Zaerr, *Performance* (2012).

23. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), present a formulation of the concepts. Other useful works include Marco de Marinis, *The Semiotics of Performance*, trans. Áine O'Healy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Dario Fo, *The Tricks of the Trade*, trans. Joe Farrell (New York: Routledge, 1991).

among performances (1981) and his affirmation of the vital significance of physical presence (1985) and gesture (1994) are also central to this study.

Over time, historical performance can indicate the variety of possibilities and reaffirm in concrete ways the crucial interactions among performers, audience, time and place, funding, and social attitudes. It is the ineluctable flexibility of performers in varying situations that I would like to explore in this retrospective.

Retrospective

Today when scholars talk about how performance may have varied in the Middle Ages, they often refer to textual variants because that is the only concrete evidence that has survived. But my experience suggests that a single performer may apply a wide range of performance options to a stable text. Further, the transformation of a text in performance is a natural and essential process. Availability of other performers, funding, contacts with sponsoring entities, composition of specific audiences, location, and time frame all contribute significantly to the development of performance. These factors can be seen in operation in my performances of a specific passage from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* across thirty-five years.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written around 1400 in a Northwest Midlands dialect of Middle English. It survives in only one manuscript, British Library MS Cotton Nero A. x, Art. 3. In the story, a green knight rides into King Arthur's banquet hall and offers an axe to the knight who will play a game, an exchange of blows. Sir Gawain accepts the challenge and beheads the Green Knight, but the man does not fall over and die. He picks up his head and rides away, reminding Gawain to come find him in a year.

In the last three and a half decades, I have performed the beheading of the Green Knight at scholarly conferences and universities, in elementary schools and high schools, on a cruise

ship in Alaska, at lavish parties, for receptions, at retirement homes, for a gathering of barbershop quartets, at WinCo, and at a cowboy bar called the Ranch Club. I have performed it alone, with one other person, with two others, and with a dozen.

Click here to listen to the Middle English stanza[24]

Andrew Taylor (2001) suggests that a single performer might have presented varying portions of a complete text on different occasions. This principle accords with my experience performing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As a demonstration at a high school, I might perform just the stanza above. For a group of university students studying love in the Middle Ages I might choose a different stanza. For a group of Middle English scholars at a conference, I might perform several dozen stanzas. Time, audience sophistication and taste, and context still dictate which portions of a long text are performed.

Besides various miscellaneous stanzas, I have developed a fifteen-minute retelling for general audiences in modern English with Middle English interpolations, a twenty-minute passage of the original text for a recording about performance with an instrument and a fifty-minute version for scholars and advanced students composed almost entirely of large blocks of original text. I have also participated in a recording of the entire text, but for this I did not recite at all, but provided inter-fitt music. Thus I have been involved in performances of a wide range of passages, and on only one occasion have I interacted with the text as a whole in performance.

In our culture, the fifteen-minute modern English adaptation for general audiences is most frequently demanded. It is comprehensible, but exotic, and it slips easily into a larger event. Payment is generally low, but few of my resources of time and energy are demanded. Since this

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24. Lines 417–43. This is my transcription from a facsimile of British Library MS. Cotton Nero A.x, Art. 3. Yoghs and thorns have been replaced with their modern equivalents, but the text remains unpunctuated to preserve the flexible groupings of the original. The translation is from Marie Borroff, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: Norton, 1967).

version has seen the greatest use in the last two and a half decades, it has undergone numerous transformations.

Performance Approach 1: The most persistent configuration is with my sister Laura, who plays the harp. Because Laura lives in a different state, we perform infrequently, but for us *Sir Gawain* is standard material so it needs little rehearsal. Since Laura improvises on established themes, her interaction with me is always dynamic. She constructs patterns, freely drawing on medieval melodic motifs which she links with thematic elements in the story. For example, she plays one melody for King Arthur's court, another for Bertilak's court, a third for the lady, and so on. Often two themes interact simultaneously. Perhaps because we are sisters, we have an intuitive sense of each other's timing, so the rhythms of the text and the rhythms of the music interact, but do not coincide. In this early recording she used an Irish harp, but now she uses a Gothic harp.

<u>Click here to listen to a selection from the recording.</u>[25]

25.*The Harper in the Hall: Medieval Tales Retold*, audiotape, Psallite, PS3182, 1988.

Performance Approach 2: For several years, I performed the same text with lute. The format was the same in that I narrated the text while enacting it, as Joe Baldassarre improvised on pre-established melodies. Performance with lute, however, created a very different effect. The lute is a more percussive instrument, and the plectrum necessitates binary patterns: any note or chord must be generated by either a downstroke or an upstroke. Music on the lute tends to be more emphatic. Collaboration with a different partner also transformed the overall effect, though the words remained the same and I followed the same general pattern of movement. Humorous elements in the story were more pronounced in this configuration.

Click here to listen to a selection from the recording.[26]

Performance Approach 3: During this time I began experimenting with accompanying my own narration with vielle. I made a recording illustrating ways *Sir Gawain* could be performed with music, demonstrating why many of the options were ineffective. Side B was a performance of a passage which I read while simultaneously playing vielle. This was, however, before I acquired my concordantly tuned vielle, which is much better suited to performance with poetry, and before I

26.*Tales and Music of the Middle Ages*, audiotape, The Quill Consort, Ars Noel NSP 1010, 1989.

developed a more fluid sense of how my own instrument could interact with thetext. It was also before I memorized longer segments of the text. So this version has developed considerably in more thantwo decades since the recording.

[*Click here to listen to a selection from the recording.*](#)[27]

Performance Approach 4: For a year (1995–96) I performed the modern adaptation of *Sir Gawain* frequently with the Katharsis Players (We also did Greek drama). Because neither Tom Talboy nor Dwayne Blackaller was a musician, my role shifted significantly, though the text remained identical. I played the vielle continuously, gliding around the edges of the action. I also recited the strictly narrative sections of the text. The others recited all the dialogue while presenting a much more truly dramatic rendition than what I had done by myself in that it involved interaction among physically present actors.

This transformation of a stable text from one actor to three reinforces the ambiguous nature of the distinction between drama and narrative in the Middle Ages. The limited number of actors allowed us to use double casting to reinforce thematic

27. *Music and Medieval Romance: A Possible Performance of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, audiotape, Chaucer Studio, 1990.

associations. Dwayne played King Arthur and Sir Gawain, the two characters who are

challenged in the tale; and Tom played the Green Knight and the Lady of the castle, the two

challengers. I underscored the thematic associations with my music, elaborating on one theme

for Arthur and Gawain and another for the Green Knight and the Lady. During these

performances I developed a clearer sense of how to accompany drama with vielle, since I could

concentrate on the music when I wasn't speaking, and I now had a better vielle for the purpose.

It is significant that there is no professional recording of this more effective version of the

vielle accompaniment. Recordings do not always document the most significant or effective

performances. Opportunity, funding, and marketing are more important than performance quality

in determining what is recorded and how widely it is known.

Performance Approach 5: In 2001, I

restructured the text for a full-scale [dramatic

production] . I made very few changes in

wording, but I added a musical introduction with

a large group of courtiers singing and

dancing. For the first time, the production was

fully dramatic, and each role was assigned to a

different person. I did none of the narration, and I played none of the dramatic roles. Instead, I

played all of the instrumental music on the vielle, and all of my energy went into enhancing

emotional tone with the music.

The director of the production was Dwayne, so many of the ideas we had used in the

Katharsis Players renditions were transferred to this production. The system for chopping off the

Green Knight's head was the same, but the thematic links previously accomplished by double casting now had to be indicated with costuming and music. This production also challenged conventions of verisimilitude by casting a woman in the role of the Green Knight. Parallels between Gawain's behavior with the lady on the three successive mornings of attempted seduction and the three animals hunted those days was expressed by representing the hunt scenes simultaneously with the bedroom scenes.

Performance Approach 6: Also in 2001 my sister Laura and I developed a fifty-minute version of the romance consisting almost entirely of large blocks of Middle English text. Over the years, our performance approach had become increasingly sophisticated. Originally, in a whimsical moment, we had used the melody

for "Greensleeves" when the Green Knight was introduced.

[Click here to listen to the original "Greensleeves" version.](#)

Now Laura only hinted at that theme. Because we were preparing the performance for scholarly audiences, she made sure that she was using only melodies and motifs that might have been available around 1400 in England, and she now used a Gothic harp.

For the performances in Kalamazoo for the International Congress on Medieval Studies (2001) and in Wales for the International Arthurian Congress (2002), we both wore simple modern black dresses. Mine was close fitting enough that my movements could easily be seen. I had worked hard to convey the differences among the characters with my movements, body positioning, and stance. We used no props and no set, though in Wales fairly elaborate lighting distinguished the three settings. In both performances I felt thoroughly connected with the audience, and I was confident that the characters were coming through clearly without undue interference from the fact that I was a middle-aged woman and not at all like any of the characters. A long performance such as this allows greater suspension of the modern expectation that drama should exhibit verisimilitude.

Transformations such as those discussed so far would have been as natural in the Middle Ages as now. An individual performer might sporadically work with another individual over a long period of time, and for shorter periods of time work with others who happened to be available. For example, in 1374 at the convent of St. Swithin, minstrels from "from the castle of the Lord King and from the household of the bishop" joined together to perform a *geste* after dinner.[28] Instrumentation and overall approach would change considerably as a result of these varying interactions. An individual's skills and tastes would also be likely to change over time.

Today some of these transformations can be captured in audio and video recordings. Yet recordings, by their very nature, transform performances, even recordings of live performances. In audio recordings, engineers sometimes insist on as little dynamic variation as possible so they do not have to use compression. This can lead to a certain uniformity that would not be present in a live performance. Overtones in instruments such as the vielle are often emphasized in

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28. Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century*, 3 vols. (London, 1774–81), 1:174.

recordings. Recordings of live performance often suffer from poor sound quality, and elements that are accepted and sometimes energizing in live performance may seem unacceptable in a recording.
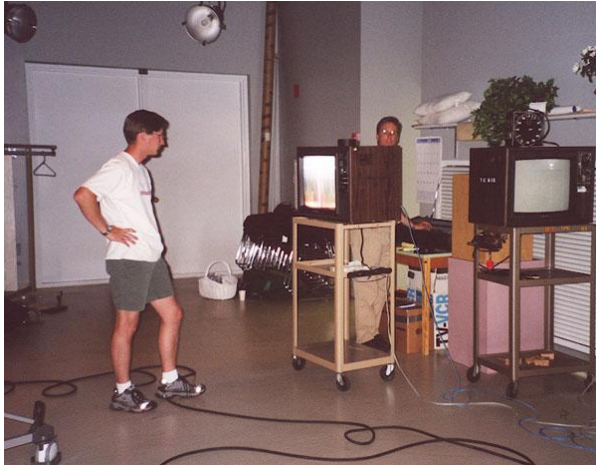
Video recordings present even greater difficulties. Maria Dobozy (2005) has very usefully discussed the importance of gestures and acting in live performance, but most people in our culture think of acting in terms of cinematic experience, and expectations are often conditioned by recorded performance. Few people recognize the crucial distinction between live performance, where physically present actors interact with theaudience, and film performance, where nuances of expression may be captured and the camera determines what we see.

Performance Approach 7: My own experience with a DVD recording of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* brought this distinction home vividly. In 2002 Laura and I undertook to make a DVD of our fifty-minute Middle English performance, and this video was intended to

capture the spirit of the live performance. Vielle player Shira Kammen joined us for the project. Because we were working with three people's complex schedules, we ended up with a fairly tight timeline, and funding was extremely limited.

In preparation for the shoot, I went to the studio to test out some ideas. I knew I couldn't wear my simple black dress because black is the color of background on video. I would become a disembodied face and hands. So I tried wearing another simple dress. It probably would have been fine for live performance, but on the screen it made me look very specifically female and middle aged. I tried pants, but I looked even more ludicrously female and modern when playing the male roles.

So I decided I needed something that would not be gender specific, something loose but capable of showing movement. I also wanted something that would not look egregiously *un*medieval. I settled on a loose tabard-like construction over leggings and a leotard of the same color. I used a color that I knew would show up well on the screen. It worked better than anything else I could find or imagine for all of the characters, and it was vaguely medieval in effect. I did not feel, however, that it was the ideal solution. There was something strange about the person who appeared on the screen, and I wondered if viewers would be distracted. But the shoot date was approaching, and I could not find anything better.

In the studio we also experimented with different backgrounds. In a live performance, the actual background is quickly filtered out by the audience, but on video it continues to interact with the performance. After trying various curtains and experimenting with some precarious blue-screen approaches, I went to a colleague in the theater department. He generously made three flats to use as backdrops: one showing a stone wall for Arthur's court, one with draperies, to show the interior spaces of Bertilak's castle, and one with trees, for the final forest meeting.

But Michael had worked exclusively with stage productions, and his excellent backdrops seemed unrealistic on screen. We all agreed that they did give the impression of a live stage performance, which was one of the articulated goals of the production.

Laura and Shira and I went to a pleasant cabin for three days to rehearse. It was an exciting time, and when we weren't working, we held a "Trimeron." Our concept for the video was to establish a contrast between Arthur's court, where Laura would appear on camera with the clear articulation of the harp, and Bertilak's court, where Shira would appear with the husky voice of the vielle. Text associated with Gawain and Arthur was accompanied primarily by harp; text associated with Bertilak and his lady was accompanied primarily by vielle. Multiple presences were indicated using both instruments.

To our delight, the concept worked extremely well in practice. There was an energy working together as a team of three. The diverse character of the two instruments was key, and we were struck by how differently they interacted with my recitation. The vielle punctuated words and phrases, while the harp interlaced patterns around words. This was because the bowed vielle was a sustaining instrument that could surge and recede beneath the words, whereas the harp was a percussive instrument that would interfere if it coincided with the words, but could develop interactive rhythmic patterns in counterpoint with the rhythms of the text. Over the three days, we developed a connection that allowed us to interact with precise timing.

We came to the studio with this energy. I had previously made a video of a different Middle English text (*The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*). Although I had previously followed an entirely different approach, I was prepared for the lengthy set-up, the

compromises on sound quality, the necessity of playing to the camera, and the Faerie-likefreezing of life into one form forevermore. Because we did the entire shoot in one very intense day, it had an energy and consistency that might otherwise have been lacking.

[Click here to view a segment of the DVD.](#)[29]

There were some interesting effects we had not anticipated. My costume created an abrupt line at the base of my neck, which enhanced the headless effect. By a remarkable coincidence that costume was close in color to the draperies of the bed chamber. Perhaps wishfully, I saw a fortuitous effect in which both the lady and Gawain were swathed in luxurious bedclothes.

[Click here to view part of the first bed chamber scene.](#)

The next day when we reviewed the window burn tape, we were pleased with our performance. There were some small details that could have been corrected, but overall we felt it effectively represented our concept. So we worked with the segments we had, and that was probably the best choice we could have made with the time and money available to us. It would take considerably more time funding to produce something that would approximate our live performance. Even then, the acting style would be entirely different from a live performance, and it would lack the intimacy of physical presence.

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29. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* DVD (TEAMS/METS and The Chaucer Studio, 2002).

Performance Approach 8: During the subsequent ten years, I came to a crisis in my research on the use of the vielle in romance performance. I was forced to acknowledge that I could not effectively play the vielle and recite Middle English verse for any length of time in performance. I decided that I would either find a way to do it or give up on performance research. Going back to first principles, scouring treatises and offhand references, collecting a rich trove of narrative melodies, I eventually realized that it was cognitively dissonant to try to speak while playing. The complex tones of the spoken voice were at odds with the pitch-specific sound of the vielle. When I sang, however, playing the vielle gave a rich complexity to the text and a wide range of ways of interacting with the melody.[30] I developed this approach for a number of popular romance texts.

Then Marilyn Lawrence approached me about creating a video clip for the *Arthurian Legend in Performance* Vimeo site, and she requested a passage from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* because it is familiar, and it can be used for teaching. I used a vielle built by Timothy McGee with an off-board string positioned away from the fingerboard. I had discovered that when I positioned my thumb against this string, it doubled the tonal center of the instrument, allowing me to bend that pitch, creating a tension between the stable drone

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30. For a more detailed discussion, see Zaerr, *Performance* (2012).

and the shifting pitch. I adapted the melody from *Der Jungere Titurel* [31] because this is a documented melody from a related stress-based language, and I incorporated the string-bending thumb for the voice of the Green Knight. I also used microtones.

Click here to view the video clip.

Now I am not as fresh and young as when I first began. I find that my voice is less reliable, and my joints are stiffer. I can still perform, but for how much longer? Like the medieval minstrels, I, too, will fade into the past, and the warm voice of a human performer will be gone forever.

Implications

This retrospective highlights several dimensions of historical performance. Most significantly, performance can reveal features in the text that may not otherwise be evident. The modern adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* allows audiences to experience the story aurally and visually in terms that make sense within our culture. The experience of the poem, not just the words, is thus translated into modern terms. This transformation is similar to what happened to the romances when they moved from French into English.

Performance in Middle English is challenging to audiences of today, but scholars and advanced students can experience simultaneous dimensions of the poem that may have been part of the original presentation: rhythmically varied poetry, visual spectacle, verbal and thematic echoes, and interaction among complex characters. The playfulness of the lady and her surprisingly blatant seduction, the humor of Gawain's uncomfortable situation, and the grotesque character of the beheading when spectators roll the head with their feet, all these are conveyed more vividly in performance than in text on a page.

31.Vienna Nationalbibliothek MS 2675.

Sometimes results provide information that would be difficult to acquire from purely textual evidence. The range of embodiments of *Sir Gawain* presented here can clarify instrumental accompaniment by demonstrating characteristics of the liquid harp, the percussive lute, and the surging vielle. Each instrument interacts with narrative in distinct ways not subject to cultural change.

When informed by historical records, textual analysis, and cultural research, historical performance can reveal possibilities for what performance may have been like in the Middle Ages. The performance of a stable text by one, two, three, or many performers and the fluid transformations between actors and musicians developed in performances of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is supported by available evidence.

As performance theory suggests, some principles of performance were as true in the Middle Ages as they are today. The importance of funding, audience composition, time, place, and situation was just as crucial then as now, and historical performance can point to some of the ways these contingencies may have affected medieval performance.

Then, as now, a single performer would develop over time. My performance with vielle moved from a rather awkward and rigidly structured accompaniment on an instrument tuned like a viola, to a more flexible and free flowing interaction with the text using an instrument that facilitates improvisation. I also corroborated available information from the Middle Ages, demonstrating that it was cognitively reasonable to recite metrical texts from memory while playing vielle. Although historical performance has different goals than other forms of performance, and the range of my performances is partly a result of my growing understanding of medieval narrative, nonetheless, some aspects of my transformations are relevant.

A single performer in the Middle Ages would very likely have been involved in many versions of a single text. Today these versions can be documented using recordings. While we have little evidence of how medieval individuals transformed a text over time, recordings can demonstrate the power performance choices can exert within a literary text, choices that in the Middle Ages passed without record. This information can provide a model for a process that would have occurred in the original cultural context.

Recordings, however, have limited value as documentation of live performance. They interact with the viewer in utterly different ways, and they call attention to different features. Modern audiences tend to assume that a video recording captures what happens in a performance, but a key element is missing. Recordings can recreate which notes were played, and which words sung, and how the performer moved, but they lack the relationship that is fundamental to the Middle English romances. "Herkneth," the romances urge, "*y* wol *you* telle." The intimate relationship between performer and audience is inscribed so profoundly throughout the romances that it is easy to miss its importance, to diminish it as a vestige of former practice. No matter whether they were performed or how, the romances present themselves as a living relationship between performer and audience.

While historical performance cannot recreate medieval entertainment, it can provide valuable clues to what that entertainment might have been like, and it can render the material more involving, despite the challenging language. In our culture there is a need for historical performance, for the dynamic challenging of barriers, the highly personal interactions, the compelling stories, and the high drama of medieval entertainment.

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