

2022-09

# Accessing the Interiors of Late Medieval Poetry through Immersive Performance Creation

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Christoffersen, T. J. (2022). Accessing the interiors of late medieval poetry through immersive performance creation (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://prism.ucalgary.ca/http://hdl.handle.net/1880/115219>

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Accessing the Interiors of Late Medieval Poetry through Immersive Performance Creation

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN DRAMA

CALGARY, ALBERTA

SEPTEMBER, 2022

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## Abstract

My graduate thesis considers both how textual immersion functions in the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and how adapting sections of the poem to immersive performances can transform the audience's perception, understanding, and experience of the text. Examining textually immersive environments—which are characterized by literary works' provocation of the senses—in late medieval literature offers insight into how mentally immersive scenes endeavour to realize various objectives, such as promoting ideals of toxic masculinity. Utilizing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a case study, my research then examines how audience engagement can be maximized through a variety of immersive strategies. I implement Practice as Research (PaR) methodologies to undergo a series of four performance experiments that place a small audience within textually immersive sections of the poem. These performative applications deploy visual, aural, and tactile immersive techniques to involve the audience more deeply and viscerally in the work, thereby evoking individualized affective responses and interpretations. Audience surveys and focus groups are used to gauge the effects of the performances, and the analysis of these post-performance responses determine how each immersive experiment impacted the audience members' engagement with the poem.

## Acknowledgements

The development and completion of this project would not have been possible without the expertise of Dr. Bruce Barton and Dr. Jacqueline Jenkins. I am so deeply grateful for their continued support and guidance. I would also like to extend my thanks to the examination committee, my cohort, the artists who contributed to this project, and everyone at the School of Creative and Performing Arts who impacted and assisted me throughout this process.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding about how immersive performance can be used to impact contemporary audiences' perception of historically distant texts. Because of the temporal remove from medieval literature, contemporary readers may find it to be inaccessible and difficult to understand. Can embodiment in a performative adaptation bridge this inaccessibility and deepen an audience's understanding of such material? And does the methodological framework implemented offer insight into audience understanding or the audience's perception of their engagement with the material?

Through a series of performance experiments that involve performers and immersive strategies, this study examines the effects upon audience-participants' engagement with the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These performative applications deploy digital, aural, and environmental immersive techniques to evoke individualized affective responses and interpretations. I invoke the term "affective" to refer to an "experience [that] is a fully embodied process of relating to, understanding, and acting within one's environment" (Barton "Subtle Spectacle" 107). This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How can immersive performance strategies enhance the affective experience and interpretive potential of medieval literature for contemporary audiences?
2. What strategies can creators of immersive performance utilize to increase the relevance, impact, and accessibility of works based upon historical texts?

Adaptation from a historical text to an immersive performance allows us to engage with sensory provocation in first a textual and then a performative context. Sensory provocation is often utilized to achieve other aims, such as participate in mythologization, and thus can be analyzed

to reveal the “interior”<sup>1</sup> of a text. Because of my research interests in queerness and gender, I am particularly engaged in the heteronormative and masculinist objectives of the poem, and in developing dramaturgical tools that can allow me to communicate these aspects of the text to an audience in an immersive context.

Using perceptual theories, I will first identify how sensory provocation operates in the text and to what thematic effect; then I will determine how to achieve similar provocation in an experimental performance context. A process of qualitative data analysis follows, with the findings being used to further develop strategies for creating immersive theatre inspired by historical texts. These strategies will then be applied to a second iteration of the work. My interpretation of both iterations of this performance will inform the refinement of my techniques for creating immersive performances based upon historical texts.

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<sup>1</sup> This terminology is borrowed from Gareth White’s “On Immersive Theatre,” in which he discusses accessing “the interior of the drama” (230).



## Section I: Theoretical Underpinnings

For approximately thirty years, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been the subject of countless queer readings that have investigated queer desire, constructions of masculinity, and homosociality within the text. According to some early scholars, at its core, the poem participates in “the romance narrative genre[’s] . . . big ostensible task: to promote heterosexuality against all odds” (Dinshaw “Getting Medieval” 127) through inculcating queer desire as the reason for chivalry’s deterioration (Boyd 78).

In her article “A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Carolyn Dinshaw asserts that the poem renders unintelligible the potentiality of homosexual sex between Gawain and Bertilak (206). She is also concerned with the feminization of Gawain in the seduction scenes, stating that this shift has put both “chivalric identity” and “the heterosexual subject” (211) at stake. Despite the ongoing threats to heterosexual chivalric culture, Gawain’s normative identities are ultimately upheld, in part because the fulfilment of a potential sexual relationship involving two men is incomprehensible within the world created by the text.

Gail Ashton gestures towards Sheila Fisher and Geraldine Heng’s scholarship from the late 1980s and early 1990s and their discussions of feminine agency, building upon their considerations of Morgan la Faye to assert that the character is at the center of, and vital to, the plot. Perhaps most crucially, Ashton stresses that rather than restoring heteronormativity, “we see the failure of heterosexual norms ever to contain their own ideals” (70), and the poem’s active queering serves to destabilize all sexual and gender norms. She comments upon several key points of the text that participate in this destabilization, such as the Green Knight’s embodiment of both masculinity and femininity, which is indicated by the simultaneous

description of his brawn and otherworldliness (Ashton 58). Gawain and Bertilak's kisses are also subversive, she suggests, but any "[d]anger is ultimately defused by its public spectacle" (Ashton 65), preventing the interaction from occupying the more threatening private sphere.

Recent scholarship continues to investigate gender and sexuality within and outside of the poem, such as Christopher D. Queen's "Negative Affect, Queer Aesthetics, and the Illuminations of Cleanness," which offers a queer reading of the illustrations accompanying *SGGK*, while interrogating the pejorative perceptions of these images by scholars. A.W. Strouse views the text with a focus on physicality and what it reveals about its relationship to circumcision, the resulting gendered implications of which include masculinity's subversion. Referring to the interspersed scenes in the poem's third fitt, he articulates that the "hunt scenes unravel the poem's heroic thread, while the seduction scenes unravel the romantic thread, with each reconnected by discerning the cut upon Gawain's flesh" (Strouse 73).

The breadth of queer scholarship on *SGGK*, with all of its divergent perspectives and approaches, speaks to the extent with which the poem grapples with masculinist and chivalric objectives, gendered behaviour, heteronormativity, and politics of desire, all of which are inextricably wound up with one another.

The impetus to adapt a section of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to an immersive performance is based in my previous work<sup>2</sup>, which has examined the interpretive possibilities of

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Kenna L. Olsen's 2018 research project *Emerging Medievalisms: Method, Media, Manuscript* <https://emergingmedievalisms.ca/> inspired my undergraduate thesis "'Thus saw I fals and sooth compounded': Destabilizing Truth through Immersive Landscapes in Chaucer's *House of Fame*" and led to the book chapter authored by myself, Olsen, and Samantha Purchase: "Transcending Boundaries for Medieval Studies: Teachingmedieval(isms) via Digital Technologies." *Decoding the Medieval: Teaching the Medieval in the Modern*

being physically immersed in the environment—or a version of the environment—that is conjured within a historical text. This adaptational process involves first identifying immersive environments and examining their relationship to the subject matter, then parsing how the language stimulates one or more senses, and determining which strategies to invoke to achieve such stimulation in a physical, rather than solely mental, capacity. I propose that physically immersing audiences using these strategies leads to a state of greater somatic engagement with the material, thus resulting in embodied understandings of the subject matter. In order to understand how the adaptation from nondramatic text to live performance (and the associated mental perceptual process of the former to an embodied understanding with the latter) can be carried out effectively, textual and performative immersion must first be contextualized.

Textual immersion is a process which entails the provocation and involvement of a reader's senses through perceptually engaging language. Immersion in this sense is characterized by a written work's potentiality to deeply absorb the reader through its utilization of sensory information and as a result, stimulate mental activity. It is a conceptual process of making tangible and immediate something which does not exist materially. Because what "works of art do is not so much represent things as make them present to us" (Kramnick 57), literature is capable of sensory provocations that cultivate a perceptually immersive landscape that is experienced by the reader, and that appears to be experienced by the characters within the narrative. Engaging the reader's sensory perception through the creation of immersive

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environments facilitates the realization of various objectives, such as establishing fear, which are often fundamental to the narrative as a whole. For instance, the language in the third fitt of *SGGK* engages the reader in seductive, violent, deeply intimate landscapes through the stimulation and activation of the aural and visual senses. It is useful to gesture to perceptual theory to understand how texts—specifically late medieval literature for the purposes of this project—participate in this process, which I have outlined in my previous work:

Jonathan Kramnick’s “antirepresentational model of perceptual experience . . . considers perceiving to be an active process—more on the pattern of touch than vision—and . . . proposes that what the senses do is make the world available rather than hold it at a skeptical remove” (57). By likening the immediacy of visual perception to tactile experience, Kramnick eliminates the removed and associative mental process that representational theory postulates. Hume posits that “nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object” (qtd. in Kramnick 59). This understanding asserts that perception itself is a distant process which forms a passageway between an impression of the sense object and one’s mind. Conversely, antirepresentational perception rejects this idea of impressional distance and its passive connotations. Ashby Kinch similarly rejects the idea that perception is passive in his merging of literary and “neuroscientific research concerning the neural basis of vision, particularly the emphasis in recent research on the ‘active’ way in which the brain engages in visual perception (264). (Christoffersen 7-8)

Increased activity, both mental and physical, is also a characteristic associated with immersive performance, a theatrical form which further prioritizes spectators’ sensory engagement with a

piece than does conventional theatre. The term is used “to describe contemporary performance practice involving a visceral and participatory audience experience with an all-encompassing, sensual style of production aesthetic” (Machon 35). We will return to the characteristics of immersive theatre; first, let us draw on dramaturgical tools of perception to better understand how textual immersion lends itself to performative applications.

In Hansen’s model of perceptual dramaturgy, a key component is “preparing for the final production phase by analyzing compositional possibilities with a focus on how they can be realized through the spectators’ potential perception” (108). Part of this analytical process and “compositional challenge is not only to identify and map possible connections within the material, but also to predict the performative effect they may bring about” (Hansen 116). To make such predictions, one must have an awareness of how the audience might process and respond to connections in the work. Because “[p]hysically-based work often aims to affect the spectators’ sensory experience in ways that do not invite them to synthesize stimuli as dramatic structure, character, or meaning” (Hansen 108), a dramaturgical framework rooted in sensory perception is necessary.

Hansen goes on to outline the memory systems which are involved in the process of making meaning out of perception—short term memory of sensory details, semantic memory, and episodic memory (116)—before detailing how they can be applied to elements of a performance. She then explicates a “theory of ‘the remembered present’” (Edelman and Tononi qtd. in Hansen 110) which posits that as one perceives familiar sensory information, a process of ‘re-entry’ takes place. She states that “[a]s most of our automated perceptions reuse established reentrant processes, they are memories projected into the present,” (110) and offers that if “new stimuli tend to reactivate and merge with past perceptions (i.e. memories) during the reentrant

processes, then it is possible that the repetition of details in different parts of a performance may create connections for the spectator simply by triggering the same perceptual process” (117). After providing detailed steps for categorizing repetitions in the material and identifying their potential effects, Hansen overviews how this process was implemented in the production of *Swimmer (68)*<sup>3</sup>, demonstrating how “perceptual dramaturgy of composition can potentially invite the spectator to direct her attention differently and discover new ways of synthesizing and responding to sensory stimuli” (122). The dramaturgical structure offered here is markedly useful in the adaptation of *SGGK* to an immersive performance context, as considering and mapping audience-participants’ potential perceptions are a central focus in my creative process.

Albeit with a different objective in place than my own, which is in part “to reorient the spectators’ attention towards elements of the performance that do not fit within the conventional foci of the art forms involved” (121), Hansen and Barton’s article “Research-Based Practice: Situating Vertical City between Artistic Development and Applied Cognitive Science” demonstrates the potential of Practice as Research to connect performance to theories of perception. It is further applicable to this project as it foregrounds the idea that “[d]ramaturgical, performative, and cognitive approaches share a focus on what something does [and] what it affects” (Hansen and Barton 135).

Similar to my own process, they “took inspiration from cognitive theories on human perception and memory to develop dramaturgical strategies of process and composition” (121).

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<sup>3</sup> Ker Wells with Bruce Barton, *Swimmer (68)*, 2009.

After articulating that “when humans recall a memory, we do not retrieve it; rather, we reconstruct the process of perception that was involved in the past experience” (124), they detail how memory theory is used to hypothesize spectators’ potential perceptions of and responses to the material. The authors go on to discuss scope when creating performances with the application of cognitive theories, stating that “[t]o make the cognitive approach more specific, it is necessary to break down the inquiries into smaller questions [and] reduce the complexity of the experimentation as well as the contextual influences on it” (133). This research offers a foundation of how understandings of cognition and memory can be effectively deployed in performative contexts, which is instrumental in my translation of a perceptually engaging (though potentially cognitively distancing) text to an immersive performance.

Textual immersion is almost always an individualistic process, as reading (specifically in contemporary terms) is generally a solitary activity, whereas immersion in performance contexts often denotes a collective experience. However, individualized experience is significant to immersive performances, where audience-participants are not designated to remain in one fixed position nor do they necessarily experience the same performative components. In addition, “immersive theatre trades on subjectivity” (Wong 52) and necessarily takes into account the lived experiences of the individuals constituting the audience. Recounting one of her immersive projects, Adrienne Wong asks “How would point-of-view influence each individual audience member’s overall construction of meaning?” (42).

Josephine Machon also comments on the individualized nature of conceptualization by highlighting the importance of each spectator’s emotions in immersive theatre: “The experiential nature of immersive practice prioritises the making-sense / sense-making processes of human perception and interpretation, where emotion and intuition hold their own weight in meaning-

making” (46). Here too is evident the centrality of the senses in the audience-participant’s interpretive process. There is not a separation of the somatic from the cognitive, as the “intersensual activity of the interactor in immersive practice includes acts of observation that trigger embodied watching” (Machon 40) where “the entire body is a receptor” (Wong 52). Consciousness of one’s participation in an immersive work is also part of this holistic perceptual process, as “the spectator is aware of the involvement of the senses and this heightened awareness is often central to the immediate experience and any subsequent analytical interpretations” (Machon 40).

For many, immersive theatre likely calls to mind large-scale productions put on by Shunt and Punchdrunk, whose work Machon “identifies as an increasingly prevalent mode in contemporary performance, which addresses multiple senses simultaneously, rather than addressing itself primarily to conscious thought” (White 229). Immersive theatre is further characterized by “degrees of interactivity and improvisation on the part of spectator as much as artist, which must be shaped expertly by the practitioner” (Machon 37). In this way, audience-participants become what Machon refers to as “interactors” (39). Similar to the immediacy of perception involved in textual immersion, “[w]atching...is understood as an active state, not a passive looking on without necessarily noticing” (Machon 39). Immersive performance is “multi-sensory, making use of exploratory experiences of space and relationships with performers, but sometimes also addressing the senses of touch and smell” (White 222), “appeal[s] to sensuous experience as a primary site of aesthetic coherence” (Alston 200), and “includes performances that are intensely intimate...as well as those that allow a little distance between spectator and performance” (White 221). Any combination or manipulation of these qualities can be deployed to varying effects for those witnessing and participating in immersive



works.

Adam Alston explores how aesthetically decadent immersive experiences challenge notions that immersive theatre primarily occupies a state of liveliness. Responding to Machon's discussions about the central role of energy exchange in such performances, Alston posits "that many immersive theatre makers...are also concerned with deadness, disease, decay and ruination" (200). He asserts that immersive theatre allows audience members to "fantasise about debauchery that most wouldn't dare to dabble in outside of such a setting" (201) by involving them so completely in the world of the piece.

Much has been written about the role of sensory engagement and involvement in medieval theatre, of both the performers and spectators. According to Robinson and Dutton, "[m]edieval theatre in all its forms offered rich multisensory experiences to its audiences, and recent research in the field has explored subjective and sensory experiences, both bodily and cognitive, in relation to spectatorship" (46).<sup>4</sup> Because *SGGK* is a nondramatic text not written explicitly for performance, the same idea does not apply to how it would have been experienced contemporarily. However, medieval literary culture entailed a certain element of performativity as texts were often read aloud and the origins of many are rooted in an oral culture of storytelling.

Evelyn Vitz and Linda Marie Zaerr argue that all medieval literature from music to books "invited performance," even asserting that "to some degree silent reading...can be usefully

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<sup>4</sup> See their article for a complete list of scholars who have contributed to this body of knowledge

thought of as a ‘performance mode’” (303). The authors assert that to understand any medieval text fully and contextually, it must be experienced as a performance.<sup>5</sup> In fact, they argue that “we need to start thinking of all of medieval literature, not just plays and songs, as works intended for performance” (Vitz and Zaerr 303). Joyce Coleman similarly advocates for the importance of aurality when considering medieval literature. According to Coleman, aurality is “‘the shared hearing of written texts’, with ‘orality’ as ‘the shared hearing of texts’ and ‘literacy’ as ‘the private reading of written texts’” (72). She positions aurality as the antidote to the dichotomous, evolutionary construction of orality and literacy, resisting the notion that the practice was transitional. She asserts that “[n]ot only did aurality not disappear, it was, in fact, the predominant means of experiencing written texts throughout the Middle Ages, both in Latin and in the vernaculars” (71). Coleman also explores how every aural reading presented a different experience, depending on a variety of factors such as the prelector’s talent and textual interpretation. This emphasis on aurality’s ubiquity in the Middle Ages and the articulation of medieval performance’s inherent ephemerality and distinctiveness are indicative of why a contemporary performance of a text such as *SGGK* is a valuable mode of engagement.

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<sup>5</sup> Zaerr’s performance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is discussed in “Experimenting with the Performance of Medieval Narrative.”

## Section II: Methodologies

In this section I will articulate the methodological underpinnings of my project to elucidate how I set out to ascertain, analyze, and communicate data. Terminology surrounding research in which artistic practice is a major constitutive factor is abundant and oftentimes obscure, so I will contextualize the language I use to refer to my process whilst simultaneously overviewing the field of scholarship by which it has been informed. Artistic research, referred to by Barton as “an ‘umbrella concept’” (“Wherefore PAR?” 4), encapsulates this broader field of methodologies in which practice-based research (PBR), performance-as-research (PAR), and practice-as-research (PaR) exist. The uniting criteria among these and other approaches within artistic research are “documentation, dissemination, and utility through transferability” (Barton “Wherefore PAR?” 7). Additionally, Barton points to “the commonly held priority that, to a defining degree, both the processes and the knowledge generated within/through ARP are fully embodied” (“Wherefore PAR?” 9).

Robin Nelson similarly discusses the role of embodiment, specifically with regards to practice-as-research, invoking the term “know-how” to denote that knowledge which is “incommunicable in words but disseminable through a process of workshop education” (107). Although the context of my project differs from that which Nelson references here, his notion of know-how, signifying “tacit knowledge” (114), and know-that, relating to “traditional theatre knowledge” (114), is crucial to consider in the development of my methodological approach. Practice-as-research projects constitute, according to Nelson, “a process of making the tacit more explicit” (113). The necessity of such methodologies lies in the fact that “[s]ome examples of practice-as-research...test certain concepts in ways of which words are not capable. For example concepts of space and time, particularly where they foreground human experience of space and

time, might best be explored through that experience” (Nelson 108). In an immersive performance context, the audience’s perception and experience of space and time is fundamental to my research objectives, thus positioning those experiences at the fore.

Henk Borgdorff’s discussion of artistic research also legitimizes creative methodologies and offers insight into knowledge production. He stresses that “art practice is paramount as the subject matter, the method, the context, and the outcome of artistic research” (146), while also underlining that to qualify as research, that practice must be “expressly intended to shift the frontiers of the discipline” (161). For Borgdorff, originality is a key consideration for artistic research and “one must determine case by case in what way and in what measure the research has resulted in original artistic and academic outcomes” (162). The generative nature of artistic research is also highlighted by Borgdorff as he asserts “[i]ts primary importance lies not in explicating the implicit or non-implicit knowledge enclosed in art. It is more directed at a not-knowing, or a not-yet-knowing” (173). Rather than seeking to communicate knowledge that exists within the source text and adapted immersive performance, this project is an open-ended process which is characterized by a set of questions which will inevitably lead to more questions.

I have also drawn upon some medieval scholars’ use of practice as research and practice-based research to inform my methodological approach. Purcell gestures towards “Sarah Dustagheer, Oliver Jones, and Eleanor Rycroft [who] point out that [practice-as-research] is simply another method of practicing history, subject to the same enmeshment in the present as any other form of historical study, and that ‘historical gaps are not necessarily a problem if they instigate a fruitful dialogue between past and present’” (435). However, the goal of these experiments is not to investigate nor replicate the conditions in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would have been experienced contemporarily, but to utilize performative elements as a

means of engaging with historically distant texts. Jacqueline Jenkins investigates performance's role in studying medieval literature by asking the following questions: "what role might embodied performance play in the research of historically distant texts? what would a methodology based on embodied performance applied to medieval texts look like? and, what should the role of the PbR practitioner / textual critic be?" ("Practice-based Research").<sup>6</sup>

The immersive adaptation of *SGGK* investigates how embodiment can be utilized as a tool of engagement with a text that is centuries removed from contemporary audiences. This temporal distance is one of the factors that Jenkins attributes to the difference between practice-based-research for theatre historians and contemporary performance researchers. She discusses the role of performative research in theatre history:

Contemporary practitioners may create a performance as a piece of research and argue compellingly that the performance is the sole research contribution; further, the ephemerality of that same performance may be seen to be an inherent part of the research. But the practice of performance-research works differently for theatre historians: we conduct our research in the absence of original conditions, audiences, staging technologies, and sensory experiences...in the end the performance is not sufficient all on its own; the knowledge it generates needs to be disseminated to affect critical practice, especially when the knowledge is related to the broadening of the performance canon.

(Jenkins)

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<sup>6</sup> Here I will note that I am making connections between practice-based-research as discussed by Jenkins and the PaR and artistic research discussed by the aforementioned scholars.

My project has a divergent aim from that of Jenkins' work, which focuses on "recovering early period performance histories and...influencing critical practices" ("Practice-based Research"), but nonetheless aligns with her methodological reasoning that the adaptation alone is insufficient as a research contribution, and any knowledge gained from the experiments must then be disseminated.

Because I contend that the performances alone do not offer enough information to constitute a complete research contribution, a process of data collection and analysis must be implemented. This process is what I termed performance experiments, designed to gauge and qualify audience responses to the experience to inform further dramaturgical exploration of immersive theatre creation. The methodology deployed ultimately must align with the project's central questions: how can immersive performance strategies enhance the affective experience and interpretive potential of medieval literature for contemporary audiences? and what strategies can creators of immersive performance utilize to increase the relevance, impact, and accessibility of works based upon historical texts? To answer these questions, I have identified three objectives of this study, which are as follows: first, to develop strategies for adapting medieval narrative texts to immersive performances contexts; second, to discover the ways in which immersive performances can foster deeper engagement with temporally and culturally distant texts for contemporary audiences; and third, to ascertain the factors that influence the degree of engagement of participants with the narrative elements of the medieval text in question.

#### Objective 1

The first objective of this study is, broadly, to develop strategies for adapting medieval narrative texts to immersive performance contexts. The adaptational process involves first identifying and explicating those elements of the source text that I find to be most immersive,

and how those elements might be realized in a live performative context. Also key to this process is identifying how immersion functions in the text through a close reading of the source text informed by secondary scholarship, to discover what the immersive language serves to communicate in each context where it is deployed.

## Objective 2

The second goal is to discover the ways in which immersive performances can foster deeper engagement with temporally and culturally distant texts for contemporary audiences. In other words, how might we communicate key textual information to audience members who have potentially never before engaged with medieval texts or, in particular, with the source text? How can we even more deeply engage audience members who have previously encountered the source text? By implementing different immersive performance strategies, I theorize that the audience will achieve a greater level of engagement with the material. Walton discusses knowledge production in terms of practice as research, with specific reference to immersive theatre: “I propose that the rupture of the wild and unknown and the process of taming and constraining can lead to new kinds of knowing...Immersive theatre can create the circumstances for such bewildering experiences for its audiences, and so lead them to the discovery of new knowledge” (126).

Following Walton’s line of thinking, I aim to design experiences that navigate this intersection of liberation and constraint to result in knowledge acquisition for the audience. This process entails conceptualizing and implementing immersive performance techniques that can physically embody the textually immersive elements. In order to determine which immersive techniques to implement, the type of sensory provocation at play first has to be identified. Then, an accordant method of immersion should be crafted which will materially provoke the same

senses. For instance, passages from the text that are aurally immersive best lend themselves to the purview of sound design.

During this process of conceptualization, the audience's comfort and willingness must be considered, as "[t]he coercive form of some immersive artworks can undo their emancipative aim, causing the audience to withdraw...The aporia of the ideological desire to emancipate spectators occludes a common experience of immersive performance that...reinforces the behaviours it seeks to dispel by creating active voyeurs and passive participants" (Walton 137). Navigating this tension necessitates the consideration of how the immersive strategies implemented can be counterproductive to a performance's goals.

### Objective 3

My final objective entails ascertaining the factors that influence the degree that participants engage with the narrative elements of the medieval text in question. Put simply, what are the factors that lead to either deepened engagement or disengagement from the material? Audience engagement will be measured by utilizing a qualitative framework for audience research, constituted by both focus groups and individual surveys. Walton identifies the following question to be considered in such studies: "Is the audience-participant a co-researcher or a test subject?" (133); the audience-participants in this study will be cooperative in that their level of interaction with the work influences the performance to varying degrees. Simultaneously, they also function as test subjects as the study seeks to measure their engagement through data collection. Because "the audience-participant...imbues [the work] with meaning" (Walton 124), their response is crucial to understanding what that meaning is in practice.

Analyzing audience-participants' responses following the performances allows for the



further optimization of immersive performance creation as a means of engaging with historically distant texts. Through the examination of how a performance can deepen an audience-participant's understanding of a medieval text, a process of embodied knowledge transmission takes place, one which is generative and reflexive.

### Section III: Design and Analysis

#### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study first engages with textual immersion in *SGGK*, the characteristics of which are contextualized in the previous section. After selecting the third fitt of the poem to work with, due to its readiness for engagement with queer theory and my perception of the poem's queerness as significant to the text, I applied the characteristics of textual immersion to the poem. By utilizing perceptual theories, I was able to identify where and how immersive qualities manifested in the text. Following that process, I completed a textual explication to reveal the narrative and thematic effects of those qualities. Essentially, how are immersive environments established in *SGGK* and what do they tell us about the text itself?

As previously outlined, there are two main concepts within perceptual theory that informed my notion of what constitutes textual immersion: Jonathan Kramnick's antirepresentational theory of perception—characterized by immediacy and activity—and the idea emerging from Ashby Kinch's research which emphasizes the active method of visual perception and rejects the notion that it is passive. Immediacy in this sense refers to the world created in a piece of art being made tangible to the spectator or reader in a manner that is akin to the sense of touch. So, any aspects of a text which conjure associations with tactility would be assigned to this category, as would any aspects that suggest an immediacy of perception. Activity of perception refers to the movement involved with the mental process one undergoes when perceiving a sensory experience within the work (that of a character) or without (the reader engaging actively with some representation of a sensory experience). These characteristics inform the idea that when the language in the text engages in sensory stimulation, an immersive environment is created.

The next piece of the framework involves looking at the relationship of textual immersion to the text's content, and what thematic effects it has. Once this relationship has been clarified, it acts as the guide for what should ideally be communicated to the audience after translating a work's textual immersion to a performative context. With this knowledge established, work then begins on deciding the most effective strategies for achieving the desired physically immersive effects.

With specific reference to *SGGK*, my aim was to reach the heteronormative, masculinist themes of the text and to do so, I had to first articulate the specific components of those themes. These components are what can be communicated to the audience-participants, rather than the overarching themes, which have the potential to be too broad to be discerned. For instance, when chivalric ideals are promoted by the text, the mechanics of this project are constituted by smaller ones, particularly through the Lady's seduction, her and Gawain's arguments, his declarations of honour, and various breaches of intimacy. In the analysis phase, we will return to this notion as I examine the data for responses which refer to these thematic gestures.

## Textual Explication

I will now outline the text<sup>7</sup> and, using these perceptual theories, articulate how I found the adapted section of the poem to be immersive. The section comes from the third fitt, in which the action alternates between the Lord's hunt and the Lady's seduction of Gawain. These scenes take place in the context of the game the Lord proposes to Gawain, which leads to an exchange of winnings at the end of each day. On the first of three days Gawain spends at Lord Bertilak's castle, the Lord's deer hunt is described in striking detail. The beginning of the hunt is established with a great degree of sensory provocation:

and the canny kennel-men had coupled the hounds  
and opened the cages and called them out.

On the bugles they blew three bellowing notes  
to a din of baying and barking, and the dogs  
which chased or wandered were chastened by whip.  
As I heard it, we're talking a hundred top hunters  
at least.

The handlers hold their hounds,  
the huntsmen's hounds run free.

Each bugle blast rebounds

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<sup>7</sup> Armitage's translation pays attention to and preserves the sonic qualities of the original text, which are fundamental to the poem's content. My experience and interpretation of this translation reflect what a contemporary reader might have experienced of the original poem.

between the trunks of trees. (Armitage 1139-49)

A sonically robust environment is created in this excerpt, with the environment characterized by overwhelming noise. There is also a consistent movement of sound throughout this passage, emphasized in the final two lines which demonstrate the magnitude of the noise. The overpowering sonic atmosphere continues to be constructed in the lines: “But the hinds were halted with hollers and whoops / and the din drove the does to sprint for the dells. / Then the eye can see that the air is all arrows” (Armitage 1158-60). Not only do these lines expound upon the aural chaos, but they are also characterized by perceptual activity. The last line directly refers to one’s eye and visual perception of the flying arrows, establishing both a sonically and visually immersive landscape. In a different section of the fitt that I did not directly draw upon, but which informed the performance’s sound design, boars are described as “a most massive swine / with a fearsome grunt” (Armitage 1441-42).

The Lord then disembowels the deer he kills and the process is described in graphic detail:

Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach  
and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle...  
Its hind legs prised apart  
they slit the fleshy flaps,  
then cleave and quickly start  
to break it down its back. (1330-31, 1349-52)

The sense of touch is palpable in this excerpt, creating a graphic and violent environment which lends itself readily to the sound design and movement in the adapted scene.

An immersive environment is also established in the bedchamber scenes through both

tactile engagement and aural provocation:

while snug in his sheets lay slumbering Gawain,  
dozing as the daylight dappled the walls,  
under a splendid cover, enclosed by curtains.  
And while snoozing he heard a slyly made sound,  
the sigh of a door swinging slowly aside.  
From below the bedding he brings up his head,  
wondering warily what it might be. (Armitage 1179-85)

Both tactility and the description of sound are utilized to indicate a breach of intimacy as the Lady enters Gawain's bedchamber while he is asleep. The activity of Gawain's perception is also at play here in the description of his confusion as he tries to make sense of the situation. His psychological state is described as the Lady's physical presence is discussed in detail:

The knight felt nervous;  
lying back he assumed the shape of sleep  
as she stole towards him with silent steps,  
then clasped the curtain and crept inside,  
then sat down softly at the side of his bed. (Armitage 1189-93)

The Lady's physical movements are emphasized here, as is her relationship to the space in a tactile sense. The touching of the curtain and the softness with which she sits on the bed conjure a mentally immersive environment which can, along with the other immersive elements I have identified, be effectively translated to a physical performance scenario.

## Adaptation

As previously discussed, I chose to adapt the third fitt due to its thematic engagement with gender and queerness. However, time constraints rendered it unfeasible to adapt the entire fitt, so I instead elected to adapt the first of the three sequences. The reason for this choice lies in the game being set up at the beginning of the fitt; selecting the second or third sequence would have been less understandable to people unfamiliar with the poem. Because a central objective of this study is to deepen engagement with historically distant material, I strived to include the most comprehensible portion of this section so as not to cause confusion and disengagement. In addition to including content that can be understood without seeing the entirety of the poem performed, the aforementioned immersive sections are clear priorities for inclusion in the adapted script. I will further elaborate on those aspects in the next section regarding experiment design.

Adapting *SGGK*, as a nondramatic text, involves primarily translating the structure from verse to play text. I adopted narration into the script, pulled existing dialogue from the source text and, in some cases, added pieces of dialogue which I felt either elucidated the script or made the scene more engaging. Below is an example of how I interspersed pieces of dialogue within the narration. The text on the left is from Armitage's lines 1137-1140, and the text on the right is my dramatic adaptation.

So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land  
his lordship and his huntsmen were high on horseback,  
and the canny kennel-men had coupled the hounds  
and opened the cages and called them out.

Fig. 1

**NARRATOR 1**  
So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land  
his lordship and his huntsmen were high on horseback—  
**LORD BERTILAK**  
With haste, men!  
**NARRATOR 1**  
—and the canny kennel-men had coupled the hounds  
and opened the cages—  
**LORD BERTILAK**  
Call out the hounds!

Fig. 2

In terms of structure, I maintained the alternation of scenes which focus on Gawain and the Lord, ending with the scene in which they make their exchange, as the juxtaposition of the seduction with the hunt is crucial to understanding the thematic parallels in the scenes.

To maintain the intimacy which is so central to the material, I elected to have only two performers play all of the roles; my reasoning was that in having fewer actors to engage with, the participants could form a more intimate connection with the performers. Performer 1 plays Narrator 1 and Gawain, while Performer 2 plays Lord Bertilak, Lady Bertilak, and Narrator 2. There is also a gender-bending element in this decision, as the performer who plays the Lord and Lady performs a gender swap as they switch between the two characters. This change is shown through costume and is also indicated in the performer's vocal qualities which differ for each character.

The first scene is narrated by a nameless individual (played by the same performer who plays Gawain) and depicts the Lord's deer hunt—energetic, loud, and bloodthirsty. The Lord's energy, determination, and leadership are showcased here as he leads his fellow hunters in tracking the deer through the forest. Through my immersive creation strategies, the participants are placed in the positions of the Lord's huntsmen. Among these strategies is the direct invitation to circle around the room with the Lord at the top of the performance.

In the second scene, another narrator (played by the same performer who plays both the Lady and the Lord) tells us where we find Gawain: asleep in his bedchamber, a sharp contrast to the activity of the Lord in the previous scene. The Lady sneaks into the room, surprising the noble knight. She immediately sets out to seduce Gawain who, in his vulnerable state of undress, modestly seeks coverage. The pair become embroiled in a negotiation of power as Gawain tries desperately to evade the Lady's tactics of seduction. Finally, after undermining Gawain's status



of nobility and calling his courtliness into question, Gawain relents and consents to a kiss. The Lady, in a subversive gender role reversal, takes the knight in her arms and kisses him before exiting.

The third scene focuses on the Lord's disembowelment of the deer he has killed. In its adaptation, I made the scene instructional, with the Lord educating participants as he describes the graphic butchering process. He coaches the audience through the disembowelment in gory detail, punctuated by gestures which I choreographed. As the Lord explains the disemboweling process, he makes stylized movements which correspond to his instructions. Meanwhile the narrator of the scene imitates the movements as a demonstration to the participants that they too can join in. Through this instructional, movement rich scene, I aimed to give participants a tactile connection to the violence of the material.

In the final scene, the Lord returns from his hunt and is prepared to exchange his winnings with Gawain. For the Lord, that means he will offer Gawain his kill while Gawain must in turn offer what he has won that day—a kiss from the Lady. While in the source text this exchange takes place at a feast, I moved the setting to a courtyard to impart a sense of liminality between the public and private arenas that the two men have inhabited for the duration of the piece. Additionally, I desired to maintain stylistic consistency through the visual projections and deploying a feast setting seemed counter to this goal (I will return to the impact of this decision in Section IV: Reimagination).

The Lord calls out to Gawain, who joins him in the courtyard and is presented with an impressive pile of meat. In a brief moment of insecurity, the Lord asks for Gawain's reassurance that he is impressed with the haul, which the knight readily provides. In turn, Gawain apologetically prefaces his offer to the Lord; he would rather give him anything greater. Then,

the men share a kiss—it is apprehensive, awkward, and contrasts the sexual tension of the second scene’s kiss. At its completion, the Lord demands to know when and where Gawain received such a prize, but Gawain tersely reminds him that providing those details was not a condition of their agreement. There is a pause before the two men erupt into raucous laughter, ending the performance with a clap on one another’s back: their attempt at a return to the safety of purely platonic male interaction.

See Appendix A and B for the source text and the performance script.

## Experiment Design

I had the opportunity to utilize the Immersion Studio at Mount Royal University's Riddell Library and Learning Centre, a space equipped with ten projectors and 360-degree screens which offer a digitally immersive experience. The space offered an uncommon degree of projection-based immersion, so it seemed an ideal location to hold my experiments.



Fig. 3

The experiment designs were guided by my interpretation of textual immersion in *SGGK*, and I followed a process of determining what strategies to implement in order to physically evoke the mentally immersive effect achieved by the text. At the same time, I endeavoured to establish how to communicate the narrative and thematic aspects of those textually immersive elements to an audience. The hunting excerpts which I determined to be aurally immersive informed what I asked the sound designer to include in the soundscape, while the emphasis on sensuality in the bedchamber informed what I requested of the projection design. I will elaborate

on these design elements in specific after first contextualizing why there was more than one design.

To determine the most effective methods of immersion in this type of performance creation, several methods must be deployed and tested. Accurately gauging the efficacy of these methods also entails isolating them as much as possible, thus necessitating numerous designs which incorporate a variety of immersive techniques. I elected to create and implement three designs, with each of them using the same script. The experiments are designed so that every group will experience compounding immersive strategies, but in different ways; for instance, some groups will experience sensory deprivation while others will not. The findings from both of these structures will then be cross-referenced in the data analysis phase. Small group sizes allow for maximal discussion time and ensure ample space for the performers and participants to practice social distancing. The three experiment designs are as follows:

1. The participants will be asked to put on blindfolds before the performance begins and will be asked to remove them when they hear an audio cue (at the top of scene three). The performers will then be accompanied by visual projections. Immersive soundscapes are heard throughout, and physical materials will be used for tactile provocation.
2. The entire performance is experienced alongside visual projections and an immersive soundscape.
3. The text will be performed alongside visual projections. Participants will then be asked to put on headphones, in which the immersive soundscape plays, isolating what the

participants are able to hear, while visual projections of the poem (in modern English)<sup>8</sup> are shown.

The immersive soundscape, which is utilized in every design but manipulated slightly in the third, is inspired by the aurally immersive language in *SGGK*. I worked with sound designers to achieve the aural environment that I interpreted to be created within the text. The instructions to the designers were a combination of specific effects and generalized sensations, such as to include the animal sounds described in the text and to establish an eerie atmosphere. They then created soundscapes for the four scenes, with an ensuing process of revisions.

The sounds for the first scene start with faint birdsong, which is then drowned out by galloping horses with gradual intensity. Horses whinny, dogs are heard barking, and a powerful bugle sounds. Men yell in the distance as the sounds of the animals continue. The bugle and yelps of dogs seem to reach a climax before the din quiets, giving way to arrows speeding through the air and a grunting boar. An echo effect takes hold in the last twenty seconds, drawing out the haunting sound of a dying animal while a steady, subtle buzzing undercuts the entire track.

The sound for the second scene is sensual, seductive, ethereal, and eerie. A woman's hoarse and breathy whisper is contrasted by another woman's bright, high-pitched vocals. Atop the vocals are a creaking and slamming door, all connected by an underlying ethereal synth. The third scene's soundscape starts with a deep buzzing that slowly builds to a crescendo before

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C for the text shown in the projections

fading out at the end of the track. Throughout is the sharp swiping and sawing of blades contesting with guttural animal noises, bones crunching, and a disembodied wet squelching.

For the fourth, the soundscape incorporates the same eerie undertones as that of the second, with faintly chirping crickets. The eerie sonic quality oscillates in intensity throughout, maintaining an uncomfortable tension until its fadeout at the end.

The visual projections vary slightly from design to design, but I will first describe the foundational projection designs (these projections were used in the second experiment design, while in the first and third, some elements were added and removed). For the first scene, as it is a hunting scene and takes place outdoors, the projection reflects a forest environment characterized by vibrant green and lush foliage. Early morning sun peers through the canopy of trees and shadows creep along the forest floor. The second projection, in contrast to the clearly contextual environment of the first, is sensual and atmospheric. Pink light emits from the screen, which portrays an extreme close-up on folds of magenta silk. The fabric, in its sensuality, tangibly evokes the tactile sensations present in the source text (such as the Lady pulling the curtain aside and sitting gently on Gawain's bed) despite being perceived visually by the participants. The third scene repurposes the first projection, and the fourth projection presents a liminal space between the forest and the castle. Conceptualized as a courtyard, brick walls surround the participants with arched entryways in the corners, through which the forest is visible. Statues also line the walls to evoke a sense that those within the courtyard's walls are being watched, as Gawain and Bertilak are in the source text.

The third experiment design utilized textual projection, as the headphones (which play the same soundscape that is heard in the other designs) deliberately isolate what the participants are able to hear, meaning the performers' dialogue is muted. My intention with this design

choice was to test whether participants could gain an embodied understanding of the material with less perceptual emphasis placed on the dialogue. The projection of the text allows participants to follow along with the text—which is in the source text’s verse form rather than the adapted script form—while hearing the soundscape very close to their ears, reflecting the theoretical notion of perceptual immediacy. The participants are asked to don the headphones at the beginning of the third scene, at which point the textual projection is incorporated. An excerpt of the poem is overlaid on the forest projection and in the fourth scene, the poem is overlaid on the courtyard projection.

Participants in the first design are asked to put on blindfolds before the performance begins, so they hear the entire first scene without seeing any projections. While blindfolded, the performers have lengths of fabric which they are able to manipulate to provoke the participants’ tactile sense. They can brush past the participants’ skin, wrap the participants in fabric, and whip the fabric to create another sonic dimension and to cause a rush of air. They are given an audio cue to remove the blindfolds, which comes at the top of the second scene. The cue is the Lady’s line “Good morning, Sir Gawain” and is intended to place the participants in Sir Gawain’s position of waking and opening his eyes to see the Lady entering his bedchamber.

The factors at play in each design, and in each scene more specifically, were a combination of controlled and uncontrollable. The factors in my control were the inclusion of a soundscape, the visual projections (both the content of the projections and when they appear), performer movement and interaction *to a degree*, and the inclusion of tactile elements, blindfolds, and headphones. Foremost among the factors not in my control included the noise of the studio’s ventilation system, the volume of the sound design and performers, and the movement or engagement of the participants.

The order of events in each experiment included a five-minute introduction before a fifteen-minute-long performance, followed by a short break, the individual survey for which twenty minutes was allocated and a fifteen-minute-long focus group session. The daily schedule included time for reflection at the end of each day, allowing me the option to make small adjustments to the designs the following day:

Day 1:

- Design 1 with group 1, followed by surveys and focus group
- Design 2 with group 2, followed by surveys and focus group
- Researcher reflection

Day 2:

- Design 2 with group 3, followed by surveys and focus group
- Design 3 with group 4, followed by surveys and focus group
- Researcher reflection

Day 3:

- Design 3 with group 5, followed by surveys and focus group
- Design 1 with group 6, followed by surveys and focus group
- Analysis of all experiments begins

Initially, I planned to conduct two sessions of each experiment design with four to five participants in each but due to the number of participants who expressed interest, I was only able to conduct four experiments. Based on the lack of participants available for two of the six time slots, these were cancelled. Because of these cancellations, the third design was run twice while the others were run once.



## Rehearsal Process

Because of the study's objectives, it was important that the performers had a sensory connection to the material so as to translate that embodiment to the participants. As such, I built methods of sensory provocation into the rehearsal process to establish this connection. Each rehearsal began with a ten-to-fifteen-minute warm-up during which I played music by NUM, the sound designers' musical duo, as the soundscape would have a similar quality to their past work. I prompted the performers to start out with small, nearly microscopic movements and gradually expand their physicality as they embodied what they heard. They were also instructed to note what emotions arose for them during the warm-up and note how those felt in their bodies. In one of the rehearsals, I conducted the same style of warm-up but manipulated the lighting in the room, dimming the lights to increase the spatially transformative qualities of the music. These warm-ups led the performers to remark on connections they made between the music in the warm-ups and the emotional content of the script.

I then incorporated a variety of physically based exercises into the rehearsals. One such exercise had the performers deliver the bedchamber scene while holding either end of a towel and maintaining tension in the towel for the duration of the scene. This exercise aims to hold the energy and connection between the characters while there is an ongoing negotiation of tension and power between the two. As well, this exercise had specific relevancy to an immersive performance as it ensured the performers' movement throughout the studio was intentional.

Another was *Towards/Away/Stay*, in which the performers stand across from one another on an imaginary line. With each line they deliver, they must either step towards or away from their scene partner or remain in the same place. The objective of this exercise is to establish the spatial relationship between the performers in context of the material.

Take it to 11 was another exercise I utilized, which involves the performers running each scene and incorporating one very strong emotion, taken to the extreme. Following the exercise, we determined whether any discoveries were made about the characters' emotions that should remain in and inform the performance. The performers experimented with heightened excitement on part of the narrator, nervousness for Gawain, enchantment of the Lady, and vengefulness for the Lord. This exercise in particular was effective for establishing character choices—although, unlike the previous examples, this was not directly relevant to immersive performance.

Blindfolds were incorporated as another way to establish a sensory connection between the performers and the material. I had the performers don blindfolds and run through the performance, though for safety reasons, they stood in place while they did so. Limitation of the performers' sight in the rehearsals placed them in the position of the participants who would experience similar sensory deprivation in the experiments. A discovery we made while the performers delivered their lines with the blindfolds on was that their connection to one another was altered; both performers felt that with their eyes covered they had to pay greater attention to one another's dialogue and thus heard tonal qualities they had not previously noticed.

Once the projection and sound designers had completed their work, I ran the performance with both the sounds and projections that would be used in the experiments to give the performers a holistic sense of the piece. However, we did not have access to the Immersion Studio until the dress rehearsal, so in earlier rehearsals the projections were on one screen rather than on the digitally immersive screens of the Studio. After performing alongside the designers' contributions, I guided a discussion with the performers about if and how the performance felt different in their bodies. They reflected that they had a deeper sense of the world inhabited by the characters and gained a deeper understanding of the seduction in the bedchamber scene as its

own type of hunt.

## Data Collection

The process of data collection entailed undergoing an ethics review process, seeking participants, having potential participants complete an informed consent form and initial survey, then placing participants in performance experiments. Additionally, as is characteristic of practice-as-research methodology, the research design incorporated systematic intervals of self-reflection, documentation, and process refinement. Prior to the commencement of the experiments, the participants were also provided with a plot summary of the poem and an overview of the experiment's design.

As the researcher, I remained in the studio for the duration of the performance to make observations of the participants, which was guided by observational questions:

1. To what degree are the audience-participants focusing their gaze on the performers? If their gazes are leaving the performers, does this appear to be due to physical obstacles or is their attention being pulled by other elements?
2. Do the audience-participants remain seated for the duration of the performance?
3. Do the audience-participants engage with one another, be it verbally or non-verbally, at any point throughout the performance?

Audio-visual recordings of the performances were also captured so I could return to them for observational and cross-referencing purposes. Following the performances, participants were asked to complete an individual written survey before then participating in a focus group. All of the questions asked of participants can be found in Appendix D, though I will also discuss the questions and the responses to those in the coming pages. It is important to note that some of the questions I formulated were informed by my initial desire to assess the audience's understanding of *SGGK* as impacted by the performance. Over the course of this study, I discovered that

although it was not possible to measure the audience-participants' levels of understanding, I was able to access their perception of their engagement with the material.

I distributed the initial surveys to establish if the participants had a diverse range of experiences with both the poem and medieval literature, generally. It is ideal for this experiment to have a range of different levels of experience, because it reflects what the audience in a public performance setting would look like. The survey first instructs "Please indicate your level of experience with medieval literature. Please respond with a number on a scale of 1-10, with 1 indicating that you have never read any medieval literature or seen any dramatic or filmic adaptations of any medieval texts, and 10 indicating you have read or studied medieval literature at considerable length." The responses to this question offered a baseline for the participants' background, with most of the participants falling somewhere in the middle of the scale. One participant ranked their experience at a 10, and two others ranked theirs at a 1.

The second question asks "Have you encountered *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* prior to this study? If so, please state what your interaction with the poem was—for instance, reading a translation of the poem or reading it in its original language (Middle English), studying the poem in an educational course, watching a filmic adaptation of the poem, etc." This question again aids in establishing that the participants have a range of knowledge of or experience with the source text. Nine of the respondents indicated they had no previous interaction with the text, while the remaining six had varying experience. Some had studied the poem years prior, while others had more recently read a translation or studied it in a post-secondary literature course.

The individual written surveys distributed after the performances allowed for participants to have focused time to complete a series of questions that I believed would yield the most helpful information for achieving the objectives of the study.

1. Please state your initial impressions of the performance you encountered
2. Did any aspect(s) of the performance feel particularly engaging to you? If so, please describe what and how to the best of your ability.
3. Did you feel particularly disengaged during any aspect(s) of the performance? If so, please describe when and why to the best of your ability.
4. Would you say you have a deeper understanding and/or appreciation of this section of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* following the performance?
5. Did you feel that the immersive strategies used in the performance made the medieval text more accessible and/or meaningful to you? If so, at what points and in what ways?
6. How involved in the action of the hunting scene did you feel?
7. Which of the four scenes (the hunt, the bedchamber, the disembowelling, or the exchange) felt most intimate to you? Please explain why.

I also elected to use focus groups as a method of data collection as they present an opportunity for generative interactions between participants in a moderated context. Some of their benefits are that they “can provide insight on multiple and different views and on the dynamics of interaction within a group context, such as consensus [and] disagreement” (Litosseliti 16). Participation in such a space allows for participants to respond to one another’s comments and can lead to interpretations that might not otherwise be discovered. Focus groups offer a more informal environment than individual written surveys because of their conversational nature. Because the participants are able to respond to one another, ask questions, and make jokes in this environment, it can lead to an increased sense of casualness which has the potential to make people feel comfortable and more willing to share. Focus groups also allow me

as the researcher to respond to comments and ask for clarification if any of the responses are unclear. The questions asked in the focus groups are as follows:

1. How did the stimulation of your senses affect how involved you felt in the narrative?
2. Did you feel particularly connected to the performers at any point of the performance? Your co-participants?
3. At any point of the performance, did you feel comfortable enough to move throughout the space? If so, when? If not, what were the obstacles?
4. At any point of the performance, did you feel compelled to engage verbally or non-verbally with the performers or co-participants? Why or why not?

Having these multiple methods of engagement creates space for a diverse range of responses.

While there will inevitably be some overlap in the responses as participants may occasionally repeat thoughts in the focus groups that they share in the individual surveys, collecting both types is still useful as the questions asked and styles of engagement yield an array of results.

## Analysis

This section is both my response to and interpretation of my work in the experiments. Because the analysis in this study is not scientific nor quantitative, I did not obtain definable knowledge but gained rich insight and gathered information for dramaturgical strategies. Before I detail the study's results, I will overview my analytical process. This entailed the use of NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to house, view, and map the information collected from the experiments. I inputted videos of the performance experiments, videos and transcriptions of the focus groups, and the individual surveys to the program, then began analyzing these data sources. The textual source of the transcribed focus groups was both included in text searches and I was able to highlight portions of it to code.

NVivo allowed for straightforward comparison between different types of data, as I was able to both make "nodes" and highlight text to code as I read through the data. I created nodes from every survey focus group question, which enabled me to view all of the respondents' answers to the questions at once. I then also made nodes out of themes that I found to be most reflective of my objectives.

As well, analyzing congregate responses in the individual surveys revealed the moments when multiple participants found themselves particularly engaged or disengaged, what felt the most immersive, and whether the poem felt more accessible following the performance.

While doing an initial overview of the material, I made note of ideas and phrases that seemed to emerge multiple times so I could use those as points of inquiry in addition to those which I conceptualized prior to data collection. This combination of preconceived and emergent themes lent themselves to NVivo's text search function, which searches across all textual data for the inputted term or root word and groups together each instance in which it is mentioned in



one location. Some of the terms I imagined might lead to the discoveries I was hoping to make included “touch,” “hear,” “see,” and “movement.” Because sensory provocation is the basis of the study, it was useful to inquire if and in what contexts audience-participants use terminology directly relating to the senses in their responses. Such queries were straightforward starting points for this type of search before moving onto the more unexpected queries that arose from the data. The list below is comprised of all the words I used in my text searches, consisting of both those I initially conceptualized and those that emerged from the data during my overview. The asterisk following a word indicates that both the root word and all stemmed words were included in the search. Words without an asterisk indicate that a search for only exact matches was conducted.

Animal
Anxiety
Anxious
Disorient*
Eavesdrop*
Eye contact
Hear*
Heart
Impulse
Interrupt
Look*
Movement
See*
Sense
Sensory overload
Sexual
Sit*
Social
Stand*
Supposed
Touch*
Vision
Visual*
Voyeur
Walk*

Fig. 4

I then contextualized how each of these concepts emerged, making note of concepts that came up repeatedly in similar contexts. I used the word tree tool to visualize the text searches and easily see the context in which a word emerged. Particularly, it is useful to know what other words are used in conjunction with the subject of the search, and if any of those appear numerous times. Congregate responses offer valuable information about the experience as it can demonstrate the effectiveness—or lack thereof—of a design choice if multiple participants share an opinion or response.

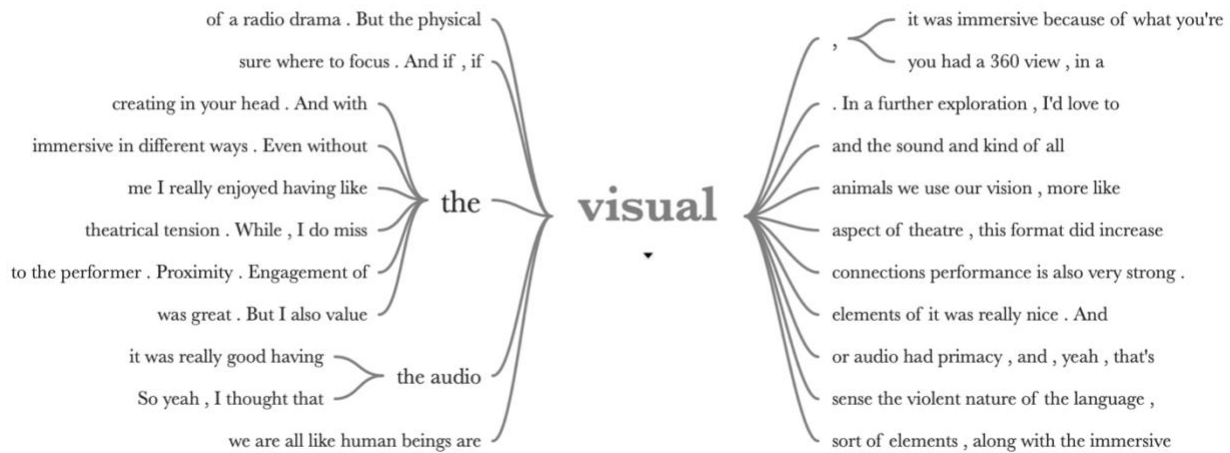


Fig. 5

I have interpreted the data I collected as constituting five central subject areas of analysis: participant connection (broken into three subsections consisting of connection to the performers, to one another, and to the text), the motion of the audience, somatic response, inhibition, and disengagement.

#### Participant Connection (to performers)

Participant connection is key to immersive performance and in this context, can be thought of in different facets. One feature of immersive performance is the opportunity for performers to make direct connections with the audience-participants. When such a connection is

made, the participants experience immersion in an isolated, rather than collective, sense. These moments in which the audience-participant experiences something unique to them can lead to heightened engagement with the work.

In response to the survey question that asked which aspects of the performance felt particularly engaging, four respondents mentioned the hunting scene. Within these responses, participants spoke not only of the scene's immediacy and theatricality, but also about direct connection with the performers. The invitation from performers to move around the room was a point of connection that resonated with multiple respondents. One participant reflected that she was inclined to participate when a performer invited participants to crouch during the disembowelment.

Eye contact was a significant connector for many of the participants, with some reflecting that the disembowelling felt engaging due to its graphic nature and the invitation in the form of eye contact. With reference to the same scene, a participant responded that they felt complicit in the butchering of the animal especially because one of the actors made direct eye contact, indicating a deeper involvement with the piece as a result. Another participant stated that making eye contact was striking because that does not usually happen in theatrical scenarios. In this regard, the novelty of this connection was what resonated for the participant.

“Extended” was a word that emerged in conjunction with “eye contact” multiple times as I conducted my word searches; this concept of prolonged eye contact was a common thread for several participants, as others remarked on being unsure when to break eye contact or feeling it was difficult to maintain. Again, subjectivity of past experiences is key here, as one participant who found difficulty in maintaining eye contact said they were unused to engaging with performers in that way, while another participant who shared she has a background in

performance felt comfortable with that form of connection. She, at another point, commented that when a performer looked directly at her, she did not feel intimidated but found it to be an interesting point of connection because there was no perceived pressure to “do” anything. One person also shared that they sometimes initiated eye contact and spoke to their comfort level in the scenario.

Of course, visual perception is a main factor in the piece, so the word “look” and its stemmed words (looked and looking) came up in multiple instances. Of particular interest to me was the emergent concept of watching the performers from different angles. One participant remarked that either looking up to see the performers or looking down at them felt powerful, and if they had engaged in the opposite way at the same point, the experience would have been altered. Another commented that because of his height, he usually has to look down at people, so it felt novel to sit and look up to watch the performers. Being able to look anywhere in the studio and still feel as though it were a part of the piece led to a sense of increased engagement for a different participant. Similarly, someone else reflected that the piece felt like a combination of theatre and film because they experienced the intimacy of theatre but with the different angles of film. The ability to choose the angle and position from which one views the performers is an individualized experience that impacts a participant’s relationship to the work.

One participant reflected that he felt most connected to the performers when he was blindfolded and touched by fabric or experienced the sensation of air rushing past him as the performers moved the fabric quickly past his skin. He reported that this sensation was also heightened for him due to the deprivation of his sight.

The appearance of the words “eavesdropping” and “voyeur” occurred in reference to the bedchamber scene; one participant stated that she felt she was listening in on an intimate

conversation that she should not be hearing. This response came from a participant in the design which employed the use of blindfolds for the bedchamber scene. When referring to the same scene but in the design which allowed participants to see and move around, a participant stated they did not want to engage or make noise because they were watching such an intimate interaction, as if they were a voyeur. Another related their experience of feeling particularly engaged during the bedchamber scene because they were so focused on watching what they felt was the most intimate scene, also referring to themselves as a voyeur. All of these responses indicate that in the bedchamber scene, the participants felt there was a breach of intimacy, as both eavesdropping and voyeurism suggest that one is taking part in an intimate moment without the knowledge of the characters. The key difference in the response of eavesdropping versus voyeurism is that in the case of the former, the participant was blindfolded and could only hear the scene, whereas the other participants who likened themselves to voyeurs were able to see the performers as well. There was a third respondent who reflected that she felt like a voyeur but without specific reference to any particular scene, so it is not possible to apply this same analysis to her response.

Physically immersive strategies have the potential to enhance the connection between performer and participant, being a particularly significant aspect of immersive performance and often being perceived as novel to the audience. A sense of intimacy was achieved in these performances, with participants both feeling that they were part of the story's intimacy and feeling they were on the outside and breaching the intimacy between the characters. The freedom of the participants to move and watch the performers from different positions and angles also affected the relationships of the participants to the performers and thus their relationship to the work itself.

### Participant Connection (to one another)

Contrary to the previous subsection in which I discussed connection between the performers and participants leading to isolated immersive experiences, here I will elaborate on how participant connection to one another can lead to collective immersion.

Connection to another audience-participant was reflected by one respondent who shared that they looked across the performers at an intimate point of the performance and made eye contact with another participant, which they felt was both interesting and strange as it would not typically happen in a proscenium theatre. The person they looked at shared this sentiment, remarking that seeing another participant felt reminiscent of seeing their reflection when watching television and being reminded that they are watching something.

One other moment of connection between two participants took place when they both stood simultaneously, while another connection between participants came in the form of sitting together, as one person commented they felt a community had been established as a group of them sat in one specific place. They then wondered if the purpose of this grouping was to feel a sense of security or merely a natural gravitation towards one another's physicality. Another participant in the same focus group commented that they sat at one point when they noticed everyone else was sitting, so the question emerges whether a group of audience-participants sitting together is due to a bond being formed or an adherence to social convention.

Social norms and conventions were directly named in some instances, with two participants sharing that they looked to the other people in their group to ensure that they were correctly following the norms of the space. One of them elaborated that they sometimes moved in order to adhere to the conventions established by the group, not in accordance with their own impulse. In a group which utilized headphones, all of the participants shared that when they

stood up it was because the others were standing. Conversely, in another group, a participant remarked that social pressures prohibited them from engaging directly with the performers so as not to bring attention to themselves.

Connection amongst participants emerged as a key aspect of these performances, with that relationship both serving to immerse the audience in a collective manner and to contribute to the participants' self-awareness. In these ways, moments of connection between audience-participants sometimes function as points of engagement and as inhibiting factors to participation.

#### Participant Connection (to material)

The final subsection of participant connection relates to the audience-participants' connection to the subject matter of the text. While connection to the narrative is a thread that runs throughout all the data, here I will only examine comments that are specific to a connection with the subject matter.

Some respondents spoke of the sensation that they had a role in the narrative, such as feeling as though they were the hunters chasing prey in the first scene. In another instance, a participant commented that they felt like they were the animal being butchered in the disembowelment scene.

The participants from the design which utilized blindfolds spoke to how the loss of vision affected their experience of the story. According to one of the participants, the loss of sight added to her experience, while another said that the lack of sight emphasized her sense that the piece has a history of orality. However, she underlined that she valued the visual experience that came after the blindfolds were removed.

These responses make clear that the freedom of where one can look (magnified by the

ability to move freely around the space) contributes to one's engagement with the work, as does depriving then returning one's sense of sight.

Another participant wrote that she felt at the centre of the action when hearing the actors while being touched at the same time. Tactile provocation for her, in combination with sound, led to a deep engagement and presence within the piece. She wrote that when touched, she felt like she was being touched by branches and leaves, speaking to a sense of immersion within the hunt scene's environment. Provocation of multiple senses offered different modes of engagement with the story, according to one participant who was in a session utilizing headphones.

One participant was particularly interested in the bowels that the Lord presents to Gawain in the final scene. She can be seen in the video of the session crouching down and staring at the pile of meat (which is a bundle of red and pink strips of fabric) for a long moment before turning her interest back to the performers. In the survey responses, she noted that she was extremely drawn to the pile but was unable, at that point, to articulate exactly why. In response to this occurrence, another participant commented during the focus group that she found it interesting when the other participant became interested in the venison. She went on to articulate how this was a fascinating moment for her as she became hyperaware of other people in the space. The investment in the meat can be interpreted as a disengagement from the performers and their dialogue but can also be seen as heightened engagement with the narrative as she effectively embodied the role of someone in the space with the Lord and Gawain who would undoubtedly be invested in such an impressive haul.

To the question that asked which of the four scenes (the hunt, the bedchamber, the disemboweling, or the exchange) felt most intimate, seven of the respondents said the disemboweling was the most intimate scene while six stated the bedchamber was the most



intimate. The disembowelment felt intimate due to the eye contact the performers held with the participants, the gore of the script, the violent sounds, the closeness of the sounds to participants in the headphone design, the performers' visceral gestures, the gratification of the violence in comparison to the seduction scene, and in one case, the backdrop of the textual projection.

Intimacy of the bedchamber scene was said to be due to a range of factors: the closeness of the performers, the scene's slower pace, the fact that there was less sensory information to absorb, the sensation of being touched by fabric for participants in the blindfold design, and the juxtaposition of the kiss followed by the violence of the disemboweling scene.

I am interested by the comparisons made by participants between these two scenes in the context of this question. That the contrast of these scenes served to illustrate their intimacy verifies that the immersive techniques used in the performances effectively communicated the tensions between seduction and violence in the text. In addition to noting this comparison, other commonalities in these responses include immediacy in terms of aural and tactile perception, and the interaction that took place between performers and participants.

One other participant shared that they felt more connected to the performers during the bedchamber scene, which they perceived to be less overwhelming than the hunt scene. This idea was echoed by someone else who thought the bedchamber was the most intimate due to there being less sensory information to process. To contextualize these responses, both of these participants were in the session which did not utilize headphones or blindfolds. The notion that too much sensory provocation can inhibit connection might also indicate there are disparate elements at play or could be due to the subjectivity of the participants' perceptions, as overstimulation of the senses is always a possibility in immersive performance.

The sexuality of the piece was commented on multiple times, with one participant writing

that he felt the disembowelment scene was sexual and thus paralleled the bedchamber scene. A second participant wrote that the immersive strategies of the piece allowed her greater access to the inner workings of the text, specifically with regards to the sexual tension of both Gawain and the Lord, and Gawain and the Lady.

In response to the fourth question, “Would you say you have a deeper understanding and/or appreciation of this section of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight following the performance?” twelve of the fifteen participants said they did indeed have a deeper understanding and/or appreciation of the poem, while three said they did not. Those who did not offered no further explanation. Of the other responses, some elaborated on the specific aspect they understood further, such as the link between Gawain’s encounters with the Lord and Lady and the presence of queerness.

The fifth question asked if the immersive strategies used in the performance made the medieval text more accessible and/or meaningful to the participants and if so, at what points and in what ways. All of the participants confirmed that the strategies made the text more accessible and/or meaningful, with specific references made to their own movement during the hunt scene, the combination of live performance with the immersive soundscape and projection, the performance taking place all around the studio, the use of touch, the instructional gestures in the disembowelment scene, and sensory provocation in general. By incorporating calls to interact with the piece and through the involvement of the senses, the performance was made more accessible and meaningful to the participants than if they had read the source text or experienced it in a more traditional theatrical form.

#### Audience Motion

Motion of the participants—and their perceptions of motion—throughout the

performance is also a significant subject area for analysis as it is a straightforward indicator of one's physical engagement with the work.

The impulse to move around the studio was mentioned by several participants, with two respondents referring specifically to walking through the space. They both shared this impulse, albeit for different reasons. One participant wrote that they walked around to keep up with the others in their group, despite feeling anxious. Another said that once they heard the soundscape in the headphones, they were compelled to move because of the intensity of the sounds. Similarly, other participants referenced aurality when they spoke about being compelled to move around the room in order to better hear the performers.

To the sixth question "How involved in the action of the hunting scene did you feel?" eleven of fifteen participants said explicitly that they felt very involved. One participant said they placed, on a scale of one to ten, their feeling of involvement at a four, while three participants misinterpreted the question and responded that they felt very involved in the disembowelment scene. (In a future scenario, I would use numbers when referring to scenes in survey questions so as to avoid similar confusion.) For those that did feel highly involved in the hunting scene, the involvement partly came from the invitation to follow the performers around the room, which one respondent noted felt like they were circling prey. This comment demonstrates that the participant experienced a deeper connection to the narrative through motion.

Participants also reflected that their connection to the intimacy in the bedchamber scene resulted from the low volume of the performers' dialogue because it pushed them to move closer to the action. In the video of the first session, two participants can be seen moving nearer to the performers in the bedchamber scene, echoing this feedback.

A respondent, when discussing their relationship to their physicality in the

disembowelment scene, described the feeling of not wanting to move because they were so focused on watching the violence. In this case, a lack of movement does not indicate disengagement but a state of being enthralled resulting in stillness.

From the blindfold design group, a participant shared that she felt being seated during the hunt at the beginning was at odds with the narrative, which gives rise to questions surrounding how movement and placement can detract from or enhance an experience which incorporates a lack of sight.

In the second group, none of the participants stood up when prompted to at the beginning of the performance. At the end of the first scene, one of the performers motioned for the participants to stand, which they did tentatively. All of them remained next to their seats and as the next scene began, one of the participants took his seat immediately. I suspect that because this group started off seated there was an established comfort level that felt daunting to traverse. The room had three chairs and there were three participants, whereas in the first session, there were more participants than chairs so not everyone could be seated at once.

During the second scene, one of the participants moved closer to the performers and then at the halfway point of the performance, both she and the remaining participants sat down again. When the performers motioned to the participants to put on their headphones, the participants did but it took a few moments. From this point forward, all of the participants remained seated.

In the first group, which did not utilize headphones or blindfolds, participants immediately started moving around the studio. Their movements were at first slow, casual, and disorganized, until one of the performers motioned for them to follow her. At this point, the participants followed her around the studio in a circle. Later in the scene, one of the actors performed a gesture which mimics an arrow flying, and a participant flinched. In the

participant's survey, she noted that this was an especially engaging moment. Other participant movement that I observed included the group standing at one of the performer's invitation to do so (a moment of initiation which I did not direct the performer to do and instructed her not to do in future performances).

During the bedchamber scene, all of the participants sat on the floor and I, as the observer, sat behind them. Following the scene, I stood to observe from a different vantage point and some of the participants followed suit. I realized in this moment that my movement primed participant movement, so I made a note to myself to make a more conscious effort to remain out of view of the participants in the following sessions. Others remained seated until one of the performers motioned for them to stand.

During the disembowelment scene in this session, one of the participants moved her hands to mimic the gestures made by the performers. In her survey response, the participant stated that she felt the brutality of the hunters when copying the performers' gestures. This comment indicates that the immersive strategy used in this scene did lead to a more meaningful interaction with the text. However, of all the performance experiments, this was the only instance when a participant engaged with imitating these movements.

In the third group, which implemented the same design as the previous session, all of the participants started in a standing position. When the first immersive projection came up, two of the participants started moving slowly around the studio. At a performer's prompt to follow her, most of the participants did, with one remaining stationary. After about a minute, one of the participants started moving in the opposite direction of the others. Subsequently in the focus group, he spoke of his theatre background which has resulted in his unconscious inclination to balance a room. Here, the subjectivity of participants' experiences is relevant to how they

physically engage with a performance.

Participants continued to shuffle around the room in the second scene, with one of them moving next to the performers. Several of the other participants moved to different positions, presumably to get a better vantage point. Later in the performance, two of the participants turned their attention to the projection and read the text rather than watched the performers. Such movement around the space differs from that which arose from a direct interaction with the performer, such as when one of the performers got up from the floor and a nearby participant backed up in response. Throughout this session, there was near constant movement of the participants; alongside the first group, this one had the most participant movement.

Prior to the performance, the participants were given instructions for when to remove their blindfolds. The cue for this action was a piece of dialogue that one of the performers delivered. One of the three participants removed their blindfold at the cue, while the other two did not, and the blindfolds were removed by a performer. A performer then prompted them to stand, but only one of them did. One of the two who remained seated did not appear to see the performer's gesture. The standing participant shifted his weight while he stood but did not move from his place. After a couple of minutes, he sat back down in his chair. In the focus group, this participant spoke of wanting to move but deciding not to after seeing that the other participants were still seated, unmoving. Later in the performance, the same participant flinched when one of the performers delivered a line while making eye contact with him. Following this action, the only participant movement that took place for the remainder of the performance was when the next immersive projection came up and the participants moved in their seats to look at it.

Through the combination of audience responses and my own observations, I have made several discoveries about the role of motion in this immersive performance. Participant

movement in the performance experiments was stimulated by performers' invitations, aurality in terms of the soundscape and dialogue, and connection to the performance's content. I discovered that a lack of motion does not always indicate disengagement or lack of involvement with the narrative but can sometimes reflect a deeper level of focus on the work. Unexpected motions from the performers can lead to higher engagement from the audience and participation in movements as prompted by the performers can offer a deeper connection to or engagement with the material. As well, deliberate choices can be made to spur audience movement with the goal of imparting a particular thematic notion.

### Somatic Experience

The somatic experiences of the audience-participants offer insight into how they were affected by the physically immersive strategies. In response to the first survey question which asked participants to state their initial impressions of the performance, ten of the fifteen responses gestured to a sense of physical immersion in some way as they recounted experiencing a significant involvement in the performance. Recurring concepts that emerged from these responses were the provocation of multiple senses and the 360-degree projections, both of which led to increased investment or involvement in the story.

Other elements that were said to be particularly engaging were the soundscape, the movement of the performers around the participants, the freedom for participants to move around the studio, and tactile provocation. Of these comments, three respondents specifically referred to the combination of these strategies leading to a sense of deeper engagement. The juxtaposition between the hunting and bedchamber scene was elucidated for one participant by the differences in the soundscape.

My focus on sensory provocation led me to run an inquiry on the word "sense," with

most of the results being related to sense-making rather than the senses.<sup>9</sup> However, one participant in the blindfold design session relayed that she missed the cue to remove her blindfold because she was so focused on her auditory sense that she became deeply absorbed in the story.

In the final experiment that utilized blindfolds that were placed on participants before the performance began, the performers moved around the participants, occasionally brushing them with lengths of fabric. The first participant who was touched with fabric displayed no physical reaction, while another participant later reached up to touch the fabric when it brushed past him. Two respondents who were in the blindfold design credited the touch component for feeling involved in the action of the hunting scene, with one of them articulating that he desired even further tactile provocation, possibly in the form of fans and mist.

One participant said they felt like the dying animal in the disembowelment scene which was emphasized because of the closeness of the sounds of knives—a comment emerging from one of the participants in the design that had them wearing headphones at this point of the performance. Hearing was also referred to by a participant who stated they felt they were more immersed in the story than they would have been if they were just reading the poem, and by another who said hearing the text spoken made the story clearer.

To my surprise, two participants referred to their hearts (one said heartbeat while the other used heart rate), making specific reference to their somatic states as a result of the

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<sup>9</sup> See Section II for a discussion on Machon’s interrelation of “making sense” and “sense-making” in immersive theatre.



experience. Both referred to the beginning of the performance—the hunt scene—when describing their bodily reactions of quickened heart beats and an increase in adrenaline. These somatic responses spurred the participants into moving around the room and engaging physically with the work.

This commentary from respondents demonstrates that the sensory perception and somatic responses of the participants led to increased feelings of involvement within both the narrative and the performance. When the participants' senses were engaged—be that auditory, tactile, or visual—their cognition was also engaged.

### Inhibition

Inhibition here refers to the audience-participants' resistance to engage physically or verbally with the work, even when they had the impulse to. The respondents offered reasoning for their inhibitions which I will now explicate.

The invitation to engage with the piece in the first scene led to one participant having the impulse to gallop around the room like a horse, though she did not act on the urge. In the fourth session, which employed blindfolds, a participant said he had the desire to explore the performance by moving and viewing it from different vantage points, but he did not, while another spoke of simply not feeling the impulse to stand and move around the room.

The sense of touch emerged several times in varying contexts, with some referring to the desire to touch the performers but not acting on the impulse. For the participant who felt compelled to touch a participant, the reason they refrained from touching an actor was due to COVID precaution and because there was not explicit permission to touch the performers prior to the performance.

One respondent remarked at the impulse to say “ew” during the disembowelment scene

when the Lord “ripped out” the deer’s spine, but she did not feel comfortable enough to speak. Another said he did not feel moved to initiate eye contact with the performers because of his perception that engaging with performers in this way is taboo.

An interesting theme that emerged was the notion of what one was “supposed” to do. Several participants used the word in the context of uncertainty in the performance. In the hunting scene, a participant shared they were unaware of what they were *supposed* to do or where they were *supposed* to go. This sentiment was reflected by several others in the same group, again reflecting the desire to adhere to social conventions. One mention referred to the bedchamber scene and wanting to avoid moving or engaging with the performers because of the notion that one is supposed to be quiet and not supposed to disturb a scene.

The idea of interruption emerged several times, with several participants commenting that they did not want to interrupt the action or the flow of the piece, and that was their rationale for not engaging verbally or moving around the space more.

These responses relating to inhibition indicate that disruption of social conventions often operate as a point of (dis)engagement within an interactive work.

### Disengagement

It was important for me to determine when audience-participants disengaged from the work and ascertain the reasons why; with this information, disengagement in future iterations of the work can be mitigated.

The most common response relating to disengagement had to do with the auditory sense. Several participants spoke of feeling disengaged when the text was more difficult to hear, which was due to a number of factors such as the noise from the fans in the studio, the use of masks, and the soundscape occasionally drowning out the performers. When the dialogue was harder to

hear, some of the participants found themselves unable to follow the narrative.

One of the participants, from a group which utilized headphones, noted in his survey response that he felt disengaged as soon as he was asked to don the headphones due to wanting to better hear the performers, and because it drew too much awareness to the strategies in place and thus did not suspend his disbelief. The same participant noted that the textual projection made the narrative easier to follow, though in the focus group he specified that he would have read the projected text regardless of the introduction of the headphones. To me, it appeared as though all of the participants in this particular session were disengaged because of the obstacles the headphones presented in terms of pressing play on the audio file, being cautious of the headphone cord, and not knowing where to place the headphones when they were not in use. Holding onto the headphones and navigating the space with them seemed to be a point of disengagement for one of the participants in particular, leading me to question whether what headphones can offer—with the technology and budget available—is worth the potential disconnection they present. In this regard, my intention to connect the participants to the material through primarily embodiment rather than in conjunction with the dialogue was ineffective. Rather than physically immersing the participants it seems to have caused confusion leading to disengagement.

The textual projection was also distracting for some, while others articulated they felt disengaged due to self-consciousness or self-awareness during the performance. The uncertainty of where to stand and not wanting to be “in the way” of the performers was mentioned, as was not knowing if one should look at the text projected on the walls or the performers. A participant in the blindfold design said their worry about when to take the blindfold off took them out of the story.

A sense of disengagement at the beginning of the piece was mentioned by a participant as they said they were disoriented and consequently felt disconnected from the experience. From the second group, another said they felt what a hunt must feel like—exciting and disorienting because they were unsure of what was going to happen. Another respondent in the same focus group agreed that they felt disoriented at the beginning, caused by a sense of uncertainty of what to do and by being transported to the forest scene. This participant did not feel disengaged by this but embraced the sensation, which resulted in their feeling satisfied. Disorientation in these responses refer to two different experiences: the first being a disorientation that removed the participant from the narrative, and the second being a feeling which led to deeper engagement in the scene. These responses demonstrate that evoking the same feeling (in this case, disorientation) will not necessarily lead to the same reactions or effects amongst all audience members, but it can still be effective for some participants.

I also discovered that several participants experienced sensory overload. One of these instances occurred for two participants in the designs which implemented headphone use, as they felt there were too many competing elements with the sound in the headphones, the performers' dialogue, and the text on the walls. These responses indicate that the multiple elements at play in this design caused a point of disconnection due to being perceived as competing with, rather than complementing, one another.

The words “anxiety” and “anxious” were used two and five times, respectively. In my initial overview of the data, I noticed the concept of anxiety arose several times. Looking specifically at the contexts in which participants felt anxious, the first scene (the hunt) was a common factor. The participants who stated they felt anxious at the beginning of the performance experienced the designs that did not utilize blindfolds. One participant explained

that their feelings of anxiousness arose from not knowing what was happening and being overwhelmed. Some of the factors leading to the sense of being overwhelmed were the intensity of the surroundings, including the actors. Another participant stated that she felt her anxiety eased as time passed and she gained comfort with the interaction that occurred between performers and participants. Someone else commented on her social anxiety and how that was an inhibiting factor for engaging verbally during the piece.

While compounding immersive strategies can be highly effective in involving participants in the work, there is also the risk of these strategies distracting from another performance element or leading to sensory overload and anxiety for the audience.

In the next section, I will outline how I utilized this information to advance my immersive creation strategies and achieve a deepened sense of audience engagement in the second iteration of the immersive adaptation of *SGGK*.

## Section IV: Reimagination

The opportunity to produce *SGGK* again came with The Alchemy Festival of Student Work, based at the School of Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Calgary. Staging this piece again allowed me to apply what I learned from the data analysis phase of the project and further develop strategies for immersive performance creation and audience engagement. The Alchemy Festival presented an occasion to apply my developed strategies under a number of different conditions: the performances would take place in a black box theatre space (the Doolittle Studio) rather than the Immersion Studio, it was open to the public, and no data would be collected from the audience-participants.

### Rehearsal

Just as the data collected from the performance experiments informed the immersive techniques implemented in the second iteration of the piece, it also informed the rehearsal process. Rehearsals were especially affected by my data collection and analysis as I chose to implement more sensory provocation of the actors in the rehearsals. Embodied knowledge is a consideration here, as I strived to use exercises in the rehearsal that would lead to bodily understandings of the material which could then be translated to the participants in the performance. Many of the techniques I developed for this iteration were also experimented with in the rehearsal process. I was guided by the question: how can I further explore the embodiment of the text within the performers in a way that will in turn lead to a greater embodiment of the audience-participants?

In this second rehearsal process, I was equipped with both theoretical background and practical experience to inform and develop my immersive strategies. I returned to Hansen's tools of perceptual dramaturgy when re-examining performer movement and physical engagement for

the piece. At the same time, I used my findings from the experiments to more accurately predict the audience's perception and engagement as a result of the stimuli within the performance. Then, in rehearsals, I was able to explore the performers' movements to map their potential effects. One aspect I paid much attention to was the repetition of movements as I wanted to more deeply explore how repetition can lead to enhanced engagement with the audience.

I questioned what sensory stimulus was being repeated, and when and in what context each repeated stimulus occurred. Then, I reflected on what potential connection could be made by the participants and to what effect. One of the most obvious repetitions to take place in the performance was in the disembowelment scene, as the narrator imitated all of the Lord's gestures. In this iteration, we had another performer who could also perform this imitation, thus making the instructional nature of the scene even more clear to participants. The repetition of these movements could lead to the participants' impulse to repeat the movements themselves. I incorporated the third performer into the scene's movements throughout the rehearsal process, having her explore her positionality in the space to find the most effective method of engagement. In the performance, the liminal performer's movement in this scene would exemplify the process of repeating the Lord's movements without interfering with the choreography of the piece.

Within the scene's choreography, I collaborated with the performers to advance the movements to be as evocative of the material as possible, easy to follow, and to contain repetitions to spark the participants' perceptual process. We altered some of the Lord's hand movements to be reminiscent of movements that occurred earlier in the scene.

Another instance of spurring participants to imitate performer movement occurred at the end of the disembowelment scene, when the Lord picked up his bundle of meat and returned to

the castle to exchange his winnings with Gawain. As the Lord walked away from the group, we planned for him to motion for the participants to follow him. This direct call to participate, especially as it followed the instructional scene, would prime the participants to continue engaging. So, when the Lord picked up his bundle of meat (which was again a collection of pink and red fabric scraps), the participants would ideally be motivated to pick up an imaginary pile of their own. The Lord would then circle the room, followed by the participants, as he travelled back from the forest to the castle. At the top of the exchange scene, I instructed the performer playing the Lord to dump the pile of meat in the middle of the studio, prompting participants to follow suit.

I conducted blindfold exercises as I did in the first rehearsals, but with more variety in this process. First, I wore a blindfold myself and placed myself in the position of a participant. By being in this position, I was able to conceptualize how the participants might perceive the sensory deprivation and provocation in the first scene. I spent a portion of time in several rehearsals blindfolded as we explored the effectiveness of our environmentally immersive strategies. I then had the actors perform the scene while blindfolded, then again with only one actor blindfolded at a time. I tested building in silence at different points of the scene to allow the participants time to absorb and inhabit the material they encountered. We also experimented with different registers of speed and intensity in each iteration of the exercise. Conducting these exercises allowed the performers to focus more intently on their dialogue and the nuances with which one another delivered their lines. We were able to dig deeper into the scene's subtext, which then informed our exploration of the relationship between the narrator and other characters in the following scenes.

Other explorations we made in the rehearsal involved direct touch between the



performers and participants. This kind of touch was not encouraged in the first iteration; I did not want touch to be excessive in this performance, but intentional. I asked the performer playing the Lady and Lord what would it feel and look like to tactilely engage multiple participants at once, particularly in the bedchamber and hunt scenes. We experimented with different incorporations of the participants' physicality in rehearsal by placing the liminal performer in the participants' position.

Finally, I wanted to incorporate different perspectives and levels in the rehearsal for performers so they would experience similar spatial freedom that the participants would. I used blocks in one rehearsal and instructed the performers to engage with different positions throughout the performance and encouraged them to note any emergent relationships to the space and material.

#### Reimagination

The change of performance space, on the one hand, removed the element of 360-degree digital immersion but on the other, addressed many of the obstacles mentioned by the study's respondents. The reason for the change of location is primarily due to the piece being programmed in a festival where all of its performances take place on the university's campus. However, a number of factors made clear that a space specifically designed for theatrical works—albeit still not in a traditional proscenium theater—could better support the objectives of the piece. Several participants in the original experiments commented on difficulty hearing the soundscape and/or performers, so a space designed for theatrical use could mitigate this issue and ideally prevent resulting disengagement and confusion. As well, I wanted to develop these immersive strategies further and offer dramaturgical applications for theatre makers who don't have access to the technology of the Immersion Studio.

As I will outline, the new space presented different ways to implement immersive techniques, as distinct venues offer distinct affordances and unique ways to achieve experiences. In the process of mapping my adjustments and improvements, no technique remained entirely the same, though I maintained some elements that were effective. What follows is my discussion of the reimagined performance, the elements that were markedly different than in the first iteration of the piece, and the reasons those changes were made.

The theatrical lighting in this studio had far greater capability than in the Immersion Studio, as this space was designed for theatrical productions and thus had a lighting grid. However, I still wanted to emulate the wash of colour that was present in the Immersion Studio as a result of the light from the projections. Crucially, I did not want the lighting to differentiate between performers and participants, as a spotlight on the performers would have done. Because of this, the lighting design was simplistic: the bedchamber scene was warmly lit with pink light trained on the canopy; the disembowelment scene was dim but illuminated with green light; and the exchange scene was the brightest, with no coloured lighting. Scattered throughout the space

were electric tealights, emitting a steady soft glow throughout the performance, which added a level of intimacy to the set.



Fig. 6

Being in this new studio space eliminated one of the main factors that made it difficult for participants in the experiments to hear the performance, namely the ventilation fans for the projectors. However, the performers were still required to wear face masks, which could present similar challenges. The volume of the soundscape, which despite being controllable in the studio, could also interfere with the participants' ability to hear the performers' dialogue. Because of the possibility for disengagement due to audio issues, I opted to mic the performers for this run. The combination of having a technician control the sound from the booth and using microphones for performers mitigated a main factor for disengagement as discovered in the experiments. This choice also introduced another performative aspect that was not present in the experimental iteration. Additionally, I opted not to use headphones at all in this iteration of the performance, as I found their inclusion in the experiments did not add enough to the participants' experience or engagement to warrant their utilization again. The headphones ultimately presented more challenges and disconnection than they contributed to the participants' immersion in the work.

An aspect in particular that I sought to enhance in this iteration was the opportunity for audience-participants to be physically involved in the piece. While there was participant movement in the experiments, both my observations and the responses indicated that there were a number of factors that inhibited further engagement. The apprehension that participants may interrupt the actors or narrative led me to believe that in future iterations of this piece the strategies to spur engagement must be further developed. Audience-participants, regardless of the degree to which they are compelled to engage, should ideally feel that their presence and/or participation is fundamental to the performance, not a disruption.

To deepen the level of engagement, the comfort of audience-participants must first be considered; then the invitation to become involved should be clarified. Here I draw a distinction

between one's comfort to participate and one's (dis)comfort resulting from the material. Much of the content in my adaptation of *SGGK* can lead to the audience's discomfort, but that does not necessarily correlate to their comfort level in terms of participation. In fact, I believe that discomfort caused by the material can actually spur the audience-participant to engage physically as it offers a release of bodily tension. This notion is exemplified in the disembowelment scene, where engaging with the movements as instructed by the Lord can be a moment of catharsis amidst the graphic content.



Fig. 7

Being comfortable enough to participate in an immersive work is largely subjective, with experience as a performer or audience member influencing one's inclination to engage (as I found in the study's responses). For those who are predisposed to forego participation, how can we increase their comfort level enough to participate if they are so moved? One such way, as has been explored in much immersive theatre, is to plant someone in the audience to participate whose actions can be implicitly followed by the rest of the audience-participants. This was an inclusion I did not make in the experiment phase because I wanted to study participant

engagement independent of such influence. In this rendition, I felt I could include someone in this role but without disguising their function in the piece. The participants should be aware that a third performer is in the space while still getting a sense that the additional performer is closely linked to the participants.

To occupy this liminal space, I brought what I termed a “liminal performer” onto the project. She was included in the rehearsal process as a collaborator and was given specific directions for how to contribute to the experience of the participants. This role offered a bridge between the spaces of performer and participant, as she did not solely occupy either sphere. The responsibilities of this performer were to create an invitational dialogue by delivering a pre-show speech to audience-participants before instructing them to don blindfolds, guiding them into the studio, aiding the performers in the first scene’s sensory provocation, and acting as a participant for the remainder of the piece as a means of demonstrating how one could engage. Her responsibility was not to explicitly guide participation, but to be a referent point should anyone be unsure of how to become involved. To encourage independent participant movement, I directed this performer to be largely inconspicuous and to never distract from the other performers.

Another straightforward way to establish audience comfort is to contextualize their participation before the performance even begins. The pre-show introduction delivered by our liminal performer began with a land acknowledgement, then offered some background on the poem, and finally included an explanation that because this is an immersive show, participants are encouraged to move around the space and engage with the work in any way they feel moved to do so. However, our experience demonstrated that even with this direct invitation, some audience members may resist participation.

Another crucial method of building audience comfort is by establishing consent and mutual respect between the audience-participants and the performers. In this piece, the performer's initial speech offered an explanation about what to expect when donning the blindfolds and being guided into the studio by all of the performers. In this explanation, she offered a moment to opt-out, so that the participants were able to consent to both wearing blindfolds and being touched. Outside of the studio were also flyers notifying audience members that they may be touched by the performers. Informed consent for the participants is crucial in establishing a safe environment where audience members feel comfortable enough to engage.

After being guided into the space by performers—who were not in character at this point, as I did not see any real benefit in that, in this instance—the audience-participants stood in place while blindfolded to experience the performance's first scene. Including blindfolds in this performance is reflective of the first experiment design, which was effective in placing emphasis on the participants' auditory perception before immersing them visually in the performance's environment.

While reflecting on whether to include any seating in this performance, I returned to the comment from a participant that being seated during the hunt felt incongruous with the scene's action. As well, the observation that participants who began seated were more reluctant to move for the rest of the piece led me to be more intentional about participants' positions at the beginning of the work. These reflections led me to the decision not to include seats unless it came up as an accessibility need for a participant. Instead, I would have the participants stand while blindfolded and, to account for safety, have them guided into the

studio.<sup>10</sup> Because they could not safely move around while blindfolded, it was important to create the sensation of movement occurring around them. The additional performer was crucial in establishing this sense of motion as she aided the other performers in establishing the scene's environment through tactile provocation.

In the experiments, a participant from the group which utilized blindfolds said that during the hunt scene it felt as though he were moving with the performers. My goal in this iteration was to amplify this sense of movement for all the participants. The same participant articulated that he desired even more physical cues to the environment, so I decided to incorporate spray bottles and battery-operated fans in addition to the lengths of fabric that were used in the experiments. While performing the scene, the actors were instructed to use fabric to brush past the participants with short and quick movements to create a sensation of bodies or trees rushing past. The spray bottles and fans were used to generate a light mist to firmly ground the participants in an outdoor environment. These additions of more immersive tactics expanded upon the tactile sense of immersion for the hunting scene. Other techniques in this scene included the third performer running through participants to add to the sense of movement; she also pounded her fists on the ground as the momentum of the scene built before gradually easing this movement at the same time that the soundscape slowed. Her fist-pounding created a vibration that travelled through the floor and led to a sensation that one's legs were moving despite actually standing in place. These approaches expanded the scene's immersive

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<sup>10</sup> The decision to lead blindfolded audience members into the space stemmed from a conversation with my supervisor Dr. Bruce Barton in which he recalled utilizing the strategy in the 2018 project *Conduct*, but which has also been used by other theatre artists.

environment and offered more physically involving inputs in which to ground the participants.

Between the first and second scenes, all three performers went through the group and gently touched the participants' shoulders, indicating for them to remove their blindfolds. In cases where the participant did not respond to this prompt, the performers would remove the blindfold. Once the participants were no longer wearing blindfolds, they were able to take in the environment they found themselves surrounded by. I directed the performers to be intentional about making eye contact with the participants at this point, so as to offer a non-verbal invitation into the world of the piece. This form of direct connection, as I found in the experiment phase, establishes the role of *participant* rather than audience member. The barrier between performers and audience was permeated through such non-verbal communication as it transgressed the social norms that have been established by some other, dominant forms of theatre that utilize a fourth-wall convention. It was important to build this immediate invitation into the work so that the participants felt welcomed into their role without hesitation. My sense was that had I allowed for too much time before making a connection, it could have led to participants feeling confused and disengaged.

By using touch and eye contact to ground the participants in the performance's world, the feeling of disorientation (which was mentioned by several respondents in the experiments) should be lessened. Yet at the same time, removing the audience's sight and immersing them through aural and tactile provocation undoubtedly has a disorienting effect, especially as so much movement occurs around the participants as they stand in place. My goal with these strategies is to initially use disorientation to deeply engage the audience in the action of the hunt, then transition them as smoothly as possible into the bedchamber's environment which then utilizes different methods of immersion and engagement.



More obvious calls for participation followed, with the performers using a mixture of body language and direct gestures to suggest movement to the participants. I gave the performers directions for both their choreographed and improvisational physical movement; the rehearsed movements and gestures were often intended to evoke a specific sensation present in the text, while improvisational movements allowed the performers to make generative connections with the participants. It felt important to give the performers creative agency in addition to the choreographed movements to establish connection with the participants that was specific to that encounter, thus emphasizing the participant's individualized role in the piece.

Subtler body language included the performers walking from one side of the studio to the other, giving participants a slight cue to follow if they so choose. In the bedchamber scene, while one of the performers lay down under the canopy, the other performer walked towards them from the middle of the studio in a way which invited the participants to join. The performer weaved through the participants, sneaking towards Gawain while engaging with the audience in a way that suggested they were in on a secret. Another subtle way of encouraging participant movement is through controlling the volume of the performers' dialogue. As I found in the experiments, when the performers lowered their voices in the bedchamber scene, it encouraged participants to move closer to them. To evoke this response again, I directed the performers to lower their voices at points when it emphasized the intimacy of the scene.

I further developed the invitation to engage with physical movement in the disembowelment scene in order to engage more participants than I did in the experiments. In addition to the Lord's choreographed movements, the performer amplified their engagement with the audience by holding extended eye contact, taking their hands to guide them through movements, or even by pausing to correct a participant's form as they imitated the movements.

The performer also spoke to participants at the end of the scene, complimenting their work and congratulating everyone on a successful butchery session. The third performer was also instrumental in increasing audience participation in this scene. She represented a method of engagement with the piece, and the participants could be influenced by her imitation of the movements and be spurred to do the same. However, I wanted to be careful not to overdetermine participation, so I instructed the performer not to deliberately coax participants to imitate her.

In the experiments, I used visual projection to evoke the tactile provocation present in the text, whereas here I opted to literally incorporate the physical sensation detailed in the poem. The following lines describe Lady Bertilak's entrance into Gawain's bedchamber: "[she] then clasped the curtain and crept inside / then sat down softly at the side of his bed" (Armitage 1192-93). This excerpt tangibly conjures the character's sense of touch, which imagery alone cannot convey. So, in the second production of the piece, I included a canopy in the set design which functions as the curtain described in the poem and represents Gawain's bed. I instructed the performer playing the Lady to choose one to two participants to follow her as she approached the bed and after pulling the curtain aside, place it in a participant's hand. With this action, the participant experiences the same sensory provocation that the Lady does in the text and is thus placed in her position. The participant is then complicit in the Lady's actions, aiding in her seduction of Gawain. Heightening the audience's participation in this scene aids in imparting the sense of intimacy that is so key to this scene.

Other techniques I developed to involve the participants physically in this scene included involving the participants in dressing Gawain. With this iteration of the performance, we elevated the costume design and were therefore able to incorporate it more deeply into the performance. When the Lady enters Gawain's bedchamber, he is in a state of undress. One of

Gawain's lines of dialogue in the script imparts his discomfort at speaking with the Lady in this

state: "But my  
gracious lady, if  
you grant me  
leave, will you  
pardon this  
prisoner and  
prompt him to  
rise, then I'll quit  
these covers and



pull on my clothes, and our words will flow more freely back and forth."

Fig. 8

In the experiment version, Gawain delivered this line and then pulled a simple costume piece over top of stage blacks. In the second version, we had Gawain wear underclothes before pulling on another costume piece, which had laces on either side. In rehearsal, the performer struggled to do the laces up on their own, so I suggested they get help from a participant to do so. Involving a participant in the dressing of Gawain creates a deeper investment in the scene's action.

For this scene, I also instructed the performers to involve participants by incorporating them into their own movements. In the bedchamber scene, the Lady and Gawain engage in an ongoing negotiation of power and status. How can participants be made to feel as though they are integral to this negotiation? In addition to the aforementioned tactics, I also suggested the performers move through the participants and even place members of the audience between themselves. The Lady was encouraged to hold participants' hands as she spoke to Gawain,

placing them on his shoulders to emphasize their complicity in her attempts at seduction. Gawain was encouraged to use participants as shields to protect himself from the Lady's advances. These were simple yet effective ways to increase the participants' involvement in this scene while communicating the inner workings of the text.

Participant movement through the space without prompts from the performers was also a main consideration of mine. A comment from a respondent reflected that the performance was reminiscent of film, as one was able to view it from different angles. Similarly, some comments pondered the novelty of viewing the performers from "unusual" perspectives, such as when sitting on the floor while the performers stood. I was struck by these contributions and wondered how I could create other opportunities to engage with unique viewing perspectives. More possibilities to engage with the work from different positions could lead to a greater number of individualized experiences of the material. What I learned from the respondents was that even by viewing a performance from a seated versus standing position can impact one's perception of the content.

To enhance these situational possibilities—especially as there were no chairs in the studio—I wanted to incorporate additional levels from which to view the performers through the inclusion of steps and platforms. Rather than watching the performers straight-on, these positions would allow participants to watch from a higher vantage point if they chose to climb the steps, or from a lower vantage point if they chose to sit on the lower levels. In conversation with the set designer, a number of challenges emerged with this idea. The first consideration we had to make was the height of the studio, which was not tall enough to accommodate the height of the steps I had imagined. Ideally, we would have been able to have three steps leading to a platform, with a total height of approximately twenty-one inches. What we were able to achieve, in keeping with

safety standards, was two platforms measuring five feet wide, four feet deep, and six inches tall. At the front of each platform was a step, with a rise of three inches and run of six. While not exactly what I envisioned for the additional levels, these platforms offered a slightly different spatial relationship to the studio and performance if participants chose to engage with it. The platforms also presented spatial opportunities to the performers; the performer who played the Lord stood on a platform for part of scene three while delivering their instructions for how to disembowel a deer. This positioning gave the participants a lower vantage point from which to view the performance, while the Lord's elevated position emphasized his authority. The other performer (at this point playing the narrator) remained on the same level as the participants.

When analyzing the data from the experiments, it seemed that the exchange scene was the least impactful in terms of immersion and conveying intimacy. It was commented on the least of the four scenes, leading me to wonder how it could be altered to be more impactful. My interpretation of the data was that the sensation of exposure in scene four was not conveyed effectively to the participants. The ways I endeavoured to do so were largely through the visual projection, with the statues taking the place of members of the court witnessing the Lord and Gawain's exchange of winnings. The projection, and the liminal setting of the courtyard, did not seem to convey the textual themes to the extent I had hoped. I thus decided to reorient the fourth scene to the original setting in the text, which is at a feast. The participants then became members of the court who were at the feast, witnessing the exchange. The projection design was altered, which I will describe in more detail shortly, as was the soundscape. I asked the sound designers to retain much of the audio quality that was present in the first performance's soundscape for the fourth scene, but to make some changes to be indicative of the setting. The designers maintained the eerie sonic quality that carries through the performance's soundscape

and added effects of a crackling fire, voices chattering, and the clatter of cutlery. Combined with the visual projection, the lighting design, and the glow from the candles, the setting of the feast was foregrounded.

I had also originally instructed the performers not to make eye contact with the participants in this scene, as I thought that would lead to the participants feeling that they were watching something they were not supposed to see. However, it became clear this choice was ineffective, so in the second iteration I encouraged the performers to be more intentional about making eye contact with the participants and to have a heightened awareness of their presence. By amplifying the Lord and Gawain's self-consciousness and bashful interactions with the participants, a greater sense of exposure was achieved. The final moment in which the Lord and Gawain reassert their relationship as platonic was also extended to include the audience, with the men turning to the participants, laughing, making eye contact, and clapping them on the back. These choices emphasized the notion that the participants were members of the court witnessing an intimate act between the Lord and Gawain—one from which the characters must retreat back to safety.

Another way in which I attempted to ground the exchange scene in the world of a feast was through scent. The only sense that was yet to be considered within the performance was olfactory, which I planned to include in the design. By incorporating scent in the performance design, I aimed to explore a new immersive technique and expand into a new branch of related inquiry. In doing so, I would establish strategies for provoking four of the five senses in my immersive performance creation—the only remaining sense would be taste, another sense which would be effective in this scene but difficult to deploy in this project due to the budget and resources available to us.

What I envisioned for the olfactory technique was to incorporate the smell of cooked meat to ground the audience-participants in the scene's environment, as food is the clearest and most obvious association one could make to a medieval feast. Other design elements that would capitalize on that association might have included food in the set design (whether it was real or not) along with a table and place settings. Going this route would have required a larger budget, time in between scenes for setup, and storage in which to keep those pieces. Because those components were not available to us, that level of design was not an option. Furthermore, I desired to keep the design as simple and efficient as possible. Utilizing scent, therefore, seemed to be the best option to create an association to food for the participants, but a number of factors ultimately made it impractical.

I wanted to attempt to incorporate scent through bringing in a container of cooked meat and having someone open it at the top of the scene, or by diffusing liquid smoke in the space. The most prevalent risk in approaching this strategy was that the smell could linger from the end of one performance to the beginning of the next, as we had multiple performances each night of the festival. Due to a lack of time in between the performances and a lack of ventilation—there were no windows in the studio—it did not seem feasible to clear out the scent in between shows. Other challenges included that we could not feasibly have someone control this element, both because we only had one technician who needed to remain in the booth and because there was no real backstage area where one could either open a container or operate a diffuser. The scent would also have to be very subtle so as not to become overpowering and distract from the other elements of the performance. Without control over this immersive input, there was a possibility of it taking over the scene and undermining my overall objectives. Because of these reasons, I decided not to pursue an olfactory immersive technique, but would not rule it out for future

performance creation if the circumstances aligned with my objectives.

Due to the nature of the new performance space, there was no capability to deploy 360-degree projection. However, I still wanted to incorporate projection in the performance to add to the audience's sense of immersion in the world of the text, so one wall in the black box studio displayed projections. The projection design was completely new and was created by a different designer. In this iteration, I asked the designer to create video projections for the second, third, and final scenes. The first reason for the change from static images to video projections was that in the former case the audience-participants moved within the projected images and the movement of video projections would likely have led to disorientation and nausea. With the projection being on only one wall, there was no such risk of discomfort. The second reason for including video projections was to create a stronger sensory relationship between the projection design and the participants. I gave the designer concepts for what sensations I wanted to evoke with the videos. Similar to the first iteration, the bedchamber scene was intended to feel seductive yet unsettling. The tactile provocation of the scene was to be emulated in the projection, so that the stimulation of this sense occurred in multiple forms. While the performers invited participants to touch fabric, I wanted the projection to depict a pair of hands touching fabric to offer a similar sensation through only visual perception. The designer then filmed two pairs of hands (their own and those of another person) stroking and grasping at pink silk (which was reminiscent of the fabric projected in the first version) at varying speeds and edited it together in interchanging segments.

The original projection for the disembowelment scene lacked a material connection to the content of the scene beyond the setting, so for this iteration I wanted the projection to reflect the gore and violence that resonated with many of the respondents. I described the physical



sensations that are evoked by the material, namely moisture and warmth, and expressed my desire for the imagery to maintain a connection to the natural world. In response, the designer filmed fake blood being squirted into a bathtub full of water and a scattering of flowers. The bathtub is then emptied, with blood swirling around the bottom of the tub and the drain.

For the exchange scene, I strived to impart the feelings of dread and discomfort that are present in the material while contextualizing the setting of a feast. At the top of the projection, we see a pair of hands lighting a candle above a table. The candles mirror the electric tealights that are scattered throughout the studio. The uneasiness of this scene builds slowly, so I asked the designer to visually depict that gradually intensifying tension. They did so by filming a hand pouring a glass of mead that then overflows and spills onto the table, slowly creeping into the wood grain.

None of the visual projections in this design utilized textual projection, primarily because without the use of headphones obstructing the participants from fully hearing the dialogue, there was no need for it. The textual projection was included to offer a link to the text for participants when their ability to hear the performers was limited, which was no longer a factor in this performance. In addition, two participants—from different groups in the experiments—shared that having to read the text contributed to sensory overload, with one of them articulating that he felt it distracted from the narrative. As well, because the projections in this design were all video, it would have been difficult to read if there were text overlaid.

### Observations

I made notes as I observed the eleven performances from the festival, paying particular attention to the degree to which participants engaged physically and verbally. One of the first interactions I noticed was the third performer handing tealights to the participants, which was not

under my direction. The participants took the tealights from the performer but seemed confused as to what to do with them afterwards. Their hands were then occupied when the disembowelment scene began, interfering with their ability to mimic the performer's movements. I then advised the third performer not to utilize the tealights in future performances.

The Lady had participants hold the canopy in the bedchamber scene in every performance, as did Gawain get participants to help him lace up his costume piece in the same scene. The interaction with Gawain's costume piece was slightly different in each show, with the Lady undoing the garment after a participant laced it up at one point and Gawain struggling against a participant's hands at another. In this scene, participant movement around the studio was significant, with some people venturing away from the canopy while others moved in very closely. The Lady, in one run, placed Gawain's garment on a participant's shoulders, who backed away until Gawain intervened and took back the costume piece. In another run, the performers sat on a platform to share their kiss, capitalizing on the opportunity to experiment with varying positionality. In a different performance, after the kiss at the end of this scene, a participant verbalized their shock at Gawain's speechlessness.

Participants engaged with the set in more ways than those who experienced the experiments, with some sitting on the platforms or rocks. In one performance, a participant knelt down during the hunt scene—the only person in all of the festival performances to stray from the standing position.

In the disembowelment scene, most people appeared to mimic the Lord's gestures and movements to varying degrees of intensity. I was struck by one participant who gripped and "cut" another participant's throat before pushing them onto the ground. These two participants then wiped their hands on each other at the end of the scene. Two others, in a different group,

gripped each other's throats at the same point of the performance. Another participant did not mimic the disembowelling movements but did step over an imaginary carcass and in the fourth scene, wiped their hands on another participant. Someone else wiped their brow in the fourth scene. Movements such as these surprised me as they were not imitative of the performers but represented moments of spontaneous impulse.

Other verbal engagement came in the disembowelment scene after the Lord motioned for a participant to pick up their "meat" and they responded that they would take the Lord's—who then gave the bundle of fabric to the participant. A particularly talkative group came towards the end of the festival and engaged verbally throughout the entire performance. In the third scene, some of the participants asked questions about the disembowelment (such as asking what a "knot" is). At the end of the performance, when Gawain and the Lord laugh before the lights black out, one participant vocalized their lack of understanding as to what was funny. These interactions indicated to me that the participants felt comfortable enough to be vocal in the performance.

My primary goal in moving from the experimental to performative iteration of this piece was to increase audience engagement, which I achieved through enhancing and implementing a number of actions, tasks, and objects. Giving performers some level of freedom to interact with audience-participants and allowing those interactions to be generative led to unexpected moments of deepened engagement.

## Section V: Dramaturgical Application

In this section, I will reiterate the questions and objectives which guided my project before outlining how I developed my immersive creation strategies, which may be helpful for other makers of immersive theatre based on historical texts. My intention is to articulate dramaturgical applications for performance contexts involving general audiences. The central questions of this project were: how can immersive performance strategies enhance the affective experience and interpretive potential of medieval literature for contemporary audiences? and, what strategies can creators of immersive performance utilize to increase the relevance, impact, and accessibility of works based upon historical texts? The study's three objectives were to develop strategies for adapting medieval narrative texts to immersive performances contexts; to discover the ways in which immersive performances can foster deeper engagement with temporally and culturally distant texts for contemporary audiences; and to ascertain the factors that influence the degree of engagement of participants with the narrative elements of the medieval text in question.

Utilizing a culmination of methodologies from the field of artistic research (inclusive of practice-as-research, practice-based research, and performance-as-research) as well as borrowing from medieval studies' use of practice-based research, I was able to implement experiments and collect data which then informed the development of my creation strategies. Based on my experience with this project, makers of immersive theatre based upon historically distant texts might consider attending to the following areas in their own creation and dramaturgical processes.

The first step in the process of adapting a historical text to an immersive performance involves, of course, textual adaptation. Mentally immersive environments are created through

perceptually engaging language, meaning that when a reader's senses are provoked, they become immersed in the environment created by the text. When adapting a text to an immersive performance context, identifying how language operates to mentally immerse the reader is key.

This identification entails the application of perceptual theory, which for my purposes, I have defined as recognizing language that engages with the active process of perception and/or the immediacy of a sensory experience. Articulating what makes a text immersive allows us to then turn to how that immersion functions. Based on my adaptational work, I have crafted the following questions which I believe can effectively guide this process:

1. Is sensory provocation present in the text? What senses are being engaged?
2. Does the text engage with the activity of perception? Is there an articulation of motion when a sense perception is described?
3. Is there a sense of immediacy or tangibility with respect to the character's relationship to their surroundings?

Once textual immersion has been examined, it is useful to speculate as to the thematic effects this immersion has in relation to the narrative as a whole. How are the characters impacted by the immersive environments they inhabit? What narrative purposes do the sensory provocations serve? Knowing what senses are being provoked and theorizing as to the effect of that provocation reveals how these textually immersive environments can be realized to physically immerse an audience.

The translation of textually immersive landscapes to a physical performance context can be guided by asking what immersive strategies will best accommodate the goals of this performance? In this project, I considered how I could provoke the same senses of the audience that are provoked in *SGGK*, and then I conceptualized techniques which could trigger a similar

perceptual process without literally creating the same conditions within the text. For example, the movement in the disembowelment scene were visceral and conjured sensations associated with butchery, but did not involve actually touching meat, blood, or weapons. I then thought of strategies for immersion that could lead to the same or similar thematic effects that are achieved by the text's immersive environments, such as how the video projection in the performance's second iteration reflected the material's tension by depicting the slow-motion spilling of beer.

## Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have gained insight into audience engagement and have developed my immersive creation strategies for performances based upon temporally distant texts. With this immersive adaptation of a fourteenth-century poem, I investigated how embodiment can function as a tool of engagement with a text that is temporally removed from contemporary audiences. I chose to adapt *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for this project due to its thematic content, which has been usefully examined by queer theorists since the late 1980s. The poem's depiction of queer desire and the performance of gender led to my curiosity of how such themes of queerness could be effectively communicated to audience-participants who may or may not have encountered the text previously. My process and decision-making throughout the project were informed by these queer readings of *SGGK* as I sought to translate themes of gender and sexuality from the text to the performative adaptation through my immersive creation strategies.

While I initially sought to investigate how an immersive performance could impact the audience's understanding of a particular work, I ultimately realized that I had not built in methods to access understanding but was instead inquiring about engagement. Measuring the audience's understanding was not accessible, though I was able to investigate the audience's self-perception of their engagement with the subject material.

By utilizing a practice-based research methodology and qualitative data analysis, and by applying what I learned from a series of performance experiments to another run of performances, I have discovered effective methods for communicating themes and content of historical non-dramatic texts to contemporary audiences. Conducting two iterations of this project allowed me to carry out the process in two vastly different performance spaces. In the

second version of the piece, aspects were won and lost, though I did not feel disadvantaged in the black box studio. In this study, I have also developed the manner in which I identify immersive elements in a text and apply those to a performance, a process which is pertinent to text selection in such immersive performance creation. These discoveries may be used as points of reference for other creators of immersive theatre who wish to draw upon historically distant texts for performance creation.



## Appendix A: Source Text

From Simon Armitage's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

Scene One:

So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land  
his lordship and his huntsmen were high on horseback,  
and the canny kennel-men had coupled the hounds  
and opened the cages and called them out.

On the bugles they blew three bellowing notes  
to a din of baying and barking, and the dogs  
which chased or wandered were chastened by whip.

As I heard it, we're talking a hundred top hunters  
at least.

The handlers hold their hounds,

the huntsmen's hounds run free.

Each bugle blast rebounds

between the trunks of trees.

(1137-1149)

As the cry went up the wild creatures quaked.

The deer in the dale, quivering with dread,

hurtled to high ground, but were headed off

by the ring of beaters who bawled and roared.

The stags of the herd with their high-branched heads  
and the broad-horned bucks were allowed to pass by,  
for the lord of the land had laid down a law  
that man should not maim the male in close season.

But the hinds were halted with hollers and whoops  
and the din drove the does to sprint for the dells.

Then the eye can see that the air is all arrows:  
all across the forest they flashed and flickered,  
biting through hides with their broad heads.

What! They bleat as they bleed and they die on the banks,  
and always the hounds are hard on their heels,  
and the hunters on horseback come hammering behind  
with stone-splitting cries, as if cliffs had collapsed.

And those animals which escaped the aim of the archers  
were steered from the slopes down to rivers and streams  
and set upon and seized at the stations below.

So perfect and practised were the men at their posts  
and so great were the greyhounds which grappled with the deer  
that prey was pounced on and dispatched with speed  
and force.

The lord's heart leaps with life.

Now on, now off his horse  
all day he hacks and drives.

And dusk comes in due course.

(1150-1177)

Scene Two:

While snug in his sheets lay slumbering Gawain,  
dozing as the daylight dappled the walls,  
under a splendid cover, enclosed by curtains.

And while snoozing he heard a slyly made sound,  
the sigh of a door swinging slowly aside.

From below the bedding he brings up his head  
and lifts the corner of the curtain a little,  
wondering warily what it might be.

It was she, the lady, looking her loveliest,  
most quietly and craftily closing the door,  
nearing the bed. The knight felt nervous;  
lying back he assumed the shape of sleep  
as she stole towards him with silent steps,  
then clasped the curtain and crept inside,  
then sat down softly at the side of his bed.

And awaited him awakening for a good long while.

Gawain lay still, in his state of false sleep,  
turning over in his mind what this matter might mean,  
and where the lady's unlikely visit might lead.

Yet he said to himself, 'Instead of this stealth  
I should ask openly what her actions imply.'  
So he stirred and stretched, turned on his side,  
lifted his eyelids and, looking alarmed,  
signed himself hurriedly with his hand, as if saving  
his life.

'Good morning, Sir Gawain,' said the graceful lady.  
'You sleep so soundly one might sidle in here.  
You're tricked and you're trapped! But let's make a truce,  
or I'll besiege you in your bed, and you'd better believe me.'

She giggled girlishly as she teased good Gawain.

The man in the bed said, 'Good morning, ma'am.  
I'll contentedly attend whatever task you set,  
and in serving your desires I shall seek your mercy,  
which seems my best plan, in the circumstances!'

And he loaded his light-hearted words with laughter.

'But my gracious lady, if you grant me leave,  
will you pardon this prisoner and prompt him to rise,  
then I'll quit these covers and pull on my clothes,  
and our words will flow more freely back and forth.'

'Not so, beautiful sir,' the sweet lady said.

'Bide in your bed - my own plan is better.'

I'll tuck in your covers corner to corner,  
then playfully parley with the man I have pinned.  
Because I know your name - the knight Sir Gawain,  
famed through the realm whichever road he rides,  
whose princely honour is highly praised  
amongst lords and ladies and everyone alive.  
And right here you lie. And we are left all alone,  
with my husband and his huntsmen away in the hills  
and the servants snoring and my maids asleep  
and the door to this bedroom barred with a bolt.  
I have in my house an honored guest  
so I'll take my time; I'll be talking to him for  
a while.  
You're free to have my all,  
do with me what you will.  
I'll come just as you call  
and swear to serve you well.'

'In good faith,' said Gawain, 'such gracious flattery,  
though in truth I'm not nearly such a noble knight.  
I don't dare to receive the respect you describe  
and in no way warrant such worthy words.  
But by God, I'd be glad, if you give me the right,

to serve your desires, and with action or speech  
bring you perfect pleasure. The honor would be priceless.’

Said the gracious lady, ‘Sir Gawain, in good faith,  
how improper on my part if I were to imply  
any slur or slight on your status as a knight.

But what lady in this land wouldn't latch the door,  
wouldn't rather hold you as I do here –  
in the company of your clever conversation,  
forgetting all grief and engaging in joy –  
than hug to her heart a hoard of gold?

I praise the Lord who uphold the high heavens,  
for I have what I hoped for above all else by  
his grace.’

That lovely looking maid,  
she charmed him and she chased.

But every move she made  
he countered, case by case.

(1208-1262)

‘Madam,’ said our man, ‘may Mary bless you,  
in good faith, you are kind and the fairest of the fair.  
Some fellows are praised for the feats they perform;  
I hardly deserve to receive such respect,

whereas you are genuinely joyful and generous.’

‘By Mary,’ she declared, ‘it's quite the contrary.

Were I the wealthiest woman in the world

with priceless pearls in the palm of my hand

to bargain with and buy the best of all men,

then for all the signs you have shown me, sir,

of kindness, courtesy and exquisite looks –

a picture of perfection now proved to be true –

no person on this planet would be picked before you.’

‘In fairness,’ said Gawain, ‘you found far better.

But I'm proud of the price you would pay from your purse,

and will swear to serve you as my sovereign for ever.

Let Christ now know that Gawain is your knight.’

Then they muse on many things through morning and midday,

and the lady stares with a loving look,

but Gawain is a gentleman and remains on guard,

and although no woman could be warmer or more winning,

he is cool in his conduct, on account of the scene he

foresees:

the strike he must receive

As cruel fate decrees.

The lady begs her leave –

at once Gawain agrees.

She glanced at him, laughed and gave her goodbye,  
then stood, and stunned him with astounding words:  
'May the Lord repay you for your prize performance.  
But I know that Gawain could never be your name.'  
'But why not?' asked the knight, in need of an answer,  
afraid that some fault in his manners had failed him.  
The beautiful woman blessed him, then rebuked him:  
'A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded,  
the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his being,  
could never have lingered so long with a lady  
without craving a kiss, as politeness requires,  
or coaxing a kiss with his closing words.'  
'Very well,' said Gawain, 'let's do as you wish.  
If a kiss is your request I shall keep my promise  
faithfully to fulfill you, so ask no further.'  
The lady comes close, cradles him in her arms,  
leans nearer and nearer, than kisses the knight.  
Then they courteously commend one another to Christ,  
and without one more word the woman is away.

(1263-1318)



Scene Three:

And the lord of the land still led the hunt,  
driving hinds to their death through holts and heaths,  
and by the setting of the sun had slaughtered so many  
of the does and other deer that it beggared belief.

Then finally the folk came flocking to one spot  
and quickly they collected and counted the kill.

Then the leading lords and their left-hand men  
chose the finest deer – those fullest with fat –  
and ordered them cut open by those skilled in the art.

They assessed and sized every slain creature  
and even on the feeblest found two fingers' worth of fat.

Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach  
and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle.

Next they lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt  
and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly,  
but carefully, being cautious not to cleave the knot.

Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut  
the gullet from the windpipe, then garbage to the guts.

Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp knives  
and slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole.

Then the beasts were prised apart at the breast,  
and they went to work on the galloching again,

riving open the front as far as the hind-fork,  
fetching out the offal, then with further purpose  
filleting the ribs in the recognised fashion.

And the spine was subject to a similar process,  
being pared to the haunch so it held as one piece  
then hoisting it high and hacking it off.

And its name is the numbles, as far as I know, and  
just that.

Its hind legs prised apart  
they slit the fleshy flaps,  
then cleave and quickly start  
to break it down its back.

(1320-52)

Scene Four:

[A]nd in excellent humour [the lord] hollered for Gawain  
to see for himself the size of the kill,

and showed him the side-slabs sliced from the ribs.

‘Are you pleased with this pile? Have I won your praise?

Does my skill at this sport deserve your esteem?’

‘Why yes,’ said the other. ‘It’s the hugest haul

I have seen, out of season, for several years.’

‘And I give it all to you, Gawain,’ said the master,

‘for according to our contract it is yours to claim.’

‘Just so,’ said Gawain, ‘and I’ll say the same,

for whatever I’ve won within these walls

such gains will be graciously given to you.’

So he held out his arms and hugged the lord

and kissed him in the kindest way he could.

‘You’re welcome to my winnings – to my one profit,

though I’d gladly have given you any greater prize.’

‘I’m grateful,’ said the lord, ‘and Gawain, this gift

would carry more weight if you cared to confess

by what wit you won it. And when. And where.’

‘That wasn’t our pact,’ he replied. ‘So don’t pry.

You’ll be given nothing greater, the agreement we have

holds good!

They laugh aloud and trade

wise words which match their mood.

(1319-1397)

Appendix B: Performance Script

**Scene One**

**NARRATOR 1**

So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land  
his lordship and his huntsmen were high on horseback—

**LORD BERTILAK**

With haste, men!

**NARRATOR 1**

—and the canny kennel-men had coupled the hounds  
and opened the cages—

**LORD BERTILAK**

Call out the hounds!

**NARRATOR 1**

On the bugles they blew three bellowing notes  
to a din of baying and barking, and the dogs  
which chased or wandered were chastened by whip.  
As I heard it, we're talking a hundred top hunters  
at least.

The handlers hold their hounds,

the huntsmen's hounds run free.

Each bugle blast rebounds

between the trunks of trees.

As the cry went up the wild creatures quaked.

The deer in the dale, quivering with dread,

hurtled to high ground, but were headed off

by the ring of beaters who bawled and roared.

**LORD BERTILAK**

After the does! Allow the broad horned bucks to pass by, for I have laid down a law that man should not maim the male in close season.

**NARRATOR 1**

But the hinds were halted with hollers and whoops.

**LORD BERTILAK**

The din drives the does to sprint for the dells.

**NARRATOR 1**

Then the eye can see that the air is all arrows—

**LORD BERTILAK**

Let them fly!

**NARRATOR 1**

—all across the forest they flashed and flickered,

biting through hides with their broad heads.

What! They bleat as they bleed and they die on the banks.

## Scene Two

### NARRATOR 2

While snug in his sheets lay slumbering Gawain,  
dozing as the daylight dappled the walls,  
under a splendid cover, enclosed by curtains.  
And while snoozing he heard a slyly made sound,  
the sigh of a door swinging slowly aside.  
From below the bedding he brings up his head,  
wondering warily what it might be.

### GAWAIN

It is she, the lady, looking her loveliest.

*Nervously, he pretends to be asleep as LADY BERTILAK steals towards him with silent steps, and sits down softly beside his bed. GAWAIN stirs and stretches, opens his eyes, alarmed.*

### LADY BERTILAK

Good morning, Sir Gawain. You sleep so soundly one might sidle in here. You're tricked and you're trapped! But let's make a truce, or I'll besiege you in your bed, and you'd better believe me.

*She giggles.*

### GAWAIN

*Lightheartedly.*

Good morning, ma'am. I'll contentedly attend whatever task you set, and in serving your desires I shall seek your mercy, which seems my best plan, in the circumstances.

*Laughing nervously.*

But my gracious lady, if you grant me leave, will you pardon this prisoner and prompt him to rise, then I'll quit these covers and pull on my clothes, and our words will flow more freely back and forth.

### LADY BERTILAK

Not so, beautiful sir. Bide in your bed - my own plan is better. I'll tuck in your covers corner to corner, then playfully parley with the man I have pinned. Because I know your name - the knight Sir Gawain, famed through the realm whichever road he rides, whose princely honour is highly praised amongst lords and ladies and everyone alive. And right here you lie. And we are left all alone, with my husband and his huntsmen away in the hills and the servants snoring and my

maids asleep and the door to this bedroom barred with a bolt. I have in my house an honored guest, so I'll take my time; I'll be talking to him for a while. *Beat.* You're free to have my all, do with me what you will. I'll come just as you call and swear to serve you well.

**GAWAIN**

In good faith, such gracious flattery, though in truth I'm not nearly such a noble knight. I don't dare to receive the respect you describe and in no way warrant such worthy words. But by God, I'd be glad, if you give me the right, to serve your desires, and with action or speech bring you perfect pleasure. The honor would be priceless.

**LADY BERTILAK**

Sir Gawain, in good faith, how improper on my part if I were to imply any slur or slight on your status as a knight. But what lady in this land wouldn't latch the door, wouldn't rather hold you as I do here—in the company of your clever conversation, forgetting all grief and engaging in joy—than hug to her heart a hoard of gold? I praise the Lord who uphold the high heavens, for I have what I hoped for above all else by his grace.

**GAWAIN**

Madam, may Mary bless you, in good faith, you are kind and the fairest of the fair. Some fellows are praised for the feats they perform; I hardly deserve to receive such respect, whereas you are genuinely joyful and generous.

**LADY BERTILAK**

By Mary, it's quite the contrary. Were I the wealthiest woman in the world with priceless pearls in the palm of my hand to bargain with and buy the best of all men, then for all the signs you have shown me, sir, of kindness, courtesy and exquisite looks—a picture of perfection now proved to be true—no person on this planet would be picked before you.

**GAWAIN**

In fairness, you found far better. But I'm proud of the price you would pay from your purse, and will swear to serve you as my sovereign for ever. Let Christ now know that Gawain is your knight.

**LADY BERTILAK**

You are such a gentleman, sir. Surely you must agree, that I must beg my leave.

*He nods. LADY BERTILAK laughs as she stands.*

May the Lord repay you for your prize performance. But I know that Gawain could never be your name.

**GAWAIN**

But why not?

**LADY BERTILAK**

A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded, the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his being, could never have lingered so long with a lady without craving a kiss, as politeness requires, or coaxing a kiss with his closing words.

**GAWAIN**

Very well, let's do as you wish. If a kiss is your request, I shall keep my promise faithfully to fulfill you, so ask no further.

*The lady comes close, cradles him in her arms, leans nearer and nearer,  
then kisses the knight, and without one more word the woman is away.*



### Scene Three

#### NARRATOR 1

And the lord of the land still led the hunt,  
driving hinds to their death through holts and heaths,  
and by the setting of the sun had slaughtered so many  
of the does and other deer that it beggared belief.

#### LORD BERTILAK

Quickly, let us count the kill! Then we shall choose the finest deer—those fullest with fat—  
and they will be cut open by those skilled in the art. Through the sliced-open throat you seize the  
stomach and bound the butchered innards in a bundle. Next, lop off the legs and peel back the  
pelt. Hook out the bowels through the broken belly, but carefully, being cautious not to cleave  
the knot. Then clasp the throat, and clinically cut the gullet from the windpipe, then garbage the  
guts. The shoulder blades, sever with sharp knives and slot through a slit so the hide stays whole.  
Prise apart the beasts at the breast, go to work on the gralloching again, rive open the front as far  
as the hind-fork, fetch out the offal, fillet the ribs. Pare the spine to the haunch so it holds as one  
piece, then hoist it high and hack it off. With its hind legs prised apart, slit the fleshy flaps,  
cleave, and quickly start to break it down its back.

## Scene Four

**LORD BERTILAK**

Gawain! Gawain, come greet your host. I have returned, venison in hand.

*GAWAIN enters.*

Have a look at the side-slabs sliced from the ribs.

*GAWAIN looks at the meat, impressed.*

Are you pleased with this pile? Have I won your praise? Does my skill at this sport deserve your esteem?

**GAWAIN**

Why, yes. It's the hugest haul I have seen, out of season, for several years.

**LORD BERTILAK**

And I give it all to you, Gawain, for according to our contract it is yours to claim.

**GAWAIN**

Just so, and I'll say the same. For whatever I've won within these walls, such gains will be graciously given to you.

*He leans in close to LORD BERTILAK, whispers:*

You're welcome to my winnings—to my one profit, though I'd gladly have given you any greater prize.

*They kiss.*

**LORD BERTILAK**

I'm grateful. But, Gawain, this gift would carry more weight if you cared to confess by what wit you won it. And when. And where.

**GAWAIN**

That wasn't our pact. So don't pry. You'll be given nothing greater, the agreement we have holds good!

*They laugh jovially. Lights down.*

## Appendix C: Text used in Textual Projection

From Simon Armitage's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

Text for scene 3 textual projection:

And the lord of the land still led the hunt,  
driving hinds to their death through holts and heaths,  
and by the setting of the sun had slaughtered so many  
of the does and other deer that it beggared belief.  
Then finally the folk came flocking to one spot  
and quickly they collected and counted the kill.  
Then the leading lords and their left-hand men  
chose the finest deer – those fullest with fat –  
and ordered them cut open by those skilled in the art.  
They assessed and sized every slain creature  
and even on the feeblest found two fingers' worth of fat.  
Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach  
and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle.  
Next they lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt  
and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly,  
but carefully, being cautious not to cleave the knot.  
Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut  
the gullet from the windpipe, then garbage to the guts.  
Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp knives

and slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole.

Then the beasts were prised apart at the breast,  
and they went to work on the gralloching again,  
riving open the front as far as the hind-fork,  
fetching out the offal, then with further purpose  
filleting the ribs in the recognised fashion.

And the spine was subject to a similar process,  
being pared to the haunch so it held as one piece  
then hoisting it high and hacking it off.

And its name is the numbles, as far as I know, and  
just that.

Its hind legs prised apart  
they slit the fleshy flaps,  
then cleave and quickly start  
to break it down its back.

Text for scene 4 textual projection:

And in excellent humour the lord hollered for Gawain  
to see for himself the size of the kill,  
and showed him the side-slabs sliced from the ribs.

‘Are you pleased with this pile? Have I won your praise?

Does my skill at this sport deserve your esteem?’

‘Why yes,’ said the other. ‘It’s the hugest haul

I have seen, out of season, for several years.’

‘And I give it all to you, Gawain,’ said the master,  
‘for according to our contract it is yours to claim.’

‘Just so,’ said Gawain, ‘and I’ll say the same,  
for whatever I’ve won within these walls  
such gains will be graciously given to you.’

So he held out his arms and hugged the lord  
and kissed him in the kindest way he could.

‘You’re welcome to my winnings – to my one profit,  
though I’d gladly have given you any greater prize.’

‘I’m grateful,’ said the lord, ‘and Gawain, this gift  
would carry more weight if you cared to confess  
by what wit you won it. And when. And where.’

‘That wasn’t our pact,’ he replied. ‘So don’t pry.  
You’ll be given nothing greater, the agreement we have  
holds good!

They laugh aloud and trade  
wise words which match their mood.

## Appendix D: Data Collection Questions

### 1. Initial Survey:

- Please indicate your level of experience with medieval literature. Please respond with a number on a scale of 1-10, with 1 indicating that you have never read any medieval literature or seen any dramatic or filmic adaptations of any medieval texts, and 10 indicating you have read or studied medieval literature at considerable length.
- Have you encountered *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* prior to this study? If so, please state what your interaction with the poem was—for instance, reading a translation of the poem or reading it in its original language (Middle English), studying the poem in an educational course, watching a filmic adaptation of the poem, etc.

### 2. Post-performance survey (individual)

- Please state your initial impressions of the performance you encountered.
- Did any aspect(s) of the performance feel particularly engaging to you? If so, please describe what and how to the best of your ability.
- Did you feel particularly disengaged during any aspect(s) of the performance? If so, please describe when and why to the best of your ability.
- Would you say you have a deeper understanding and/or appreciation of this section of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* following the performance?
- Did you feel that the immersive strategies used in the performance made the medieval text more accessible and/or meaningful to you? If so, at what points and in what ways?

- How involved in the action of the hunting scene did you feel?
- Which of the four scenes (the hunt, the bedchamber, the disembowelling, or the exchange) felt most intimate to you? Please explain why.

3. Post-performance discussion questions (focus group)

- How did the stimulation of your senses affect how involved you felt in the narrative?
- Did you feel particularly connected to the performers at any point of the performance? Your co-participants?
- At any point of the performance, did you feel comfortable enough to move throughout the space? If so, when? If not, what were the obstacles?
- At any point of the performance, did you feel compelled to engage verbally or non-verbally with the performers or co-participants? Why or why not?

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