

Fairies, Kingship, and the British Past in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* and *Sir Orfeo*

by

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Abstract

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My dissertation focuses on two fairy narratives from medieval Britain: the tale of Herla in Walter Map's twelfth-century *De Nugis Curialium*, and the early fourteenth-century romance *Sir Orfeo*. I contend that in both texts, fairies become intimately associated with conceptions of the ancient British past, and, more narrowly, with the idea of a specifically insular kingship that seeks its legitimization within that past.

In Chapter One, I argue that Map's longer version of the Herla narrative is his own synthesis of traditional materials, intended to highlight the continuity of a notion of British kingship that includes the pygmy king, Herla and Henry II. In Chapter Two, I contend that the two fifteenth-century versions of *Sir Orfeo* are likely descendants of an intermediary version that was copied from the Auchinleck text after it had been mutilated; therefore, the conflation of Thrace with Winchester in the Auchinleck version is unlikely to be an interpolation by a scribe. In Chapter Three, I examine the *Orfeo* poet's manipulation of his sources, both actual and ostensible. I assert that through the substitution of insular fairies for the Classical gods, the poet audaciously claims for the story of Orpheus an origin in the British past. Similarly, he implies that his poem, rather than being a translation of a now-lost *Lai d'Orphey*, is instead the English "original" of that work. In Chapter Four, I examine the depiction of the fairies in *Sir Orfeo*. Drawing on a range of medieval fairy narratives as a basis of comparison, I argue that the *Orfeo* poet seemingly invites the use of conventional aspects of fairy alterity as an interpretive paradigm early in the poem, only to dissolve boundaries between the fairy and human realms later in the work; in this manner, he prepares the way for the climax of the narrative, in which the fairy king, Orfeo, and the steward are all figured as types of a virtuous British kingship.

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## Chapter One: Walter Map and the Tale of Herla

The Anglo-Welsh secular cleric Walter Map was probably born in the first half of the 1130s in the Welsh Marches – most likely in Gloucestershire or southern Herefordshire – and his family may have been well-connected (Map xiii-xiv). He was in Paris by 1154 as a student of the canonist and theologian Gerard la Pucelle (Map xv and n. 4), and some years later he seems to have enjoyed the patronage of Gilbert Foliot, bishop of first Hereford (1148-63) and then London (1163-87) (Map xvi). By 1173, however, Map was a royal clerk in the court of King Henry II, and he appears to have held that position until the latter's death in 1189 (Map xvi-xvii). He was appointed royal justice in England in 1173, and in 1179 he represented Henry II at the Third Lateran Council (Map xvi-xvii). Concurrent with his service to the king, Map was granted a number of other appointments; in 1173, Gilbert Foliot made him a canon of St. Paul's and awarded him the prebend of Mapesbury, the first-recorded of a number of benefices Map would accumulate throughout his life (Map xvi-xviii).<sup>1</sup> Map became a canon of Lincoln by the early 1180s; in 1186 he was appointed chancellor there, but had moved to the precentorship by 1189 (Map xvii-xviii). In 1196 or 1197 he was made archdeacon of Oxford, a position he probably held until his death on 1 April in either 1209 or 1210 (Map xvii).

Map seems to have enjoyed great renown as a prolific literary artist in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors, his most recent editors, note that “a large quantity of the best Latin secular verse of the late twelfth century was attributed to him,” and the *Queste de Saint Graal* and the *Mort Artu* in the *Prose Lancelot* cycle claim him as their author (Map xx). However, twentieth-century scholarship has stripped Map's *oeuvre* of all the romances and Goliardic poetry; outside of some “odd scraps of verse” (Map xxiii n. 2), only the *De Nugis Curialium* remains (Map xx).<sup>2</sup> The title of the *De Nugis Curialium* (hereafter, *DNC*) is often translated as “Courtiers' Trifles,” and Map appears to have composed the bulk of the work during the early 1180s, when he was in fact a member of the Henrician court (Map xxvi). The book comprises a curious and nearly indescribable mixture of court satire, jokes, personal anecdotes, history, pseudo-history, and folklore. Map tells us that one section of the larger book, an antifeminist tract entitled *Dissuasio Valerii ad Ruffinum philosophum ne uxorem ducat*, had circulated as an independent work before the compilation of the *DNC* (Map 312-3); more than four dozen copies of that text survive today (Map xlvi). Strangely enough, however, the lengthy *De Nugis Curialium* itself seems to have been unknown to Map's contemporaries; the book is not mentioned or alluded to in any other medieval work, and only one text survives; it is included in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 851 (3041), a manuscript copied in the late fourteenth century and later supplemented in the fifteenth (Map xlv-xlvii).<sup>3</sup> Brooke and

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<sup>1</sup> The prebend of Mapesbury in what is now northwest London was probably named for Walter Map (Map xvi).

<sup>2</sup> A thirteenth-century manuscript (Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 32) includes a couple of brief anecdotes labeled “From the sayings of W. Map” (*Ex dictis W. Map*); Brooke and Mynors offer the text and an English translation as an appendix to their edition of the *DNC* on pages 515-6.

<sup>3</sup> In recent years, Bodley 851 has achieved a good deal of fame for its inclusion of the Z text of *Piers Plowman* by William Langland.

Mynors state flatly that the *DNC* “did not circulate at all” in the Middle Ages (Map xx).<sup>4</sup>

Like his friend and colleague Gerald of Wales, Walter Map seems to have straddled the racial and cultural boundaries between Wales and England in the late twelfth century. Gerald comments that Map was “of English origins” (*ab Anglia oriundus*) (Map xiii), but Map’s own identification with the Welsh in the *De Nugis Curialium* cannot be doubted. He calls them “my compatriots” (*[c]ompatriote nostri*) (Map 182-3), and he says that Thomas Beckett – then the royal chancellor – once asked him his opinion about about their trustworthiness because Map himself “[was] a dweller on the marches of Wales” (*marchio sum Walensibus*) (Map 194-5). And as Brooke and Mynors note, Map’s surname “is a version of the Welsh ‘Vab’ or ‘Mab’ or ‘Ap’ meaning ‘son of’; Map was very likely a nickname which was attached by the English to some of their Welsh friends on the border” (Map xiii).<sup>5</sup> The precise degree of Map’s familiarity with Welsh culture remains uncertain, however. Brynley F. Roberts opines that even if Map had a claim to Welsh origins, “his education and career placed him firmly on the Anglo-Norman side of the geographical and cultural divide” (“Melusina” 283), and he concludes that Map and Gerald were both “observers of Welsh life without being part of it” (“Melusina” 284). Juliette Wood similarly sees Map as distanced from traditional Welsh culture, but she is willing to entertain at least the possibility that he had more than a passing familiarity with the Welsh language:

We know he spoke Latin and Anglo-French. These would have been necessary for a cleric and a courtier. He includes a few words of Welsh and English, but in contexts which reveal that to him they were foreign languages. Whether he had any fluency in these languages is unclear from the text. It seems doubtful but is not beyond the realms of possibility. (“Walter Map” 93)

Wood calls Map’s observations on the Welsh “extremely valuable,” but she cautions that they “are a mixture of first and second hand information, more so than has previously been supposed” (97).

On the face of it, Map’s own attitudes towards the Welsh would appear to be clear-cut. Brooke and Mynors note “the low opinion [Map] seems to hold of the Welsh,” and many of his comments on his “compatriots” are less than flattering. The essence of his response to Beckett’s question about the faithfulness of the Welsh was that “while you hold the sword they [i.e., the

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<sup>4</sup> The idea that the *DNC* was unknown to medieval writers is a commonplace of the scholarly literature on Walter Map, and at this point it seems that *proof* that any given author knew the *DNC* will simply never be forthcoming. But the likelihood of Map’s influence on other writers should not be dismissed out of hand. In their edition of Gervase of Tilbury’s early thirteenth-century miscellany *Otia Imperialia* (hereafter, *OI*) – a book that is reminiscent of the *DNC* in both its structure and content – S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns offer an appendix entitled “Allusions to Classical, Medieval and Patristic Sources.” There they list more than a half dozen narratives from the *DNC* as parallels to texts in the *OI* (pages 953-54). While the editors’ comments on the individual texts make it clear that they consider the particular narratives in the *OI* tales similar to those in the *DNC* rather than allusions *per se*, the similarities are sometimes rather striking. Since Gervase was a younger contemporary of Map’s and moved in some of the same circles, the possibility that the latter influenced the former may deserve closer scrutiny than it has thus far received.

<sup>5</sup> Whatever the origin of the appellation, it appears to have been used as a surname by other members of Map’s extended family as well (Map xiv-xv).

Welsh] will submit, when they hold it they will command” (*dum tenebitis ensem supplicabunt, cum ipsi tenuerint imperabunt*) (194-5). At other points in the *DNC* he comments further that “[t]he glory of the Welsh is in plunder and theft” (*In rapina et furto gloria Walensium*) (196-7), that they are “swift [. . .] to shed blood” (*in sanguine <m> proni*) (202-3), and that “[s]o strong and innate in the Welsh is the disuse of civility, that if in one respect they may appear kindly in most they show themselves ill-tempered and savages” (*si in aliquo uideantur modesti, in multis appareant discoli et siluestres*) (146-7). Even when he praises an aspect of Welsh culture, as in his celebrated remarks on Welsh generosity and hospitality, he prefaces his comments with the qualification that the Welsh are “prodigal of life, greedy of liberty, neglectors of peace, warlike and skilled in arms, and eager for vengeance” (*uite prodigi, libertatis auari, pacis neglectores, bellicosi armisque prudentes et uindictae auidi*) (Map 182-83).

Nevertheless, while Map’s direct comments on the nature of the Welsh character reflect precisely the attitudes one might expect from a member of the Henrician court, many of his narratives in the *DNC* offer a greater ambivalence, suggesting that his engagement with his own cultural heritage was more complex and nuanced than scholars have generally conceded. For instance, in *Distinctio ii.23* of the *DNC*, Map tells a historical anecdote about the meeting of the Welsh king Llywelyn with the Anglo-Saxon king Edward the Confessor, which Map says is “the one thing [Llywelyn] is recorded to have done nobly and courteously” (*unum nobiliter et honeste fecisse dicitur*).<sup>6</sup> In the tale, the kings’ entourages took up positions on opposite banks of the Severn River – which often marked the boundary between Wales and England – and each side laid out reasons why the other should be the one to cross over:

Allegabat maioritatem Luelinus, parietatem Eduuardus: Luelinus quod sui totam Angliam cum Cornubia, Scotia et Wallia conquisissent a gigantibus, et se affirmabat in rectissimo descensu heredem, Eduuardus quod a conquisitoribus suis eam sui obtinuissent antecessores. Post multam igitur preliacionis rixam, ingressus cimbam Eduuardus ad Luelinum properauit. Est autem ibi Sabrina miliare habens in latum. Videns ipsum et agnoscens Luelinus, proiecto pallio solempni (nam se foro parauerat) usque ad pectus ingressus est aquam, et cymbam corditer amplectens ait: ‘Sapientissime rex, tua humilitas meam uicit superbiam, et sapienci triumphauit inepciam; collum quod contra te fatuus erexi ascendes, et sic intrabis terram quam tibi hodie tuam fecit benignitas.’ Acceptumque humeris super pallium suum sedere fecit, et iunctis manibus sibi fecit hominium.

[Llywelyn alleged his precedence, Edward his equality: Llywelyn took the ground that his people had gained all England, with Cornwall, Scotland, and Wales, from the giants, and affirmed himself to be their heir in a direct line: Edward argued that his ancestors had got the land from its conquerors. After a great deal of

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<sup>6</sup> Whether by accident or design, Map often plays fast and loose with historical facts in his narratives, and that pattern is clearly visible here. As Brooke and Mynors note, Map seems in this tale to have conflated two Welsh kings – Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (reigned 1023-39) and Gruffudd ap Llywelyn (reigned 1039-63) (Map 186 n. 1). The incident narrated here is not recorded elsewhere; if it actually took place during the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-66), then Gruffudd ap Llywelyn would have been the Welsh king involved.

quarrelsome contention Edward got into a boat and set off to Llywelyn. At that point the Severn is a mile broad. Llywelyn seeing and recognizing him cast off his state mantle – for he had prepared himself for a public appearance – went into the water up to his breast and throwing his arms lovingly about the boat, said: ‘Wisest of kings, your modesty has vanquished my pride, your wisdom has triumphed over my foolishness. The neck which I foolishly stiffened against you you shall mount and so enter the territory which your mildness has to-day made your own.’ And taking him on his shoulders he seated him upon his mantle, and then with joined hands did him homage.] (Map 194-95)

Map was a highly-placed official in the court of the king of England, and his telling of a dispute over political precedence between a Welsh king and an English ends rather unsurprisingly in the former doing homage to the latter. And the depiction of Llywelyn here is consistent with Map’s remarks about the Welsh quoted above: if Llywelyn is ultimately “kindly” in this particular tale, he proves himself to be “ill-tempered” and even “savage” in the other anecdotes Map relates in this section. But a subtler ambivalence also haunts this narrative. Map puts into Llywelyn’s mouth a recognizably Galfridian story about how Llywelyn’s ancestors won the isle of Britain from the giants that had been occupying it, and that narrative is never challenged by Edward, who instead claims that the fact of conquest (presumably by his Anglo-Saxon forebears) puts him on an “equal” footing with British/Welsh arguments for historical precedence. Even as Map’s tale affirms the propriety of English overlordship in Britain, it simultaneously rehearses with apparent equanimity Welsh claims to sovereignty in the island as a whole, insistently placing them before the reader. And in fact much of the second of the *DNC*’s five large sections – *distinctiones* (“distinctions”), as Map or a later scribe labels them – concerns itself with anecdotes and observations drawn from Welsh history.

Perhaps the most celebrated narrative found in the *De Nugis Curialium* concerns an ancient British king named Herla. In the more famous of Map’s two versions of the tale, Herla and his court visit the otherworld at the behest of a pygmy-like king, but they find upon their return that more than 200 years have passed in the human realm, and that they are unable to dismount from their horses without fear of sudden death. Herla and his followers become spectral wanderers upon the earth until, Map tells us, the first year of the reign of Henry II, when they seem to disappear forever. Map ruefully concludes that Herla’s band appears to have transmitted its unrest to Henry’s courtiers.

This narrative is most commonly read as an instance of courtly satire. Sian Echard, for instance, describes it as “a gentle dig at the perpetual wanderings of the Angevin court” (233). And such a satirical perspective is well supported by the text itself. The first “distinction” begins with a lengthy dissection of the perils and foibles of court life. In the chapter immediately preceding the one telling of Herla, for instance, Map claims that there may be certain points of comparison between the court and the infernal regions: in his usual waggish style, he notes:

Non dico tamen quod infernus, quia non sequitur, sed fere tantam habet ad ipsum similitudinem quantam equi ferrum ad eque.

[I do not, however, say that [the court] is hell; that does not follow: only it is almost as much like hell as a horse’s shoe is like a mare’s] (Map 14-17)

Nevertheless, I would contend that discussions of the Herla episode have all too often read it as *solely* a jocular take – or not so jocular take – on the Henrician court, and that other potential resonances of the text have been ignored. In chapter i.11 of the *DNC*,<sup>7</sup> Map seems explicitly to provide a context of satire for his longer Wild Hunt narrative; but we will see that in iv.13, as in many other places in Map’s text, the question of context is itself a vexed one. The associative principle by which Map organizes his material allows two very different contexts – a collection of reports of the uncanny, on the one hand, and courtly satire, on the other – to make competing claims on the Herlethingus story at the heart of iv.13, seeming almost wilfully to disrupt the rote application of a reading that appeals too heavily to context alone. The contextually overdetermined nature of the Herlethingus passage may be a product of Map’s own hermeneutic strategies. At the very end of Distinction Two, Map famously expresses an unwillingness to foreclose upon the interpretive possibilities opened up by any particular story he records:

Silua[m] uobis et materiam, non dico fabularum sed faminum appono; cultui etenim sermonum non intendo, nec si studeam consequar. Singuli lectores appositam ruditatem exculpant, ut eorum industria bona facie prodeat in publicum. Venator uester sum: feras uobis affero, fercula faciatis.

[I set before you here a whole forest and timberyard, I will not say of stories, but of jottings; for I do not spend time upon cultivation of style, nor, if I did, should I attain to it. Every reader must cut into shape the rough material that is here served up to him, that thanks to their pains it may go forth into the world with a fair outside. I am but your huntsman. I bring you the game, it is for you to make dainty dishes out of it.] (Map 208-9)

Of course, this is to a certain extent a sly bit of rhetorical bravado, a sort of extension of the humility topos so frequently deployed in the pages of the *DNC*. Nevertheless, it also serves both to justify the looseness of narrative structure in the work by allotting to the reader the ultimate “responsibility for the creation of meaning” (Echard 21), and, simultaneously, to suggest that the *ruditatis* of the work – its rough framework, or, in the terms I am employing here, the context of any one part of the text – should not be seen as delimiting the full semiotic potential of a given narrative. I would contend that Map’s individual narratives have typically been underinterpreted; in the case of the two tales under consideration here, a comparison of the details of the two versions in i.11 and iv.13 will suggest the existence of interpretive possibilities that mark out a middle ground between the immediate context and those based on texts far removed from the *DNC* both temporally and culturally.

In this chapter I will argue that the Herla episode has very specific implications for our understanding of Map’s position on Welsh and English relations. In particular, I will be arguing that the more celebrated of the two accounts is actually a pointed revision and reinvention of the earlier narrative. Map has combined two well known folkloric themes – the Wild Hunt and the journey to fairyland – in order to subtly invoke the alleged Welsh hope for the return of Arthur.

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<sup>7</sup> As noted above, Map’s text is divided into five large *distinctiones* or “distinctions,” and each of these is subdivided into chapters. Throughout the dissertation I will follow Brooke and Mynors, Map’s most recent editors in referring to individual chapters as, say, “i.11,” where the small Roman stands for Distinction One, and the Arabic numeral stands for its eleventh chapter.

In this manner, he confirms the propriety of the English lordship of Wales while insistently foregrounding Wales's status as the historical wellspring of Britishness.

I will begin with a more detailed look at the two versions of Map's narrative. Like a number of other fairy narratives in the *De Nugis Curialium*, the tale of Herla (or the company of Herlethingus) appears twice in the work. In the form the *DNC* now has, the narrative appears first in i.11 and then much later in iv.13. The two accounts have different contexts and vary fairly substantially in content. The narrative in i.11 is longer and much fuller: it follows the transformation of the character Herla from a king of the ancient Britons into a leader of a variant of the Wild Hunt, and it ends in the mid twelfth century with a description of Herla's phantom host apparently sinking into the River Wye in the first year of the rule of King Henry II. The second version of the narrative focuses more narrowly on the scene of the host's disappearance, and it seems to *repeat* some of the features of the other text. However, the most recent editors of the *De Nugis Curialium*, C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors, have rather convincingly shown that the original sequencing of the distinctions was rather different than that found today. The *DNC* must have opened with what are *now* Distinctions 3, 4, and 5, followed by Distinctions 1, and 2 – in that order. “At some date unknown,” they write, “[Walter Map] decided to make the satire on the court [found at what is now the beginning of Distinction One] the opening of the book, and so cut his loose quires like a pack of cards, arranging the material in approximately its present order” (Map xxx). This implies that in the original form of the *DNC*, Distinction Four must have preceded Distinction One. This fact is significant because it suggests the possibility, at least, that the second, shorter version of the tale was the first composed. Admittedly, determining the order of composition of the various sections of the *DNC* is a difficult proposition. Still, I hope to demonstrate that the nature of the differences between the two accounts strongly suggests that the longer, more celebrated version of the tale in i.11 is actually a major revision of the shorter version found in iv.13.

Commentators often conflate the two narratives in i.11 and iv.13, viewing them more or less as complementary parts of a whole, but the differences between them are sufficiently significant to warrant looking at each separately. Here I will begin with an examination of the shorter version in iv.13; that narrative follows, accompanied by the paragraphs that precede and follow it:

Supra Cenomannum in aere comparuit multis hominum centenis grex caprarum maximus. In Britania minori uise sunt prede nocturne militesque ducentes eas cum silencio semper transeuntes, ex quibus Britones frequenter excusserunt equos et animalia, et eis usi sunt, quidam sibi ad mortem, quidam indempniter.

Cetus eciam et phalanges noctiuage quas Herlethingi dicebant famose satis in Anglia usque ad Henrici secundi, domini scilicet nostri, tempora regis comparuerunt, exercitus erroris infiniti, insani circuitus et attoniti silentii, in quo uiui multi apparuerunt quos decessisse nouerant. Hec huius Herlethingi uisa est ultimo familia in marchia Walliarum et Herefordie anno primo regni Henrici secundi, circa meridiem, eo modo quo nos erramus cum bigis et summariis, cum clitellis et panariolis, auibis et canibus, concurrentibus uiris et mulieribus. Qui tunc primi uiderunt tibiis et clamoribus totam in eos uiciniam concitauerunt, et ut illius est mos uigilantissime gentis statim omnibus armis instructa multa manus aduenit, et quia uerbum ab eis extorquere non potuerunt uerbis, telis adigere

responsa parabant. Illi autem eleuati sursum in aera subito disparuerunt.

Ab illa die nusquam uisa est illa milicia, tanquam nobis insipientibus illi suos tradiderint errores, quibus uestes atterimus, regna uastamus, corpora nostra et iumentorum frangimus, egris animabus querere medelam non uacamus; nulla nobis utilitas accedit inempta, nichil emolumenti prouenit, si dampna pensentur, nichil dispensanter agimus, nichil uacant<er>; uana nobis infructuosa<que> adeo properacione deferimur insani; et cum semper in abscondito secrecius nostri colloquantur principes, seratis et obseruatis aditibus, nichil in nobis consilio fit. Furia inuehimur et impetu; presenciam negligenter et insulse curamus, futura casui committimus; et quia scienter et prudenter in nostrum semper tendimus interitum, uagi et palantes, pauidi pre ceteris hominum exterminati sumus et tristes. Inter alios queri / solet que causa doloris, quia raro dolent; inter nos causa leticie, quia raro gaudemus. Doloris aliquando leuamen habemus, leticiam nescimus; subleuamur solacio, gaudio non beamur. Ascendit autem in nobis cum diuiciis meror, quia quanto quis maior est, tanto maiori quassatur sue uoluntatis assultu, et in predam aliorum diripitur.

[Over Le Mans, in the air, there appeared to many hundreds of people a great herd of goats. In Lesser Britain there have been seen droves of spoil by night and soldiers driving them who always pass in silence, and the Bretons have often 'cut out' horses and beasts from among them, and made use of them – some with fatal results, others without harm to themselves.

The nocturnal companies and squadrons, too, which were called of Herlethingus, were sufficiently well-known appearances in England down to the time of King Henry II, our present lord. They were troops engaged in endless wandering, in an aimless round, keeping an awestruck silence, and in them many persons were seen alive who were known to have died. This household of Herlethingus was last seen in the march of Wales and Hereford in the first year of the reign of Henry II, about noonday: they travelled as we do, with carts and sumpter horses, pack-saddles and panniers, hawks and hounds, and a concourse of men and women. Those who saw them first raised the whole country against them with horns and shouts, and as is the wont of that most alert race, a large force came equipped with every weapon, and, because they were unable to wring a word from them by addressing them, made ready to extort an answer with their arms. They, however, rose up into the air and vanished on a sudden.

From that day that troop has nowhere been seen; they seem to have handed over their wanderings to us poor fools, those wanderings in which we wear out our clothes, waste whole kingdoms, break down our own bodies and those of our beasts, and have no time to seek medicine for our sick souls. No advantage comes to us unbought, no profit accrues if the losses be reckoned, we do nothing considered, nothing at leisure; with haste that is vain and wholly unfruitful to us we are borne on in mad course, and since our rulers always confer secretly in hidden places with the approaches locked and guarded, nothing is done by us in council. We rush on at a furious pace; the present we treat with negligence and folly, the future we entrust to chance, and since we are knowingly

and with open eyes always wending to our destruction, wandering timid waifs, we are more than any man lost and depressed. In other societies it is the common question, ‘Why are you sad?’ for sadness is rare; in ours it is, ‘Why are you cheerful?’ for we are seldom happy. Relief from sorrow we sometimes experience, gladness we do not know; we are lightened by solace, not blessed with happiness. But along with wealth, sorrow climbs up into our hearts; for the higher anyone rises, the fiercer are the assaults on his will which shake him, and he becomes the prey and spoil of others.] (Map 370-73)

The immediate context of Map’s shorter version of the Wild Hunt story proves to be surprisingly complex. Chapter iv.13 contains two other brief accounts of uncanny phenomena that precede the tale of the Hunt, then the latter narrative itself, and then a final, prolonged satirical commentary on the world of the courtier that continues on for a number of paragraphs not included here. The first of these sections, describes Nicholas Pipe, a man “gifted . . . with the aptitudes of fish” (*acceperat aptitudinem piscium*; 368-69) in that he could stay in the sea for up to a year at a time.<sup>8</sup> The next small section – the one with which my quoted excerpt begins – consists of two very brief, related sketches: the first recounts the sighting of a great herd of goats in the air above Le Mans; the second describes herds of horses, driven by eerily silent soldiers, that appear by night in Brittany. The following section describes the wandering of the silent host of Herlethingus and its ultimate disappearance in Hereford. The relatively lengthier final section of the chapter offers a satirical description of the frenzied and peripatetic court of King Henry II. The juxtaposition of these four accounts may at first appear arbitrary, but here, as elsewhere in the *DNC*, Map’s sequencing of his narratives seems to depend on a chain of subtle associations: a tale of a human strangely out of place in the sea leads to one of goats strangely out of place in the air; the spectral herd of goats then evokes a spectral cavalcade with its silent drovers; the latter image segues in its turn into the tale of the company of Herlethingus, with its description of pack animals and silent riders; finally, since Map’s portrait of the latter uncanny host resembles that of a royal court on the move, the similarity leads him into a more protracted reflection on the perils of life in Henry’s ever-wandering court, which rounds out the chapter. While scholars almost inevitably discuss Map’s narrative of the company of Herlethingus within the context of courtly satire, it is important to note that in its original setting, the tale is simultaneously part of a sequence of prodigies and wonders and part of the introduction to Map’s look at the Henrician court.

A number of the details of the Herlethingus narrative itself will take on added significance when compared to Map’s second version of the tale in i.11. While most of Map’s account of Herla in section i.11 takes place among the “ancient Britons,” this version of the tale in iv.13 gives it a context that is effectively English, both culturally and geographically. Map first introduces the host of Herlethingus as an example of a phenomenon occurring “in England” (*in Anglia*).<sup>9</sup> He then specifies that the particular instance he recounts here takes place in “the

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<sup>8</sup> The rubrication for the chapter as a whole refers to Nicholas Pipe alone; in Latin the rubric reads, *De Nicholao Pipe homine equoreo* (“Of Nicholas Pipe, the Man of the Sea”; 368-69).

<sup>9</sup> I believe that Map’s use of *Anglia* in this account is indeed intended to refer specifically to “England,” just as Brooke and Mynors translate it. But at least once in the *DNC* Map uses the term rather more broadly. In the story of Gado, a Vandal who enters the service of the Anglo-Saxon king Offa, Map refers to Gado’s return to *insulam*

march of Wales and Hereford” (*marchia Walliarum et Herefordie*; 370-71), locating it in territories under the control of either the English crown or the Marcher lords.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Map’s most recent editors impose upon the witnesses to the disappearance of the host a Welsh identity. Map writes:

Qui tunc primi uiderunt tibiis et clamoribus totam in eos uiciniam concitauerunt, et ut illius est mos uigilantissime gentis statim omnibus armis instructa multa manus aduenit, et quia uerbum ab eis extorquere non potuerunt uerbis, telis adigere responsa parabant.

[“Those who saw them first raised the whole country against them with horns and shouts, and as is the wont of that most alert race, a large force came equipped with every weapon, and, because they were unable to wring a word from them by addressing them, made ready to extort an answer with their arms.”]

Map does not explicitly identify “that most alert race” (*uigilantissime gentis*), and there is no mention of Welshmen in this excerpt, but Brooke and Mynors gloss the phrase as referring to “[t]he Welsh” (Map 371 n. 4) without further comment. They have almost certainly arrived at this conclusion by comparing Map’s account in iv.13 with that in i.11, where the host is described as appearing to “many Welshmen” (*multis Wallensibus*; Map 30-31). However, as I note in my discussion of that narrative below, Map’s second account of the story in i.11 alters it in a large number of very striking ways, sometimes openly contradicting the earlier version. Certain aspects of the later story are clearly pointed revisions of earlier details, and it is not prudent to assume that any feature of the narrative remains unchanged between the two versions. Given that the passage is set near Hereford, an important local center of English settlement and political administration in the mid twelfth century, the idea that only the Welsh would be portrayed as reacting to the sudden manifestation of a large host seems surprising, if not

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*nostram, id est Angliam* (“our island, I mean England”; 166-67). This use of *Anglia* where one might expect *Britannia* doesn’t seem to be repeated elsewhere in the *DNC*.

<sup>10</sup> It is not clear to me how precise Map’s geographic terminology is meant to be here. Literally, the Latin text says that the host of Herlethingus was seen in the “march of Wales and of Hereford.” (In this case, *Herefordia* would appear to mean “Herefordshire” in general rather than just its cathedral city.) Map may simply mean that the host was seen in areas on either side of the border between Wales and Herefordshire. On the other hand, he may be using “marchia Herefordie” more technically, in which case the text could mean that the host appeared in those areas of Herefordshire that were under the control of Marcher lords. According to the *Victoria History of the County of Hereford*, a number of the districts in the west of Herefordshire were considered Marcher lordships under Henry II:

Since the re-establishment of the central government by Henry II the distinction between the administrative shire and the Marcher districts in its western border had become well defined. Geographically the shire included the lordships of Wigmore and Lugharness in the north-west, those of Clifford, Winforton, Stapleton, Eardisley, Whitney, and Huntington in the west, that of Ewyas Harold on the south-west. But the power of the sheriff extended over none of these districts, nor were they organized in hundreds. (Carlyle 4.360-61)

My own guess is that Map did not intend a high degree of precision here, but perhaps only an in-depth review of his use of place names could shed more light on this topic.

downright improbable. As I observe later in this chapter, a well-defined polemical intent may lie behind Map's restriction of the observers to the local Welshmen in his revised version of the narrative in i.11. In the absence of any such context in iv.13, however, there is no particular reason why the "most vigilant race" couldn't be a reference to the local Englishmen or Marchers. And in fact it would seem unlikely that a large crowd of Welshmen dwelling in Herefordshire in 1154 would have easy access to arms, especially given the twenty years of unrest in the Marches which had preceded that date during the chaos of King Stephen's reign and had likely made the need for vigilance a universal for those dwelling on either side of the English-Welsh border.

Map's reference to "the nocturnal companies and squadrons [. . .] which were called of Herlethingus" (*[c]etus [. . .] et phalanges noctiuage quas Herlethingi dicebant*) alludes to a variant of the "Wild Hunt," a general term for a broad array of phenomena well known in the folklore of northern Europe and elsewhere from medieval times to the present. The nature of the Hunt can vary widely, but many of the earlier medieval accounts of the Hunt can be said to possess some or all of the following features: a night-time setting (though appearances at noon are not uncommon); a mounted host led by a rider with otherworldly connections; a sometimes solemn, and sometimes frenzied atmosphere; a noisy tumult, including the shouts of the riders, and occasionally the baying of hunting dogs and the blowing of horns; the presence of persons whom witnesses know to be deceased; and in the more explicitly religious instances, penitential torment and the presence of demons.<sup>11</sup> The earliest account of the Wild Hunt from England was composed probably about a half century or less before Map began work on the *DNC* and helps to confirm his claim that the Wild Hunt was widely known in England in the twelfth century. Found in the *Peterborough Chronicle* entry for 1127, the narrative possesses a number of the classical features of the motif, particularly those associated with hunting *per se*: the chronicler records the appearance of twenty or thirty large, black riders – mounted on horses and bucks and accompanied by strange black dogs – who blew hunting horns at night in the region between Peterborough and Stanford (*Peterborough* 49-50). The *Chronicle* account shares with Map's the details of a large host of mysterious riders appearing in England, but the anecdote in *DNC* iv.13 is in many regards much more closely paralleled by a narrative found in the *Ecclesiastical History* (hereafter, *EH*) of Orderic Vitalis.

Orderic (1075-ca. 1142) was an English-born cleric resident in Normandy from the age of ten, at which time he was sent by his father as an oblate to the Abbey of Saint Evroult (*EH* 4.2-5). In Book 8, Chapter 17 of the *EH*, Orderic describes a priest's night-time encounter in Normandy with an eerie host of men and women, both afoot and mounted, who, along with a number of supernatural beings, make up a penitential procession of the recently dead (*EH* 4.236-

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<sup>11</sup> The body of scholarship on the Wild Hunt and related phenomena is extensive, and there is no clear consensus among scholars on just what precisely constitutes its chief aspects. Its most salient features vary by region and time period, and scholars tend to define it in terms of the phenomena with which they are most familiar. Beyond the studies cited in the present discussion, one of the most comprehensive recent surveys of the phenomenon is that found in *Chasses fantastiques et cohortes de la nuit au Moyen Âge* by Claude Lecouteux (Paris: Imago, 1999). Lecouteux inventories a broad range of accounts of nocturnal supernatural hosts from medieval Northern and Western Europe; he discusses Walter Map's tale of Herla on pages 81-90, and the *mesnie Hellequin* – including Orderic Vitalis's tale of Walchelin – on pages 91-105. *Le mythe de la Chasse sauvage dans l'Europe médiévale* (Paris: Champion, 1997), edited by Phillippe Walter, offers a range of essays on the phenomenon. I became aware of Karin Ueltschi's large monograph *La Mesnie Hellequin en conte et en rime* (2008) only as I was working to complete this chapter, and I was unable to take advantage of Ueltschi's work.

51). According to Orderic's account, on the bright, moonlit evening of January 1, 1091, the priest Walchelin, serving in the village of Bonneval in the Norman diocese of Lisieux, was returning alone from a visit to a sick man when he heard "a sound like the movement of a great army" (*ingentem strepitum uelut maximi exercitus cepit audire; EH 4.238-39*). When Walchelin attempts to hide, he is told to stop by a "man of huge stature, carrying a great mace" (*quidam enormis staturae ferens ingentem maxucam; EH 4.238-39*), and both then watch as the "army" (*exercitum; EH 4.238-39*) passes by:

Ecce ingens turba peditum pertransibat. et pecudes ac uestes multimodamque suppellectilem et diuersa utensilia quae predones asportare solent super colla scapulasque suas ferebat. Omnes nimirum lamentabantur. seseque ut festinarent cohortabantur. Multos etiam uicinorum suorum qui nuper obierant presbiter ibidem recognouit. et merentes pro magnis suppliciis quibus ob facinora sua torquebantur audiuit.

[A great crowd on foot appeared, carrying across their necks and shoulders animals and clothes and every kind of furnishing and household goods that raiders usually seize as plunder. But all lamented bitterly and urged each other to hurry. The priest recognized among them many of his neighbors who had recently died, and heard them bewailing the torments they suffered because of their sins.] (*EH, 4.238-239*)

Walchelin then sees hundreds of men carrying biers surmounted by dwarves, a demon torturing a dead murderer, and "a troop of women" (*cohors mulierum*), mounted sidesaddle on horses, who are punished for licentiousness by repeatedly rising into the air and falling back onto burning nails embedded in their saddles (*EH 4.238-39*). "The priest recognized a number of noble women in this troop," Orderic says (*In hoc agmine prefatus sacerdos quasdam nobiles feminas recognouit; EH 4.240-41*). Later, Walchelin sees a troop of monks and clergy, groaning and lamenting and occasionally beseeching his prayers, and then a great army of knights enduring various punishments. At this point, Walchelin puts a name to what he is witnessing:

Gualchelinus autem postquam multorum milium ingens cohors pertransiit intra semetipsum sic cogitare cepit, 'Haec sine dubio familia Herlechini est. A multis eam olim uisam audiui, sed incredulus relatores derisi quia certa indicia nunquam de talibus uidi. Nunc uero manes mortuorum ueraciter uideo sed nemo michi credet cum uisa retulero, nisi certum specimen terrigenis exhibuero.'

[Walchelin, after the great army of many thousands had passed by began to say to himself, 'This is most certainly Herlechin's rabble. I have heard many who claimed to have seen them, but have ridiculed the tale-tellers and not believed them because I never saw any solid proof of such things. Now I do indeed see the shades of the dead with my own eyes, but no one will believe me when I describe my vision unless I can show some sure token to living men.'] (*EH 4.242-43*)

Determined to acquire proof, Walchelin attempts to steal one of the horses in the cavalcade and

is angrily approached by four knights who start to seize him. Walchelin is rescued from them by a knight who demands he take a message to the living in order to lessen his own torment; when the priest refuses, the knight grabs him by the throat, leaving a permanent scar on his neck, and drags him along the ground (*EH* 4.242-47). Walchelin is finally rescued by his own deceased brother Robert, who asks him for his prayers, warns Walchelin to reform his own life, and then gallops away (*EH* 4.246-49). Orderic writes that he heard the tale from Walchelin's own mouth, saw the scar on the priest's neck, and recorded his words "so that just men may be encouraged in good, and vicious men may repent of evil" (*ut in bonis consolidentur iusti, et a malis resipiscant peruersi*; *EH* 4.248-51).

Orderic's tale, while far longer and more detailed than Map's narrative in iv.13, bears many similarities to it. The particular incident Map narrates takes place at noon, but Map says the "companies of Herlethingus" (*cetus Herlethingi*) are typically "nocturnal" (*noctiuage*), and the host seen by Walchelin appears in bright moonlight. Map's witnesses see people "who were known to have died" (*quos decessisse nouerant*), and Walchelin "recognized [. . .] many of his neighbors who had recently died" (*[m]ultos [. . .] uicinorum suorum qui nuper obierant [. . .] recognouit*) as well as "a number of noble women" (*quasdam nobiles feminas*) among the "shades of the dead" (*manes mortuorum*). Map's host is a "concourse of men and women" (*concurrentibus uiris et mulieribus*), and Walchelin's vision similarly includes both genders. While Map emphasizes the "carts and sumpter horses and pack-saddles and panniers" (*bigis et summariis, [. . .] clitellis et panariolis*) of a noble household on the move, those among Walchelin's dead penitents who most resemble Map's host are described as being on foot and carrying on their necks "every kind of furnishing and household goods that raiders usually seize as plunder" (*multimodamque suppellectilem et diuersa utensilia quae predones asportare solent*); nevertheless both accounts emphasize that these troops of the dead are still burdened with the types of worldly furnishings they accumulated during life.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the two accounts is the use of virtually the same name for the host of the dead. Map calls the troop the *familia Herlethingi* (translated as "the household of Herlethingus" by Brooke and Mynors), while Orderic calls it the *familia Herlechini* (translated as the "rabble of Herlekin" by Marjorie Chibnall). These names are clearly related to the *mesnie Hellequin*, a name in French for a type of the Wild Hunt recorded in France and elsewhere in Europe from Orderic's time down to the twentieth century. The form of the name employed by Map, *Herlethingus*, does not appear elsewhere, and has elicited a great number of explanations; the name employed by Orderic, *Herlechinus*, is phonologically closer to *Herlekin*, *Hellequin* and other variants found in the larger European tradition.<sup>12</sup> Map's use of the

<sup>12</sup> The etymologies of *Hellequin* and related forms – for instance, "Hurlewayne" found in later Middle English sources, the *Arlecchino/Harlequin* of Italian and French *commedia dell'arte*, and perhaps even the word "harlot" – are problematic and have attracted the attention of such eminent philologists as Jakob Grimm, Ferdinand Lot, Jan de Vries, and many others; a detailed summary would exceed the brief of the present discussion, but a usefully concise overview of earlier opinions can be found in Sainéan, pages 185-86; in his article "Hellequin, Hannequin et le Mannequin," Philippe Walter provides in passing a review of much of the more recent opinion on the etymology of these forms, and on pages 36-38 he offers an inventory of the range of variants found in earlier sources. Despite the great amount of interest scholars have shown in finding an etymological source for this complex of names and phrases, it is safe to say that no consensus has ever been reached. One cannot miss the tone of weariness in Jean-Claude Schmitt's remarks when – commenting skeptically on earlier work by Philippe Walter – he says, "I do not attribute great importance to the etymological research" (*Ghosts* 248 n. 14). But see the next paragraph.

One of the more colorful explanations for Map's use of the variant *Herlethingus* in iv.13 comes from Kemp

term *familia Herlethingi*, never employed in the account he gives in i.11, links the shorter version of his tale not only to Orderic’s narrative, but also to many other mentions of the host of *Herlekin* or the *mesnie Hellequin* that would appear in both English and continental literature in centuries to come. To provide only a few examples from England, Map’s contemporary Peter of Blois – born in France but later resident in England – briefly compares worldly clerks at Henry’s court with the *milites Herlewini* (“knights of Herlewinus”) in a letter written in 1175 or earlier (Harf-Lancner, “L’enser” 39-40; Harf-Lancner, “Malheurs” 13). And references to the host of “Hurlewayne” – a form obviously similar to that employed by Peter of Blois – occur in fifteenth-century English literature in *Richard the Redeless* (90) and in the *Canterbury Interlude and Merchant’s Tale of Beryn* (8).<sup>13</sup>

As I noted above, Orderic at the end of his account says he has transcribed Walchelin’s words so that “vicious men may repent of evil.” Orderic’s tale is the first to identify itself as a narrative of the *mesnie Hellequin*, but other such narratives of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries are almost invariably associated with the same penitential intent as that articulated in the *EH*. Writing less than a decade before Map begins work on the *DNC*, Herbert of Clairvaux tells in his *Libri de miraculis* (*Books of Miracles*) of a young man who encounters at night what he calls the *familia Herlequini*, a tumultuous procession of craftsmen undergoing torment while floating just above the ground; the young man recognizes among them a dead friend, carrying a ram on his shoulders, who asks him to return the animal to a widow from whom he had stolen it in order that he might be freed from torment (Schmitt, *Ghosts* 115). Roughly a half century later, the Cistercian monk Helinand of Froidmont wrote in his

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Malone, who sees it as a scribal misreading of the hypothetical English word “Herleking” (i.e., “Herla the king”) that eventually “lost its final [g] in the mouths of Frenchmen” (194). More recently, however, Jean-Claude Schmitt has revived H. Flasdieck’s earlier opinion that the form used by Map is closest to the origin of the name: “There is no doubt that the name Hellequin (or Herlequin or Helething), which appeared first in Normandy and then in England, is of Germanic origin and refers to the army (*Heer*) and to the assembly of free men (*thing*), of those alone who bear arms” (*Ghosts* 100). The uniqueness of Map’s form, his tendency toward creative invention, and the phonological difficulty of explaining far more common early forms like *Hellequin* as a derivation of *Herlethingus* make this claim seem unlikely to me.

<sup>13</sup> The meaning of the references to Hurlewayne in both fifteenth-century texts is somewhat obscure. In the earlier text, *Richard the Redeless*, the poet upbraids King Richard II for his poor choice of counselors: “Other hobbis ye hadden of Hurlewaynis kynne, / Reffusyng the reule of realles kynde” (90-91). As the *Middle English Dictionary* notes, a “hobbe” can refer to “a person of common birth,” or perhaps – the definition is marked with a question mark – to “a hobgoblin.” It is not clear here whether Hurlewayne has become a type of the unruly commoner, or whether he has instead been assimilated into the company of folkloric supernatural beings more generally.

In the prefatory remarks to the *Canterbury Interlude*, the poet notes that some of the *Canterbury Tales* are most amenable to those who do not care for virtuous matter but rather

to foly  
Leyd wit and lustes all, to such japes  
As Hurlewaynes meyné in every hegg that capes  
Thurh unstabill mynde, ryght as the leves grene  
Stonden ageyn the weder, ryght so by hem I mene. (6-10)

The precise meaning of this passage is somewhat unclear, but here “Hurlewaynes meyné” – an obvious calque on the most common French forms of the name – seems to partake of the same sense of frenzy that Map attempts to evoke with the mention of the *familia Herlethingi*.

autobiographical *De cognitione sua* of a man who is visited at night by a dead friend wearing a beautiful cape; when the dead man explains that the cape is unbearably heavy and a punishment for his sins, the living man asks him whether he is now a member of the *militia Hellequini* (Schmitt, *Ghosts* 115). In the latter case, the answer is “no,” and the dead man explains that the *militia Hellequini* had ceased its journeying, its penance done (Schmitt, *Ghosts* 115). Helinand’s tale nevertheless underscores how strongly the *mesnie Hellequin* was associated with a vision of the tormented dead in this period.

Walter Map’s brief description of the *familia Herlethingi* in iv.13 is more a sketch than a narrative, and it lacks the detail of these fuller accounts. But with the exception of the silence of the *familia* in Map, the details of his text line up well with those in other narratives of the period: the eerie appearance of a large host with a name employing some variant of *Hellequin*, the presence of the recent dead known to onlookers, its continuous wanderings, and the participation of both men and women link the story in *Map* iv.13 with other instances of the penitential procession of the *mesnie Hellequin* from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and especially with that in Orderic Vitalis. Walter Map always appears to be more interested in turning traditional materials to his own purposes than in offering a text scrupulously faithful to the tradition, and it is therefore perhaps unwise to claim definitively that any section of the *DNC* records without tendentious alteration a folk belief current in late twelfth-century England. But the details of Map’s account of the *familia Herlethingi* as given in its first appearance seem to me likely to reflect a tale that fell well within the range of variation for separate accounts of the *mesnie Hellequin* in Map’s period. The same cannot be said of the tale of Herla Map offers in *Map* i.11

In the ordering of the *DNC* as we now have it, the first version of Map’s Wild Hunt narrative occupies the entirety of i.11. There it comes at the end of a prolonged sequence of sections – i.1 through the early part of i.10 – in which Map compares life at court to being in Hell and critiques at length the mad restlessness of the Henrician court in particular; these ideas are also present as part of the tale’s context in iv.13.<sup>14</sup> However, the version in i.11 is much longer than that in iv.13; like its shorter analogue, the longer account ends with the manifestation of the Hunt in the Welsh marches and Hereford during the first year of King Henry’s reign, but it also includes an originary narrative for the Hunt that follows the transformation of Herla – the name Map gives the leader of the host in i.11 alone – from a king of the ancient British to a phantom haunting the border between Wales and England. While the folkloric motif of the *mesnie Hellequin* accounts for nearly all of the narrative detail of the version in iv.13, in i.11 Map seriously curtails specific details of that motif while combining the remainder with the folkloric theme of a trip to fairyland, drawing heavily on fairylore strongly associated with Wales and other Celtic lands. The two versions of the tale ultimately recount more or less similar events surrounding the host’s final disappearance, but the elaboration of the “backstory” in i.11 – as well as numerous differences of detail in those elements that *are* shared by the two accounts – make it clear that i.11 is a thoroughgoing revision and expansion of iv.13, composed with a very different set of aims in mind. The version in i.11 runs as follows:

#### xi. *De Herla rege*

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<sup>14</sup> A leaf is missing from the manuscript after the end of section i.5 of the *DNC*, and sections i.6 through i.8 are now lost, as is the beginning of i.9. See the entry for i.6 (Map 10).

Vnam tamen et solam huic nostre curie similem fuisse fabule dederunt, que dicunt Herlam regem antiquissimorum Britonum positum ad rationem ab altero rege, qui pigmeus uidebatur modicitate stature, que non excedebat simiam. Institit homuncio capro maximo secundum fabulam insidens, uir qualis describi posset Pan, ardenti facie, capite maximo, barba rubente prolixa pectus contingente, nebride preclarum stellata, cui uenter hispidus et crura pedes in caprinos degenerabant. Herla solus cum solo loquebatur. Ait pigmeus: ‘Ego rex multorum regum et principum, innumerabilis et infiniti populi, missus ab eis ad te libens uenio, tibi quidem ignotus, sed de fama que te super alios reges extulit exultans, quoniam et optimus es et loco michi proximus et sanguine, dignusque qui nupcias tuas me conuiuia gloriose uenustes, cum tibi Francorum rex filiam suam dederit, quod quidem te nesciente disponitur, et ecce legati ueniunt hodie. Sitque fedus eternum inter nos, quod tuis primum intersim nupciis, et tu meis consimili die post annum.’ His dictis ei tygride uelocius et terga uertit et se rapuit ab oculis eius. Rex igitur inde cum admiracione rediens, legatos suscepit, precesque acceptauit. Quo residente solempniter ad nupcias, ecce pigmeus ante prima fercula, cum tanta multitudine sibi consimilium quod mensis repletis plures foris quam intus discumberent in papilionibus pigmei propriis in momento protensis; prosiliunt ab eisdem ministri cum uasis ex lapidibus preciosis et integris et artificio non imitabili compactis, regiam et papiliones implent aurea uel lapidea suppellectile, nichil in argento uel ligno propinant uel apponunt; ubicunque desiderantur assunt, et non de regio uel alieno ministrant, totum de proprio effundunt, et de secum allatis omnium excedunt preces et uota. Salua sunt Herle que preparauerat; sui sedent in ocio ministri, qui nec petuntur nec tribuunt. Circumeunt pigmei, gratiam ab omnibus consecuti, preciositate uestium gemmarumque quasi luminaria pre ceteris accensi, nemini uerbo uel opere uel presencia uel ausencia tediosi. Rex igitur eorum in mediis ministrorum / suorum occupacionibus Herlam regem alloquitur sic: ‘Rex optime, Deo teste uobis assum iuxta pactum nostrum in nupciis uestris; si quid autem diffinicionis uestre potest amplius a me peti quam quod cernitis, accurate supplebo libens; si non, uicem honoris inpenso cum repetam non differas.’ His dictis, responso non expectato, se subitus inde papilioni suo reddit, et circa gallicinium cum suis abscessit.

Post annum autem coram Herla subitus expetit ut sibi paccio seruetur. Annuit ille, prouisusque satis ad repensam talionis, quo ductus est sequitur. Cauernam igitur altissime rupis ingrediuntur, et post aliquantas tenebras in lumine, quod non uidebatur solis aut lune sed lampadarum multarum, ad domos pigmei transeunt, mansionem quidem honestam per omnia qualem Naso regiam describit Solis. Celebratis igitur ibi nupciis, et talione pigmeo decenter inpenso, licencia data recedit Herla muneribus onustus et xenniis equorum, canum, accipitrum, et omnium que uenatui uel aucupio prestanciora uidentur. Conducit eos ad tenebras usque pigmeus, et canem modicum sanguinarium portatilem presentat, omnibus modis interdicens ne quis de toto comitatu suo descendat usquam, donec ille canis a portatore suo prosiliat, dictaque salute repatriat. Herla post modicum in lumine solis et regno receptus ueteranum pastorem alloquitur, petens de regina sua rumores ex nomine, quem pastor cum admiracione

respiciens ait: ‘Domine, linguam tuam uix intelligo, cum sim Saxo, tu Brito; nomen autem illius non audiui regine, nisi quod aiunt hoc nomine dudum dictam reginam antiquissimorum Britonum que fuit uxor Herle regis, qui fabulose dicitur cum pigmeo quodam ad hanc rupem disparuisse, nusquam autem postea super terram apparuisse. Saxones uero iam ducentis annis hoc regnum possederunt, expulsis incolis. Stupefactus ergo rex, qui per solum triduum moram fecisse putabat, uix hesit equo. Quidam autem ex sociis suis ante canis descensum inmemores mandatorum pigmei descenderunt, et in puluerem statim resoluti sunt. Rex uero rationem eius intelligens resolutionis, prohibuit sub interminacione mortis consimilis ne quis ante canis descensum terram contingeret. Canis autem nondum descendit.

Vnde fabula dat illum Herlam regem errore semper infinito circuitus cum exercitu suo tenere uestanos sine quiete uel residencia. Multi frequenter illum, ut autumant, exercitum uiderunt. Ultimo tamen, ut aiunt, anno primo coronacionis nostri regis Henrici cessauit regnum nostrum celebriter ut ante uisitare. Tunc autem uisus fuit a multis Wallensibus immergi iuxta Waiam Herefordie flumen. Quieuit autem ab illa hora fantasticus ille circuitus, tanquam nobis suos tradiderint errores, ad quietem sibi. Sed si nolis attendere quam plorandus fiat, non solum in nostra sed in omnibus fere potentum curiis, silencium michi libencius et certe iustius indicere placebit. Libetne nuper actis aurem dare parumper?

[11. *Of King Herla*]

[One court and one only do stories tell of that is like our own. A king of the most ancient Britons, Herla, it is said, was on a time interviewed by another king who was a pygmy in respect of his low stature, not above that of a monkey. This little creature was mounted on a large goat, says the tale, and might be described in the same terms as Pan; his visage was fiery red, his head huge; he had a long red beard reaching to his chest, which was gaily attired in a spotted fawn’s skin: his belly was hairy and his legs declined into goats’ hoofs. Herla found himself tête-à-tête with this being, who said: ‘I am the king over many kings and princes, an unnumbered and innumerable people, and am sent, a willing messenger, by them to you. I am unknown to you, it is true, but I glory in the renown which has exalted you above other monarchs, inasmuch as you are a hero and also closely connected with me in place and descent, and so deserve that your wedding should be brilliantly adorned by my presence as a guest, so soon as the King of the Franks has bestowed his daughter upon you. This matter is being already arranged, though you know it not, and the ambassadors will be here this very day. Let this be a lasting agreement between us, that I shall first attend your wedding and you mine on the same day a year hence.’ With these words, swifter than a tiger, he turned and vanished from view. The King returned home struck with wonder, received the ambassadors and accepted their proposals. When he took his place in state on the wedding day, before the first course the pygmy made his appearance, with so vast a crowd of similar beings that the tables were filled and a larger number sat down to meat outside the hall than within it, in pavilions

brought by the pygmy, which were set up in a moment of time. Out of these pavilions darted servants bearing vessels each made of a single precious stone, by some not imitable art, and filled the palaces and the tents with plate of gold and jewels; no food or drink was served in silver or wood. Wherever they were wanted, they were at hand: nothing that they brought was from the royal stock or elsewhere; they lavished their own provision throughout, and what they had brought with them more than satisfied the utmost wishes of all. Nothing of Herla's preparations was touched: his own servants sat with their hands before them, neither called for nor offering aid. Round went the pygmies, gaining golden opinions from everyone: their splendid clothing and jewels made them shine like burning lights among the company: never importunate, never out of the way, they vexed no one by word or deed. Their King, while his servants were in the midst of their business, addressed King Herla in these terms: 'Noble king, I take God to witness that I am here present at your wedding in accordance with our agreement. Yet if there be anything more of your contract then you see here that you can prescribe to me, I will gladly supply it to the last point; if there be nothing, see that you do not put off the repayment of the honour conferred on you when I shall require it.' And so, without awaiting a reply, he swiftly betook himself to his pavilion, and about cock-crow departed with his people.

After a year had passed, he suddenly appeared before Herla, and called on him to fulfil his agreement. To this he consented, and after providing himself with supplies sufficient for an adequate repayment, he followed whither he was led. The party entered a cave in a high cliff, and after an interval of darkness, passed, in a light which seemed to proceed not from the sun or moon, but from a multitude of lamps, to the mansion of the pygmy. This was as comely in every part as the palace of the Sun described by Naso. Here the wedding was celebrated, the pygmy's offices duly recompensed, and when leave was given, Herla departed laden with gifts and presents of horses, dogs, hawks, and every appliance of the best for hunting or fowling. The pygmy escorted them as far as the place where darkness began, and then presented the king with a small bloodhound to carry, strictly enjoining him that on no account must any of his train dismount until that dog leapt from the arms of his bearer; and so took leave and returned home. Within a short space Herla arrived once more at the light of the sun and at his kingdom, where he accosted an old shepherd and asked him for news of his Queen, naming her. The shepherd gazed at him with astonishment and said: 'Sir, I can hardly understand your speech, for you are a Briton and I a Saxon; but the name of that Queen I have never heard, save that they say that long ago there was a Queen of that name over the very ancient Britons, who was the wife of King Herla; and he, the old story says, disappeared in company with a pygmy at this very cliff, and was never seen on earth again, and it is now two hundred years since the Saxons took possession of this kingdom, and drove out the old inhabitants.' The King, who thought he had made a stay of but three days, could scarce sit his horse for amazement. Some of his company, forgetting the pygmy's orders, dismounted before the dog had alighted, and in a moment fell into dust. Whereupon the King, comprehending the reason of their dissolution,

warned the rest under pain of a like death not to touch the earth before the alighting of the dog. The dog has not yet alighted.

And the story says that this King Herla still holds on his mad course with his band in eternal wanderings, without stop or stay. Many assert that they have often seen the band: but recently, it is said, in the first year of the coronation of our King Henry, it ceased to visit our land in force as before. In that year it was seen by many Welshmen to plunge into the Wye, the river of Hereford. From that hour the phantom journeying has ceased, as if they had transmitted their wanderings to us, and betaken themselves to repose. Yet if you are not willing to admit how lamentable this unrest may be, not only in our own Court, but in almost all those of great princes, you will have to enjoin silence on me: I shall be quite satisfied, and it will assuredly be fairer. Will you listen for a brief space to an account of certain recent events? (Map 26-31)

The material of iv.13 has been drastically reconceptualized here, and in fact Map appears to announce a revisionist intent in the first line of i.11. Near the very end of iv.13, he stresses the uniqueness of the Henrician court in its frenzy and moral dissipation: “I would have this publicly known about our court, for never yet has there been one like it heard of in the past, nor is such another to be feared in the future” (*Hoc de nostra uelim manifestari curia, quia nondum audita est ei similis preterita uel timetur futura*; 374-75). He begins the present chapter, by contrast, with a contradiction of that earlier claim: “One court and one court only do stories tell of that is like our own” (*Vnam tamen et solam huic nostre curie similem fuisse fabule dederunt*; 27-28). Somewhere between the composition of the two sections it seems to have occurred to Map that the comparison of the *mesnie Hellequin* with a royal court might be usefully developed at length. More importantly, this first line of i.11 serves to herald the many changes in the narrative that will follow.

Perhaps the most striking change here is the deletion of any traces of the type of penitential narrative represented by Orderic’s text. Most obviously, nowhere in i.11 does Map refer to the host by name, whereas in the course of the much briefer narrative in iv.13 Map refers once to the “companies and squadrons [. . .] of Herlethingus” (*[c]etus [. . .] et phalanges [. . .] Herlethingi*) and once to the “household of Herlethingus” (*familia [. . .] Herlethingi*). Other parallels with Orderic’s tale of Walchelín also disappear in Map’s newer version. In both Orderic’s account and in chapter iv.13 of the *DNC*, observers claim to have seen among the *mesnie Hellequin* people they recognize as having died, and this detail is a commonplace in such narratives. But the recently deceased do not figure in the tale of King Herla in i.11. In fact, by explicitly placing the origin of Herla’s troop in the distant British past, Map makes it impossible that the twelfth-century observers said to have seen Herla and company could have recognized any of the ancient Britons among the party. It is perhaps just possible that we are intended to assume that Herla’s troop has over the centuries been expanded by the inclusion of people more recently deceased, but the newer version of the tale never makes this claim in any way.

In i.11, references to the *mesnie Hellequin* are replaced by the mention of a “King Herla” (*Herlam regem*; 30-31) whose followers are simply referred to as “his band” (*exercitu suo*; 30-31). Herla is not mentioned in iv.13, and as Helaine Newstead notes, “Herla is not the name of any British or Welsh king, nor is he otherwise known to history or legend” (109). Various scholars take Map’s claim that he is retelling a folk narrative (*secundum fabulam* 26) at face

value, and have attempted to discover in the name “Herla” the root of “Hellequin” and, ultimately, “Harlequin,” the name of a stock character in Italian and French *commedia dell’arte*. As I observed in a footnote above, Kemp Malone, for instance, sees Map’s *Herlethingus* in iv.13 as a variant of the word “Herleking,” i.e., “Herla the king” (194), but “Herleking” itself is unrecorded and purely hypothetical. Newstead has reasonably observed that the name “Herla” may be a back-formation from a name like *Herlechinus*, but she sees this process as occurring through an anonymous process of folk etymology: “If the originally independent story of the pygmy king was attached to the tradition of the Wild Hunt in order to explain the wanderings of the company, the name of its leader, Herla, may possibly have been derived from one of the names of the Wild Hunt current in the twelfth century” (109). While Newstead’s view seems much more likely to me than Malone’s, both scholars assume Map had an otherwise unrecorded folkloric source. Ferdinand Lot offers a simpler and more probable solution when he ascribes the invention of both Herla and his tale to Map himself: *Herla est . . . une création de la fantaisie de Gautier Map et non une forme populaire* (“Herla is . . . a creation of the imagination of Walter Map and not a popular form”; 441 n 3). The elaborate concoction of a purported folktale would be wholly in keeping with Map’s approach to his material elsewhere in the *DNC*. Brooke and Mynors, Map’s most recent editors, make this clear: “In recounting history or telling stories of the contemporary world Map uses a certain license, enjoys a display of falsification which is often mild and sometimes not so mild” (Map xxxviii). And though they do not explore particularities, they offer the tale of Herla as an illustration of this aspect of Map’s writing:

Typical of his method is the story of King Herla (i.11). Herla takes his name from Herlechin or Herlekin, or Harlequin, leader of a ghostly troop of huntsmen, who meet us in the pages of Orderic Vitalis and Peter of Blois and other medieval writers. King Herla’s tale in Map ends indeed with the ghostly hunt; but the rest of the story is utterly different from other versions of the tale of Harlequin.  
(Map xxxix)<sup>15</sup>

Map’s invention of Herla in i.11 allows him to distance himself to a degree from what readers may already know of the *mesnie Hellequin* because, by providing the story of the Hunt’s leader, he implicitly purports to relate the true narrative of the Hunt’s origins.

Another related feature of the creation of Herla is that Map humanizes the leader of the Hunt and his companions by providing a backstory for them. Wild Hunt narratives typically emphasize the uncanny aspects of the host, its leader, and other members. In Orderic’s account, for example, Walchelin is first approached, as I noted above, by a “man of huge stature, carrying

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<sup>15</sup> Brooke and Mynors provide a general overview of Map’s alteration of his sources on pages xxxiv-xlii of their introduction to the *DNC*.

Even among his contemporaries Map appears to have had a reputation as an artful distorter of the facts. The late twelfth-century romancer Hue de Rotelande – whose own relationship with the truth appears to have been a conflicted one – has this to say about Walter Map in his romance *Ipomedon*:

Sul ne sai pas de mentir l’art,  
Walter Map reset ben sa part. (Map xxi n1)

[I am not alone in knowing the art of lying,  
Walter Map knows well his own part [in that].]

a great mace.” Orderic never describes this giant as the leader of the procession, but his size, his position in the vanguard, and his role as the first to approach Walchelin suggest that he fulfills that function; furthermore, while the mace is a type of club and therefore a weapon appropriate to a giant, its use as a symbol of authority might also be invoked here. The mace-bearer’s huge stature, peremptory manner, and position at the head of a penitential procession lend him an undoubted air of the uncanny. Herla, by contrast, would appear to be not just a fully human character at the beginning of the narrative, but a sympathetic one, possessed of a glowing reputation (if the pygmy king can be believed) and an earnest desire to fulfill his obligations and to protect the well-being of his followers. No trace of the demonic taints his portrayal in the narrative. While the figures in other contemporary tales of the *mesnie Hellequin* would appear to be either denizens of the infernal regions or humans who are suffering for transgressions committed during life, Map seems actively to resist portraying Herla as deserving of his fate. And unlike the eerily silent figures of the recent dead whom Map depicts in iv.13, Herla is no stranger to human communication; indeed, the narrative logic of his tale would seem to imply that the shepherd Herla speaks to upon first returning to the human realm (or perhaps similar, later interlocutors) is the source of the story itself.

A final large difference between the narratives in iv.13 and i.11 is that the latter is set firmly within a British and Welsh cultural context. As I noted earlier in this chapter, in Distinction Two Map takes pains to embed fairy narratives first told in Distinction Four within a well-developed Welsh cultural framework. The story of Herla in i.11 admittedly stands physically apart from those tales within the *DNC* and is instead set against a background of narratives about the corrupting influences of courts and noble households. But the tale of Herla itself insistently elaborates a Welsh cultural context only hinted at by the story of the *familia Herlethingi* in iv.13. While the opening sentence of the account of the *familia* describes its appearances in “England,” the opening of Herla’s tale describes him as a “king of the most ancient Britons” (*regem antiquissimorum Britonum*), the ancestors of the Welsh. Furthermore, at the end of the tale, the Saxon shepherd says that “it is now two hundred years since the Saxons took possession of this kingdom and drove out the old inhabitants” (*Saxones uero iam ducentis annis hoc regnum possederunt, expulsis incolis*), making it clear in retrospect that the setting of the bulk of the narrative constitutes Map’s vision of a pre-Saxon Celtic Britain. And while the ethnicity of the witnesses to the disappearance of the *mesnie Hellequin* is never made clear in iv.13, in i.11 Herla’s band is seen by “many Welshmen to plunge into the Wye, the river of Hereford” (*multis Wallensibus immergi iuxta Waiam Herefordie flumen*).<sup>16</sup> The fact that only Welshmen would witness Herla’s final vanishing seems surprising. In the mid twelfth century, as today, Hereford was situated towards the middle of Herefordshire, well away from the Welsh border. Map’s wording is somewhat vague here, but if he means to imply that Herla and his men plunged into the Wye River in the vicinity of Hereford – as the translation by Brooke and Mynors might seem to suggest – then one could reasonably expect the crowd of witnesses to contain at least as many Englishmen as Welshmen. On the other hand, *Herefordia* could be used for “Herefordshire” in general in medieval Latin texts, making the setting of Map’s story more

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<sup>16</sup> Brooke and Mynors note that the meaning of the Latin text is not completely clear at this point: “‘Iuxta Waiam’ is an odd phrase in this context, and something may be amiss” (Map 30 n. 1). Taken literally, Map’s wording in Latin would seem to mean that Herla and his band were seen “to have plunged next to the Wye.” As Brooke and Mynors imply, the text may simply be faulty at this point. But perhaps Map meant to communicate the idea that the host was still at some small distance from the river when it seemed to plunge from view.

difficult to pinpoint.<sup>17</sup> The Wye enters Herefordshire in the northwest, flows east to the city of Hereford and then more or less south, forming the border between England and Wales at roughly the point at which it exits Herefordshire at the latter's southernmost extent. Map may intend that the final disappearance of the Herla's host be seen as taking place in a predominantly Welsh district in either the far west or the far south of the shire. But given the ambiguity of his phrasing, he may equally intend the incident to be seen only by Welshmen even if it occurs near Hereford in the culturally English center of the shire. In any case, the specificity with which Map limits the witnesses may signal a more emphatically political significance to this tale than most scholars have been willing to accord it; I discuss this possibility in more detail below.

Creating the figure of Herla allows Map to "Briticize" in i.11 a supernatural phenomenon that in iv.13 even he acknowledges as one strongly associated with England. Map heightens the British and Welsh associations of his narrative even more emphatically by linking the tale of the Wild Hunt to the folkloric motif of the visit to fairyland. The degree to which the theme of a journey to the otherworld is elaborated in i.11 with recognizably traditional material has no parallel in fairy narratives recorded in France or Britain in the medieval period. An astonishingly dense cluster of recognizable motifs appears in the tale of Herla, most of them in the first part of the narrative; among those commonly associated with fairies in Britain are the following: the small stature of fairies,<sup>18</sup> the prescience of fairies,<sup>19</sup> the fairy insistence on contracts and promise-keeping,<sup>20</sup> the sudden disappearance of fairies,<sup>21</sup> the subterranean realm reached by a passageway in a hillside or cliff and illuminated by artificial means,<sup>22</sup> objects made wholly of

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<sup>17</sup> As far as I can tell, Brooke and Mynors do not translate *Herefordia* or its variants with "Herefordshire" at any point, and all uses of the name in the *DNC* may simply refer to the city. If Brooke and Mynors's English translation is taken as one's guide in this matter, Map never explicitly refers to Herefordshire by name.

<sup>18</sup>(small stature) The size of fairies varies widely from narrative to narrative. Today, fairies can of course be almost vanishingly diminutive; such traditions coexist in the modern period with those that see fairies are similar in height to humans or even taller. Diane Purkiss notes that miniscule fairies would appear to be an innovation of the late sixteenth century: "Though there are scattered references to tiny fairies in literature before Shakespeare, they are small rather than insect-like, like the three-foot childlike Oberon of Huon" (181). As Purkiss implies, fairies of the medieval period could be roughly the same height as humans, and this appears particularly the case when a fairy becomes a lover of a human in a tale. For instance, in Map's own narrative about the wife of Eadric Wild, he reports that the fairy women sighted by his protagonist are "greater and taller than our women" (*maioresque nostris et proceriores*; 154-55). But if medieval references to small fairies are "scattered," they also tend to occur in narratives that can claim a close connection to a living fairy belief. The "pygmies" of Map's tale of Herla are closely paralleled by the very small fairies in the story of Elidurus related by Gerald of Wales, where the Latin texts refers to Elidurus's otherworldly acquaintances as "pygmaei" (*Itinerarium Cambriae* 76).

<sup>19</sup>(prescience) Marie de France's *Lanval* (71-4), *Guingamor* (447-56), *Graelent* (243-47), *Tydorel* (111-48), *Degaré* (115-17)

<sup>20</sup>(promise-keeping) Marie de France's *Lanval* (143-50), *Sir Orfeo* (449-71), Gerald of Wales's tale of Elidurus in the *Itinerarium Cambriae* (75-6)

<sup>21</sup>(disappearance) Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* (III.989-96), *Sir Orfeo* (191-4)

<sup>22</sup>(Otherworldly subterranean realm) *Sir Orfeo* (347-76), *Yonec* (425-36), William of Newburgh's tale of the Green Children in *The History of English Affairs* (1.116-17), Gervase of Tilbury's tales in *The Otia Imperialia* of King Arthur in Etna and of the goatherd who visits the Antipodes (336-37, 642-5), Gerald of Wales's narrative of Elidurus in the *Itinerarium Cambriae* (75), *Gui de Warewic* and its Middle English translation *Guy of Warwick*.

crystal,<sup>23</sup> the fairy interest in hunting and its accoutrements,<sup>24</sup> the supernatural passage of time in fairyland,<sup>25</sup> and, concomitantly, the instantaneous ageing of humans who have returned from there,<sup>26</sup> the taboo against touching the ground after returning on horseback from fairyland,<sup>27</sup> and the assimilation of a human to a fairy-like state.<sup>28</sup> The presence of so many traditional fairy motifs in a single narrative would not be too far out of the ordinary if encountered in a collection of folktales collected in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. However, I would argue that in the medieval period such a density of fairy motifs in one relatively short tale from Britain is virtually unprecedented; only the early thirteenth-century French Breton lay *Guingamor* and the early fourteenth-century Middle English Breton lay *Sir Orfeo* display a similar clustering.<sup>29</sup> The sheer

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<sup>23</sup>(objects made of crystal) *Sir Orfeo* (149-52, 357-58)

<sup>24</sup> (hunting and the accouterments of the hunt) *Sir Orfeo* (281-88), *The First Branch of the Mabinogion* (3-4), *Lanval* (573-74)

<sup>25</sup>(supernatural passage of time) *Guingamor* (596-608)

<sup>26</sup>(instantaneous aging) *Guingamor* (644-50), *Oisín in the Land of Youth* (456)

<sup>27</sup>(taboo against touching the ground) *Oisín in the Land of Youth* (451-52, 456)

<sup>28</sup>(humans becoming fairies) Etienne de Rouen's *Epistola Arthuri* in the *Draco Normannicus* (242-43). On illustration 9 of her book *At the Bottom of the Garden*, Diane Purkiss reproduces a sixteenth-century Flemish woodcut that she interprets as representing "[ ] man caught in the act of becoming a fairy. His feet are already furred, though he has yet to grow horns" (unnumbered illustration page occurring between pages 172 and 173 of the numbered text). I share Purkiss's implied belief that the transformation of humans into fairies through contact with the latter is a (generally unacknowledged) aspect of some fairylore, but it is unclear to me why she feels the one human in the picture is becoming a fairy rather than a demon.

<sup>29</sup> I discuss the density of folkloric motifs in Middle English *Sir Orfeo* in the next chapter; there, too, I detect the hand of an author with a degree of access to a living folk tradition. Analyzing a narrative in terms of the thickness of traditional motifs included is admittedly a somewhat dicey procedure. Some genuine folk narratives employ a large number of traditional motifs, and others many fewer; the difference is no guide to degrees of "authenticity," if such a concept can be said to exist in folk narrative. But the manner in which traditional popular narratives come down to us from the Middle Ages does tend to level the details of such texts, effacing much traditional material along the way. Clerical authors recounting folk narratives generally paraphrase their source-texts and rationalize the contents of the latter; they also have an understandable tendency to interpret these narratives in terms informed by a theological perspectives on supernatural phenomena. The authors of romances who employ traditional materials tend to deal in a small number of motifs that have been rationalized and made to conform to the conventions and expectations of the genre. Also, the traditional motifs that were employed by romancers generally seem to have been passed on from one author to the next. It is very difficult to assess just how widespread belief in fairies would have been in the Middle Ages, and it is not safe to assume that all or even many romance authors would have had access to a living tradition of fairylore. As a result of all these factors, texts like Map's tale of Herla, the French Breton lay *Guingamor* and the Middle English Breton lay *Sir Orfeo* stand out for their motific richness.

Very little scholarly work appears to have been done on the employment of folkloric elements in romance, and unfortunately critics too often simply conflate evidence from romances with that from other sources when attempting to reconstruct the nature of medieval fairy belief.

*Guingamor*, like Map's tale of Herla, recounts a human's journey to the otherworld and the tragedies that ensue upon his return to the mortal realm. Medieval texts exploit the familiar themes of the supernatural lapse of time in fairyland and the instantaneous ageing of humans return from there surprisingly rarely. It is intriguing, then, that two narratives that do employ these ideas would both be informed by such a wealth of traditional materials, but the tales are sufficiently different in both detail and atmosphere to make any genetic connection between them

number of traditional motifs on display here suggests that Map had some sort of access to living oral traditions of fairylore, or, at the very least, that he based his narrative on an actual folk narrative.<sup>30</sup> Even if the latter option is the case, his preservation of so much traditional material in a recognizable form is remarkable for the period, and almost certainly represents an attempt to highlight traditional themes. Furthermore, the motifs Map employs here may well have had particularly Welsh or “British” associations for his readers in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. A number of these motifs have analogues in other contemporary narratives, particularly in discussions of Welsh folklore in Latin works of non-fiction, or in romances – especially Breton lays – that claim for themselves a setting in the British past (i.e., in ancient Wales or Brittany). As my footnotes make clear, among the twelfth- and thirteenth-century works that share fairy motifs with the tale of Herla are the Breton lays *Yonec* and *Lanval* by Marie de France, the anonymous Breton lays *Guingamour*, *Graelent* and *Desiré*, and the tale of Elidurus found in the *Itinerarium Cambriae* by Gerald of Wales. We cannot be sure that medieval British fairylore had its ultimate roots solely in Celtic tradition, as modern scholars too often assume, but medieval writers also tended to associate the types of motifs employed by Map with Celtic lands or the British past. And the very density of such themes suggests that Map was exploiting his familiarity with native Welsh traditions to underscore very emphatically the “British” associations of his narrative; he thereby creates an atmosphere of folkloric authenticity consonant with a tale that claims for itself origins in ancient Britain.

Given the pains Map takes to embed the tale of Herla within a matrix of allusions to Celtic fairylore, one aspect of the account in i.11 seems at first out of step with the larger narrative in that it clearly betrays the impress of learned clerical culture. In describing the appearance of the pygmy-like fairy king encountered by Herla, Map invokes conventional aspects of the classical demigod Pan rather than stereotypes of insular fairies:

Institit homuncio capro maximo secundum fabulam insidens, uir qualis describi posset Pan, ardenti facie, capite maximo, barba rubente proluxa pectus contingente, nebride preclarum stellata, cui uenter hispidus et crura pedes in caprinos degenerabant.

[This little creature was mounted on a large goat, says the tale, and might be described in the same terms as Pan; his visage was fiery red, his head huge; he had a long red beard reaching to his chest, which was gaily attired in a spotted fawn’s skin: his belly was hairy and his legs declined into goats’ hoofs.]

Certain aspects in this depiction of the pygmy king could, arguably, answer to traditional

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unlikely.

<sup>30</sup>Juliette Wood remarks that “it is possible to think of Walter Map, if only in a limited sense, as a tradition bearer. He is after all our only link with those who originally told and listened to these stories. His work contains an enormous amount of folklore material, much of it undoubtedly derived from oral tradition. He was certainly conscious of the traditional nature of his work. His use of the term *nugae* reveals this as does the manner in which he recounts his material. In addition, the tales are present in a context free from the necessarily distorting effects of summary which usually occur when the tales are included in medieval documents such as historical chronicles or romances. Of course, the *De Nugis* is not free from the distorting effects of Walter Map’s intentions and the details of many of the tales reflect the educated mind and fertile imagination of Map himself” (“Walter Map” 93-94).

characteristics of otherworldly or marginalized beings: his small stature accords well with fairy traits, particularly in Wales; and his size, disproportionately large head, long beard and red face might link him to the dwarfs of Arthurian romance.<sup>31</sup> But the king's goat-like feet, his use of a goat as a mount, and his odd attire are all alien to insular traditions, and the portrait as a whole obviously derives from classical sources.

Helaine Newstead has insisted that the tale of Herla should be interpreted within the context of Map's comparison of the royal court to Hell in Distinction One ("Some Observations" 105-6), and she sees the allusion to Pan in this scene as an elaboration upon Map's larger theme: "Although the [pigmy] king was generous and benevolent in his actions, the details of his appearance and the comparison with Pan would have suggested the demoniac to Walter's contemporaries" ("Some Observations" 107). Classical deities, along with most other supernatural beings, were routinely interpreted as devils in orthodox Christian theology of the Middle Ages, and at various points in his text Map does indeed align fairies and other supernaturals with the demonic (iv.6, iv.11). But Map's own perspective on supernatural phenomena is more complex than Newstead suggests here, and in sections ii.11-15 – a series of brief chapters that recount human encounters with fairies, demons and other Others – he repeatedly interrupts his narratives to note with wonder that human interaction with such beings occasionally produces a positive result.<sup>32</sup> In ii.15, the final chapter of this section, Map retells a narrative from Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes* in which first a centaur and then a satyr helpfully provide accurate directions to the hermit Antony in his search through the desert for Paul. In Map's version, unlike the original, the satyr appears to be Pan himself, and a number of elements in his portrait are virtually identical with those in the earlier description of the fairy king:

Post hunc se sibi ultroneum obtulit aliud quoddam pedibus caprinis, uentre hispido, nebridem habens pectore stellis stellatam, facie ardenti, mento barbato, cornibus erectis; husiusmodi autem Pana dicunt antiqui; *pan* autem interpretatur omne, unde tocius in se mundi formam habere dicitur. Hic uerbis discretis uiam docuit, quesitusque quis esset, respondit se angelorum unum qui eiecti cum

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<sup>31</sup> Diane Purkiss has identified "podal oddity" as a determining characteristic of both child-killing demons and nymphs, two groups conceptually related to fairies (36-38). For the most part, however, fairies in insular tradition are not distinguished by the oddity of their legs or feet.

<sup>32</sup> In these five chapters, interactions between humans and supernaturals can certainly end to the detriment of the former. In the tale of Eadric Wild in ii.12, for instance, the marriage between Eadric and his fairy wife ends with her sudden disappearance and the heartbroken death of the protagonist apparently soon thereafter. But at the end of this narrative, Map notes that while sexual unions between humans and succubi or incubi are generally dangerous, the son of Eadric and his fairy spouse ended his days as a devout man who ceded his estates to the bishopric of Hereford. In ii.13, a brief reflection on the nature of the *fantasmata* Map is recounting in this section, he attributes such apparitions to the workings of devils, and then asks, "But what are we to say of those cases of 'fantasy' which endure and propagate themselves in good succession . . . ?" (*Et quid de his fantasticis dicendum casibus, qui manent et bona se successione perpetuant . . . ?*; 160-61) Map briefly notes that another such marriage produced a great lineage, attesting that God's works "transcend our questioning and escape our discussion" (*nostras transcendunt inquisitiones et disputationes euadunt*; 160-61). The final chapter in this sequence, ii.15, begins with a further statement of wonder – "What is to be said of these and of like stories?" (*Quid super his et huiusmodi dicendum?*; 162-63) – and then recounts an episode from Saint Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes* (*Vita Sancti Pauli*) in which the hermit Antony sets out to find his fellow hermit Paul of Thebes.

Lucifero dispersi sunt per orbem singuli secundum merita superbie sue.

[After him, there put himself purposely in his view another creature with goat's feet and hairy belly, on his breast a fawn's skin with starry marks, with fire-red face, bearded chin and upright horns. Such was Pan as described by the ancients, and the meaning of *pan* is *all*, signifying that he has in him the form of all nature. This creature told Antony the way in distinct speech, and when asked who he was replied that he was of the angels who were cast out with Lucifer, and were scattered throughout the world, each one according to the deserts of his pride.]

(Map 164-65)

With the exception of the horns, every aspect of the physical description of Pan here is found in the earlier portrait: both have a red face, a beard, a hairy belly and goat-like feet, and both sport a dappled fawnskin; in most cases, the Latin vocabulary used to describe the physical features and clothing of Pan and the fairy king is virtually identical. While Pan's self-confessed relationship with the angelic hosts exiled with Lucifer from heaven obviously introduces an ominous note into the anecdote, Map leaves the ultimate theological status of Pan carefully ambivalent: he is neither a human nor, strictly, a denizen of hell, and his willingness to aid Antony – apparently without divine coercion – only serves to heighten the ambiguity of the scene.<sup>33</sup> Considering the striking resemblance between Pan in ii.15 and the explicitly Pan-like fairy king in i.11, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the theological status of the latter is just as ambivalent as that of the former. The final fate of Herla might well suggest that he has been led astray by a devil in fairy guise, but Map carefully – perhaps even slyly – avoids foreclosing on the interpretive possibilities opened up by his narrative.

The invocation of Pan in i.11 serves not just to raise pointedly unanswerable questions about the nature of the fairy king, but also to highlight the status of the tale of Herla as an originary narrative. Some twelfth-century writers – and occasionally even those of later periods – juxtapose fairy motifs with classical materials. In the hands of French and English writers, this move can be used to nativize classical narratives while simultaneously claiming for fairy

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<sup>33</sup>Map's narrative ends with the passage I have excerpted here, but Jerome's original – a hagiographic text well known in the Middle Ages – avoids attributing supernatural associations to the satyr, and instead presents him as a type of being halfway between the human and the bestial. After providing Antony with directions, Jerome's satyr subsequently asks for Antony's blessing upon himself and his tribe; in response, Antony rejoices in Christ's glory, and then curses Alexandria for continuing to worship pagan gods: "The wild beasts speak of Christ while you worship monsters instead of God" (*Early Christian Lives* 79). Jerome rounds off the scene with an anecdote strangely reminiscent of many in Walter Map's work as he notes that a living example of the type of being mentioned in the narrative was exhibited at Alexandria and its corpse was later salted and carried to Antioch to be shown to the emperor. It is not surprising that a tale incorporating such elements attracted the attention of Walter Map, but the latter details of Jerome's narrative seem intended to portray his satyr as a focus of anthropological, rather than theological, interest.

As I noted above, the identification with Pan in ii.15 is Map's own innovation (cf. the commentary of Brooke and Mynors at *DNC* 162 n. 1), and his satyr's claim to be one of the angels outcast with Lucifer but allowed to inhabit the terrestrial orb is echoed by another outcast angel later in the *DNC* (318-23). That being does turn out to be an avatar of the devil, but his mendacious claim to be – like the satyr in ii.15 – one of the lesser outcast angels allowed to suffer their penalty "either in the solitude of the desert or in inhabited places" (*tum in uastitate solitudinis tum in locis habitacionis*; 320-21) is an attempt to obscure, rather than proclaim, the degree of his demonic affiliations.

traditions native to Britain the ancientness of classical texts. The version of the Wild Hunt Map relates in iv.13 would appear to be an account of a contemporary legend with strong English associations. In i.11, however, Map spiritedly – if improbably – reclaims the Hunt for ancient Celtic Britain through both appeals to both Welsh folklore and classical mythology. The appearance of a Pan-like fairy underscores the foundational claim implicit in Map’s text in i.11; the blurring of the boundaries between the classical demigod and an insular supernatural implies a regression to a distant, Galfridian past in which classical descent of the Brisith is made visible. And if the allusion to Pan in this scene provides a potentially troubling reminder of the paganism inherent in British antiquity, it also serves to associate the pagan Britons with the prestigious culture of the pagans of the classical Mediterranean.

Herla’s condemnation to a life of eternal wandering has the feel of a punishment, but the nature of his transgression is far from clear. In this regard, perhaps the most influential recent opinion is that of Jean-Claude Schmitt, who sees the pygmy as “the king of the dwarfs [. . .], that is, the dead.” (*Ghosts* 111).<sup>34</sup> Schmitt believes that Herla receives castigation for having attempted to seal an imbalanced pact with such a supernatural figure:

“In this tale, in which several folkloric motifs are easily identifiable (such as the difference in the passing of time on earth and in the hereafter), the theme of the pact between the living and the dead stands out. This is essential to the tale, since Walter Map sees the acceptance of the pact as King Herla’s fundamental error and the reason for his punishment. This agreement suggests a diabolical pact, but Walter Map does not call it that, and on the contrary, he preserves the ambivalence of the tale. King Herla’s error resides above all in the imbalance of the exchange: the dwarf, through his increased gifts, ruins the reciprocal relationship that he himself proposed. Without expecting any gift in return, the giver doubles his offering: he crushes the other man with his gifts. King Herla is literally paralyzed by the generosity of his partner, to the point of no longer being able to get down from his horse. This is what condemns him to the wandering of the dead.” (*Ghosts* 112)<sup>35</sup>

Laurence Harf-Lancner and Elisabeth Pinto-Mathieu similarly see Herla as the victim of an imbalance of trade with the Otherworld: “[I] est donc écrasé par la largesse de son hôte féérique” [“He is thus crushed by the generosity of his supernatural host”] (204). While none of these scholars explicitly refers to the work of French sociologist Marcel Mauss, this interpretation of the scene seems influenced by the emphasis Mauss placed on the *reciprocity* of

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<sup>34</sup>Without citing Schmitt, Laurence Harf-Lancner and Elisabeth Pinto-Mathieu offer essentially the same identification of the pygmy with the leader of the dead in an essay from 2002: “Le roi des pygmées règne ici sur le monde des morts et en signant un pacte avec lui, Herla devient son prisonnier, condamné à errer éternellement entre deux mondes” [“Here, the king of the pygmies reigns over the world of the dead, and in signing a pact with him Herla becomes his prisoner, condemned to wander eternally between two worlds”] (201).

<sup>35</sup> Schmitt first articulated a version of the idea of the imbalance of exchange between the pygmy and Herla in an article from 1984, in which he states, *Herla est châtié pour avoir agi comme si l’échange d’égal à égal avec le roi des nains était possible* [. . .] [“Herla is punished for having acted as if an exchange between equals were possible with the king of the dwarves [. . .]”] (“Temps” 502).

gift-giving in his seminal monograph *Essai sur le don (The Gift)*. However, Map's text does not highlight the exchange of gifts in a way that would seem to validate the opinions of Schmitt, Harf-Lancner and Pinto-Mathieu. In particular, when Herla prepares for his trip to the pygmy's realm, Map merely says that Herla, "after providing himself with supplies sufficient for an adequate repayment, he followed whither he was led." If Map were attempting to emphasize a failure of reciprocity, we might expect him to provide a quick inventory of the gifts offered to the pygmy in order that the reader would be aware of the size of the imbalance; instead, Map's description is vague, and it is difficult to see that it supplies the emphasis these critics claim for it.

What then does account for Herla's fate? Could the failure of the greyhound to jump down from Herla's saddle represent, for instance, an unfortunate "misfiring" of fairy technology, a simple miscalculation on the part of the pygmy king? While perhaps no less improbable than the idea of a severe imbalance in the exchange of gifts, this theory seems to run counter to descriptions of fairy accomplishment in both Map and elsewhere; in the scene of Herla's wedding, for instance, the pygmy servitors prosecute their tasks with an efficiency unmatched by their human counterparts, and their extraordinary equipment is of the very best. In medieval accounts more generally, fairy technologies and their employment typically achieve an ideal human technologies can only aspire to.

The key to the plight of Herla and his men lies instead in the supernatural passage of time to Map's presentation of the history of Britain. Apparently ignoring the Roman conquest of Britain (or perhaps implying a setting beyond the reach of Roman influence), Map opens the story during a period of British dominance of the island: Herla is referred to as a "king of the most ancient Britons" (*regem antiquissorum Britonum*). Then, during what Herla thought was a three-day stay in the pygmy king's realm, two hundred years passed, and "the Saxons took possession of this kingdom and drove out the old inhabitants" (*Saxones uero iam ducentis annis hoc regnum possederunt, expulsis incolis*). And the tale closes with the disappearance of Herla's troop into the River Wye, a traditional boundary between England and Wales, "in the first year of the coronation of our King Henry" (*anno primo coronacionis nostri regis Henrici*). By the end of the narrative, not only have the Saxons been replaced by the Normans, but the trouble-ridden reign of Stephen of Blois has given way to that of the first of the Angevin kings.

Alongside this historical sequence of British, Saxon and Norman kings, Map's tale posits the existence of a supernatural realm or realms, whose rulers are explicitly described as holding much in common in with their human counterparts. The pygmy king notes that Herla is "closely connected with [himself] in place and descent" (*loco michi proximus et sanguine*), and his interest in the human king seems, at least at first, to proceed from a sort of familial pride. The narrative furthermore underscores the existence of such affiliations between the two rulers through a system of parallels: Herla's own marriage is complemented by that of the pygmy exactly one year later, and each attends the wedding ceremony of the other. By the end of the narrative, Herla and his men take on otherworldly qualities that in some respects surpass the uncanniness of the fairies themselves, but both groups are described as seeming to disappear before the eyes of human witnesses: the fairy king "vanished from view" (*se rapuit ab oculis eius*) during his first interview with Herla; and the latter, along with his troop, suddenly plunged into the River Wye (*immergi iuxta Waïam Herefordie flumen*) in the first of Map's two accounts, or "rose up in the air and vanished on a sudden" (*eleuati sursum in aera subito disparuerunt*) in the second.

The second half of the story reveals just how tightly structured Map's narrative is, as an intricate set of symmetries brings humans and supernaturals, Britons and Normans into an ever closer correspondence. Even while a mere mortal, Herla resembles the otherworldly pygmy king; but once Herla and his followers take on otherworldly characteristics themselves, they resemble the chaotic court of King Henry II. Map introduces the narrative of Herla with the observation that "[o]ne court and one only do stories tell of that is like our own" (*Vnam tamen et solam huic nostre curie similem fuisse fabule dederunt*; 27-28), and the end of the story spells out the basis of the comparison: once the host led by Herla has vanished in to the Wye, it is "as if they had transmitted their wanderings to us, and betaken themselves to repose" (*tanquam nobis suos tradiderint errores, ad quietem sibi*; 30-1). This sudden disappearance takes place in the first year of Henry's reign, and Map therefore jokes that the restlessness of the Angevin court to which he belongs can be attributed to its inheritance of the frenzied wanderings of Herla's ancient Britons.

While there can be no question that a rueful humor is one of Map's primary objectives in the telling of this tale, the pains he takes in its structuring suggest that the parallels between the British and Norman kingships – and to a lesser degree, that of the Saxons – should not be passed over too quickly. In fact, Map seems to see kingship as a principle that imposes upon the discontinuities of insular history a certain comparability. Map's dating of the disappearance of the Herlething to the first year of Henry's reign enables the satirical thrust of the piece by suggesting the transference of the chaos of the ancient British court to that of the English king. But for Map's contemporaries, it would also likely have suggested Henry II's response to the Welsh territorial *revanche* that characterized the two decades before the latter king ascended the throne. During the reign of Stephen of Blois (1135-1154), the attention of both the Marcher lords and of the English nobility in general was focused on the political turmoil in England; Welsh princes took advantage of this opportunity to reassert their autonomy and to reclaim territory that had been annexed by the English; as R. R. Davies notes, "the Welsh recovery of the years 1135-55 is undoubted" (*Age* 51). Henry II, who came to the throne of England on December 19<sup>th</sup> in 1134 (Warren, *Henry II* 53), responded to the Welsh resurgence by making the reestablishment of the English overlordship of Wales a high priority. He took no major actions in that regard during the first year of his reign, but in 1157 he successfully launched a major expedition into Wales; by 1158 he had forced the return of much of the land recaptured by the Welsh during the reign of Stephen, and had also received the formal submission of Owain Gwynned and Rhys ap Gruffudd, the two most important princes of north and south Wales, respectively (Davies, *Age* 51-52). Hostilities broke out again in the mid-1160s and continued intermittently until 1170, but in late 1171 Henry adopted a new strategy of *rapprochement* with the Welsh princes, which, until his death in 1189, had the effect of bringing peace to Wales and the Marches while confirming Henry's overlordship (Warren, *Henry II* 161-69).

From the perspective of the early 1180s, when Map is most likely to have been working on Distinction One of the *De Nugis*, the accession of Henry II to the throne could be seen as bringing to an end two decades of Welsh military aggression. For Map's contemporaries, then, his description of Herla and his frenzied rout sinking into the waters of the Wye during the first year of Henry's reign would also have served to evoke Henry's success in bringing Wales back into the political orbit of England as well as the relative calm that followed.

The image of an ancient British king appearing in Norman England at the head of a warband would have carried a powerful political charge in the late 1100s. By the early decades

of that century, if not sooner, English sources begin to maintain that Welsh popular belief looked upon the legendary King Arthur as a national deliverer who would return to Britain and restore dominion in the island to the Welsh. William of Malmesbury provides the earliest known documentation of this so-called “Breton hope”; in a discussion of the tomb of the British hero Gawain in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, written in the 1120s, William notes that while the location of Gawain’s burial place is known, the mystery surrounding the ultimate fate of his uncle has been a source of wild speculation: “Arthur’s grave, however, is nowhere to be found, whence come the traditional old wives’ tales that he may yet return” (*Sed Arthuris sepulchrum nusquam uisitur, unde antiquitas neniaram adhuc eum uenturum fabulatur; Gesta Regum Anglorum* 1.520-21).<sup>36</sup> The publication of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britannie* in 1136 lent the Arthurian mythos both cachet and widespread currency. And Geoffrey’s notoriously ambiguous account in the *Historia* of the apparent death of Arthur at the Battle of Camlann almost certainly helped to bolster belief in the “Breton hope” – at least among the English. John Gillingham has argued that from the 1140s, “there can be no doubt that the figure of Arthur was perceived as a threat to the Anglo-Norman rulers” (“Context” 112 ).

In a paper that is rarely cited in Anglophone scholarship on the *DNC*, French folklorist Jean-Claude Schmitt has argued that for Map – a Welshman, but also a member of the Henrician court – the figure of Herla may have carried a decidedly political resonance. Schmitt has claimed elsewhere that Map’s story of Herla is a traditional text, one that “reveals a true myth of the origin of the hunt [i.e., the Wild Hunt], which goes back to the Celtic origins of the population of Great Britain” (111); Schmitt here seems to take at face value Map’s claim to be recounting a popular tale. Nevertheless, in an earlier work, Schmitt hypothesized that Map’s interest in recording the narrative of Herla may have been born out of Map’s loyalty to Henry II and an impulse to “defend him and to protect the new dynasty”:

Or, les retours périodiques du roi légendaire des <<très anciens Bretons>> ne constituaient-ils pas une menace symbolique pour le nouveau roi? Et inversement la disparition de la troupe fantastique des revenants l’année même du couronnement du nouveau roi ne soulignait-elle pas la légitimité de ce dernier? Ainsi l’usage de la <<fable>> aurait-il eu un but politique caché et même paradoxal, la défense du roi Henri II. Ce n’est là qu’une hypothèse, que semble pourtant confirmer le rapprochement de la légende d’Herla d’une autre légende utilisée au même moment à des fins politiques: la légende d’Arthur."

[Now wouldn’t the periodic returns of the legendary king of the “very ancient Britons” constitute a symbolic threat for the new king? And inversely, wouldn’t the disappearance of the fantastic troop of revenants the very same year as the

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<sup>36</sup>Henry of Huntingdon expresses almost precisely the same idea in a letter written in 1139: “[H]is own kinsmen the Britons deny that he died and solemnly expect even now that he will come” (*[P]arentes sui Britones mortuum fore denegent, et venturum adhuc sollemniter expectent*; qtd. in Henken 42). Elissa R. Henken opines that “[t]hough this letter was written in connection with Geoffrey’s *Historia* [published in 1136], it was written so soon after that work that it surely reflects genuine current tradition as yet uninfluenced by Geoffrey” (42). While Henry’s remarks may well have been made in ignorance of Geoffrey’s work, the similarities between this passage and that quoted above from William of Malmesbury suggest that Henry may have been simply paraphrasing William rather than reporting current Welsh tradition at first hand.

coronation of the new king underscore the legitimacy of the latter? The employment of the “fable” would have had a hidden and even paradoxical political goal: the defense of King Henry II. This is just a hypothesis, one that seems nevertheless to confirm the connection between the legend of Herla and another legend used at the same time for political ends: the legend of Arthur.”] (“Temps” 503-4)

The purpose of such a use of the Herla legend, Schmitt explains, would be to “anchor the legitimacy of the Angevin king in British history, while depriving the latter of its subversive charge: there is no more room in this history for the ‘Breton hope’” (*ancrer la légitimité du roi angevin dans l’histoire bretonne, tout en privant celle-ci de sa charge subversive: il n’y a plus de place dans cette histoire pour << l’espoir des Bretons >>*; 506). Schmitt’s reading seems to me to explain more fully than do “satirical” interpretations why Map developed the cultural and historical setting of the tale so elaborately. The “Britishness” in which the tale of Herla is couched hardly seems relevant to a reading that merely skewers the moral inanition of royal courts. And Schmitt’s interpretation may help explain one of the differences in detail between the versions of the tale in sections iv.13 and i.11. In the former – almost certainly the first version of the tale to be written – the silent host “rose up into the air and vanished on a sudden.” Such an end seems no end at all; the disappearance into thin air lacks an air of finality. In the latter version, however – in which the disappearance of the host is watched by an audience that seems to consist only of the Welsh, the descendants of “the most ancient Britons” – Herla and his men seem to “to plunge into the Wye, the river of Hereford.” As Map enhances the symbolic potential of the narrative, he simultaneously works to less its symbolic ambiguity.

Nevertheless, Schmitt’s reading seems to me unlikely to account for some aspects of the tale and the historical and cultural context from which it emerges. The need to “legitimize” the Plantagenet dynasty would surely have been most keenly felt in its earliest years; by the time Map is likely to have been writing in the early 1180s, Henry would have been on the throne for over a quarter of century, and the greatest threats to his rule and the peace of his kingdom at that time came from his own sons rather than from the Welsh. Furthermore, the satirical nature of Map’s tale, while far from the “whole story,” in my view, cannot be fully discounted; emphasizing the frenzy and corruption of the Henrician court might just as easily be considered a way of *delegitimizing* it.

And even as the story of Herla may work to dissolve Welsh claims to the island of Britain in the mid twelfth century, it chooses as its own narrative and thematic center the passage of dominion in Britain from the ancient Britons to the Saxons. At the heart of the tale, the chronological discontinuity introduced by the motif of the supernatural passage of time in fairyland is aligned with the historical and dynastic discontinuity introduced by the Saxon conquest. Herla is not condemned to wander the island for centuries because he failed to make a properly reciprocal exchange of gifts with a supernatural. Instead, the motif of the supernatural passage of time in the tale does what it always does – it highlights the disorientation of individuals and peoples who find themselves dispossessed and decontextualized by the processes of historical change. The first sentence of the narrative refers to the “most ancient Britons” (*antiquissimorum Britonum*), the people who from a Galfridian perspective, at least, had once enjoyed the rule of the whole island of Britain. And one of the last sentences of the narrative refers to Welshmen (*Walensibus*) – the inhabitants of a small corner of the same island –

watching the last living Britons sink into the waters of the Wye.

By offering an elaborate, detailed and attractive alternative narrative of an ancient British king who returns to the contemporary world at the head of a British host, Map boldly rewrites and – to a certain extent – depoliticizes the original narrative of Arthur’s return at the head of a host of ancient British warriors. Herla’s appearances in Henrician England are underpinned by no political motivation, and his followers are better prepared for a wedding feast than an invasion; according to Map’s telling, Herla and his followers are intent on trying to find their way home in a world that has changed, rather than spearheading a Welsh “reconquest” of the island. And Map’s analogue of Arthur has already come and gone by the time the tale is told, leaving barely a ripple on the waters of the Wye. If the story of Herla has any *immediate* political message for Britain in the 1180s, it is that the accession to the throne of Henry II signaled the reassertion by the King of England of control over Wales and the Welsh Marches. But the tale of Herla also insistently focuses our attention on a very different time, a “pre-Conquest” Britain of right social proportions – a lost world in which a fairy monarch might recognize a British king as one “connected with [himself] in place and descent.”

## Chapter Two: Manuscripts and Editions of *Sir Orfeo*

In Chapter One, I argue that the Herla episode in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* combines a dense cluster of fairy motifs, which are strongly associated with Celtic and British traditions, with classical material, blurring the boundaries between an insular supernatural world and the world of the classical gods. I have suggested further that Map posits the existence of a fairy realm in the *DNC* whose supernatural rulers bear an uncanny similarity to human rulers, and that he uses this similarity as a way of commenting on twelfth-century politics and the nature of rulership in general. One of the most important aspects of Map's use of fairylore, I argue, is that we see a Latin writer synthesizing local folklore with learned and authoritative textual traditions. This synthesis becomes even more evident in the text I will discuss in the following three chapters, *Sir Orfeo*. Like the Herla episode, *Sir Orfeo* presents us with a remarkable constellation of fairy material.

This chapter focuses on the manuscript tradition of *Sir Orfeo* and on the complex series of revisions, additions, deletions, and reworkings that characterizes the poem's literary development from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century. The process that I have identified in Map's depiction of fairy material, in which the relationship is blurred between insular fairy lore and classical mythology, continues to develop in *Sir Orfeo* as it is copied and recopied for successive generations of readers. Modern readers interested in *Sir Orfeo* usually encounter the poem in an edited version that stitches together material from multiple manuscripts and texts, based on various surmises about its original state. I argue, however, that these additions obscure crucial details about the changes that were wrought to *Sir Orfeo* as it was repeatedly revised, and that these changes reveal shifting understandings of the relationship between insular folklore (the fairy otherworld) and the dominant Christian account of the supernatural, in which supernatural beings were categorized as either angels or demons. While both the Herla episode and the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* seek to emphasize traditional British lore as a way of exploring the nature of rulership, this emphasis was gradually reshaped as the Middle English literary tradition developed over time, resulting in versions of *Sir Orfeo* in which fairies were deprived of agency (through deletions from the original text) or were humanized (through additions to the original). These alterations profoundly change the ways in which *Sir Orfeo* could be understood as an exploration of kingship and rule as well as a meditation on alterity and British identity, topics I discuss in Chapters Three and Four.

This chapter disentangles the textual threads that make up modern editions of *Sir Orfeo*. I explore the three major manuscripts of the poem, the fourteenth-century Auchinleck manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1), and the fifteenth-century Harley manuscript (London, British Library MS Harley 3810) and Ashmole manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61), showing how the two fifteenth-century versions of the poem both deemphasize fairy material, though in strikingly different ways, in order to enhance the lay's status as a devotional text. As I do so, I pay special attention to the precise versions of *Sir Orfeo* that appear in each manuscript, which enables me to comment on the ways in which damage to the Auchinleck manuscript resulted in the production of various reworkings of the poem, as well as on the probable dating of that damage. Throughout, I aim to paint a picture of the changes to *Sir Orfeo* that fits into a larger literary narrative of fairy stories and images that begins with Walter Map and ends with the close of the medieval period. This narrative stitches together the bifurcated literary history of Middle English, which has been divided into Early

Middle English and Late Middle English, with Chaucer representing a new beginning for English poetry. On the contrary, I show that fairylore characterizes Middle English verse, including Chaucer's poetry, from the twelfth century through the fifteenth century. The two chapters that follow this one continue to map the implications of reading *Sir Orfeo* in light of its manuscript versions, carrying through my analysis of the fairy tradition into the fifteenth-century Harley and Ashmole MSS. I look first at the conflation of classical myth with British folklore in the romance, and then at the way in which the otherness of the romance's fairies is nuanced and slowly disassembled over the course of the work.

When I was first engaged on the research for those chapters on myth and alterity in the romance, I noted that a number of critical interpretations of *Sir Orfeo* seemed to depend upon a particular understanding of the nature of the relationship between the three manuscripts of *Sir Orfeo*. I was especially struck by a passage in Thorlac Turville-Petre's seminal volume *England the Nation*; in a discussion of the interest in English history evinced by the compiler of the early fourteenth-century Auchinleck Book – the source of the oldest of the three versions of *Sir Orfeo* – Turville-Petre notes that that earliest version of the romance uniquely sets the tale in England. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Two Breton lays are given settings in England. *Lay le Freine* [. . .] is set unremarkably 'in þe west cuntre', but much more striking is the trouble taken, in this version only, to place the action of *Sir Orfeo* [. . .] in Winchester. Orfeo is introduced as 'a kinge / In Inglond, an hei3e lording' (39-40), his homeland of Thrace is identified with Winchester, 'For Winchester was cleped þo / Traciens, wipouten no' (49-50), and it is to Winchester, 'his owen cite' (479), that he returns with his restored wife at the end of the poem. None of these remarks appear in the other two versions, and it is almost certain that they are interpolations by the Auchinleck scribe. If so, *Sir Orfeo* is an extreme example of the lengths to which the revisers will go to underline the theme of Englishness. (115-16)

What surprised me in this was that Turville-Petre assumed so readily that a passage that didn't appear in the two later versions of the romance was most likely an interpolation into the earliest text. His understanding of Auchinleck's audacious conflation of Thrace and Winchester in lines 49-50 seemed to imply that the two later versions of the poem represented a line of descent that was perhaps parallel to but independent of the line of transmission represented by the Auchinleck text.

Turville-Petre's claim was of more than passing interest to me because I had come increasingly to believe that the identification of classical Greece with ancient Britain in *Sir Orfeo* was an essential aspect of the poet's vision, and one that helped to explain his substitution of British fairies for the Greek gods; this idea provides the basis for the next chapter of the dissertation. I soon discovered that Turville-Petre's views of the interrelations between the *Sir Orfeo* manuscripts were supported by – and probably founded on – the discussion of manuscript affiliations in the introduction to A. J. Bliss's second edition of *Sir Orfeo* (1966), the standard scholarly edition of the lay. In the notes to his edition, Bliss too called lines 49-50 in the Auchinleck text "unlikely to be genuine" (*Sir Orfeo* 52), and unsurprisingly, he inclined to the view – described in much greater detail below – that the two later manuscripts most probably

descended from a common ancestor coeval with the Auchinleck text, and that they were therefore likely to be independent of the latter text.

I then began to study Bliss's rationale for the editorial choices in his edition of *Sir Orfeo*, especially that underlying his reconstruction of the prologue to the headless Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*. Re-examining Bliss's evidence, I slowly became convinced that the nature of the relationship between Auchinleck and the later two texts could be much more easily explained if the latter were descended from the former. This argument proved to be complex, and I develop it in detail over the course of the first two-thirds of the following pages. Later in the chapter, I explore the ramifications of this idea, speculating on the nature of the Auchinleck-descended precursor text that served as the common source of the two later versions, and I end with a discussion of how the scribes of those later texts deal with the fairies in ways that both build on and depart from the tendencies of Auchinleck and their more immediate source.

*Sir Orfeo* survives in three manuscripts: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1 (hereafter "Auchinleck"), dated to around 1330;<sup>1</sup> London, British Library MS Harley 3810 (hereafter "Harley"), dated to the beginning of the fifteenth century; and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 (hereafter "Ashmole"), dated to the end of the fifteenth century (*Sir Orfeo* x-xii).<sup>2</sup>

The Harley and Ashmole texts of *Sir Orfeo* appear to be complete in themselves, though relative to Auchinleck these two later versions both possess a number of omissions and additions.<sup>3</sup> If one could consider the opening of the surviving text of Auchinleck in isolation from all other outside concerns, it too might not immediately appear to be fragmentary: the first 18 lines of the poem as it now stands – lines 39-56 in the now-standard enumeration of Bliss's edition – unquestionably possess an air of the initiatory, introducing the main character Sir Orfeo, his wife Heurodis and their capital of Winchester/Traciens before the narrative moves on to the main action of the plot in line 57. Nevertheless, a number of factors make it clear that the Auchinleck text of *Sir Orfeo* is acephalous. The extant text begins at the very top of the left-hand column of f. 300r of the Auchinleck manuscript with a paragraph sign and a small initial. The preceding leaf of the manuscript – f. 299a – has been extracted, and only a thin stub remains. Bliss notes:

The [Auchinleck] MS. has been much mutilated for the sake of the illuminations, but enough remains to show that every article of any magnitude began with a rubricated title, a large initial, and a crude illumination. It therefore seems probable that *Sir Orfeo* began in the last column of the missing folio, which was

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Cooper has very recently argued that "the [Auchinleck] manuscript cannot have been produced before 1331 at the earliest" (95).

<sup>2</sup> On the dating of Ashmole, A. J. Bliss notes that "the manuscript was compiled over a period of years; it is written in a clear but coarse hand of the end of the fifteenth century [. . .]. If the identification of the watermarks is reliable [. . .] *Sir Orfeo* [. . .] must have been written after 1488" (*Sir Orfeo* xii). Similarly, Lynne S. Blanchfield, speaking of the manuscript as a whole, notes that the paper in the codex has been "dated on watermark evidence between 1479 and 1488" ("Romances" 79).

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Bliss provides an extensive listing of the omissions and additions in Harley and Ashmole relative to Auchinleck on pages xv-xvii of his edition of *Sir Orfeo*.

cut away for the sake of the illumination. ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 7)<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, codicological evidence for the loss of the head of the Auchinleck text finds support in the generic characteristics of the Breton lay. The Breton lay in Middle English generally possesses at least a brief preface that includes one or more of the following items: a prayer or invocation, a self-reflexive discussion of the nature of the Breton lay, or a request for the attention of the audience. None of these appears in the opening lines of the Auchinleck text.

By contrast with the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* in its present state, the Harley and Ashmole versions of the poem possess relatively lengthy prologues, or – as I will hereafter call them – "prefaces" (54 and 48 lines, respectively),<sup>5</sup> each of which includes the sort of introductory

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<sup>4</sup> While Bliss's remarks seem to me sufficient for the argument I am making here, the codicological evidence for the fragmentary condition of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* can be laid out more completely. First, no article in the Auchinleck manuscript for which the beginning survives starts with just a paragraph marker. And unlike the surviving text of *Sir Orfeo*, most items in Auchinleck seem originally to have carried a title (Pearsall and Cunningham xiv). Only five non-fragmentary items lack titles; of these, just two – the *Speculum Guy de Warewyke* (item 10) and the *Liber Regum Anglie* (item 40) – are of substantial length. (Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham do note, however, that titles appear to have been "an afterthought" in the production of the manuscript; the scribes left no extra space for them, and in some cases titles have been inserted away from the beginning of the text (xiv).) Next, as Bliss implies, the majority of the articles in the manuscript were apparently preceded by an illumination: the folios with which 18 items began have been "wholly or partly lost, and the removal may in many cases be ascribed to a desire for the miniature" (Pearsall and Cunningham xv). Of those items in the manuscript for which the beginning survives, eight lack a miniature: items 10, 14, 20, 21, 25, 39, 40 and 44. Most of these are relatively short, though item 25 – the romance *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* – is of course one of the lengthier romances in the volume. Among texts copied, like *Sir Orfeo*, by Scribe 1, only the very brief *The Four Foes of Mankind* (item 39) and *Liber Regum Anglie* (item 40) lack miniatures (Pearsall and Cunningham xv). Finally, with one exception the beginnings of non-fragmentary items in Auchinleck are marked by ornament or at least decorated initials; only the so-called *Battle Abbey Roll* – a bare list of names of the Norman knights who ostensibly fought with William the Conqueror at Hastings – lacks ornament, a title, or an introductory flourish of any kind.

<sup>5</sup> Writers who address the missing initial lines of *Sir Orfeo* at any length generally use the word "prologue" to describe the introductory material at the beginning of the text, but the *exact* meaning of the word varies among critics of the poem. A. J. Bliss – in both his edition of the poem as well as in his article "*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" – generally employs "prologue" to refer only to introductory matter which discusses the nature of the Breton lay (i.e., ll. 1-24 in Harley, ll. 7-26 in Ashmole, and ll. 1-22 in *Lay le Freine*). By contrast, the most recent editions of the Auchinleck text, Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, provide a very brief survey of the ways in which the different earlier editors of the poem have dealt with the missing prefatory material, and there they consistently refer to any *reconstructed matter* that precedes the extant opening lines of the Auchinleck text as a "prologue" (*The Middle English Breton Lays* 22-23). Their use of the term seems intended to emphasize the fact that these reconstructed openings are modern addenda to the medieval text. In this chapter, I would prefer to employ "prologue" to denote *all* prefatory material in the text that does not participate directly in the plot of the narrative, such as initiatory prayers, calls for the attention of the audience, descriptions of the lay genre, introductory portraits of important characters, etc. However, Bliss's terminological distinctions have made their way into some later discussions, usage varies in any case, and I myself have adopted Bliss's term "prologue section" to refer to the portions of the four texts that discuss the nature of the Breton lays. As a result, use of the word "prologue" here would be unduly confusing, and instead I have elected to use the word "preface" where one might usually expect the former term. In the three *Orfeo* texts, and in fact, in *Lay le Freine* as well, I see the action of the narrative *per se* as being signaled by the first use of the word "Bifel" in the text; this corresponds to line 19 in the extant Auchinleck text, line 57 in Bliss's reconstructed text of Auchinleck, line 55 in Harley, line 49 in Ashmole, and line 23 of *Lay le Freine*. In all four texts, I will employ "preface" to refer to the introductory material that precedes the first occurrence of "Bifel." However, I will continue to use "prologue" to refer to the sections of the texts for which Bliss has employed this term, and I will not of course alter the terminology in quotations from critics.

material just mentioned: the Harley preface contains a conventional call for attention (ll. 23-24); and the prefaces of both later recensions contain a remarkable discussion of the nature and origins among the "Brytouns" of the Breton lay genre (Harley ll. 1-24; Ashmole ll. 7-26). Surprisingly, this latter section of the Harley and Ashmole prologues corresponds fairly closely to the 22-line prologue of the Middle English Breton lay *Lay le Freine*.<sup>6</sup> The unique text of *Lay le Freine* also appears in the Auchinleck Book (item 26, ff. 261r-262a);<sup>7</sup> as the manuscript currently stands, seven items intervene between *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*.<sup>8</sup> While *Lay le Freine* is a fairly faithful translation of the Old French lay *Le Fresne* by Marie de France, no equivalent to its preface appears in the Old French manuscripts of Marie's lays.<sup>9</sup> Many critics have assumed that the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* originally possessed some version of the material present in the *Lay le Freine* prologue, but questions about the interrelationships of the three texts of *Sir Orfeo* as well as the acephalous nature of Auchinleck render certainty on this point impossible to achieve.

The affiliations of the three manuscripts are difficult to ascertain and will be the subject of more prolonged attention later in this section. For the moment, it will suffice to note that A. J. Bliss – the editor of the most widely cited edition of *Sir Orfeo* – concludes that the two later manuscripts "are dependent on a common ancestor, either descended from or coeval with A[uchinleck]" (*Sir Orfeo* xv). Although Bliss concedes that the dependence of Harley and Ashmole on the Auchinleck text "must remain a possible hypothesis," he contends that "it is much more probable that the common original of H[arley] and [Ashmole] was coeval with A[uchinleck]" (*Sir Orfeo* xiv-xv).

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<sup>6</sup> The spelling of the titles of texts in Middle English can of course vary, and *Lay le Freine* is also commonly spelled *Lay le Freyne*. For the titles of texts in the Auchinleck MS., I will employ the spellings used on the "Auchinleck Manuscript" pages of the Web site of the National Library of Scotland (<http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/>). Naturally, the spellings of titles in quotations by other scholars will not be altered.

<sup>7</sup> The preface to *Lay le Freine* appears to be intact, but the text as a whole is imperfect. A portion of the vellum between the title of the poem and the first line of the preface – where a miniature illustration almost certainly stood – has been excised; as a result, a gap of 13 lines (corresponding to ll. 121-33 in the recent edition by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, p. 71) now stands at the head of column b on f. 261v. Most of the leaf following f. 262 has also been removed, leaving only fragments of the final portion of the lay still visible on the thin stub, which has been labeled "262a" by a later hand.

<sup>8</sup> The intervening items are *Roland and Vernagu*, *Otuel a Knight*, *Kyng Alisaunder*, *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, *The Sayings of St. Bernard*, *Dauid þe King*, and *Sir Tristrem*. Leaves have been lost between *Otuel a Knight* and *Kyng Alisaunder*.

<sup>9</sup> The opening of *Le Fresne* consists of a single couplet and is in fact the briefest of all Marie's prologues in the *lais*:

Le lai del Fraisne vus dirai  
sulunc le cunte que jeo sai. (*Lais* 88)

Gabrielle Guillaume argued in 1922 that the *Lay le Freine* prologue bears little resemblance to the prologues written for twelfth and thirteenth century Breton lays in Old French (459). Following a suggestion first made by Ernst Brugger, Guillaume remarks that given its potential applicability to a wide range of lays, the *le Freine* prologue might originally have been written as an introduction to "a collection of lays" (459). This notion seems to be endorsed by Bliss in his edition of *Sir Orfeo*; he remarks that "[t]he prologue is unlike any of the extant French prologues, and seems more suited to a collection of lays than a single lay" (xlvii).

The respective states of the three versions of *Sir Orfeo* obviously complicate the choice of a base text for editions of the poem: Auchinleck, the earliest text, is fragmentary, while Harley and Ashmole, both complete in themselves, are younger than Auchinleck by at least 70 years or more and are generally considered to be abridgements or studied revisions of their exemplars (*Sir Orfeo* xv-xvii). The standard text of the poem – the Auchinleck version as presented in A. J. Bliss's second revised edition of *Sir Orfeo* (1966)<sup>10</sup> – employs the extant Auchinleck text as the base but appends to it a 38-line opening section compounded of verses drawn from the *Lay le Freine* and Harley prologues. Bliss's hybrid text has long been accepted as the standard edition of the poem.<sup>11</sup> For the sake of convenience, therefore, I have – except where otherwise stated – employed the Auchinleck text as presented by Bliss for all citations of *Sir Orfeo* in this chapter; enumeration of lines cited here and all citations of Bliss's notes, etc. refer to his second edition of the poem.

Nevertheless, Bliss's editorial strategies are at times highly interventionist, especially in the earliest sections of the poem, and they deserve rather more scrutiny than they have received. I take issue in particular with two of the principles that inform Bliss's presentation of the text of *Sir Orfeo*: first, his assertion that the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* share what he has called the “prologue section”; and second, his conviction that the two later versions of the poem are related to the Auchinleck text but are independent of it, sharing with Auchinleck a common ancestor. The first claim, though widely accepted in the critical literature on *Sir Orfeo*, rests upon surprisingly little hard evidence, as I hope to demonstrate. I suspect that its persistence in *Orfeo* scholarship has also led critics to accept sometimes uncritically the second claim, since the commonality of the prologue section to both *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* (in all its versions) seems like the simplest explanation for the presence of the prologue in the two fifteenth century redactions of the poem that does not, simultaneously, require us to consider them to be descended from Auchinleck itself. And, in its own right, the claim of the independence of Harley and Ashmole from Auchinleck seems to bolster the argument made by Bliss – and later others, such as Thorlac Turville-Petre – that rejects as “spurious” or “of doubtful authenticity” sections of the Auchinleck text that have no equivalent in the two later versions of the poem (*Sir Orfeo* xiv, n. 2). This chapter considers the implications for *Sir Orfeo* criticism of rejecting these foundational assumptions that underpin Bliss's edition and that have been too readily accepted by scholars of the poem. To begin to address these issues more fully, I now turn to a detailed discussion of the prefaces of each of the three texts of *Sir Orfeo* as well as that of *Lay le Freine*.

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<sup>10</sup> Bliss's first edition of *Sir Orfeo* appeared in 1954.

<sup>11</sup> While there has been widespread acceptance of Bliss's text as the authoritative standard, dissenters do exist. John B. Beston, for instance, still cites the text of *Sir Orfeo* offered in *Middle English Metrical Romances* by W. French and C. Hale (1930) for an article written in 1976 – ten years after the appearance of the second edition of Bliss's *Sir Orfeo* and 22 years after the first. Beston's tight-lipped note explains that French and Hale “give the Auchinleck text as it stands” but concedes that “[o]ne also needs to consult the edition by Bliss, which prints all three MSS. of the poem” (“Case Against” 162, n. 6). As a more recent instance of the avoidance of Bliss's text, Corinne Saunders, in the introduction to a collection of essays published in 2005, employs the text of *Sir Orfeo* found in the student-oriented collection *Middle English Verse Romances*, edited by Donald B. Sands and first published in 1966 (“Introduction” 5, n. 12). Sands himself calls Bliss's version of the poem “the best edition of *Sir Orfeo*” (187), and his own edition largely follows that of Bliss but avoids the latter's reconstructed prologue, starting instead with the extant opening lines of the text.



copy in Auchlinleck and shares its opening – the first 22 lines – with sections of the prefaces of the Harley and Ashmole versions of *Sir Orfeo*:

We redeþ oft & findeþ [ywri]te, & þis clerkes wele it wite, layes þat ben in harping ben yfounde of ferli þing.	
Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo, & sum of ioie & mirþe also, & sum of trecherie & of gile, of old auentours þat fel while; & sum of bourdes & ribaudy, & mani þer beþ of fairy.	5     10
Of al þinge[s] that men seþ, mest o loue for soþe þai beþ. In Breteyne bi hold time þis layes were wrou3t, so seiþ þis rime.	   15
When kinges mi3t our yhere of ani meruailes þat þer were, þai token an harp in gle & game, & maked a lay & 3af it name. Now of þis auentours þat weren yfalle y can tel sum ac nou3t alle.	    20
Ac herkneþ lordinges, soþe to sain, ichil 3ou telle Lay le Frayn. ("Middle English <i>Lai le Freine</i> " p. 1, 1-22)	

Except for the final couplet, the *le Freine* prologue consists of a discussion of the nature and origin of the Breton lay genre. Bliss refers to the Harley and Ashmole equivalents of these lines as the "prologue section" ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 7), and I will employ that terminology here.

The preface of the Harley text is 54 lines in length:

We redyn ofte & fynde y-w[ryte], As clerkes don vs to wyte, The layes that ben of harpyng Ben y-founde of frely thing:	
Sum ben of wele, & sum of wo, & sum of joy & merthe also; Sum of bourdys, & sum of rybaudy, & sum þer ben of the feyré; Sum of trechery, & sum of gyle, & sum of happes þat fallen by whyle;	5    10
Of alle þing þat men may se Moost to lowe, forsoþe, þey be. Jn Brytayn þis layes arne y-wrytt, Furst y-founde & forthe y-gete, Of adventures þat fallen by dayes,	   15

Whereof Brytouns made her layes.  
 When þey my3t owher heryn  
 Of adventures þat þer weryn,  
 Þey toke her harpys with game,  
 Maden layes & 3af it name. 20  
 Of adventures þat han be-falle  
 Y can sum telle, but nou3t all:  
 Herken, lordyngys þat ben trewe,  
 & y wol 3ou telle of Syr Orphewe.  
 Orpheo was a ryche kyng, 25  
 & in his tyme a grete lordyng;  
 Ful fayr man, & large þerto,  
 & hende, curteis & hardy also.  
 His fadre was come of Syr Pilato,  
 & his modur cam of Yno, 30  
 That sum tyme wer goddys holden  
 For wordys þat þey dedyn & tolden.  
 Orpheo most of ony þing  
 Lovede þe gle of harpyng;  
 Syker was euery gode harpure 35  
 Of hym to haue moche honour.  
 Hym-self loued for-to harpe,  
 & layde þeron his wittes scharpe;  
 He lerned so, þer noþing was  
 A better harper in no plas. 40  
 [Jn] þe world was neuer man born  
 Þat onus Orpheo sat byforn  
 (& he my3t of his harpyng her)  
 – He schulde þinke þat he wer  
 Jn one of þe joys of Paradys, 45  
 Suche joy & melody in his harpyng is.  
 Orpheo sugerneþ in Crassens,  
 Þat is a cyté of noble defens.  
 He haþ a quene, ful feyre of pris,  
 Þat is clepyd Dam Erodys, 50  
 Þe feyrest womman for þe nonys  
 Þat my3th be made of flessche & bonys;  
 All hur bere & hur godenes  
 – My3th no man discryve hur fayrenes. (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley ll. 1-54)

Lines 1-24 consist of the "prologue section" ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 7), and they correspond in large part to the lines opening lines of *Lay le Freine* presented above. Lines 25-32 correspond to the "king section" of the Auchinleck opening. Lines 33-46 constitute the "harper section" of the prologue (Bliss, "*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 7); here the poet describes Orfeo's hospitality toward harpers and the king's own preeminence on their chosen instrument. The final section of the

Harley prologue, lines 47-54, corresponds in large part to the "capital and queen section" of Auchinleck.

The Ashmole preface is 48 lines in length:

Mery tyme is in Aperelle, That mekyll schewys of manys wylle. In feldys & medewys flowrys spryng, In grenys & wodys foules syng; Than wex 3ong men jolyffe,	5
And þan proudyth man & wyffe. The Brytans, as þe boke seys, Off diuerse thingys þei made þer leys: Som þei made of herpyngys, And som of oþer diuerse thingys;	10
Som of werre & som of wo, Som of myrthys & joy also; Som of trechery & som off gyle, Som of happys þat felle som-whyle, And som be of rybawdry,	15
And many þer ben off fary; Off all þe venturrys men here or se Most off luffe, for-soth, þei be, That in þe leys ben j-wrou3ht, Fyrst fond & forth brou3ht.	20
Off aventours þat fell som-deys The Bretonys þer-of made þer leys, Off kyngys þat be-fore vs were; When thei my3t any woundres here They lete them wryte as it wer do,	25
And þer-among is Syr Orfewo. He was, for-soth, a nobull kyng, That most luffyd gle & herpyng; Wele sekyr was euery gode herper To haue off mekyll honour.	30
Hym-selue he lernyd forto herpe, And leyd þer-on hys wytte so scherpe; He lernyd so wele, wyth-outen les, So gode herper neuer non was. In all þys werld was no man bore	35
That had Kyng Orfeo ben be-fore (And he my3ht hys herpe here) Bot he wold wene þat it were A blyssed-full note of Paradys, Suche melody þer-in is.	40
The kyng jorneyd in Tracyens, That is a cyté off grete defence,	

And wyth hym hys quen off price  
 That was callyd Dame Meroudys;  
 A feyrer lady than sche was one 45  
 Was neuer made off flessch ne bone;  
 Sche was full off lufe & godnes,  
 Ne may no man telle hyr feyrnes. (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole ll. 1-48)

Lines 1-6 provide a somewhat conventional description of the effects of April on nature and humans, and for the sake of convenience I will refer to it hereafter as the "April section."<sup>14</sup> The "prologue section" of the opening occupies lines 7-26. Lines 27-40 and 41-48 in Ashmole constitute the "harper section" and "capital and queen section," respectively.

The interrelationships *between* these three prefaces – and various other texts outside the *Orfeo* tradition – are complex and occasionally unclear. At this point I will provide only a bare sketch of the different affiliations, though certain of these will later become the focus of a more prolonged discussion. Table 1 (see end of chapter) provides a schematic representation of the most important parallels between the three *Sir Orfeo* texts. Starting at the top right of the chart, the 6-line "April section" in the Ashmole recension finds no analogue in the other two texts, though it corresponds very closely to lines 259-64 of the romance *Of Arthour and of Merlin* (*Sir Orfeo*, pages 56-7, note to Ashmole ll. 1-6), the earliest version of which appears in the Auchinleck manuscript (item 31, ff. 201r-256v).<sup>15</sup> The borrowed passage has not been carefully

<sup>14</sup> The source of these lines is discussed below.

<sup>15</sup> The first six lines of the Ashmole *Orfeo* are as follows:

Mery tyme is in Aperelle,  
 That mekyll schewys of manys wylle.  
 Jn feldys & medewys flowrys spryng,  
 Jn grenys & wodys foules syng;  
 Than wex 3ong men jolyffe, 5  
 And þan proudyth man & wyffe. (*Sir Orfeo* ll. 1-6)

For comparison, the relevant lines in the Auchinleck *Of Arthour and of Merlin* are as follows:

Mirie time is Auerille  
 Than scheweþ michel of our wille 260  
 In feld and mede floures springeþ  
 In grene wode foules singeþ  
 3ong man wexeþ iolif  
 And þan proudeþ man and wiif. (*Of Arthour* pp. 19 and 21, ll. 259-64)

The Lincoln's Inn manuscript of *Of Arthour and of Merlin* contains only the first couplet of the Auchinleck text cited immediately above, but the Lincoln's Inn couplet seems to have more in common with the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo* than with the Auchinleck *Of Arthour and of Merlin* :

A mury tyme is in Auerel  
 Pat muche schewiþ monnes wil – (*Of Arthour* pp. 18 and 20, ll. 235-36)

Both *Orfeo* and the later *Of Arthour and of Merlin* text share the preposition "in" in the first line of the passage, and the choice of "man's will" rather than "our will" in the second. Given this admittedly sparse evidence, it appears that

integrated into the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo*: the opening emphasis on April (l. 1) seems at odds with the mention in line 49 that the action of the narrative takes place at the beginning of May.

Moving down the chart, the Harley and Ashmole recensions share the "prologue section" with the prologue of the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine*. The analogous passages in *Lay le Freine* and Harley mirror each other fairly closely. However, the order of the two couplets in lines 7-10 of Harley is reversed compared to the equivalent lines in *Lay le Freine* (ll. 9-10, 7-8); *Lay le Freine* and Ashmole present these lines in the same order.<sup>16</sup> As Bliss notes, lines 13-14 in *Lay le Freine* – which discuss the making of lays in ancient "Breteyne" – are somewhat different from their analogues in Harley and Ashmole (ll. 13-14 and 19-20, respectively), and these lines in the latter texts are followed by a couplet (Harley ll. 15-16 and Ashmole ll. 21-22) not represented in *Lay le Freine* ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 11). The Ashmole "prologue section" deletes the equivalent of the first couplet in Harley and *Lay le Freine* and replaces it with a couplet (Ashmole ll. 7-8) that may be borrowed from the beginning of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*; I discuss this possibility in more detail below. Ashmole also adds one verse (l. 23) not found in the other two texts, and then reduces the final eight lines of the "prologue section" in Harley (ll. 17-24) and *Lay le Freine* (ll. 15-22) to a mere three lines (Ashmole ll. 24-26).

The Auchinleck and Harley texts share the 8-line "king section"; while there are significant differences between the two passages, they offer clear line-by-line parallels to each other.<sup>17</sup> The Ashmole text does not contain the "king section."<sup>18</sup> As mentioned earlier, there is a

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Rate – the Ashmole scribe – has borrowed his opening lines from a version of *Of Arthour and of Merlin* more closely related to the Lincoln's Inn text.

<sup>16</sup> Here are the passages in the three respective manuscripts:

Sum of bourdys, & sum of rybaudy,  
& sum þer ben of the feyré;  
Sum of trechery, & sum of gyle,  
& sum of happes þat fallen by whyle (Harley 7-10)

Som of trechery & som off gyle,  
Som of happys that felle som-whyle,  
And som be of rybawdry,  
And many ther ben off fary (Ashmole 13-16)

And sum of trecherie and of gile,  
Of old aventours that fell while;  
And sum of bourdes and ribaudy,  
And mani ther beth of fairy. (*Lay le Freine* 7-10)

<sup>17</sup> The differences between the "king sections" in Auchinleck and Harley may point to larger differences in their respective treatments of the Orfeo story. Auchinleck says merely that Orfeo was a "kinge" (l. 40) while Harley says that he was a "ryche kyng" (l. 25). The difference may seem minor, but Harley again uses the phrase "ryche king" to describe the fairy king in line 381, thereby heightening the parallels between the two royals.

Auchinleck says that Orfeo was a king "[i]n Jnglond" (l. 40), while Harley – in keeping with the larger practice of both the later manuscripts – omits any reference to England.

Auchinleck describes Orfeo as being descended from "King Pluto" (l. 43) and "King Juno" (l. 44), while Harley names Orfeo's forebears as "Syr Pilato" (l. 29) and "Yno" (l. 30). Harley's transformation of these names obscures somewhat the tale's associations with classical mythology, perhaps replacing it with Christian mythology in the case of "Syr Pilato" – possibly an allusion to Pontius Pilate – and it simultaneously has the virtue of removing the

high probability that Harley and Ashmole share a common antecedent (*Sir Orfeo* xiv-xv); it is therefore likely that the Ashmole redactor canceled this portion of the text.

The Harley and Ashmole texts possess in common the 14-line "harper section," which is not found in Auchinleck. The differences between the two passages are relatively minor, though once again the Ashmole redactor may have altered the first line of the passage in order to provide a smooth transition from the earlier section.<sup>19</sup>

The Harley and Ashmole prologues share with the Auchinleck text the "capital and queen" passages. However, both the later texts lack one couplet, lines 49-50 in the Auchinleck text, which equates Orfeo's home of Winchester with the legendary birthplace of the Greek Orpheus:

(For Winchester was cleped þo  
Traciens, wiþ-ouren no.)

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celebrated "King Juno" gaffe in the Auchinleck text, in which a goddess is referred to as a "king."

Finally, line 46 of Auchinleck declares that Orfeo's ancestors were considered gods because of "auntours þat þai dede & told," but Harley replaces "auntours" with "wordys" (l. 32). Once again, the change is minor but striking, and points to the possibility that the redactor of the Harley version (or possibly the redactor of the Harley/Ashmole antecedent) wished to downplay the possibility that non-Christian gods were considered gods because of marvels they experienced or created rather than because of empty boasts or claims.

<sup>18</sup> It is possible that the first couplet in the Ashmole "harper section" – lines 27-28 – may preserve a remnant of the "king section." It depicts Orfeo as a "nobull kyng":

He was, for-soth, a nobull kyng,  
That most luffyd gle & herpyng;

The first line here is rather different from the first line of the opening couplet of the Harley "harper section" (ll. 33-34):

Orpheo most of ony þing  
Lovede þe gle of harpyng;

On the other hand, that first line in Ashmole is similar to the first line of the opening couplet of the Harley "king section" (ll. 25-26):

Orpheo was a ryche kyng,  
& in his tyme a grete lordyng;

In the Harley text, "ryche king" answers fairly well to "nobull kyng" in the Ashmole text, and the fact that the opening couplets of the both the "harper" and "king" sections begin with the same rhyme would have allowed the substitution of lines without alteration of the basic rhyme scheme. My guess is that Rate, the redactor of the Ashmole version, purposely omitted the "king section" but imported its first line into the "harper section" in order to preserve a mention of Orfeo's kingly identity.

<sup>19</sup> The first line of the "harper section" in Harley begins with the word "Orfeo." But the final line of the "prologue section" in Ashmole (l. 26) – which immediately preceds the "harper section" there but not in Harley – also ends with the mention of "Sir Orfewo." It appears that the Ashmole redactor has substituted a new line for the beginning of his "harper section" in order to avoid repeating the name of the hero. In the preceding footnote, I also discussed the possibility that the first line of the Ashmole "harper section" is a remnant of the "king section" that Rate or another redactor combined with the former passage.

No similar lines appear in the Harley and Ashmole texts, and in fact no mention of the city of Winchester occurs in either work.<sup>20</sup> The parentheses around this couplet are of course an editorial intervention on the part of A. J. Bliss. He encloses within parentheses a number of other short passages in the Auchinleck text: l. 35, ll. 58-62, l. 282, part of l. 337, and l. 485. Bliss never explains his use of the parentheses, but most (if perhaps not all) of these passages can be read as brief asides that do not immediately bear upon the plot. Nonetheless, Bliss's use of parentheses around lines 49-50 probably reflects his view that this couplet is "unlikely to be genuine" (*Sir Orfeo* 52, note to lines 49-50), no doubt because of its omission in both the later texts of *Sir Orfeo*.

With the establishment of the general shape of the three *Orfeo* prefaces and the rudiments of their interrelationships, it is possible to move on to a consideration of the rationale employed by A. J. Bliss in the reconstruction of the prologue to the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* on the now-missing f. 299. Two basic and complementary principles necessarily inform any reconstruction: the *size* of the space available; and the presumed *content* of the missing text. Surprisingly, Bliss only touches on these issues in his edition, but he does discuss them at some length in the article "*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46," published in 1953, the year before the appearance of his critical edition of *Sir Orfeo*. There, Bliss first engages the problem of the length of the missing prologue by noting that the Auchinleck scribes preferred to begin major items at the head of a new column; he therefore reasons that *Sir Orfeo* must have begun at the top of column B on f. 299v ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 8). Of the 44 lines that would typically be available there, a few would have to be given over to a rubricated title and an illumination. The former would probably occupy a single line, and of the latter Bliss notes that "nearly all" the illuminations in the Auchinleck manuscript "occupied ten, eleven or twelve lines," though they could be as small as five lines or as large as fifteen ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 8). According to Bliss's calculations, then, the missing text of the prologue was probably 28 to 38 lines in length. However, both Bliss and Fred Porcheddu note that in a few cases the Auchinleck scribes inserted the title and illumination for a new article at the very bottom of one column and began the text proper at the head of the next (Bliss, "*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 9; Porcheddu 491-92). *Sir Orfeo* is preceded by the romance *Sir Tristrem* in the manuscript as it currently stands; since it is now impossible to determine where on folio 299 *Sir Tristrem* ended or whether short filler texts intervened between *Tristrem* and *Orfeo*, the possibility that the beginning of *Orfeo* was inserted at the bottom of column A on f. 299v needs at the least to be considered. The lost section could therefore have been larger than Bliss's estimate by up to six lines, making the full estimated range of the lost text in column B some 28 to 44 lines.

Once he has determined the approximate length of the missing text in the Auchinleck prologue, Bliss turns to a reconstitution of its content. He notes that combining the 24-line "prologue section" with a 14-line "harper section," a 1-line title, and a small, 5-line illumination would exactly fill the 44-line column ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 9). The neatness of the fit between the space available and the sections of the prologue shared between the different versions of the text leads him to conclude very simply that "[b]efore it was mutilated . . . the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* contained the 'prologue section,' the 'harper section' and the 'king section' in that order"

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<sup>20</sup> After *Orfeo* departs from fairyland along with his wife, the Auchinleck poet says, "To Winchester he is y-come" (l. 478). "Winchester" is replaced by "Crassens" in Harley (l. 441) and by "Trasyens" in Ashmole (l. 469). I discuss the Winchester/Traciens equivalency and its implications in the next chapter.

("Sir Orfeo, Lines 1-46" 10); these sections appear in the same order in the reconstructed prologue of his edition.

Somewhat frustratingly, Bliss generally fails to make explicit the methodology behind certain of his choices in the selection of content, but one can with some confidence abstract the basic principles from his arguments in both "Sir Orfeo, Lines 1-46" and his edition of *Sir Orfeo*. As a general rule, Bliss appears to have included in his reconstituted preface material appearing in both the two later manuscripts. This criterion for inclusion would appear to be the basis on which he includes the "prologue section" cognate with that in *Lay le Freine*; as mentioned earlier, versions of this section appear in both Harley and Ashmole.<sup>21</sup> Bliss never actually discusses the possibility that the Auchinleck text might not have included an equivalent of the *Lay le Freine* prologue, and he provides no defense of his decision to include it.

Bliss provides more explicit justification for his inclusion of the "harper section" in his reconstructed preface. Both Harley and Ashmole possess the "harper section": in Harley, it bridges the the "king" and "capital and queen" sections; in Ashmole – which lacks the "king section" – it bridges the "prologue" and "capital/queen" sections. In the surviving Auchinleck text, by contrast, the "king" and "capital and queen" sections appear in an unbroken sequence. Auchinleck could only have possessed the "harper section" if it appeared in the portion of the prologue that is now missing. In that case, the various sections of the prologue would necessarily have appeared in Auchinleck in a sequence different from that of the two later manuscripts; the "harper section" would have to come before the "king section." Bliss maintains that "[t]he 'harper section' is essential to the story, for Orfeo's skill in playing the harp is the mainspring of the action; it is scarcely conceivable that such a passage could have been omitted by accident" ("Sir Orfeo, Lines 1-46" 7). In Bliss's conception, the "harper section" must therefore have been contained in the now-missing portion of the Auchinleck prologue, and the most reasonable order for the first sections in Auchinleck would have been prologue-harper-king ("Sir Orfeo, Lines 1-46" 10). But if one accepts this argument, does Auchinleck or Harley preserve the original order of the presumed archetype of *Sir Orfeo*? Bliss opines that Auchinleck "was written by a careful scribe," while Harley was apparently "written down from memory by a minstrel whose memory failed him increasingly often toward the end of the poem" ("Sir Orfeo, Lines 1-46" 10), and that this version is therefore "much abbreviated and garbled" ("Sir Orfeo, Lines 1-46" 10). "Furthermore," he writes, "the [presumed] order of the MS. Auchinleck is logical: it matters little whether Orfeo was a king or not, but it matters a great deal that he was a harper" – implying, apparently, that the "harper section" would have occupied the earlier position of greater emphasis ("Sir Orfeo, Lines 1-46" 10). In Bliss's edition of *Sir Orfeo*, the "harper section" (lines 25-38) appears immediately before the point at which the extant Auchinleck text begins, and it bridges the "prologue" (lines 1-24) and "king" (lines 39-46) sections.

For the sake of comparison, I present here the section of Bliss's Auchinleck text analogous to the passages from *Lai le Freine*, Harley and Ashmole presented earlier:<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> As I note below, certain scholars – such as Oscar Zielke and Gabrielle Guillaume – had already assigned a version of the *Lay le Freine* prologue to the Auchinleck text of *Sir Orfeo* by the time of Bliss's first edition, and that undoubtedly influenced his choice of content in the reconstructed prologue. I discuss earlier opinions on the relationship between the *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* prologues below.

<sup>22</sup> Editors of Middle English texts generally employ brackets to signal the presence of reconstructed text. In the following passage, however, A. J. Bliss uses brackets somewhat differently. Lines 1-39 constitute Bliss's speculative reconstruction of the now-missing lines of the Auchinleck prologue; because much of lines 1-39 is faithfully

We redeþ oft & findeþ [y-write,]  
 & þis clerkes wele it wite,  
 Layes þat ben in harping  
 Ben y-founde of ferli þing:  
 Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo, 5  
 & sum of ioie & mirþe al-so,  
 & sum of trecherie & of gile,  
 Of old auentours þat fel while,  
 & sum of bourdes & ribaudy,  
 & mani þer beþ of fairy; 10  
 Of al þinges that men seþ  
 Mest o loue, for-soþe, þai beþ.  
 ¶In Breteyne þis layes were wrou3t,  
 [First y-founde & forþ y-brou3t,  
 Of auentours þat fel bi dayes, 15  
 Wher-of Bretouns maked her layes.]  
 When kinges mi3t our y-here  
 Of ani meruailes þat þer were,  
 Þai token an harp in gle & game,  
 & maked a lay & 3af it name. 20  
 Now, of þis auentours þat weren y-falle  
 Y can tel sum, ac nou3t alle:  
 Ac herkneþ, lordinges [þat beþ trewe,]  
 Ichil 3ou telle [Sir Orfewe.  
 Orfeo mest of ani þing 25  
 Loued þe gle of harping;  
 Siker was eueri gode harpour  
 Of him to haue miche honour.  
 Him-self he lerned for-to harp,  
 & leyð þer-on his wittes scharp; 30  
 He lerned so, þer no-þing was  
 A better harpour in no plas.  
 In al þe world was no man bore  
 Þat ones Orfeo sat bifore  
 (& he mi3t of his harping here) 35  
 Bot he schuld þenche þat he were  
 In on of þe ioies of Paradis,  
 Swiche melody in his harping is.]

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supplied from *Lay le Freine* in the Auchinleck manuscript, Bliss brackets only those sections that do not appear in *le Freine*. Of the bracketed sections here, Bliss supplies the final word of line 1, the end of line 23, and more or less all of lines 24-38 (“the harper section”) from the Harley *Sir Orfeo*. Lines 14-16 are a sort of hybrid of the analogous lines in the Harley and Ashmole texts; I offer a brief comparison of these passages with the equivalent *Lay le Freine* text in footnote 37 below.

Unless otherwise noted, I have attempted throughout this chapter to preserve Bliss’s punctuation, though paraph markers (i.e., ¶) are retained only when they seem relevant to the argument at hand.



missing text. No evidence points to the presence of the "harper section" there, and it seems at least as likely that the passage was absent from the Auchinleck prologue.

I turn now to a more prolonged examination of Bliss's decision to include the *Lai le Freine* prologue in the Auchinleck text, and the scholarly background for that choice. The idea of the shared prologue has had a long life in the scholarship on both *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, and it continues to enjoy a surprisingly broad scholarly consensus today. Ascribing the prologue to the original exemplars of both lays provides the simplest explanation for its presence in the Harley and Ashmole texts, and it is most likely for this reason that the notion had become well established in the critical literature long before the publication of Bliss's first edition of *Sir Orfeo* in 1954. The earliest widely available edition of the poem, published by Oscar Zielke in 1880, employed Auchinleck as the base text with a 24-line addition at the beginning; while Zielke's reconstructed opening was compounded of verses drawn from both the Harley *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, he did not offer an explicit opinion on the original content of the *Sir Orfeo* prologue in Auchinleck. In 1906, Lucien Foulet seems to have been the first to argue explicitly that the original version of the prologue "must have opened the French *lai d'Orphée*" (the supposed source of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*) and that therefore the *Lay le Freine* opening was a borrowing from *Sir Orfeo* ("Prologue" 47). Responding to Foulet's article in 1922, Gabrielle Guillaume implicitly accepted the notion of a common prologue but insisted that the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* was the borrower (459). Neither scholar considered the possibility that the prologue might not have been included in the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*, and their implied insistence on the commonality of the prologue seems to have framed the issue for later researchers.<sup>23</sup>

In an influential article published in 1941, Laura Hibbard Loomis acknowledged the peculiarity of a shared prologue even while helping to enshrine the concept as part of the later reception of *Sir Orfeo*: "Surprising though it be, this same Breton-Lay [i.e., *Lay le Freine*] Prologue . . . once also prefaced the lay of *Orfeo* in the same manuscript" ("Chaucer" 119). A. J. Bliss attempted in his 1954 edition of *Sir Orfeo* to resolve the Foulet-Guillaume debate by attributing both poems – and their shared opening – to the same hand: "If it is accepted that the same author wrote both *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freyne* . . . the problem loses much of its urgency" (*Sir Orfeo* xlvi). He believed that it was "probable, though not certain, that the prologue originally belonged to *Sir Orfeo*," but he also acknowledged the possibility that the prologue "might have been composed at any time, and subsequently adapted both for *Sir Orfeo* and for *Lay le Freyne*" (*Sir Orfeo* xlvi). John B. Beston, writing in 1976, rejected Bliss's theory of common authorship for the two poems; like Guillaume, he attributed the *origin* of the prologue to the *Lay le Freine* poet, but did not challenge the notion that the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* also carried the prologue: "The *le Freine* poet in his prologue seems to have written somewhat awkwardly an original compilation which the *Sir Orfeo* poet seems to have refashioned in a more polished form" ("Case Against" 161). The following year, in the authoritative introduction to their facsimile of the Auchinleck manuscript, I. C. Cunningham and Derek Pearsall ratified

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<sup>23</sup> In an edition of *Lay le Freine* published in 1929, Margaret Wattie reviews the work of both Foulet and Guillaume and ultimately sides with the latter. In arguing that *Sir Orfeo* is the borrower of the "prologue section," Wattie notes that the two later texts of *Sir Orfeo* "are much inferior to the text in the *Lai le Freine*," that there is "no sign that the author of *Sir Orfeo* knew Marie, as the author of the prologue certainly did," and that "there is more than one echo of *Lai le Freine* in the other poem [i.e., *Sir Orfeo*]" ("The Middle English *Lai le Freine*" xiii). Throughout this discussion, Wattie is careful to focus her attention on the two later versions of *Sir Orfeo*; she never offers an explicit opinion on whether the Auchinleck manuscript may have shared the "prologue section" with *Lay le Freine*, Harley and Ashmole.

the line of reasoning initiated by Loomis and Bliss: "There has been much argument about where the prologue 'belongs'; but it clearly belongs to both poems, and offers for both the same kind of general historical background and *apéritif*" (x). More recently, the idea of the shared *Sir Orfeo-Lay le Freine* prologue has been endorsed – with varying degrees of qualification – by a number of scholars, all of whom cite either Cunningham and Pearsall or Bliss as authorities; these critics include Nicolas Jacobs in 1982 ("*Sir Degarré*" 296),<sup>24</sup> Murray J. Evans in 1995 (96),<sup>25</sup> and (more cautiously) Elizabeth Archibald in 2000 ("Case " 40).<sup>26</sup> And the most recent edition of the poem – that of Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury in *The Middle English Breton Lays* (2001) – follows Bliss in supplying most of the missing lines of the Auchinleck prologue from *Lay le Freine* ("*Lay le Freine*" 42).<sup>27</sup> There have of course been dissenters. In a 1985 paper, John Finlayson remarked that "the Prologue [sic] which *Orfeo* shares with *Le Freine* is not attached until the mid-fifteenth century (*pace* Laura Hibbard Loomis)" 358). Nevertheless, such instances are few, and more than one hundred years after Foulet made the case for the shared prologue, the notion remains vital. More recent scholarship offers an opportunity to reevaluate this foundational assumption.

The near-*verbatim* repetition of the same lengthy prologue in two different works of the same manuscript is assuredly a rare phenomenon if it occurs at all; I have so far been unable to locate a single instance anywhere else in the Middle English corpus.<sup>28</sup> But the fact that a theory

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<sup>24</sup> In a discussion of the relationship between *Lai le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo*, Nicolas Jacobs mentions "a common prologue to *Orfeo* and *Freine*, formerly though no longer existing in the Auchinleck text of both lays" ("*Sir Degarré, Lay le Freine*" 296). He cites for authority Bliss's edition of *Sir Orfeo* and Bliss's article "*Sir Orfeo*, lines 1-46."

<sup>25</sup> Murray J. Evans, citing Bliss's edition of *Sir Orfeo*, writes, "*S[ir] O[rfeo]* and *Le Freine* may have been written by the same author and probably originally shared the same prologue in Auchinleck" (96).

<sup>26</sup> In reference to the *Lai le Freine* prologue, Elizabeth Archibald writes, "The same prologue is attached to *Sir Orfeo* in two fifteenth-century manuscripts, and was probably included in the Auchinleck version, though it has not survived there (Pearsall and Cunningham, xi)" ("Case" 40).

<sup>27</sup> In the notes to their edition of *Sir Orfeo*, Laskaya and Salisbury comment on what they perceive as a contradiction between Bliss's claims for the origins of his reconstructed prologue and his actual text: "He notes that the first twenty-four lines 'can be supplied with some certainty,' for they reappear in *Lay le Freine*, but that the remaining fourteen must be reconstructed from H[arley] and [Ashmole]. But in fact, he follows only the first twelve lines of *Lay le Freine*, then reconstructs mainly from H[arley] lines 13-24" (42). Actually, Bliss's reconstructions of lines 1-12 and lines 17-24 follow *Lay le Freine* extremely closely, generally differing from the original only in terms of orthography and punctuation. Only in lines 13-16 of his own version of the prologue does Bliss diverge markedly from the text of *Lay le Freine*, and he very carefully lays out his reasons for that difference ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 11; *Sir Orfeo* xlvii-xlviii). Furthermore, in reference to Kenneth Sisam's edition of *Sir Orfeo* in *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose* (1921), Bliss explicitly criticizes Sisam for supplying the first 24 lines of the missing Auchinleck prologue from the Harley manuscript when parallel lines were available in *Lay le Freine*, which also appears in Auchinleck and is likewise written in the London dialect; he notes that "it is more satisfactory for many reasons to supply the missing lines in a contemporary version which shows the same dialect and the same orthography as the rest of the text of *Sir Orfeo*" ("*Sir Orfeo*, Lines 1-46" 11). Despite their critique of Bliss, Laskaya and Salisbury follow his reconstructed prologue more closely than some other recent editors, deviating from Bliss's text only in terms of orthography and punctuation.

<sup>28</sup> Discussing the ostensibly shared *Orfeo-Lay le Freine* prologue, Ezio Levi cites what he considers a similar case in Italian medieval literature: "Ma in Italia nessuno si miraviglierà se due testi popolari antichi quali *Sir Orfeo* e il *Lay de la Freine* hanno il medesimo prologo; perché questo fatto è comune anche nella nostra letteratura giullaresca del

of the commonality of the *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* prologues has persisted largely unchallenged is all the more remarkable in light of more recent work on the manner in which the Auchinleck codex was produced. Timothy A. Shonk and others have demonstrated that the Auchinleck MS was the product of a tightly controlled and centralized process of assembly. Shonk in particular argued rather compellingly in a 1985 article that one of the six copyists of the manuscript – Scribe 1 – served as "editor" of the work as a whole (77) and imposed upon it a previously agreed-upon plan that followed the specifications of a paying customer (82).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Scribe 1 was responsible for the copying of both *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* (Pearsall and Cunningham xv). He appears to have taken great pains to ensure that very little of the available column-space of the manuscript was not filled with text, rounding out the ends of gatherings with short "filler" texts of a carefully calculated length. Although 334 folios survive, I count only ten on which more than two of the lines ruled for text have not been filled.<sup>30</sup> This statistic seems all the more remarkable in light of the scribes' predilection for starting most works at the head of a new column.<sup>31</sup> The theory of the common prologue, then, asks us to

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medesimo secolo. Il prologo del cantare di *Bruto di Bretagna* è identico a quello del cantare di *Gismirante*. L'ottava iniziale che forma il prologo dei <<cantari>> era una formula introduttiva, che non era connessa in modo indissolubile col testo e poteva esserne staccata o riunita secondo le necessità della recitazione in mezzo alla plebe" ["But no one in Italy would marvel that two popular ancient texts like *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* have the same prologue, because this situation is also common in our minstrel literature from the same century. The prologue to the *cantare Bruto di Bretagna* is identical to that of the *cantare Gismirante*. The initial octet which forms the prologue to the *cantari* was an introductory formula; it was not connected in an inseparable way to the text and could be detached from it or reunited with it according to the needs of a recitation before an audience" (translation mine)] (197). While it is possible (and perhaps even likely) that Middle English poets and/or scribes had a greater sense of the "separability" of Breton lay prologues than scholars have yet noted, it is clear that the Italian tradition Levi refers to is foreign to Middle English romance.

<sup>29</sup> Malcolm Parkes and Pamela Robinson have argued that the work done by the "sixth" scribe might actually have been performed by Scribe 1 (Hanna, "Reconsidering" 92).

<sup>30</sup> The following is a list of those places in the manuscript where a folio lacks more than two lines of text for which it has been ruled, along with an estimate of the number of lines "missing": f. 38v, 18 lines at the end of col. B; f. 69v, all but 5 lines of col. A and all of col. B; f. 78r, 2 lines of col. B; f. 104v, 15 lines at the end of col. B; f. 107r, only 8 lines of cols. A through C are filled, and only 7 of col. D – the rest of the page is left blank; 107v, left entirely blank except for pen-tests and random jottings in later hands – the page is apparently lightly ruled for vertical columns only; f. 260v, 34 lines at the end of col. B; f. 303r, 5 lines at the end of col. A; f. 303v, 21 lines at the end of col. B; f. 317r, 4 lines at the end of col. B; f. 325v, 26 lines at the end of col. B.

In every case, the blank lines mark the end of a text, and, in most of the instances here, they stand at the end of a gathering, or at the end of a scribe's stint of copying, or both. The largely blank verso of f. 69 may be particularly significant in the present context. A gap of two in the original numbering of the items in the manuscript between the text that ends on f. 69v and the one that begins on 70r suggests that two items have been omitted. Because the catchword at the bottom of f. 69v indicates that no gathering has been lost at this point, Derek Pearsall concludes that the space at the end of f. 69v was left for two short fillers that were never copied (*Auchinleck* xxi). If Pearsall is right, this would seem to indicate that even very small filler texts had been chosen and assigned a position and item number in the manuscript before having been copied. This speaks not only to the completeness of the vision Scribe 1 had for the text, but also to his confidence that he could provide fillers of precisely the size needed. But for a very different interpretation of this situation, see the discussion in Murray J. Evans, p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> I do not mean to imply here that there are no instances in Auchinleck in which a passage appearing in one text of the manuscript also appears in another: such intertextual "borrowings" are one of the more distinctive and intriguing characteristics of this codex, and Pearsall and Cunningham provide a brief – and decidedly not exhaustive – account

believe that the organizer of a very carefully arranged codex – a scribe determined to make every line of text count – knowingly copied the same column-length prologue twice within thirty-some folio pages and may even have been the person who transferred the prefatory material from one of the two texts to the other. Given the current understanding of the role of Scribe 1 in the manuscript's production, this claim seems increasingly unlikely.

Moreover, the manuscript context of *Lay le Freine* makes it likely that that poem has the stronger claim to being the original possessor of the “prologue section.” The elaborateness of the section seems intended to provide a virtual “beginner's guide” to the Breton lay genre, and lines 3-12 in particular furnish a sort of inventory of themes ostensibly representative of the lays:

We redeþ oft & findeþ [ywri]te,  
 & þis clerkes wele it wite,  
 layes þat ben in harping  
 ben yfounde of ferli þing.  
 Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo,           5  
 & sum of ioie & mirþe also,  
 & sum of trecherie & of gile,  
 of old auentours þat fel while;  
 & sum of bourdes & ribaudy,  
 & mani þer beþ of fairy.               10  
 Of al þinge[s] that men seþ,  
 mest o loue for soþe þai beþ. (*Lay le Freine* ll. 3-12)

As a whole, the motifs represented here do not seem especially relevant to *Lay le Freine* in particular: while “ferli þing,” “wo,” “mirþe,” and “loue” certainly figure in the narrative, “wer,” “bourdes” and “ribaudy” certainly do not. And the emphasis laid on Faëry by granting it a position of prominence near the end of the catalogue might seem better suited to *Sir Orfeo* – or any of the many lays in French and English in which fairies appear – than to *Lay le Freine*. On the other hand, many of these same topics are equally inappropriate as a summary of *Sir Orfeo*. Gabrielle Guillaume and other early critics of the poem accordingly suggested that the prologue originally might have been intended as an “introduction . . . not only for the *Lay le Freine*, but for a collection of lays” (Guillaume 459), but the type of collection hypothesized by Guillaume is unknown in Middle English; no surviving Middle English manuscript contains only Breton lays, and only Auchinleck possesses more than two. Elizabeth Archibald has more recently suggested that the Auchinleck manuscript was itself the “collection” for which the prologue was written: the prologue’s ostensible survey of the Breton lays “might be taken to suggest . . . that the genre was not well known to English readers by the early to mid-fourteenth century, when the Auchinleck MS was produced, and thus needed some kind of introduction” (“The Breton Lay” 66). The *Lay le Freine* prologue, then, might have served specifically to introduce the lays of the Auchinleck manuscript even though they do not appear as a bloc.

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of such instances on pp. x-xi of their fascimile of the Auchinleck manuscript. I would contend, however, that the obvious prominence that the beginning position of a text lends to any particular material that appears there would make the sort of “doubling” of introductory material that Bliss and others argue for quite unlikely in a manuscript so concerned to communicate a sense of consistent organization. And, certainly, no other instances survive in the manuscript.

The manuscript includes three texts often considered "Breton lays" by modern critics; no other manuscript contains as many, though four later codices do contain two lays apiece.<sup>32</sup> In the order in which they appear, the Auchinleck lays are *Sir Degaré* (item 17; ff. 78rb-84a [stub]), *Lay le Freine* (item 30, ff. 261ra-262a [stub]), and *Sir Orfeo* (item 38, ff. 299a [stub]-303ra). *Sir Degaré*, the first of the three, shares some features with poems identifying themselves as Breton lays. Nevertheless, it occurs in a portion of the manuscript dominated by religious and didactic pieces, and – like the four later recensions of the poem – the Auchinleck *Sir Degaré* does not claim for itself membership in the lay genre. A number of recent critics have also challenged the work's status as a lay (Finlayson 357; Strohm 28; Harrington 79-80).<sup>33</sup> Therefore, *Lay le Freine* is, in order of appearance, the first poem in Auchinleck to identify itself explicitly as a Breton lay; together, it and the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* represent the first texts in Middle English to make such a claim. The poem's prologue might therefore provide an interpretive context for both *Lay le Freine* itself as well as for *Sir Orfeo*. The prologue could conceivably have been a "readymade" borrowing lifted from a no longer extant text, but it may just as easily have been produced by the Auchinleck Scribe 1 or one of his colleagues; Thorlac Turville-Petre, among others, notes that the Auchinleck scribes appear to have revised or rewritten aspects of a number of works in order to bring them into alignment with "the overall design of the volume" (*England the Nation* 114).

The grand gesture of a lengthy, genre-summarizing prologue may also provide a measure of the prestige accorded *Lay le Freine* by the Auchinleck redactor or by the person who commissioned the manuscript. The opening of the lay marks the beginning of both gathering 37 and booklet 6 in the manuscript. Timothy A. Shonk observes that the poem's placement is unusual for a relatively short piece, since the scribes usually reserved the initial position in a gathering for major works (76). Similarly, Ralph Hanna has suggested that works at the start of a booklet in Auchinleck were likely to have been specially requested by the client who commissioned the manuscript: "front-loading" booklets would have allowed the scribe to get right to work on such texts (94). The location of *Lay le Freine* at the head of both a gathering and a booklet may indicate that the work was held in particular esteem by the purchaser of the codex.<sup>34</sup> If so, the addition to the poem of a lengthy prologue might have been purposefully

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<sup>32</sup> The manuscripts containing two lays each are Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 (*Sir Orfeo, Erle of Tolous*); London, British Library MS Additional 27879 (*Sir Degaré, Landevale*); London, British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (*Emaré, Sir Launfal*); and Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38 (*Sir Degaré, Erle of Tolous*).

<sup>33</sup> Personally, I disagree with these three scholars on the generic affiliations of *Sir Degaré*. While the use the Auchinleck scribes made of *Sir Degaré* may have made an association with the lays inappropriate in this manuscript, a number of the formal characteristics of the text indicate that the Breton lay may have provided the original template on which the poem was modeled. I hope to show in a later project that David V. Harrington's own useful criteria for membership in the genre suggest – at the very least – that the themes and narrative structure of *Sir Degaré* were heavily influenced by familiar conventions of the lay.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy A. Shonk anticipates – and rejects – the argument that I am making here, i.e., that the atypical placement of a brief narrative like *Lay le Freine* at the very beginning of gathering 37 may indicate that the piece enjoyed a special prominence among works selected for inclusion in the Auchinleck manuscript. Shonk believes that "[i]t is difficult to designate *Lay le freine* as a major poem with which [Scribe 1] would have wanted to begin a new gathering" (76). And, he continues, a "better explanation" would take into account the interactions between Scribes 1 and 5 (76). He notes that gathering 29 is shared between the latter two scribes (76): Scribe 5 finished *Sir Beues* on f. 201ra of the gathering, and Scribe 1, apparently not wanting to waste the remaining five (or six?) folios, began the

deployed as an attention-getting device that marked off the particular lay as a valuable work while simultaneously providing a primer to the lay genre as a whole.

As a translation of a surviving work by Marie de France, *Lay le Freine* has generally been considered a minor – if quite competent – work, and the poem has attracted only a fraction of the critical attention accorded *Sir Orfeo*. The positions of the two texts in the Auchinleck manuscript might, however, indicate that the relative degree of prestige accorded each work by the early fourteenth-century Auchinleck compilers may have been different. As noted, *Lay le Freine* initiates both a gathering and a booklet. By contrast, *Sir Orfeo* – almost certainly a much longer work than *Lay le Freine* when the latter was intact<sup>35</sup> – starts precisely in the middle of gathering 44 (Pearsall and Cunningham xiii), a position of rather less prominence. While I readily concede that manuscript position is never a sure arbiter of a text's literary value as perceived by a compiler, *Lay le Freine* seems by virtue of its context in Auchinleck likely to have been the original – and probably unique – bearer of the preface it now possesses.<sup>36</sup>

The concept of the shared *Sir Orfeo-Lay le Freine* prologue in Auchinleck provides the simplest explanation for the presence of the *Lay le Freine* prologue in the two later recensions of *Sir Orfeo*, accords well with the critical view of *Sir Orfeo* as a text worthy of an elaborate preface, has been hallowed by a long scholarly tradition, and is enshrined in Bliss's influential

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lengthy romance *Of Arthour and of Merlin* at the top of f. 201rb, requiring "nearly six [sic] additional gatherings (30-36)." Scribe 1 then filled out gathering 36 with three short filler pieces and later, during the final assembly of the manuscript, provided a catchword linking gatherings 36 and 37 (76). Shonk writes: "During [Scribe] V's stint . . . Scribe I must have been at work copying something. I suggest that he was copying *Lay le freine* while V was at work on his section" (76).

Shonk's argument fails to explain why Scribe 1 did not simply begin the new gathering with a larger work, as was his typical practice in Auchinleck. Presumably, Shonk believes – but does not state – that choosing to start a shorter work would have allowed Scribe 1 greater leeway to get to work on *Of Arthour and of Merlin* as soon as Scribe 5 had finished. But even if Scribe 1 had begun gathering 37 with a lengthy romance, one would think that gathering 29 – once Scribe 5 had done with it – could wait until Scribe 1 had time to complete whatever he was working on. Shonk's theory is possible but lacks the virtue of necessity.

Furthermore, do we need to assume that manuscript order reflects so closely the sequence in which items were copied? In a more recent article, Ralph Hanna notes: "[T]here is no necessary connection between the bound order of the book we have – this was imposed on the booklets at the end of the procedure – and the various stages of its production" ("Reconsidering" 92). Precisely because *Lay le Freine* is a fairly brief piece at the beginning of a gathering, it could easily have been copied *at nearly any time in the production of the manuscript* and then set aside if the need arose. Shonk does not seem to take this possibility into account.

<sup>35</sup> The unique Auchinleck text of *Lay le Freine* is fragmentary: it breaks off at line 340 since f. 262, on which the piece presumably ended, has been excised. Because the *Lay le Freine* is a fairly faithful rendering of the *Le Fresne* by Marie de France and currently ends at a point that corresponds to the one of the final scenes in Marie's poem, it seems reasonable to speculate that the original Middle English text was not much longer than what survives. Henry W. Weber provided *Lay le Freine* with what Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury call "an imaginative re-creation of [the] Middle English translated directly from Marie de France's lay" (86, note to ll. 341-end). This supplementary ending, included in their edition of the poem, brings the work to a total length of 408 lines. Bliss's reconstructed version of *Sir Orfeo* is by contrast 605 lines in length (including the *explicit*), and as I argue above the original Auchinleck text could conceivably have been a few lines longer still. While estimations of the original length of both poems are admittedly the product of some guesswork, the evidence suggests that *Lay le Freine* was roughly only two-thirds the length of *Sir Orfeo*.

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that the argument I am making here might conceivably be reversed: the position of prominence accorded *Lay le Freine* in the manuscript might have been the result of its bearing a rather elaborate prologue that Scribe 1 – or the purchaser of the manuscript – considered especially worthy of attention.



Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* has been lost, it is striking that in this section of their prefaces the Harley and Ashmole texts fail to preserve *a single line* not affiliated with the “prologue section.” In other words, the proponents of a shared *Orfeo-le Freine* prologue effectively claim that in the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* the shared “prologue section” coincidentally ended at precisely the point at which the surviving text begins. That contention stretches credulity: as noted, a column of the Auchinleck manuscript would typically have filled a space equivalent to 44 lines; even if the illustration that accompanied *Sir Orfeo* were unusually large – say, 15 lines in length – a number of lines would still have to be accounted for; if the title and illustration appeared at the bottom of column B, even more material would be missing.<sup>38</sup> Bliss rectified this problem by assuming the presence of the “harper section” of the later prefaces and an unusually small illustration, but as I pointed out, the “harper section” is hardly necessary in Auchinleck; and if it were present there, the ordering of the various sections of the preface in Auchinleck would be different from that in the two later texts – and Bliss never attempts to explain why such a resequencing would occur in the later versions. If the Harley and Ashmole exemplar were independent of the Auchinleck exemplar, we should expect the openings of those texts to preserve some material beyond the “prologue section” shared with *Lay le Freine*. The absence of such material may point to a different understanding of the associations between the various texts.

If we reject the theory of the shared *Orfeo-Lay le Freine* “prologue section,” another possibility suggests itself as a resolution of the difficulties surrounding the relationship of *Lay le Freine*, the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*, and the Harley and Ashmole texts of *Sir Orfeo*: these affiliations can be more readily explained by the possibility that the antecedent of the two later texts was copied from the Auchinleck text or a close descendant of it *after* Auchinleck folio 299a, which contained the beginning of *Sir Orfeo*, had been cut out of the manuscript. In such a scenario, a later redactor, confronted with an acephalous text of *Sir Orfeo* lacking the expected prologue, would have borrowed genre-appropriate introductory material from another Breton lay – in this case, *Lay le Freine*. This would explain why the Harley and Ashmole prologues begin to share material not associated with the *Lay le Freine* “prologue section” only – and precisely – at the point at which the surviving manuscript of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* starts. It is, of course, tempting to speculate that the source for both the text of *Sir Orfeo* and the *Lay le Freine* prologue might have been the actual Auchinleck texts of the two poems: the copyist, finding the prologue to the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* missing, would have turned to the intact prologue of the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine*, the one other self-identified Breton lay in the codex. For the purposes of the present argument, however, it is only necessary that the redactor's original text of *Lay le*

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relationship likely lies behind these parallels, but the precise details seem irrecoverable.

Nevertheless, Bliss attempts to reconstruct the original text. Because he sees *Sir Orfeo* as the original possessor of the “prologue section” (*Sir Orfeo* xlvi), Bliss attributes the differences between the texts to the corruption of the copy of *Lay le Freine* in Auchinleck (*Sir Orfeo* xlvi). He speculates that a copyist of *Lay le Freine* must have been faced with a defective version that lacked the second couplet altogether and had only one line of the first; apparently hybridizing the first couplets of Harley and Ashmole, Bliss reconstructs the one line as “In Breteyne þis layes were wrou3t” (*Sir Orfeo* xlvi).

<sup>38</sup> The *Lay le Freine* “prologue section” is 22 lines in length and its descendant in Harley occupies 24 lines. Even if we use the larger of these two numbers and assume a one-line title and a very large 15-line illustration, we are left with a total of 40 lines; 4 of the 44 lines for which the folio is ruled are unaccounted for. And the problem could potentially be larger: it is possible that the Auchinleck text of *Sir Orfeo* started at the very top of column B on f. 299v, meaning that up to 16 more lines (i.e., the space occupied by the title and the illustration) would have to be accounted for.

*Freine* be a close relative of the Auchinleck text and that his original of *Sir Orfeo* be a close descendant of the mutilated text in Auchinleck.

The idea that Harley and Ashmole have as their source an exemplar descended from the Auchinleck text after folio 299a had been removed may allow us to date that excision. The Auchinleck manuscript is dated to the early 1330s, and Harley is generally dated to the first third of the fifteenth century; as a result, the Auchinleck folio must have been removed some time in the first century of the manuscript's existence. If the excision of folio 299a occurred at the same time as the removal of many other folios from Auchinleck, then this temporal range may also serve to date the mutilation of the manuscript as a whole.

The suggestion that the two later versions had their origin in a text descended from the mutilated Auchinleck text of *Sir Orfeo* and augmented by a borrowing from the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine* (or a closely related version) implies that scribes working past the time at which the Auchinleck manuscript had first been composed maintained a familiarity with the Breton lays found in the Auchinleck codex; it assumes furthermore that they had access to the manuscript itself or to closely related texts of the lays. Support for the possibility of such a situation comes from the work of Nicholas Jacobs, who has made the case for a similar scenario in order to explain the interrelationships among the various texts of the Middle English Breton lay *Sir Degaré* as well as the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine* and perhaps the Auchinleck *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*. In one instance, Jacobs notes that a certain passage in the Auchinleck *Sir Degaré* (ll. 219-22) appears to be a borrowing from *Lay le Freine* (ll. 145-50) in which the original central couplet has been deleted. Nevertheless, later recensions of *Sir Degaré* descended from the Auchinleck text of the same poem possess a clear analogue of the missing lines, and in a complex argument Jacobs concludes that "*Freine* was used twice in the course of the textual history of *Degarré*, once in the initial composition and once in the interpolation of the extra couplet at some later stage in the tradition" (296).<sup>39</sup> He employs a similar line of reasoning to demonstrate that the Auchinleck *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* – or "a virtually identical text" – has also been employed twice in the *Sir Degaré* tradition: "first in the redaction of the archetype of the existing manuscripts, if not, indeed, in the composition of the original text, and subsequently in the expansion of a later version of the poem" (299). Jacobs's contentions about the role of the Auchinleck manuscript in the transmission of *Sir Degaré* suggest that later copyists maintained an ongoing familiarity with the manuscript, and employed it as a source of corrections and additions for texts derived from it. Jacobs's article was published in 1982, and it displays the influence of Laura Hibbard Loomis's seminal essay "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340" (1942), in which Loomis examined a number of the many intertextual relationships between works in the Auchinleck codex; in explanation of these, she posited the existence of a London "bookshop" in which texts of the various works in Auchinleck (and presumably others) were collected, copied, and made available to customers over the course of years. A good deal of work on the nature of the Auchinleck manuscript since the 1980s has

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<sup>39</sup> Jacobs adduces in support of this particular argument "the existence of a common prologue to *Orfeo* and *Freine*, formerly though no longer existing in the Auchinleck text of both lays" (296). I spelled out my opposition to the idea of the shared prologue above, but I do not believe that Jacobs's citation of the idea here harms in any significant way his case for the two-stage influence of *Lay le Freine* upon the textual history of *Sir Degaré*.

increasingly cast doubts on the once-influential “bookshop theory.”<sup>40</sup> Rhiannon Purdie, for instance, has recently noted that Loomis’s idea confuses “the great improbability of finding the precise physical exemplar lying behind a specific manuscript with the far greater likelihood of finding some version of a source for the text represented by that copy” (124). While rejecting the idea of the Auchinleck bookshop itself, Purdie maintains that the circumstances of manuscript circulation in fourteenth century England – and in London in particular – could account for the type of multiple borrowings envisioned by Jacobs, as well certain of the other intertextual relations in the manuscript; she writes that

some of the other signs of borrowing and influence between Auchinleck texts, including those cases indicating multiple stages of borrowing, [. . .] can be explained by a model in which texts are assumed to have been circulating severally and together, both before and long after the compilation of the Auchinleck manuscript. If Scribe 1 were well enough connected to acquire all the exemplars lying behind the Auchinleck manuscript, he is likely to have lent exemplars to others as well, refreshing what was inevitably a far larger pool of circulating texts than has survived. It is noticeable that the most intricate intertextual connections (as opposed to one-stage borrowings, such as the *Amis*-poet’s use of the stanzaic *Guy*) seem to occur between those texts whose dialectal profiles place them within London’s orbit (*Degare*, *Le Freine*, *Orfeo*, *Bevis*, *Arthour and Merlin*, *Otuel and Roland*, *Roland and Vernagu*), and this would be consistent with a genesis in, and long residence on, the capital’s extensive literary circuit. (124)

In Purdie’s view, a combination of two factors – the tendency of certain texts to be transmitted in company with each other, and the existence of a localized, standing network of scribes who borrowed and lent texts among themselves – could reasonably account for many of the same features that led to Loomis’s postulation of an Auchinleck bookshop. Purdie’s understanding of manuscript circulation in London seems consonant with the explanation I offered above for the details of the relationships between *Lay le Freine*, the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*, and the two later *Orfeo* texts; both *Lay le Freine* and *Orfeo* are, as Purdie notes, among those poems that may have been in circulation among the scribal community in London.

The composite nature of the prologue to the Ashmole recension of *Sir Orfeo* may provide an example of an even more elaborate sequence of interactions between earlier Breton lay and romance texts, on the one hand, and later texts of the *Sir Orfeo* tradition, on the other. The beginning of the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo* may also serve as a demonstration of the particular susceptibility of Breton lay prologues to reformulation through revision and borrowing. As noted above, the first six lines of the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo* constitute a recognizable version of lines 259-64 of the romance *Of Arthour and of Merlin*. The earliest copy of the latter text is found in the Auchinleck manuscript, but the Auchinleck *Of Arthour and of Merlin* probably was not the

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<sup>40</sup> Discussion of the intertextual relations between Auchinleck texts – and between Auchinleck texts and later works potentially descended from them – has a long history. Chapter four of Rhiannon Purdie’s *Anglicising Romance: Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature* (2008) offers a recent and detailed review of many of the key issues in this ongoing debate.

direct source of the borrowed verses.<sup>41</sup> Whatever the exact origin of these lines, Lynne S. Blanchfield believes that Rate, the Ashmole scribe, interpolated them into his copy of the text because their reference to "man & wyffe" in line 6 "highlights the domestic relevance of the romance," and the passage as a whole "shows off Rate's knowledge of Arthuriana" ("Romances" 70).<sup>42</sup> These six lines in Ashmole are followed by another apparent interpolation, a couplet that has no exact equivalent in the other two texts of *Sir Orfeo*:

The Brytans, as þe boke seys,  
Off diuerse thingys þei made þer leys. (*Sir Orfeo*, "Ashmole" ll. 7-8)

In a paper published in 1966, Peter Heydon pointed out the resemblance of these lines to the opening of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*:

Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes  
Of diverse aventures maden layes. (V: 709-10)<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bliss considers a direct relationship between the Auchinleck *Of Arthour and of Merlin* and the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo* unlikely: "Probably the scribe of [the Ashmole text] or one of his predecessors happened to have found the lines in some independent text of *Arthour and Merlin*" (*Sir Orfeo*, p. 57, note to Ashmole ll. 1-6).

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed evidence suggesting that later recensions of *Of Arthour and of Merlin* – such as the Lincoln's Inn manuscript – are closer in nature to the text that provided the lines for Ashmole than the Auchinleck version of the romance.

<sup>42</sup> As Blanchfield notes, three other Arthurian texts appear in Ashmole 61: *Libeaus Desconus*, *Sir Corneus*, and *Sir Cleges* ("Romances" 70). Critics of the Middle English Breton lays have tended to discount that genre's claims to "Britishness," and the affinities of various lays with other texts set in ostensibly British or Arthurian milieux have generally been overlooked. The Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*, for instance, appears immediately after *Sir Tristrem* in the manuscript, and *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, included in the same codex, is arguably (depending upon one's classification of Layamon's *Brut*) the earliest Arthurian romance in Middle English.

<sup>43</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis points out the resemblance of Chaucer's couplet to the one couplet of the "prologue section" of both Harley and Ashmole that has no exact equivalent in the *Lay le Freine* preface: "Of adventures þat fallen by dayes, / Wherof Brytouns made her layes" (Harley 15-16); "Off aventours þat fell som-deys / The Bretonys þer-of made þer leys" (Ashmole 21-22). Employing the Harley text as the base of comparison, Loomis notes that it uses "precisely the same rime" as Chaucer's couplet, that the Harley and *Franklin's Tale* couplets have seven out of twelve words in common, and, she adds, the two are "almost identical" and share "an almost complete correspondence of ideas" ("Chaucer" 119). For Loomis, these resemblances parallel and provide support for her claim that Chaucer borrowed from the "Auchinleck Prologue" in the composition of the *Franklin's Tale*: "To all intents and purposes the Franklin's Prologue is simply a suavely charming summary of the earlier passage" ("Chaucer" 121). Echoing Loomis, Bliss too notes "the general resemblances" between the *Sir Orfeo* and *Franklin's Tale* prefaces (*Sir Orfeo* xlviij), and, more specifically, he agrees with Loomis that the two opening lines of Chaucer's poem "closely resemble lines 15-16 of the *Sir Orfeo* prologue" (*Sir Orfeo* xlviij n 4), concluding that "Chaucer had read *Sir Orfeo* in the Auchinleck MS" (*Sir Orfeo* xlviij).

I find these parallels – especially the shared "dayes/layes" rhyme – intriguing, but the two couplets are actually rather less precisely a match than Loomis claims: the syntax is quite different, no surprising lexical choices are held in common, and the ideas expressed, while somewhat atypical of the prologues to Middle English lays, are commonplace in French Breton lays. While Loomis's suggestion cannot ultimately be ruled out, this correspondence feels to me more likely to have been the product of coincidence than that pointed out by Heydon. Even if the *Franklin's Tale* couplet is related to that of the two later texts of *Sir Orfeo*, one other possibility needs to be considered: that the couplet might have been borrowed from the former text and inserted into the prologue of *Sir Orfeo* by the redactor of the Harley-Ashmole precursor. Given the early fifteenth century date of Harley 2253, this

While the first rhyming word in the Ashmole couplet ("seys") differs from that of the *Franklin's Tale* ("dayes"), the two sentences are syntactically and semantically quite similar, and the use of "diverse" in both seems particularly striking. Heydon, assuming that the lines from Ashmole represented a now-lost portion of the original Auchinleck prologue, attributed the similarity to borrowing on the part of Chaucer (535-40). But the chronology of the texts involved renders this unlikely: neither the *Lay le Freine* prologue nor the Harley prologue – both texts older than Ashmole – shares the latter's close resemblance to the opening of the *Franklin's Tale*, and Chaucer's text is of course a good deal older than the late-fifteenth century Ashmole manuscript. Furthermore, the Ashmole scribe routinely revised texts he copied (Blanchfield, "Romances"); the possibility that he borrowed the next two lines from Chaucer's well known *Franklin's Tale* accords well with his habits. One cannot, of course, absolutely rule out coincidence in the case of two couplets that are essentially formulaic, but the fact that both occur near the very beginning of a lay, discuss the origin of Breton lays among the ancient Britons, share a similar syntax and grammar, and have in common the use of the word "diverse" (not otherwise found in the *Orfeo* tradition) suggests that Rate may have consulted the *Franklin's Tale* – a well known and self-proclaimed example of a Breton lay – in order to fill out the preface to the lay he was copying.

One unexpected result that emerges from a study of the various prefaces to *Sir Orfeo* is that fourteenth and fifteenth century scribes not only had a strong sense that certain "Breton lays" were accompanied by certain characteristics, but also that they knew where to find further examples of the Breton lay. The translator of *Lay le Freine* – or perhaps one of the scribes of the Auchinleck book – exchanged Marie's very brief preface to *Le Fresne* for one of a greater length.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the redactor of the Harley-Ashmole precursor text, faced with an acephalous copy of *Sir Orfeo*, apparently supplemented his version of the poem with the *Lay le Freine* "prologue section." And Rate, the redactor of the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo*, filled out the preface to his own rendition with a couplet apparently lifted from the opening of Chaucer's Breton lay *The Franklin's Tale* – which may, in its turn, have been influenced by some earlier version of *Sir Orfeo*.<sup>45</sup> For scribes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a relatively lengthy and self-reflexive preface apparently constituted one of the hallmarks of the Middle English Breton lays. Even more intriguingly, the same scribes appear to have maintained at least a mental index of poems identified as Breton lays, enabling them to identify and track down copies of poems that could provide examples of opening and closing matter appropriate to the genre.

In the half century that has passed since the publication of the first edition of A. J. Bliss's text of *Sir Orfeo* in 1954, scholars have done surprisingly little to investigate the affiliations of the three texts of the poem. Bliss's comments in this regard still seem more or less to determine the consensus on the issue. After briefly investigating inconclusive evidence, based on rhyme

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suggestion resides within the realm of the possible, if not the probable.

<sup>44</sup> As I noted above, scholars have speculated that the *Lay le Freine* "prologue section" was intended as an introduction to the genre for English readers. It is also possible, however, that the translator simply wanted to provide an opening more typical of the length of the prefaces of other Breton lays in Middle English.

<sup>45</sup> See footnote 43 for Laura Hibbard Loomis's suggestion that the prologue to the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* may have influenced the opening of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*.

schemes, that Harley and Ashmole are more closely affiliated than either is with Auchinleck, Bliss notes that such evidence is bolstered by shared additions and omissions in the two texts:

[A] close relationship between H[arley] and [Ashmole] is confirmed by other evidence. H[arley] and [Ashmole] omit two couplets which are found in A[uchinleck], lines 49-50 and 481-82, and add two couplets after lines 468 and 518; moreover, the readings of H[arley] and [Ashmole] are in general very similar, as even a cursory reading of the texts reveals. (*Sir Orfeo* xiv)

He cautions, however, that is impossible to determine on this basis the later texts' relationship to Auchinleck:

But unfortunately, while it seems safe to assume that H[arley] and [Ashmole] are closely related, it is not possible to determine the exact affiliation; it is not possible to prove that H[arley] and [Ashmole] are not descended directly from A[uchinleck]; though this circumstance is so rare among M[iddle] E[nglish] texts that it must be considered intrinsically improbable. (*Sir Orfeo* xiv)

Bliss remarks further that descent from Auchinleck would only be possible through a shared antecedent no longer extant:

[I]f H[arley] and [Ashmole] are descended from A[uchinleck] they are dependent on a common original itself descended from A[uchinleck]. This must remain a possible hypothesis, though it is much more probable that the common original of H[arley] and [Ashmole] was coeval with A[uchinleck]. (*Sir Orfeo* xiv-xv)

And he finally concludes that

H[arley] and [Ashmole] are dependent on a common ancestor, either descended from or coeval with A[uchinleck]. [. . .] In point of fact, the advanced corruption of H[arley] and [Ashmole] makes it likely that their common ancestor was already much inferior to A[uchinleck]. (*Sir Orfeo* xv)

Bliss's insistence that Harley and Ashmole are descended from a common ancestor seems compelling. However, as I have argued above, the nature of the Harley and Ashmole prologues indicates their derivation from Auchinleck after the excision of folio 299a – an idea simply never considered in Bliss's work on the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*. If the latter contention is valid, and if Harley and Ashmole do indeed share a precursor text intermediate between themselves and Auchinleck, then it should be possible to determine the nature of that text more closely.

An understanding of the affiliations between Harley and Ashmole seems best approached through an examination of their shared additions and omissions, but Bliss's tally of these alterations may seriously understate their number. In the preceding paragraph, I cited Bliss's comment that "H[arley] and [Ashmole] omit two couplets which are found in A[uchinleck], lines 49-50 and 481-82, and add two couplets after lines 468 and 518." By contrast, my own collation of the raw data on omissions and additions that Bliss provides for Harley on pages xv-xvi of his edition and for Ashmole on page xvi leads to the conclusion that the two texts omit a total of

*fifteen shared lines* and add *thirty-seven shared lines*. I offer an overview of these alterations in Table 2; in order to make the shared omissions more easily visible, I have broken down long omissions into sections when one of the two texts shares only part of an omission with the other. For instance, Harley omits Auchinleck lines 375-76 while Ashmole omits Auchinleck lines 367-76; in Table 2, I have broken that bloc of omitted lines in the latter text into lines 367-74 and 375-76 so that the parallel between Harley and Ashmole is immediately apparent.

Taking Auchinleck as the standard, both Harley and Ashmole omit the equivalents of Auchinleck lines 49-50, 375-76, 394, 397-400, 403-4, 409, 481-82, and 591-92. The two later texts also have in common 15 lines added in the "prologue section,"<sup>46</sup> 14 lines in the "harper section," two lines added after Auchinleck line 468, two after Auchinleck line 518, and four lines of a prayer after Auchinleck line 604, the end of the Auchinleck version.<sup>47</sup> In the case of the additions, most of the discrepancy between Bliss's figure and my own can be easily explained: Bliss assumes the 15 shared lines of the "prologue section" and the 14 shared lines of the "harper section" were simply lost in Auchinleck with the excision of f. 299a, while I consider them an addition that probably originated with the Harley-Ashmole precursor; Bliss moreover doesn't seem to consider the final prayer in Harley and Ashmole a shared addition. The discrepancy between our calculations of the number of shared omissions would at first seem rather more puzzling, but an examination of the first three columns of Table 2 indicates that all of the shared omissions that Bliss does not consider as part of his own tally of shared omissions occur in sections where one of the two later texts also lacks lines adjacent to the shared omitted text. For example, both Harley and Ashmole lack the equivalent of Auchinleck ll. 591-92, a couplet not

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<sup>46</sup> As noted above, the Ashmole preface appears to have been rewritten to accommodate Rate's rearrangement of this part of the poem. As a result, the question of what constitutes a "shared line" may seem rather subjective. I see the following sets of lines as being equivalent in the "prologue section": Harley ll. 3-16 and Ashmole ll. 9-22; Harley l. 17 and Ashmole l. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Harley and Ashmole both possess a small concluding prayer that does not appear in Auchinleck. The Harley version is four lines long:

& all þat have herde þis talkyng  
 Jn heven-blys be his wonyng!  
 Amen, Amen, for charyté!  
 Lord vs graunt þat it so be! (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley ll. 506-9)

The version in Ashmole is six lines long:

And all þat þys wyll here or rede  
 God forgyff þem þer mysded,  
 To þe blysse of Heuyn þat þei may com,      600  
 And euer-mor þer-jn to wonne;  
 And þat it may so be  
 Prey we all, for charyté! (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole ll. 598-603)

Lines 508-9 of Harley clearly correspond to ll. 602-3 of Ashmole, though one of the two texts has transposed them. Lines 506-7 of Harley seem more or less to parallel ll. 598 and 601 of Ashmole. The redactor of the latter text appears to have extended the prayer by altering the rhyme and splitting the original couplet into the initial and final lines, respectively, of two new couplets. Bliss may have considered these changes too great to warrant calling the added prayer "a shared addition," but he does not discuss this topic. It may also be possible that the extent of the changes simply obscured the shared nature of the prayer for him.

included on Bliss's list of shared omissions. But while that omission is an isolate in Ashmole, it forms part of a larger block of cancelled text in Harley: the equivalent of Auchinleck ll. 589-94 is lacking in the latter manuscript. It is possible therefore that Bliss felt the commonality of the omissions in these sections was due to coincidence, but he never comments explicitly on this point.<sup>48</sup>

Estimating the role of coincidence in omissions shared between Harley and Ashmole is complicated by the fact that the scribes of both Harley and Ashmole seem to display highly interventionist tendencies. Both Harley and Ashmole omit a large number of lines relative to Auchinleck: Harley cancels a total of 105 lines, while Ashmole cancels 53. (See Table 2 for specific omissions.) Lynne S. Blanchfield has studied patterns of innovation in texts copied by Rate, the sole scribe of MS Ashmole 61, and she insists his alteration of texts should not be underestimated:

In Rate's case, over-hesitation in designating scribal influence on his texts presupposes an inordinate degree of lost material; whereas the commitment to detecting his presence within the texts has brought to light prevailing patterns which appear to support, for the most part, the contention that Rate plays an active part in the re-shaping of his texts [. . .]. ("Romances" 68)

Blanchfield has also documented Rate's impulses toward both sustained reduction and elaboration of texts over the range of a number of works in the Ashmole codex ("Romances" 69, and nn. 13, 15). The characteristics of the Harley scribe are more difficult to chart, but Bliss notes that "although the additions by H[arley] are few and unimportant [. . .] the omissions are very considerable, particularly toward the end of the poem; contraction becomes increasingly severe, so that of the last hundred lines of the poem less than half survive in H[arley]. Probably the text was written down by a minstrel from memory: this would explain the steadily increasing omissions, the transpositions, and the generally advanced corruption of the readings" (*Sir Orfeo* xvi). Bliss's theory of a minstrel-copyist may not be fully persuasive, and the possibility that the Harley scribe sought simply to save either time or parchment through his increasingly frequent deletions should be considered.<sup>49</sup> But Bliss's sense that a large number of Harley's many omissions are the work of the copyist of this particular version seems compelling. Taken together, the willingness of both scribes to omit lines as needed suggests that it is not unlikely that an omission extant in the Harley-Ashmole precursor might be immediately contiguous to a

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<sup>48</sup> The lack of mention of one further shared omission seems to have been the result of a small oversight on Bliss's part. Auchinleck line 409 is omitted in both Harley and Ashmole, but Bliss doesn't remark on the deletion at any point.

<sup>49</sup> Textual evidence from Harley suggests that the copyist probably was *not* a minstrel. A surprising number of the Auchinleck lines canceled in Harley refer to minstrels or musical performances. Among the relevant omitted lines are the following: Auchinleck 521-22, in which an entertainment at the steward's hall features "tromptours," "tabourers," "harpours," and "crouders"; Auchinleck lines 589-90, which describe the "menstraci" and "melody" with which Heurodis was brought into town at the end of the poem; and Auchinleck lines 597-602, in which Auchinleck describes how "[h]arpours in Bretaine" later made a lay celebrating Orfeo's exploits. Even aspects of Orfeo's own performances or role as a minstrel are excised in Harley; omitted lines include Auchinleck 439-42, Auchinleck 445-46, Auchinleck 485-46, and Auchinleck 527-28. To be sure, Harley omits a very large number of lines in this portion of the manuscript; nevertheless, verses mentioning music or musicians seem disproportionately to attract cancellation, and the possibility that the Harley scribe nursed an "anti-minstrel" bias cannot be discounted.

deletion introduced by one of the two later redactors, especially toward the end of the poem. Because Bliss counted as “shared” omissions or deletions only those passages where a particular textual alteration both began and ended at the same point in both texts, I believe he may have undercounted such passages, thereby obscuring for later scholars the potential closeness of the Harley and Ashmole *Orfeos*.

The commonalities between the two become more apparent even as the frequency of deletion in Harley increases. In the sections of their texts equivalent to lines 1-374 in Auchinleck, Harley and Ashmole share only one omitted couplet: Auchinleck lines 49-50, which claim an equivalency between "Traciens" and Winchester. Meanwhile, Harley cancels 14 lines independently in this section, and Ashmole cancels 34 independently. Toward the end of the romance, however, there is a noticeable shift in the pattern of alterations. Of the 105 lines Harley cancels in the romance as a whole, 89 occur in Auchinleck lines 375-604. At the same time, the Ashmole manuscript cancels only 17 lines in this section of the manuscript, and 13 of those 17 are omissions shared with Harley; Ashmole deletes only two couplets independently. Such a marked concentration of shared omissions seems likely traceable to a common precursor.<sup>50</sup> Admittedly, defining just what constitutes a “shared” omission can occasionally be difficult; below, I discuss at some length the status of lines 394, 397-400, and 403-4 in this regard.

Shared additions are of course far less likely to be the result of coincidence, and a pattern of links between the two manuscripts becomes even more visible in this regard. If we set aside the "prologue" and "harper" sections, Harley adds 10 lines beyond what is preserved in Auchinleck, and Ashmole adds 52 lines. (See Table 2 for specific additions.) 8 of Harley's 10 added lines are shared with Ashmole. And once the "prologue" and "harper" sections are accounted for, a surprising 37 of Harley's 39 added lines can be seen as held in common with Ashmole. While Ashmole adds another 46 lines that have no equivalent in Harley, the fact that nearly all of Harley's textual enlargements are attested to by the later manuscript provides further evidence that the two redactions share a closer relationship than Bliss was prepared to concede. I believe that a more detailed look at the textual alterations shared between the two texts can provide a sense of the Harley-Ashmole precursor's form, as well as some of the motivations of its redactor.

A small number of the shared divergences from the Auchinleck text seem to be of limited thematic significance for the later versions of the romance. Auchinleck lines 481-82, apparently canceled in the Harley-Ashmole precursor, merely relate Orfeo's reluctance, after a decade in self-imposed exile, to head into the center of Traciens without first getting the lay of the land.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> It should be noted here that 7 of these shared lines occurs in a block of text (Auchinleck lines 391-404) where the possibility, at least, that cancellations occurred independently cannot be ruled out. I discuss this section below.

<sup>51</sup> The couplet reads, "No forþer þan þe tounes ende / For knowleche no durst wende."  
In the notes to his edition, Bliss comments at length on these lines:

This couplet is omitted by H[arley] and [Ashmole], and if it could be shown to be genuine the omission would be valuable evidence of a close relationship between the two later manuscripts. But in fact the lines are implausible, for lines 505-8 show that Orfeo was in any case quite unrecognizable; he was bent and shrivelled, his beard hung to his knee, and his clothes must have been very tattered after ten years in the wilderness. It is equally implausible that he should have borrowed the beggar's clothes (499), and this detail is omitted by the later manuscripts (the *begerwede* of [Ashmole] 562 clearly refers to Orfeo's own tattered clothes). (*Sir Orfeo* 54, n. 481-82)

Similarly, Auchinleck lines 591-92 tell that the citizenry of Winchester shed tears upon learning of the safe return of their king; the couplet reinforces the sense of the townspeople's devotion to their king, but its omission in the later texts hardly alters the character of the romance.<sup>52</sup> A third couplet added to the precursor also appears to be relatively minor: inserted after the equivalent of line 518 in the Auchinleck text, lines 470-1 in Harley and 508-9 in Ashmole are little more than a stage direction, moving the steward, his lords and Orfeo from a street in Winchester into the king's hall.<sup>53</sup>

By contrast, many of the other additions and omissions shared between the two later versions appear to reveal a nuancing or transformation of the themes of the Auchinleck text. One important trend visible in both later texts is the attempt to heighten the parallels with the classical story of Orpheus and to remove some of the more audacious elements of the earlier poet's revision of the myth. Most notably, both Harley and Ashmole omit Auchinleck lines 49-50, in which the poet glosses a mention in line 47 of "Traciens" or Thrace, the mythological home of Orpheus, with the startling claim that Traciens is now the city of Winchester:

(For Winchester was cleped þo  
Traciens, wiþ-outen no.) (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 49-50)

The Auchinleck poet is consistent in identifying Traciens with Winchester; toward the end of the poem, mention of Traciens disappears altogether, and the poet describes Orfeo making his way back to Winchester after he and his wife have escaped from fairyland:

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Bliss seems to read the couplet as saying that Orfeo didn't dare venture farther than the town's end for fear of being recognized. In his glossary, the entry for "knowleche" reads, "knowledge, recognition" (*Sir Orfeo* 66), and the latter word seems most apt given Bliss's larger interpretation. His understanding of the phrase would appear to be supported by the *Middle English Dictionary*, which does indeed offer "recognition" as a definition for "knowleche" in section 7(a) of the entry for that noun. Furthermore, the *MED* lists a fixed phrase, "for knowleche," meaning "for fear of being recognized" – precisely the meaning given to it by Bliss. But chances seem very good that the *MED* editors have based this particular entry on Bliss's own definition; outside of *Sir Orfeo*, no other example is provided for this sense of "for knowleche," and I was unable to locate a similar instance through use of the searchable Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse despite searches employing all 28 of the spelling variants listed in the *MED*.

I believe the most obvious alternate to Bliss's understanding of "knowleche" may be more plausible. In this section of the romance, Orfeo has just left fairyland with his wife and has returned to Traciens. Unsure of the political situation, he attempts to find out more from a beggar before venturing into the heart of his capital; just a few lines after the passage in question, the poem notes that Orfeo "asked tidinges of that lond, / & who the kingdom held in hond" (487-88). Looked at from this perspective, Auchinleck lines 481-82 seem to indicate that Orfeo dared go no farther than the town's end because of a pressing need for more knowledge of the current circumstances in Traciens. Given Orfeo's ten-year-long absence, "knowledge" as in "information" seems like the most appropriate sense of the word in this context.

By saying that the Auchinleck couplet is "implausible," Bliss implies that it must be an interpolation in the Auchinleck version of the text; in his view, Harley and Ashmole share this "omission" simply because the couplet didn't occur in the pre-Auchinleck antecedent from which Bliss believes they likely descend. But my review of his evidence here leads me to the conclusion that there is no good reason for believing that Auchinleck lines 481-82 are not genuine, and that their common absence in Harley and Ashmole may indeed indicate the close relationship between those texts that Bliss denies in his note.

<sup>52</sup> The couplet reads, "For ioie þai wepe wiþ her ei3e / Þat hem so sounde y-comen sei3e."

<sup>53</sup> In Harley the couplet reads, "Anone þey went in-to þe halle, / Þe steward and þe lordys all." In Ashmole, the equivalent couplet reads, "The steward and þe lordys alle / Anon þei went in-to þe halle."

So long he hap þe way y-nome  
To Winchester he is y-come,  
þat was his owen cité. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 477-79)

The two later texts are equally consistent in avoiding a mention of Winchester. Harley calls Traciens “Crassens” throughout, while Ashmole uses only “Trasyens”:

So long þey have vnder-nome 440  
Pat to Crassens þey wer y-come,  
That sum-tyme was her owne ceté. (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley ll. 440-42)

So long he hys wey þer nom  
To Trasyens þei wer j-com,  
That some-tyme was his awne cyté. (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole ll. 468-70)

The use of “Trasyens” in Ashmole suggests that the original name may have survived in the Harley-Ashmole precursor but was altered in Harley.

In regards to the pair of lines in Auchinleck, Bliss comments, "This couplet is unlikely to be genuine, and its omission by H[arley] and [Ashmole] should not be considered evidence of a close relationship between them" (*Sir Orfeo* 52, n. 49-50). As I noted earlier, Bliss's skepticism about these lines may help explain his use of parentheses around them. Most modern scholars share his doubts. Rhiannon Purdie, for instance, notes that the “Englishness” imposed upon the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine* may or may not have been added “at the Auchinleck stage of transmission” (98).<sup>54</sup> But the case of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* is for her an unambiguous one: “We are on surer ground with *Sir Orfeo*: the Auchinleck copy is the only one of three surviving Middle English copies to rebrand Orpheus as king of an England (line 40) where ‘Winchester was cleped þo / Traciens withouten no’ (lines 49-50)” (98). These lines do resemble techniques of “Englishing” employed elsewhere in the Auchinleck codex, and the possibility that they are a product of the same ideological impulse needs to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, alternate explanations for these and other features have been slighted in the history of the reception of *Sir Orfeo*. For me, Purdie’s remarks are particularly striking in that she implies that the existence of alternate readings is sufficient to establish the interpolated nature of the Auchinleck couplet; the interrelations of the three manuscripts do not enter her discussion. If Auchinleck was the source of a Harley-Ashmole antecedent, as I have argued above, then its text needs at the very least to be recognized as the template from which the later recensions varied. That possibility does not in itself prove that Auchinleck lines 49-50 were not an interpolation on the part of Scribe 1, but I feel it usefully complicates the debate over his role and the larger motivations behind the manuscript. Moreover, in the next chapter, I address the poet’s conflation of Thrace and Greek gods with England and British fairies, and I argue that the romance’s blending of the classical and the British is part of a larger and consistent thematics. For the moment, it will suffice to notice that the omission of the “Winchester” couplet can also be explained by a desire on the part of the Harley-Ashmole redactor to remove elements of the romance that most strongly obscure its relation to the familiar story of Orpheus.

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<sup>54</sup> Marie de France’s *Le Fresne* seems to be set in Brittany, but as Purdie notes, the unique Middle English text of *Lay le Freine* in the Auchinleck manuscript is given a setting in “Ingland” (l. 239) (Purdie 98).

As I noted above, I believe the lengthy “harper sections” in Harley (ll. 33-46) and Ashmole (ll. 27-40) were unlikely to have been part of the material included on the now-missing first folio of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*. Like the potential suppression of the equivalency between Thrace and Winchester, the addition of the “harper section” would have bolstered a connection with the mythical narrative by foregrounding Orfeo's connection with music and harping, the most salient characteristic of his namesake. It might also have served to highlight the redactor-poet's own connections to a professional forebear.

The tendency toward bringing *Sir Orfeo* somewhat closer to the Greek myth appears to continue in the Ashmole text. For instance, Orfeo's role as a musician receives heightened emphasis in the scene in which Orfeo presents himself to the porter at the gateway to the fairy castle. In Auchinleck the couplet reads, “Þe porter vndede þe gate anon / & lete him in-to þe castel gon” (ll. 385-86). The corresponding couplet in Ashmole reads, “The porter vndyd þe 3ate anon / And as a mynstrell lete hym gon” (ll. 376-77). Lynne S. Blanchfield notes that Ashmole line 377 “uniquely emphasizes that ‘as a mynstrel’ Orfeo was allowed into the palace” (“Romances” 69). Similarly, in the description of Orfeo playing his harp for the forest animals on fine days during his exile, the Ashmole text adds a couplet that emphasizes the taming of the beasts through Orfeo's artistry:

The bestys of the forest wyld  
Com about hym meke & myld. (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole ll. 279-80)

Blanchfield remarks that “the taming motif foreshadows the conquering of the Otherworld powers by music in both myth and romance, but it is only present in Rate's version, which is thus much closer to the classical Orpheus story” (“Romances” 70). Rate's “classicizing” moves may reflect an extension of a trend in the later reception of the romance that was already evident in the Harley-Ashmole precursor. And they may also answer to an increasing uneasiness with the romance's supernatural elements, including the fairies – a concern that crops up with more frequency in the latter half of the two later texts.

Murray J. Evans has noted that both the Harley and Ashmole versions of *Sir Orfeo* excise details relating to the fairies (98, 100). And in fact the majority of omissions shared between the two later texts may betray an anxiety about the depiction of fairyland in Auchinleck. As we will see below, determining just what constitutes a “shared omission” in the section of the romance depicting fairyland is fraught with some difficulty. Nevertheless, all three of the unambiguously shared deletions relating to fairies in the two later texts of *Sir Orfeo* occur within a fairly short stretch of text (Auchinleck ll. 375-409) in which the poet describes the sights that greet Orfeo upon his entry there. The first deletion that I will examine here – Auchinleck ll. 375-76 – is an isolated excision in Harley, but part of a larger block of canceled text in Ashmole (see Table Two).<sup>55</sup> A lengthy and detailed description of the marvels of the fairy castle ends with the following couplet:

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<sup>55</sup> The block of lines canceled in Ashmole includes Auchinleck ll. 367-78. While Rate retains the description of the wall and outer ramparts of the fairy castle, he deletes part of the description of the dwellings within the wall (Auchinleck ll. 367-78) and of the land round about (Auchinleck ll. ). He also deletes a transitional couplet (Auchinleck ll. 377-78) in which Heurodis and the other ladies enter the castle and Orfeo expresses the desire to follow them.

This association that the Auchinleck Orfeo draws between the fairy kingdom and the divine court of Paradise might have been a source of discomfort for a later redactor. As I noted in the preceding chapter on Walter Map, a strictly orthodox Christian perspective on the supernatural in the medieval period would have assimilated all supernatural beings to one of only two categories: angels or demons. In the twelfth century, however, both lay writers and secular clerics challenged such neat delineations. Marie de France's birdman Muldumarec in the Breton lay *Yonec* is both a shapechanger and a self-professed Christian who is able to receive the Eucharist without ill effect. The fairy mistress in Marie's *Lanval* appears capable of teleportation and also takes her human lover Lanval with her to the supernatural realm of Avalon at the end of the lay, but her place in Christian cosmology simply is not a concern in the text. And both Walter Map and Gerald de Barri wrote of fairies without – in some cases, at least – conflating them with demons.<sup>56</sup> The romance writers who followed in Marie's wake – such as the composer of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* – often upheld this convention of an ambiguous fairy world that resisted placement in either of the two categories available in an orthodox perspective.<sup>57</sup> However, a growing unease about the nature of the fairy world may be detected in Middle English Breton lays from the late fourteenth century onwards. A writer of the latter period, Thomas Chestre, thoroughly reworked *Sir Landevale*, a fairly faithful Middle English translation of Marie's *Lanval*, into the much longer *Sir Launfal*. While the title character's mistress retains aspects of her supernatural nature, Chestre diminishes her role in the narrative and makes a number of gestures in the direction of humanizing her.<sup>58</sup> For instance, while the origins of the lady remain mysterious in *Lanval* and *Landevale*, Chestre somewhat ambiguously grounds her in this world. Unlike most fairies in Breton lays and early folk narratives, she receives a name ("Dame Tryamour," *Sir Launfal* l. 279), and she also becomes the daughter of a man who seems simultaneously to be the king of "Fayrye" (*Sir Launfal* l. 280) and of "Olyroun" (*Sir Launfal* l. 278) – which according to Bliss must be a reference to "the Île d'Oléron (Charente-Inférieure), off the coast of Brittany [. . .]" (*Sir Launfal* pp. 89-90, note to l. 278).<sup>59</sup> This trend toward a

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<sup>56</sup> For both Walter and Gerald, see my discussion in Chapter One.

<sup>57</sup> Many scholars believe the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* to be a translation from a French Breton lay, but I feel it more likely that the romance was originally written in English. I address this issue at length in Chapter Three.

<sup>58</sup> In none of the medieval texts of the *Lanval* tradition is the title character's mistress referred to as a fairy – a common situation in early fairy narratives, and one that remains typical of folk narratives about fairies collected in modern times. *Sir Launfal* does refer to "Fayrye" twice, however; in the glossary to his edition of *Sir Launfal*, A. J. Bliss translates this as "the land of Faerie," and accordingly capitalizes it (*Sir Launfal* 137). The first instance of the term is discussed immediately above. The second instance occurs near the very end of the lay, as the poet describes Launfal's fate: "That noble knyght of the Rounde Table, / Was take ynto Fayrye" (*Sir Launfal* ll. 1034-35).

<sup>59</sup> In Marie's *Lanval*, the title character and the fairy ride off to Avalon at the very end of the story, and given the argument I am making here it is striking that in *Sir Launfal* Chestre substitutes a known island in the human domain for the fairy-haunted otherworld of Arthurian romance. It should nevertheless be noted that Chestre may not have been familiar with the name of Avalon; the main text he was adapting – the Middle English *Landevale* – has *Landevale* taken to "a joly yle / That is clepyd Amylyon" (*Sir Launfal* p. 128, ll. 533-34) where Marie's text has "Aualun" (*Sir Launfal* p. 128, l. 641). Bliss suggests that "Avalon" was altered to "Amylyon" in *Landevale* under

muting of the supernatural finds its completion in the Middle English Breton lay *Sir Degaré*. The earliest version of the work appears in Auchinleck and tells of a princess who is raped by a “fairi knyghte” (*Sir Degaré* l. 100) in the forest and later secretly bears and then gives up her child, Degaré; she sends along with him a pair of magic gloves that the fairy had given her at their first encounter.<sup>60</sup> William C. Stokoe, Jr. has pointed out that two main textual traditions of *Sir Degaré* are represented among the surviving manuscripts (522-23).<sup>61</sup> The early fourteenth-century Auchinleck text represents the first of these; the earliest representative of the second is the late fourteenth-century Egerton manuscript (London, British Library MS Egerton 2862). According to Stokoe, the latter group of texts is characterized by “the complete removal of the supernatural background. The hero’s father in Z [i.e., the second group of texts] is no longer by his own admission a fairy-knight, but a plain mortal. The gloves in AC [i.e., the first group of texts] said to be a gift to the princess from ‘ffairi-londe’ [. . .] are in Z merely the gift of her lover” (Stokoe, 526). Seen against this background, the decision of the Harley-Ashmole redactor to delete the comparison between fairyland and paradise may reflect a growing cultural anxiety about the literary representation of the supernatural in general and of fairies in particular.

The later *Sir Orfeo* redactor’s decision to excise the metaphorical equation of fairyland with Paradise in Auchinleck lines 375-76 may also reflect a recontextualization or “repurposing” of the *Orfeo* narrative in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Murray J. Evans has argued that the manuscript contexts of *Sir Orfeo* in the two later codices betray a stronger devotional bias than that of Auchinleck. While Harley 3810 offers texts covering a broad range of popular reading in the later Middle Ages, Evans argues that the manuscript as a whole “has a pervasive religious tone” (98). Moreover, he maintains that Harley’s omission of details relating to the fairies in particular befits the scribe’s recontextualization of the romance as a whole:

In such a context, a *Sir Orfeo* stripped of most of its faery atmospherics and human drama and having a lengthened final prayer may appear to have an

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the influence of “the romance of *Amis and Amiloun*, where *Amylion* is a variant of *Amiloun*” (*Sir Launfal* p. 39, note to l. 278). Nevertheless, Chestre understood that Launfal had been taken into “Fayrye” – a reasonable equivalent for “Avalon” in the romance tradition – so his use of “Olyroun” instead of a form of Avalon may have been a conscious choice to avoid some associations of the latter name.

<sup>60</sup> Stokoe also notes other aspects of the Auchinleck lay that have been “disenchanted” in the later textual tradition. Towards the end of *Sir Degaré*, the hero encounters an eerily empty hall in a castle, a strange dwarf, a group of maiden-huntresses, and the mistress of the castle, who may be a fay herself. Stokoe claims that in the second group of texts, all such details which might indicate for the romance “an origin in tales of magic and enchantment” have been “exorcized”: “The redactor is not presenting the lady as a fee, the dwarf as a thinly disguised shape-shifter, or the castle as a place of magic” (526). He also suggests that the later redactor may have altered one couplet (Auchinleck 858-59) in order to “gloze over any hint of fairy harping” (“Double Problem” 527).

<sup>61</sup> The texts of *Sir Degaré* found in Stokoe’s “first version” of the romance appear in the following manuscripts: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland Advocates MS 19.2.1 (i.e., “Auchinleck”), usually dated to the period between 1330 and 1340; and Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2, dated to approximately 1420-50. Texts of the “second version” appear in these manuscripts: London, British Library MS Egerton 2862, dated to the late fourteenth century; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poetry 34, dated to the fifteenth century; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 261, dated to 1561; and London, British Library MS Additional 27879, dated to 1650. For the grouping of these manuscripts into two different *Sir Degaré* traditions, see Stokoe, “Double Problem” 522-23. For the dating of the individual manuscripts, see *Sir Degaré*, pp. 97-98.

exemplary religious thrust. Indeed, its sparer narrative may invite an allegorical gloss. (99)

Similarly, Evans describes the manuscript context of Ashmole 61 as “largely edifying”; the Ashmole text, too, “omits much faery descriptive detail and has an extended final prayer, similarly yielding a more pious version [i. e., of *Sir Orfeo*] than Auchinleck’s” (100). Evans sees these alterations as being the result of similar but independent revisionist impulses on the part of the Harley and Ashmole scribes. However, if a Harley-Ashmole precursor existed, as I have argued here, the Harley and Ashmole scribes may have been willing to consider *Sir Orfeo* as appropriate to the devotional contexts of their own manuscripts precisely because elements that seemed potentially inimical to those contexts had already been excised or muted to some extent.

The second of the three omissions shared by Harley and Ashmole in this section of the romance occurs less than thirty lines after the comparison between fairyland and Paradise. Following Orfeo’s first glimpse of the fairy castle, he talks his way in by posing as a traveling minstrel. Just within the walls he views a gallery of human captives, apparently frozen in the postures they held when first abducted from the human realm (ll. 387-408). The imagery on display in this episode is arguably the eeriest and most disturbing in the romance, offering glimpses of humans who are suffering grisly wounds, held in stasis on the threshold of a death both imminent and deferred, or caught forever in the throes of madness; predictably, the passage has been heavily rewritten in both later manuscripts. I present further discussion of some of the central details of the episode below, but here I am concerned with the end of the episode, where the Harley-Ashmole redactor appears to have dropped a couplet that may have activated some of the same anxieties stirred up by the earlier comparison of fairyland with Paradise. As Orfeo comes to the end of this gallery of the undead, the Auchinleck narrator explicitly attributes their presence to the agency of the fairies:

Eche was þus in þis warld y-nome,  
Wiþ fairi þider y-come. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 403-4)

This couplet is missing from both Harley and Ashmole, and its omission may perhaps be attributable to a desire on the part of the Harley-Ashmole redactor to lessen the sense of the power wielded by the supernatural here – a motivation which, as we will see, appears to lie behind many of the independent omissions of verses in the Harley manuscript. The most remarkable feature of this couplet, however, is its careful demarcation between “þis warld,” the human world inhabited by the narrator and his audience, and the fairy realm, the “þider” into which the human captives are brought by “fairi,” i.e., enchantment.<sup>62</sup> The poet’s careful dichotomy suggests that the fairies inhabit another “world” of their own, an idea that seems unsurprising today; for instance, the most general definition for the term “other world” offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* reads, “[T]he world of the supernatural” (def. A.1.), and the phrase “fairy otherworld” in its various spellings appears frequently in scholarship on fairylore in both medieval and modern literature. This couplet – and its deletion in the two later manuscripts – may have attracted little critical attention precisely because the idea of a separate

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<sup>62</sup> Some authorities – most notably the *OED* – would read “fairy” as meaning “a fairy” or even “fairies” here. But in the early fourteenth century, the period in which the Auchinleck codex was produced, the word was far more likely to have meant “enchantment” or “magic.” I discuss this interpretive problem at some length in note 78 below.

fairy realm is familiar to moderns, and it does not offer a serious challenge to contemporary Western cosmology. In Middle English literature, by contrast, the idea of a world beyond the human one had the strong tendency to invoke some aspect of the Christian afterlife. Under the headword “world,” the *Middle English Dictionary* offers the following definitions for “the other world” or “tother world” in definition 2. (e): “the realm of eternal existence, life to come, next world.” Within a devotional setting – the sort of manuscript context Murray J. Evans argues for in the case of both the Harley and Ashmole texts – the idea of a fairy “other world” might have been seen as difficult to accommodate within orthodox theology. From a strict Augustinian perspective, fairies could only be fallen angels – an idea already current in late thirteenth century England – and a fairy world would necessarily be some aspect of Hell.<sup>63</sup> But even the two later texts never quite demonize the fairies of *Sir Orfeo*. In all three manuscripts, for instance, Orfeo falls upon his knees when first greeting the fairy king – a gesture unlikely to have been accorded a demonic being by the protagonist of a medieval romance (Auchinleck l. 418; Harley ll. 382, 386; Ashmole l. 405).<sup>64</sup> And rather surprisingly, Harley and Ashmole share an added couplet in which the Fairy king commends Orfeo as a “trew(e) man” (Harley l. 431; Ashmole l. 457) after the equivalent of Auchinleck line 468 – an assessment that seems touching rather than satanic.<sup>65</sup> While the Harley text greatly curtails references to the fairies, neither later version directly addresses the problem of the fairies’ ontological status in the romance, so the removal of this couplet may have seemed like a practical response to a potentially thorny issue.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> In the literature of medieval Britain, the idea of fairies or elves as fallen angels receives its most sustained articulation in the *vita* of Saint Michael in the late thirteenth century version of the *South English Legendary* found in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud 108. In a discussion of the various forms taken by the fallen angels on earth, the hagiographer notes that people often see great companies of female fallen angels called “elune” in out-of-the-way places; they resort to the woods by day and the hills by night, with the occasional trip to town thrown in for good measure:

And ofte in fourme of wommane : In many derne weye  
 grete compaygnie men i-seoth of heom : boþe hoppie and pleiþe,  
 þat Eluene beoth i-cleopede : and ofte heo comiez to toune,  
 And bi daye mucche in wodes heo beoth : and bi ni3te ope heiþe dounes.  
 (*The Early South English Legendary*, p. 307, ll. 253-56)

<sup>64</sup> It is worth noting, however, that while the Auchinleck text has Orfeo repeat this act of obeisance when taking leave of the Fairy king (Auchinleck l. 472), Harley and Ashmole omit the repetition of the gesture. This shared deletion in the later two texts probably constitutes yet more evidence of the workings of a Harley-Ashmole redactor.

<sup>65</sup> I discuss this shared addition at some length in Chapter Four.

<sup>66</sup> One other possibility suggests itself here. The Fairy king in *Sir Orfeo* serves as the *de facto* analogue of Pluto, the ruler of the underworld, in the classical myth of Orpheus. And while the medieval romance takes pains to emphasize that the mortal captives in fairyland are not dead, few readers conversant with, say, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* could have ignored the potential parallels between the classical underworld and the fairy kingdom. Even without a demonic interpretation of the fairies, this line of thinking could in itself prove to be a source of anxiety for a scribe adapting *Sir Orfeo* for a religious audience: the mortal Orfeo could conceivably be seen as successfully recovering his “dead” wife from the afterlife without the invocation or intervention of a divine power. Of course, none of the versions of *Sir Orfeo* explicitly encourages such a reading, but it seems possible at least that a redactor could have been concerned to foreclose on any such reading.

Finally, a similar problem may have led to one last shared omission at the very end of the scene in which the mortal captives appear. While A. J. Bliss lists Auchinleck line 409 as a deletion only in the Ashmole text, the fact is that neither manuscript includes it:<sup>67</sup>

¶& when he hadde bihold þis meruails alle  
He went in-to þe kinges halle. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 409-410)

The word “meruails” is likely to have been the semantic lightning-rod drawing the redactor’s attention here. The word “marvel” had both negative and positive connotations in Middle English, as it does in Modern English. Under sense 1a. (a) alone of the headword “merveille,” for instance, the *Middle English Dictionary* offers the following range of meanings:

A thing, act, or event that causes astonishment or surprise; a wonderful feat; an unnatural occurrence or circumstance; a wonder of nature or art; a monster or monstrosity

In devotional contexts in particular, however, the word was commonly employed as a synonym for “a miracle” (sense 1b. in the *MED*), and this may have spurred the redactor into avoiding the possibility of attributing miracles to the fairies by simply removing the problem altogether.<sup>68</sup>

The three shared omissions I have discussed in this relatively short stretch of the romance – Auchinleck lines 375-76, 403-4, and 409 – seem to form a well-defined and coherent pattern in which a redactor attempts to avoid the problem of the ontological and theological ambiguity of fairies by removing moments that might appear to emphasize it. The treatment of these lines witnesses, I believe, to the existence of the author of a Harley-Ashmole precursor interested in adapting the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* – or a version closely derived from it – to a context more solidly devotional than that found in the earlier manuscript. It may have been these deletions that made the Harley-Ashmole precursor text of *Sir Orfeo* seem like a work amenable to the religious contexts in which the Harley and Ashmole scribes would later place it.

One other pattern of omission in this portion of the romance may point to a more specific concern with the details of living fairylore on the part of a reviser. The scene in which Orfeo observes human captives held in stasis in fairyland has been aggressively revised in both later manuscripts, and a number of couplets found in the Auchinleck text in this section of the romance – Auchinleck lines 394, 397-400, and 403-4 – are not found in Harley or Ashmole.

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<sup>67</sup> Bliss discusses omissions shared between Harley and Ashmole on page xiv of his edition of *Sir Orfeo*, but Auchinleck 409 is not mentioned there. Similarly, the line is not part of Bliss’s list on page xv of Auchinleck lines deleted in Harley. Bliss does list Auchinleck lines 409-10 as a deletion in Ashmole on page xvi. Bliss’s failure to note the omission of line 409 in Harley is probably just a simple oversight, but it deprives users of his edition of one more piece of evidence that the Harley and Ashmole texts are more closely related to each other than Bliss believes.

Interestingly, Harley retains an equivalent to Auchinleck l. 410, the second half of the couplet that included l. 409 in the Auchinleck version. The replacement couplet in Harley reads, “He went forþe in-to þe halle; / Þerin was grete joy with-alle” (Harley ll. 379-80). The presence of one line of the original couplet in Harley suggests that it may not have been omitted in its entirety in the Harley-Ashmole precursor.

<sup>68</sup> It also needs to be said here that in the Harley manuscript, this scene of the romance has been so truncated – and so thoroughly “disenchanted” – that a reference to “marvels” of any stripe seems rather less appropriate there than it does in either the Auchinleck or Ashmole texts.

Nevertheless, the commonality of these omissions may or may not have its origin in the Harley-Ashmole precursor; the Harley manuscript, in particular, has so strongly altered the episode that its original form in the precursor text is irrecoverable for these lines. The alterations undertaken by both texts do however point to a shared anxiety about the motif of fairy abduction. The Auchinleck version of the scene reads as follows:

Pan he gan bihold about al  
 & sei3e liggeand wiþ-in þe wal  
 Of folk þat were þider y-brou3t  
 & þou3t dede, and nare nou3t. 390  
 Sum stode wiþ-ouren hade,  
 & sum non armes nade,  
 & sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde,  
 & sum lay wode, y-bounde,  
 & sum armed on hors sete, 395  
 & sum astrangled as þai ete;  
 & sum were in water adreynt,  
 & sum wiþ fire al for-schreynt.  
 Wiues þer lay on child-bedde,  
 Sum ded & sum awedde, 400  
 & wonder fele þer lay bisides  
 Ri3t as þai slepe her vnder-tides  
 Eche was þus in þis warld y-nome,  
 Wiþ fairi þider y-come.  
 Þer he sei3e his owen wiif, 405  
 Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,  
 Slepe vnder an ympe-tre:  
 Bi her cloþes he knewe þat it was he.  
 ¶& when he hadde bihold þis meruails alle,  
 He went in-to þe kinges halle. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 387-410)

The details of this scene have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Here, I wish to confine my remarks to those elements of the episode relevant to its treatment in the three manuscripts and, by implication, in the transmission history of the various texts.

In one of the earliest and most influential analyses of this scene, Dorena Allen noted in 1964 that much of it is “explicable in terms of fairy superstition” (105) – specifically, in terms of beliefs about the fairy tendency to abduct or “take” mortals. Examining both early medieval and modern accounts of fairy abduction, Allen noted that the circumstances of the abduction of a number of the “taken” in *Sir Orfeo* have striking parallels in traditional fairylore.<sup>69</sup> Line 394, for

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<sup>69</sup> Allen herself notes that much of the evidence for fairy abduction presented in her article draws on periods (the modern and the late classical/early medieval eras) and cultures (Ireland, Brittany, Italy and Flanders) often rather removed from the Britain of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries (105, 106, 107). In a recent article, Alan J. Fletcher has critiqued Allen’s approach, and has dismissed her evidence as having been “dehistoricized” (161). While I, too, have reservations about some of Allen’s claims, I believe her methods are largely defensible and ultimately necessary in the case of beliefs that are often attested to only by intermittent and scattered sources. And as

instance, describes some of the kidnapped as lying restrained as a result of mental disturbance: “& sum lay wode, y-bounde.” Allen observes that mental illness has been read in certain traditional communities as evidence that a person has already been abducted by fairies: “[I]n the Ireland of the nineteenth century, delirium was still looked upon as an infallible sign that the sick man’s spirit [. . .] was already with the *daoine maithe* [i.e., the fairies], who would soon, at his death, claim his body as well” (105). In other words, from the perspective of inhabitants of rural Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the insane could be seen as already having been abducted by the fairies, even though their bodies seemed to remain among the living. While I am aware of no *medieval* sources that explicitly interpret an instance of apparent madness as being evidence that a fairy abduction had already taken place, the link between mental disturbance and a mental sojourn in fairyland is made in *Sir Orfeo* itself. While she seems to be sleeping in an orchard, Orfeo’s wife Heurodis is first kidnapped by fairies and then returned to Tracyens; when she awakens, her behavior seems consistent with a temporary fit of insanity:

Sche crid, & lopl̃i bere gan make:  
 Sche froted hir honden & hir fet,  
 & crached hir visage - it bled wete;  
 Hir riche robe hye al to-rett,  
 & was reueyd out of hir witt. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 78-82)

The meaning of the word “reueyd” in line 82 has been the source of some disagreement among scholars. In a note on this line on page 52 of his edition, Bliss offers the reasonable opinion that “reueyd” is simply the past participle of the verb “reuey,” meaning “to hunt along the banks of a river.” Given that definition, the phrase in line 82 would be parallel to the Modern English “driven out of her wits.” Whatever the specific meaning of “reueyd,” Bliss’s interpretation of the line as a whole receives support from the two later manuscripts: Harley says that “Erodys” “was wode out of hur wit þere” (l. 80), while Ashmole says “Meroudys” “was ravysed out of her wytte” (l. 70). In the case of Orfeo’s wife, madness seems to be the *after-effect* of a dream-state journey to fairyland and the resulting hostile contact with fairies there; in the instances Allen cites, by contrast, a mortal’s apparent insanity was interpreted as a sign that the person’s spirit was *already* captive in fairyland. Still, the situations are markedly similar in that they link madness and a mental sojourn in the fairy realm, thereby suggesting the validity of the connections Allen argues for.

In some of the other cases Allen explores, being in a certain set of circumstances can predispose one to fairy abduction. In this regard, she sees parallels in this section of *Sir Orfeo* to traditional belief in the abduction of women in childbirth, people who have drowned and – more generally – people who have met an untimely or violent death:

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I note there, Fletcher’s own alternate explanation of the scene draws on a text from a distinct tradition of penitential manuals removed from the traditional folk belief he attempts to recover. It is virtually certain that aspects of the larger complex of living fairy belief in the Middle Ages are either unattested or only poorly attested in surviving records. The difficulties both Allen and Fletcher (and for that matter, I myself) encounter in providing persuasive evidence for the *details* of fairy belief in a given localized culture at a certain historical moment point to what is probably the biggest obstacle in undertaking research on medieval fairylore.

Those who died in child-birth and those who died by drowning were invariably considered to be *taken*, and are placed in fairyland also by our poem (ll. 397 and 399). The mutilated of ll. 391-92 may have suffered the bloody violence with which, earlier in the poem, Heurodis herself is threatened; the wounded of l. 393 – and possibly the horseman of l. 395 – may have met the same fate as Thomas Reid, who died in the Battle of Pinkye, but whom Bessie Dunlop saw among the *sidhe*. For the rest of the catalogue (ll. 396 and 398), there are to my knowledge no exact parallels, but since almost any unnatural death was attributed to the *good people*, it is impossible to say whether we owe these remaining lines to a single narrator’s whim or to authentic popular tradition. (105)<sup>70</sup>

There can be no doubt that the apparent victims of many kinds of untimely death are often linked to fairyland in traditional sources, but that category constitutes a sort of catch-all that includes virtually any mortal circumstance. Insanity, drowning and being a new mother are arguably the three well-defined categories in Allen’s study for which the best and most specific evidence can be adduced from a wide variety of sources in the folklore of the British Isles.

An examination of the text of the equivalent scene in the Ashmole manuscript demonstrates that those three categories have been expunged from the list of abductees present in the Ashmole version of the episode. Rate’s text reads as follows:

Than lokyd he a-boute þe walle	
And saw it stond ouer-alle,	
Wyth men þat wer thyder brou3ht,	380
And semyd dede, & wer nou3ht.	
Som þer stod with-outyn hede,	
And some armys non hade,	
And som, þer bodys had wounde,	
And som onne hors þer armys sette,	385
And som wer strangyld at þer mete,	
And men þat wer nomen wyth þem ete;	
So he saw þem standing þer.	
Than saw he men & women in fere:	
As þei slepyd þer vndryn-tyde	390

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<sup>70</sup> Allen’s allusion to Bessie Dunlop and Thomas Reid is no more self-explanatory in her article as a whole than it is in my excerpt. Bessie Dunlop was a Scottish midwife from Lyne, Ayrshire accused of witchcraft and sorcery in 1576. The records of her trial on November 8 of that year have survived and offer insight into the cross-pollination between beliefs in fairylore and witchcraft in the early modern period. Dunlop claimed that the Queen of Elflame (i.e., fairyland) had sent Thomas Reid – a man who had earlier died at the Battle of Pinkye in 1547 – to her as a kind of mentor in supernatural matters. At the conclusion of the trial, Dunlop was convicted and burned. Diane Purkiss discusses the trial records of Dunlop and others in Chapter Three (“Birth and Death: Fairies in Scottish Witch-trials”) of her book *At the Bottom of the Garden*; Dunlop’s account receives its most prolonged attention there on pages 105, 107-8 and 112. At a number of points in her study, Purkiss argues that fairies are often equivalent to the “the untimely dead” (78) of a community, and she refers to Thom Reid simultaneously as a fairy and as “a ghost of sorts – one of the dead, one who died by violence, by premature separation from the world, in battle” (105).

The full transcript of Dunlop’s trial can be found in Robert Pitcairn, *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1833), Vol. 1, Part 2, pp. 51-58. An online scanned version of Volume One of the Pitcairn text is now available on the *Internet Archive* Web site: <http://www.archive.org/details/criminaltrialsin01pitc>



þat he loued as his lyfe.  
 Sche lay vnder an ympe-tre:  
 By her glowes he wüst it was sche.  
 He went forþe in-to þe halle:  
 Þerin was grete joy with-alle. (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley ll. 371-80)

The omission of most of the catalogue of the abducted certainly solves a number of problems for the Harley scribe. Most obviously, the general unease of this episode is greatly muted in Harley; only the *suggestion* that Orfeo may be viewing human captives of the fairies remains, and the revisions focus attention more squarely on Orfeo's recognition of his wife.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, in both Auchinleck and Ashmole, we are assured that the captives are not dead, but that claim is undercut by the fact that some stand "without a head" (Auchinleck l. 391; Ashmole l. 382); the troubling status of these undead is rendered moot by the compaction of the scene in Harley. For my purposes here, however, the Harley episode creates a different problem: its truncation makes it more difficult to speculate on what the Harley-Ashmole precursor might have looked like in this section of the romance. If such a precursor did indeed exist, then the fact that the later Ashmole text preserves most of the details of the Auchinleck text in this scene indicates that the omissions in Harley are likely to be the work of the Harley scribe and not part of an editorial inheritance. In that case, are the omissions in Ashmole the work of Rate, or of the Harley-Ashmole redactor?

The irregularities of rhyme in this scene *may* indicate that the alterations in Ashmole are due in large part to Rate. As I noted above, the equivalent of Auchinleck line 394 ("& sum lay wode, y-bounde,") is omitted in Ashmole; there, the remaining line of the couplet – Ashmole line 384 – no longer has a rhyme. And the following line – Ashmole line 385 – appears to be an insertion unique to the Ashmole text; it forms a somewhat awkward near-rhyme ("sette"/"mete"/"ete") with the couplet that follows it. Lynne S. Blanchfield has noted that "[t]hroughout [Rate's] texts the rhyme-schemes are often sacrificed to rewriting, showing that content and context are more important to the scribe than form and style, and that he is more concerned with the adaptability of the texts than with their preservation" ("Romances" 68). The alterations of the rhyme scheme in this section of the romance accord well with Rate's usual practice, and Blanchfield herself attributes both of the excisions in the abductee passage to him: "In [Ashmole] the goriest elements in the list of entranced captives are dropped (A[uchinleck] 394, 397-400) [. . .]" ("Romances" 69). However, even though Rate seems virtually certain to have reworked this scene extensively, the possibility remains that the "shared omissions" in this scene – especially lines 397-400 and 403-4 – might have been already have been omitted in the Harley-Ashley precursor, and the deletions of those lines would have accorded well with the larger pattern of omissions in the precursor text; the severe truncation of this scene in Harley makes it impossible to attain greater certainty on this point.

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<sup>72</sup> In this passage as a whole, the Harley scribe may be attempting to de-emphasize the supernatural aura that envelops the mortal captives in the Auchinleck version. In the earlier text, Orfeo "sei3e liggeand wiþ-in þe wal / Of folk þat were þider y-brou3t" (388-89). The incapacity of the abductees, the suggestion of their unconsciousness as they *lie* in the fairy courtyard, underscores the eerie stasis in which they seem to be held. The Harley redactor by contrast portrays the captives as sitting: "He sawe folk sit vnder þe wal, / Sum þat wer þyder y-brou3t" (ll. 372-73). The more active posture of sitting upright would seem to imply consciousness on the part of the human captives.

Beyond the shared additions and omissions of the Harley-Ashmole precursor, both the later texts independently add or excise material relevant to the fairies of *Sir Orfeo*. Like the precursor text, both later versions of *Sir Orfeo* independently alter the text in ways that might have been motivated by a desire to make it consonant with a manuscript context more squarely devotional than that of Auchinleck. For the most part, however, the two later recensions attempt to achieve that goal through markedly different strategies. Harley displays a particular concern with omitting moments in which the power of fairies over humans is demonstrated. In Ashmole, Rate also seems to be worried about the representation of fairy power, but his response is to lessen the alterity of the fairies through additions that reduce the aura of the supernatural that surrounds them, thereby refiguring the fairies as a still-powerful but more comprehensible and nearly human force within the romance.

Excision is the Harley scribe's favorite editorial tool. The Harley text cancels 105 lines of the Auchinleck text, well over one sixth of the total length of the romance. The great bulk of these omissions occur in roughly the last third of the poem, and their preponderance there makes it difficult to determine that the Harley redactor targeted any one set of images or ideas for deletion.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, cancellations of references to the fairies begin in Harley well before omissions in general become frequent, and in fact the first omission the Harley text makes independent of Ashmole relates, perhaps tellingly, to the supernaturals. Early in the Auchinleck text, the fairy king appears to Queen Heurodis while she sleeps in the palace orchard, and he demands that she return to the same spot on the following day, telling her that she will then be taken off to fairyland forever and that if she fails to comply, the consequences will be gruesome (the lines deleted in Harley have been italicized):

"Loke, dame, to-morwe þatow be	165
Ri3t here vnder þis ympe-tre,	
& þan þou schalt wiþ ous go,	
& liue wiþ ous euer-mo;	
& 3if þou makest ous y-let,	
Whar þou be, þou worst y-fet,	170
& to-tore þine limes al,	
þat noþing help þe no schal;	
& þei þou best so to-torn,	
3ete þou worst wiþ ous y-born." ( <i>Sir Orfeo</i> , Auchinleck ll. 165-74)	

In Harley, the lines equivalent to Auchinleck 167-68 are deleted:

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<sup>73</sup> Despite the very large number of cuts in Harley, certain patterns do seem to emerge. Most of the omitted lines can be seen to fit into one of the following categories: lines that dwell on Orfeo's fall from power and its attendant humiliations (Auchinleck ll. 206-7, 241-42, 247-50, 458, perhaps 485-86, 501-8, perhaps 539-40, and 559-62); lines that refer to the fairies (Auchinleck ll. 167-68, 293-96, perhaps 411-12, perhaps 439-42, 445-46, 458, and 559-62); lines that refer to musicians or musical performances (Auchinleck ll. 439-42, 445-46, 485-86, 521-22, 527-28, 589-90, and 597-602); and lines that describe characters' strong emotional responses to some cue (Auchinleck ll. 545-52, 555-56, and perhaps 439-42, and 445-46). Arguably, these categories may be targeted for omission simply because they tend not to advance the plot of the narrative a great deal. Nevertheless, it might well be instructive to see whether these patterns hold for any other texts in the Harley manuscript.

Murray J. Evans provides a slightly different listing of the types of material excised from Harley on page 98 of his *Rereading Middle English Romance*.

"Loke to-morwe þat þou be  
 Here vnder þis ympe-tre;  
 & 3if þou makest ony lette, 165  
 Wher-euer þou be, þou schalt be fet,  
 & to-tor þy lymes al,  
 Þat no-þing help schalle;  
 & þau3 þou be so to-tore,  
 3it schalt þou away be bor." (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley ll. 163-70)

Strikingly, the Harley redactor preserves the details of the fairy king's bloodcurdling threat to carry off Herodys's mangled remains to fairyland, but he omits the claim that Herodys will dwell with the fairies ever afterwards. The scribe may have felt that the couplet hinted too strongly at the potential immortality of fairies and their captives in fairyland. The question of fairy longevity is only infrequently addressed in medieval works, but the possibility of immortality in fairyland occurs in Arthurian texts in particular from the late twelfth century *Draco Normannicus* onwards. If Murray J. Evans is right in seeing the manuscript of Harley as largely devotional, the scribe's anxiousness about an immortal race that can also confer apparent immortality upon humans would be understandable; the casual religious heterodoxy latent in romance conceptions of fairyland is highlighted by the type of recontextualizations that *Sir Orfeo* underwent in the fifteenth century.

The Harley redactor's second independent omission of fairy-related materials deals more explicitly with the martial power of fairyland. During his sojourn in the woods, Orfeo has four visions of – apparently – the fairy court; he first sees the fairy king out hunting with his knights; later he witnesses 1000 armed men pass by with drawn swords; still later he sees men and women dancing; and finally he will witness his wife and ladies of the fairy court hawking. In the second of these tableaux, the Auchinleck texts emphasizes the warlike demeanor of the fairy host (the lines deleted in Harley have been italicized):

& oþer while he mi3t him se  
 As a gret ost bi him te, 290  
 Wele atourned, ten hundred kni3tes,  
 Ich y-armed to his ri3tes,  
*Of cuntenaunce stout & fers,*  
*Wiþ mani desplaid baners,*  
 & ich his swerd y-drawe hold 295  
 – *Ac neuer he nist whider þai wold.* (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 289-96)

The Harley scribe shortens the passage, removing in particular the perhaps threatening portrait of the fairy host as a combat-ready troop on the brink of engagement:

& oþer while he my3t ysé  
 A grete ost by hym te, 280  
 Wel a ij c kny3tes,  
 Wele y-armed at al ry3tes. (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley, ll. 279-82)

It may also be worth noting here that the size of the fairy host is also reduced from 1000 knights in Auchinleck to 200 in Harley, but such alterations of numbers between the texts may not always be significant. Harley's excision of the final two couplets lessens the sense of the martial power of fairyland, and also removes an implied invidious comparison between the human and fairy kings: in Harley, the disparity between the feckless passivity of Orfeo and the warlike demeanor of his supernatural counterpart is greatly muted.

Even after Orfeo's successful recovery of his wife from fairyland, the Harley scribe seems intent on cutting from the text explicit reminders of the fairies' role in Orfeo's troubles. For instance, once Orfeo returns in disguise to Winchester, the Auchinleck text describes how a poor beggar apprises him of happenings in the city over the last ten years:

Pe pouer begger in his cote  
 Told him euerich a grot: 490  
 Hou her quen was stole owy,  
 Ten 3er gon, wiþ fairy,  
 & hou her king en exile 3ede,  
 Bot no man nist in wiche þede. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 489-94)

While the Ashmole text follows Auchinleck fairly closely in this excerpt,<sup>74</sup> Harley suppresses the mention of "fairy" in Auchinleck line 492:

Pe por begger in his cote  
 Anon tolde hym every grote:  
 How þe quene was fet a-way, 450  
 Of þe londe, for-soþe to say,  
 & how þe kyng aftur þem 3ede,  
 No man wyst in-to what stede. (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole ll. 448-53)

While no attentive reader of the text could possibly be unaware of the agents of Orfeo's misfortunes by this point in the narrative, Harley again diminishes the role of the fairies by pointedly suppressing just who "stole" the queen. And the revision of this scene is similar in another way to the rewriting of the scene discussed immediately above: by replacing mention of Orfeo's going into exile in Auchinleck line 493 with the implication (unsubstantiated earlier in the Harley text) in Harley line 452 that Orfeo had gone into the wilderness in order to pursue his wife's abductors, the scribe retrospectively rehabilitates Orfeo as a man of decisive action in the middle portion of the narrative. For the Harley reviser, diminution of the fairies' agency is typically balanced out by an enhancing of Orfeo's.

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<sup>74</sup> For the sake of comparison, the Ashmole version of the text reads thus:

Jn þat same tym þat old man,  
 He told hym all þat he can,  
 And how þe quen was tw3t away  
 Jnto þe lond of fayrey,  
 And how þe kyng exiled 3ede,  
 Bot no man wyst in-to what stede. (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole lines 478-83)





In Ashmole, Rate interpolates into the Auchinleck version of Heroudis’s account a nine-line block that recasts the earlier third-person description of the fairy encounter in the first-person words of “Meroudys” – Rate’s name for Orfeo’s wife. This addition alters the passage significantly in that the queen describes herself as having awoken *before* she encounters the fairy king’s messenger (the interpolated lines are here presented in italics):

As j went þys vndyr-tyde  
 To pley me be myn orcherd-syde  
*J fell on slepe all be-dene* 125  
*Vnder an ympe vpon þe gren;*  
*My meydens durst me not wake,*  
*Bot lete me ly3e & slepe take,*  
*Tyll þat þe tyme ouer-passyd so*  
*That þe vndryn was ouer-go.* 130  
*When j gan my-selue a-wake*  
*Ruly chere j gan to make,*  
*For j saw a sembly sy3t:*  
 To-werd me com a gentyll kny3t  
 Wele j-armyd at all ry3ht, 135  
 And bad j schuld vpon hy3eng  
 Com speke wyth hys lord þe kyng.  
 J ansuerd hym wyth wordys bold;  
 J seyde j durst not, ne not j wold. (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole, ll. 123-39)

By interpolating these lines into Meroudys’s speech, Rate removes the supernatural element of a fairy visitation during sleep that characterizes the same scene in Auchinleck; in his version, Meroudys wakes (line 131), and *then* sees the fairy knight before her (line 134). Rate’s alteration would seem to stem from a concern about the ability of the fairies in the Auchinleck text to communicate mentally with a person during sleep. In Ashmole, the resequencing of events in this scene deprives the fairies of a faculty that may smack too emphatically of the demonic. Admittedly, although Rate alters Meroudys’s description of her fairy encounter, he leaves the earlier third-person account in Ashmole lines 53-76 – where Orfeo’s wife awakes after her fairy encounter, just as in Auchinleck – relatively unchanged and makes no attempt to harmonize the two divergent narratives. Nevertheless, the care with which the later scene, at least, has been revised in Ashmole strongly suggests a concern to lessen the supernatural aura surrounding the romance’s fairies.

A similar impulse appears to motivate a later insertion in the scene in which the fairies abduct Meroudys before Orfeo’s eyes. In Auchinleck, Orfeo and a thousand of his knights proceed to the orchard with Heurodis the day after her vision, in accordance with the demands of

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awake, / Sche crid, & loþli bere gan make.” However, the text doesn’t explicitly correlate the earlier third-person account with Heurodis’s own, and it assumes that the reader or listener will understand that the fairy threats are the immediate trigger for the deranged behavior Heurodis’s attendants witness. Although Heurodis’s fairy encounter is explicitly presented as having taken place as a lucid vision during sleep, its factuality is never questioned by the other characters in the Auchinleck text.

the fairy king. They position a rank of armed men – a “scheltrom” in the Middle English (187) – around the queen, but she nevertheless disappears from among them:

Pai made scheltrom in ich a side,  
& sayd þai wold þere abide  
& dye þer euerichon,  
Er þe quen schuld fram hem gon; 190  
Ac 3ete amiddes hem ful ri3t  
Þe quen was oway y-tvi3t,  
Wiþ fairi forþ y-nome  
– Men wist neuer wher sche was bicomē. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck, ll. 187-94)

Just what is envisioned here by the Auchinleck text depends in part on the meaning of the word “fairi” in line 193. The editors of the *Middle English Dictionary* cite this line as the earliest instance of their sense 2.(a) of the word “fairie”:

Supernatural contrivance; enchantment, magic, illusion; also, something supernatural or illusory, a phantom.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> A good deal of scholarship supports the idea that the use of “fairi” in line 193 of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* implies that Heurodis was carried off by enchantment without any mention of the actual appearance of a fairy host. In his glossary to Kenneth Sisam’s *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose*, J. R. R. Tolkien glosses “fairi” in line 193 of *Sir Orfeo* as “magic” (339). In his own glossary to *Sir Orfeo*, A. J. Bliss similarly offers “faery, enchantment” (p. 63). (One might imagine that Bliss’s use of “faery” here could be the common alternate spelling of “fairy.” But Bliss consistently spells the latter term “fairy” throughout the introduction to his edition of *Sir Orfeo*, and it is thus clear that “faery” in his glossary means something like “the concept or realm of enchantment.”) Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, the editors of the most recent student edition of *Sir Orfeo*, gloss “fairi” as “enchantment” (“*Sir Orfeo*,” *MEBL*, gloss to line 193).

Nevertheless, one extremely important authority interprets “fairi” in this scene as applying to fairies collectively. The *OED* cites four meanings for the word “fairy” in Middle English: sense A. 1. is “[t]he land or home of the fays; fairy-land” (first cited, according to the *OED*, circa 1320 in *Sir Orfeo*; now obsolete); sense A. 2. is “[a] collective term for the fays or inhabitants of fairyland; fairy-folk” (first cited circa 1320 in *Sir Orfeo*; now obsolete); sense A. 3. is “[e]nchantment, magic; a magic contrivance; an illusion, a dream” (first cited circa 1300; now obsolete); and sense A. 4. a. is “[o]ne of a class of supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to possess magical powers and to have great influence for good or evil over the affairs of man” (first cited circa 1393). Of the four possibilities offered, senses A. 2. (“fairies collectively”) and A. 3. (“enchantment, magic”) seem most relevant to the present context. The *OED* cites line 193 of *Sir Orfeo* as the earliest instance of sense A. 2.:

c1320 *Orfeo* 189 Awey with the fayré sche was ynome.

If the *OED* editors are correct, this line in Auchinleck could suggest, at least, that Orfeo and his men see the queen carried off by fairies. And taken at face value, the use of the definite article with the word “fairi” in the *OED* citation strongly supports the idea that the word refers collectively to fairies here. But while the dictionary’s estimate of a date of composition for *Sir Orfeo* “circa 1320” clearly implies a reference to the Auchinleck manuscript, line 193 in that text – quoted in the last block quotation above – does not actually include the definite article. The form of the line cited in the *OED* is actually taken from the early fifteenth century Harley manuscript; the equivalent line there is transcribed thus by Bliss:

Awey with þe fayré sche was ynome. (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley l. 189)

While such a use of “fairy” would have been without recorded precedent at the time of the likely composition of the



above, but an analysis of his additions and other alterations of the scene will be easier to follow with the Auchinleck text once again in front of us. There, the last two-thirds of the scene involving the human captives looks like this:

Sum stode wiþ-outen hade,  
 & sum non armes nade,  
 & sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde,  
 & sum lay wode, y-bounde, 395  
 & sum astrangled as þai ete;  
 & sum were in water adreynt,  
 & sum wiþ fire al for-schreynt.  
 Wiues þer lay on child-bedde,  
 Sum ded & sum awedde, 400  
 & wonder fele þer lay bisides  
 Ri3t as þai slepe her vnder-tides  
 Eche was þus in þis warld y-nome,  
 Wiþ fairi þider y-come.  
 Þer he sei3e his owen wiif, 405  
 Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,  
 Slepe vnder an ympe-tre:  
 Bi her cloþes he knewe þat it was he.  
 ¶& when he hadde bihold þis meruails alle,  
 He went in-to þe kinges halle. (*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck ll. 391-410)

In Ashmole, Rate alters a number of the extant lines in this scene and adds a trio of new lines after Ashmole 386, the equivalent of Auchinleck 396 (the interpolated lines are here presented in italics):

Som þer stod with-outyn hede,  
 And some armys non hade,  
 And som, þer bodys had wounde,  
 And som onne hors þer armys sette, 385  
 And som wer strangyld at þer mete,  
*And men þat wer nomen wyth þem ete;*  
*So he saw þem standing þer.*  
*Than saw he men & women in fere:*  
 As þei slepyd þer vndryn-tyde 390  
 He þem saw on euery syde.  
 Among þem he saw hys wyue,  
 That he louyd as hys lyue,  
 That ley þer vnder þat tre ful trew:  
 Be hyr clothys he hyr knew. (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole ll. 382-95)

One of Rate's most interesting changes here appears to be a possible pun aimed at tamping down the horror in the opening description of the captives' mutilated bodies. In Auchinleck, the first





different but self-consistent manners that produce very divergent texts – even as the degree of those divergences can be explained through a close analysis. I feel strongly that this aspect of their interrelationship has been overlooked in discussions of the three versions as a whole.

This chapter is unusually long, and it offers quite a number of challenges to the usual understanding of the interrelationships between the three manuscripts of *Sir Orfeo*. In order to highlight the most significant aspects of the observations made here, I list below what I consider to be the most important conclusions of this chapter:

- 1) The texts of *Sir Orfeo* in Harley 3810 and Ashmole 61 likely descend from a common antecedent copied from the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* – or a close descendant – after f. 299 had been extracted from the manuscript.
- 2) At the time of the copying of the Harley-Ashmole antecedent, the imperfect beginning of the text was supplemented by prefatory material ultimately derived from the opening of the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine*.
- 3) The "harper section" of the text found in the two later recensions is an interpolation original to a common ancestor of the Harley and Ashmole texts, and it was probably intended to emphasize links between the romance and its mythological sources.
- 4) Recent research not available to A. J. Bliss when he produced his editions of *Sir Orfeo* suggests that one scribe oversaw the construction of the Auchinleck manuscript as a whole. Given that circumstance, it seems very unlikely that that principal architect of the manuscript would have allowed two Breton lays – *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* – to share nearly identical "prologue sections." The original "prologue section" of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* may well have been quite different from the *Lay le Freine* prologue, and in fact I consider it unlikely that the two shared any portion of their respective prefaces.
- 5) The characteristics that the Harley and Ashmole versions of the romance share with each other but not with Auchinleck are sufficiently common and consistent to permit the reconstruction of aspects of a Harley-Ashmole precursor from which both fifteenth century texts later diverged in various ways. A hallmark of the antecedent text is the attempt to render *Sir Orfeo* more amenable to the kinds of devotional settings in which it would later appear. Given the ontological and theological difficulties surrounding fairies in the medieval ages, the precursor text was particularly concerned to mute or contain the problems surrounding the text's supernaturals.
- 6) If the precursor to the Harley and Ashmole texts of *Sir Orfeo* was indeed copied from the Auchinleck text after the opening had been excised, as I have contended above, then it should be possible to employ this information in estimating a very approximate date for the mutilation of the Auchinleck codex. Since the Harley-Ashmole precursor would obviously predate the production of Harley 3810 in the early fifteenth century, the excision of the illustrations from the Auchinleck manuscript must have taken place relatively early in the life of that codex – sometime in the roughly hundred-year span between the 1330s and the assembly of British Library MS Harley 3810. I realize that this claim rests on two basic and ultimately unprovable assumptions: first, that the use of the *Lay le Freine* prologue in the later texts is best accounted

for by the absence of a prologue in the Auchinleck text of *Sir Orfeo* by the time it was consulted by the copyist of the Harley-Ashmole precursor; and second, that the various excisions from the text were all made at approximately the same time. Nevertheless, both these assumptions seem to me to explain the surviving evidence more satisfactorily than any alternate hypothesis.

7) The history of the Ashmole text of *Sir Orfeo* has two important implications for both the *Orfeo* tradition and our understanding of the Middle English Breton lay in general. First, versions of Auchinleck romances very closely related to those in Auchinleck itself might have been in the scribal community as a source of familiar texts over the span of a quite lengthy period, and they might have served as a source of corrections and additions for later recensions of texts originally derived from Auchinleck or from closely related copies of those texts. Second, fourteenth and fifteenth century scribes not only had a strong sense of the generic conventions of the Breton lay but also knew where to find further examples of the genre. The translator of *Lay le Freine* – or perhaps one of the scribes of the Auchinleck book – exchanged Marie's very brief prologue to *le Fresne* for one of a more typical length that served as an introduction to the genre for English readers. Similarly, the redactor of the Harley-Ashmole precursor text, faced with an acephalous copy of *Sir Orfeo*, supplemented his version of the poem with the *Lay le Freine* prologue. And Rate, the redactor of the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo*, filled out the prologue to his own rendition with a couplet apparently lifted from the prologue of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* – which may, in its turn, have been influenced by some earlier version of *Sir Orfeo*. For scribes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a relatively lengthy and self-reflexive prologue clearly constituted one of the hallmarks of the Middle English Breton lays. Even more intriguingly, the same scribes appear to have maintained at least a mental index of poems belonging to the genre, enabling them to identify and track down copies of poems that could provide examples of opening and closing matter appropriate to the genre.

8) While both the Harley and Ashmole scribes are concerned with the depiction of fairy power in the romance, they approach that problem in different ways. The Harley scribe tends to omit moments in the lay that ascribe power and agency to the fairies at the expense of Orfeo. Rate, the Ashmole scribe, tends to contain the energies in the text through the interpolation of additions that humanize the fairies and render their power more comprehensible.

**Table 1: The *Sir Orfeo* preface by section in the various manuscripts**

<u>Auchinleck</u>	<u>Harley</u>	<u>Ashmole</u>
-----	-----	"April section" ll. 1-6 (6 lines)
-----	"Prologue section" <sup>81</sup> ll. 1-24 (24 lines)	"Prologue section" <sup>82</sup> ll. 7-26 (20 lines)
"King section" ll. 39-46 (8 lines) <sup>83</sup>	"King section" ll. 25-32 (8 lines)	-----
-----	"Harper section" ll. 33-46 (14 lines)	"Harper section" ll. 27-40 (14 lines)
"Capital/Queen section" <sup>84</sup> ll. 47-56 (10 lines) <sup>85</sup>	"Capital/Queen section" ll. 47-54 (8 lines)	"Capital/Queen section" ll. 41-48 (8 lines)

**Table 2: Comparison of omissions and additions to the Harley and Ashmole texts of *Sir Orfeo***

Auchinleck is employed as the standard; information is taken from Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*, 2d ed., pp. xv-xvi. The first three columns collect omissions; the second three collect additions. I've corrected three errors in Bliss's enumeration of omissions and additions on pp. xv-xvi of his edition. First, he lists Harley as omitting lines 166-67, rather than 167-68. Second, he doesn't note on p. xvi that Harley and Ashmole add a couplet after Auchinleck line 518, even though he does acknowledge this on p. xiv, in the note to Harley lines 470-71 on p. 56, and in the note to

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<sup>81</sup> Most of the "prologue section" in Harley corresponds very closely to the first 22 lines of the Auchinleck *Lay le Freine*, but ll. 15-16 of Harley have no equivalent in the other text.

<sup>82</sup> The opening couplet of the Ashmole "prologue section" is different from the opening couplet of Harley but is strikingly similar to first couplet of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*. The correspondence between the two couplets will be taken up later in this chapter. Ll. 21-23 in Harley have no equivalent in Ashmole; l. 24 in Harley appears to parallel l. 26 of Ashmole. Where Ashmole shares text with Harley in this section, the relationship between the Ashmole prologue and the *Lay le Freine* prologue is approximately the same as that between Harley and *Lay le Freine* (see footnote 11).

<sup>83</sup> Ll. 39-46 in Bliss's enumeration correspond to ll. 1-8 in the extant text of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*.

<sup>84</sup> Ll. 49-50 of the Auchinleck "Capital and Queen section" – which claim that Winchester had once been known as Traciens – have no equivalent in Harley or Ashmole.

<sup>85</sup> Ll. 47-56 in Bliss's enumeration correspond to ll. 9-18 in the extant text of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*.

Ashmole lines 508-9 on p. 57. Finally, he fails to note that Auchinleck l. 409 is omitted in both Harley and Ashmole.

An asterisk marks shared omissions or additions acknowledged by Bliss.

<u>H Omits</u>	<u>B Omits</u>	<u>Shared Omission</u>	<u>H Adds</u>	<u>B Adds</u>	<u>Shared Addition</u>
	19-22			beg+6	
	39-46		[+24]	[+20]	["Harper" – 15 lines shared]
49-50	49-50	49-50*			
	59-60		[+14]	[+14]	["Prologue" – 14 lines shared ]
	67-68				
	97-98			104+2	
	123-24			120+2	
167-68				131+1	
	177-78			132+1	
206-7				134+9	
241-42				159+1	
247-50				180+2	
293-96				190+2	
	299-302			270+2	
	367-74			274+2	
375-76	375-76	375-76	280+2		
	377-78			356+1	
391-93				396+3	
394	394	394		416+2	
395-96			468+2	468+2	468+2*
397-400	397-400	397-400		476+2	
401-2			518+2	518+2	518+2*
403-4	403-4	403-4		549+1	
409	409	409		550+1	
	410			558+2	
411-12			end+4	end+6	[H and B share 4 lines at end]
439-42					
445-46					
458					
481-82	481-82	481-82*			
485-86					
501-8					
521-22					
527-28					
539-40					
545-52					
555-56					
559-62					
565-82					
585-86					
589-90					
591-92	591-92	591-92			
593-94					
597-602					

Chapter Three:  
*Sir Orfeo*, Classical Mythology, and the *Lai d'Orphey*

As its name implies, *Sir Orfeo* is an adaptation of the classical myth of Orpheus, in which the Thracian harper rescues his wife Eurydice from the underworld with the help of his musical skill, only to lose her forever when he looks back before they have reached the surface. The Middle Ages knew the story of Orpheus and Eurydice from four main classical sources: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (X-XI), Virgil's *Georgics* (IV), Fulgentius's *Mitologiae* (3:10), and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (III, *met.* xii). In addition, numerous commentaries on these works, such as the *Ovide Moralisé*, furthered the dissemination of Orphic narratives during the medieval period. The complex reception of a tale as well known as this one makes it impossible to identify a single version of the myth as the ultimate source-text for *Sir Orfeo*, though recent scholarship suggests that the plot of Ovid's account, laid out in Books X and XI of the *Metamorphoses*, may bear the greatest resemblance to that of the Middle English Breton lay. Nevertheless, *Sir Orfeo* offers a host of surprising revisions of the familiar original, particularly in the opening verses of the Auchinleck text as it now stands:

Orfeo was a kinge,	
In Ingland an hei3e lording,	40
A stalworþ man & hardi bo;	
Large & curteys he was al-so.	
His fader was comen of King Pluto,	
& his moder of King Juno,	
þat sum-time were as godes y-hold	45
For auentours þat þai dede & told.	
þis king soiournd in Traciens,	
þat was a cité of noble defens	
(For Winchester was cleped þo	
Traciens, wiþ-outen no). (39-50)	50

In these lines, Orfeo, unlike Orpheus, is not merely a harper, but a king. And while some early Classical sources make Orpheus the son of the Muse Calliope and the wine god Oeagrus (Friedman, *Orpheus* 6), the Middle English Orfeo is depicted as a descendant of Pluto and Juno. The latter deity, a goddess in classical sources, has puzzlingly been masculinized as a “king.” The southern English city of Winchester is revealed to be Orpheus's ancient homeland of Thrace, and later in the poem Hades itself receives an extreme insular makeover, as the classical underworld becomes the subterranean world of Faëry, with the role of Pluto filled by the fairy king. But the most startling change the medieval poem works upon the classical story comes at the end: Orfeo's success in recovering his wife Heurodis is unmarred by any reversal, and the king and queen of Traciens enjoy a long and, presumably, happy life together.<sup>1</sup>

From the mid-1960s until very recently, critics had paid little attention to the relationship between *Sir Orfeo* and classical sources for the myth of Orpheus. This disinterest might in part be attributable to A. J. Bliss's influential claim that the Orpheus narrative had entered the

<sup>1</sup> As Roy M. Liuzza notes, a small number of texts that allegorize Orpheus as Christ – such as the *Reductorium Morale* of Pierre Bersuire – also substitute a happy ending for the classical one; these narratives seem unlikely to have influenced *Sir Orfeo* (“*Sir Orfeo*” 274 and n. 19).

folklore of Brittany long before Breton harpers transformed it into the antecedent of the Middle English poem (*Sir Orfeo* xxxiii-xxxiv); such a scenario would diminish the relevance of the mythical texts for the understanding of the English poem. A. C. Spearing, for instance, has recently written: “I think it most likely that the Orpheus story came to [the *Sir Orfeo* poet] indirectly, probably through Celtic or French rather than Latin sources, and that he was unaware of his divergences from classical forms of the story and *a fortiori* of his divergences from the meanings attributed to the story by medieval scholars” (Spearing, “*Sir Orfeo*” 261). From such a perspective, the poem’s mythological peculiarities – the unusual claims about Orfeo’s ancestry, the unexpected masculinizing of Juno, and the conflation of Thrace and Winchester – are seen as the products of inadvertency rather than artfulness. J. Burke Severs, writing in 1961, genially ascribes to the poet “a refreshing ignorance of classical mythology and geography” (197), a view still endorsed by Spearing in the article just quoted (“*Sir Orfeo*,” 261).<sup>2</sup> And certainly the reference to “King Juno” remains a puzzling crux, difficult to attribute to anything but confusion – on the part of a copyist, at least, if not on the part of the poet himself.<sup>3</sup>

It seems unlikely, however, that an English romancer conversant with such details of the classical myth as the name of Orpheus’s homeland could have confused Thrace with Winchester through “ignorance.” And the poet betrays his familiarity with learned medieval conventions for the portrayal of classical deities when he presents us with a prim euhemerization of Pluto and Juno in lines 45-46, fastidiously qualifying his invocation of these pagan gods with the words “Þat sum-time were as godes y-hold / For auentours þat þai dede & told.” In fact, the scholarly *care* with which the poet of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* faithfully reproduces details of classical

<sup>2</sup> Like many earlier critics of the poem, Severs accepts the poem’s designation as a Breton lay literally: once a lay sung among the Bretons, *Sir Orfeo* was later translated into French and then into English (197); it is specifically the English poet, and not his Breton or French predecessors, Severs claims, who is responsible for the poem’s display of “refreshing ignorance” (197).

<sup>3</sup> The simplest solution to the problem of “King Juno” is that of Constance Davies, who suggests the possibility that “King” might be a scribal error for “Queen”; presumably, she envisions the scribe having repeated the “King” of “King Pluto” in line 29. However, Davies also offers an alternate explanation – that “Juno” might originally have been “Jove,” “the ancestor of Orpheus through his mother, Calliope” (“Classical” 166). E. C. Ronquist favors the likelihood that “King Juno” was the result of careless transmission, noting a similar apparent error in the text of the medieval German romance *Salman und Morolf*, where Isold is referred to as “kunig [king] Isold” (114 n. 15). And Felicina Rota notes a more immediately relevant instance of gender confusion in the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *The Seege or Batayle of Troye*: there, Alisaunder (Paris) tells his father Priam how, while on a hunting trip, he had encountered “ffour ladyes of Elfen land” in a dream – they were named Saturnus, Jubiter, Mercurius and Venus (451 n. 6). Rota does not comment further, but the implication would appear to be that Middle English poets typically played fast and loose with the genders of the classical gods. (But see below in this section, where I discuss this passage in *The Seege*.) Marie-Thérèse Brouland offers, somewhat uncharacteristically, one of the more attractive explanations yet advanced: *L’expression King Juno [. . .] qui peut apparaître comme une erreur de copiste, ne le serait peut-être pas. En effet, outre le sens de <<roi, monarque en titre>>, le mot king a été utilisé (vers 1300-25) pour se référer a une reine en titre, celle qui détient le pouvoir (et non pas l’épouse du roi), soit <<a reigning queen>>* (“The expression ‘King Juno’ [. . .] which could appear to be a copyist’s error, perhaps might not be such. Indeed, besides the sense of ‘king, ruling monarch,’ the word ‘king’ was used (around 1300-25) to refer to a ruling queen, one who holds the power (and not the spouse of the king), ‘a reigning queen’”; 274-75 – italics in the original). This suggestion is intriguing, but the usage of “king” cited here by Brouland appears to be quite rare; the *Middle English Dictionary* entry for “king” gives just one occurrence of this particular definition, in line 869 of the *Metrical Chronicle* of Robert of Gloucester (transcribed from the Caligula MS): “Hennin & Morgan . . . adde despit þat womman king ssolde alonde beo” (*MED*, s. v. “king,” 1e). In this passage, unlike that in *Sir Orfeo*, the word “king” is clearly modified by “womman.” Brouland’s claim would possess more force if an example in which “king” alone carried the sense of “a reigning queen” were available.

mythology can be appreciated through a comparison of this passage with its equivalent in the older of the two fifteenth-century versions. The Harley text calls Orfeo's father "Syr Pilato" (29) and his mother "Yno" (30). The latter name appears to be merely a distortion of "Juno," but the change of "Pluto" to "Pilato" seems to swap Classical mythology for Christian mythology; as E. C. Ronquist notes, the new appellation retains the "ominousness" of the original (101).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it may be intended to move us away from the Classical story and its potentially troubling pagan resonances, a process furthered by the transformation of Orfeo's city of Traciens into the otherwise unfamiliar "Crassens" (47).<sup>5</sup> Unlike its counterpart in the Auchinleck manuscript, the Harley text of the poem betrays no overt awareness of the poem's relationship to its classical sources, thereby highlighting the earlier version's attentiveness to such details.

In recent years, critics have spotted a number of points in the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo* that appear to be narrative parallels of events in the Ovidian or Virgilian accounts of Orpheus, moments at which an element of the plot of the classical narrative has strategically been put to a new use in the Middle English poem. A subtle but significant alteration of the source texts can be seen in the speech delivered by Orfeo after the abduction of Heurodis by fairies; despondent and intent on leaving Traciens, he vows to avoid the sight of women, saying, "Neuer eft y nil no woman se" (211). David Salter notes the resemblance of this scene to one shared by the stories of Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Georgics* (101); in the *Metamorphoses*, for instance, Orpheus, after three years of mourning for his wife, refuses all love of women – *omnemque refugerat Orpheus / femineam Venerem* – and finds solace instead in the arms of young men (X.76-7).<sup>6</sup> Despite this similarity between the two moments, the Middle English poet has utterly *recontextualized* the vow made by Orpheus. Orfeo's resolve to avoid even the sight of women represents, metonymically, a rejection of human society *in toto*, allowing the poet to introduce into the tale Orfeo's prolonged wilderness exile. But Orfeo's failure to reject the love of women also leaves the door open to his eventual resumption of heterosexual married life when, at the end of the narrative, he is reincorporated into human society. The Middle English poet effectively acknowledges the *Metamorphoses* and *Georgics* as intertexts, but insists on deepening the extent of his hero's self-isolation – Orfeo avoids all human contact for ten years – and implicitly puts aside the possibility of Orfeo's adoption of a homosexual lifestyle.

A similar veiled allusion may underpin a scene that marks the end of Orfeo's self-exile. When he encounters his wife amidst a group of sixty fairy women out hawking, the two lovers gaze silently at each other in recognition and sorrow, but the fairies force Heurodis away from him, leading her back toward the subterranean passage to fairyland; Orfeo fails to speak to his wife, but then summons his resolve and follows the fairy cohort underground (323-48). Roy M. Liuzza reads in this passage a foreshadowing "of the permanent loss of Eurydice" (275), but David Lyle Jeffrey may be more precisely correct in equating the presumed darkness of the subterranean pathway with the final obscurity into which Eurydice recedes in Ovid's account: "The sudden hope of Heurodis – met in the forest and lost again to darkness in her shadow's

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one should not rule out the possibility that the distortion of "Juno" to the unfamiliar "Yno" was purposeful, and intended to assist in removing the narrative from a context of recognizably pagan references, as with the change from "Pluto" to "Pilato."

<sup>5</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the fifteenth-century Ashmole text of *Sir Orfeo* dispenses with the "king section" of the prologue, thereby eliding any reference to Orfeo's ancestry; in contrast to the Harley manuscript of *Sir Orfeo*, however, it preserves the first reference to "Tracyens" (41).

<sup>6</sup> The analogous scene occurs in Virgil's *Georgics* in IV.507-20.

fading – is both effective anticipation of the legend’s original ending and, in retrospect, its minute portrayal” (58). Orfeo’s journey into darkness will result in the recovery of his wife, and Jeffrey’s reading of the structural parallel here implicitly transforms the Classical Orpheus’s final missed chance into the medieval Orfeo’s opportunity.

Liuzza has also pointed out that *Sir Orfeo* presents a surprising parallel to the account of Orpheus’s death given at the beginning of Book XI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The Latin text recounts how crazed Maenads, incensed at Orpheus’s rejection of womankind, tear him to pieces even as he plays his lyre. This scene most likely provided the inspiration for an elaborate lie told by Orfeo at the end of the Breton lay. Newly returned from fairyland and disguised as a poor minstrel, Orfeo tests the loyalty of his steward by explaining that he found the harp he is playing ten years ago, next to the body of a man who had been “to-torn smale” by animals in the wilderness:

‘Lord!’ quap he, ‘In vncouþe þede,                    535  
 Þurth a wildernes as y 3ede,  
 Þer y founde in a dale  
 Wiþ lyouns a man to-torn smale,  
 & wolues him frete wiþ teþ so scharp;  
 Bi him y fond þis ich harp,                            540  
 Wele ten 3ere it is y-go.’ (*Sir Orfeo* 535-41)

The steward’s anguished reaction to Orfeo’s account of his own death convinces the latter that his second-in-command has remained faithful to him, whereupon Orfeo reveals his true identity (542-74). The similarity between these narratives of the deaths of Orpheus and Orfeo is unmistakable. But while Orpheus is “actually” rent to shreds, Liuzza notes that the ending of the Middle English poem reveals the tale of Orfeo’s death by dismemberment to be, explicitly, “a fiction, a ruse” – and one perpetrated by the medieval protagonist (276). Seen in such a light, the happy ending of *Sir Orfeo*, in which the harper of Traciens successfully recovers his wife from the underground realm, can be read as a direct response to the poem’s classical ancestry: “[I]t may be argued that the difference between these traditions [. . .] is part of the *Orfeo* poet’s theme, and that their merger is represented by *Orfeo*’s recovery of Heurodis: what the classical Orpheus was unable to perform has been achieved by the medieval Orfeo and his poet” (Liuzza, 278).<sup>7</sup> Liuzza’s interpretation sees the poet’s recasting of the episode as both an acknowledgment of and as a challenge to his Classical sources.

For an audience intimately familiar with the *Metamorphoses*, and perhaps the *Georgics* as well, the passages from *Sir Orfeo* that I have just examined might sound like echoes of the

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<sup>7</sup> One of the parallels Liuzza identifies seems to me perhaps less likely than the others discussed here. He equates Orfeo’s impassioned soliloquy in lines 331-37 – in which Orfeo laments that death has not slain him after his sight of Heurodis – with the madness of Orpheus after the second death of Eurydice, and the fairy women with the bloodthirsty Maenads (276-77). However, Orfeo’s speech in the former episode – inspired by loss but inflected with a new resoluteness – marks his *emergence* from a period of near-madness. And while Heurodis’s fairy companions and the Maenads both represent large groups of women encountered in the wilderness, one has to wonder whether Ovid’s fur-clad Bacchantes bent on mayhem and dismemberment were likely to remind anyone of the elegant fairy women out hawking. Furthermore, medieval audiences would probably have been more alive to a rather different learned analogue to the fairy huntresses: the huntress Diana and her band of female followers (Purkiss 142-44; Briggs, *Anatomy* 23-24). Nevertheless, the potential parallels Liuzza suggests here are at least possible and may point to the subtlety with which the Orfeo poet revised his sources.

more familiar Classical narrative; they would appear to have been altered by the kind of distortion and recombination of plot elements that we might imagine occurring at the end of a long chain of oral transmission. By fashioning his plot around only the most basic points of contact between the two narratives, the poet makes it theoretically difficult to tell which text influenced the other. When he then proceeds to embroider the basic fabric of the plot with a variety of folkloric elements, he produces a richly detailed, organic whole, similar in structure to the myth of Orpheus, but clearly the product of a very different cultural milieu. The care the poet has taken to transform Ovidian and Virgilian “survivals” from his sources and integrate them into his revamped and fairy-haunted version of the Orpheus myth seems, finally, to indicate that we are being asked to reverse the usual understanding of the relationship between the Classical texts and the Middle English Breton lay. In the case of every structural parallel, one of the works is the source-text and the other its derivative. But the English poet’s strategic manipulation of his sources constitutes an implicit claim that *his* is the true story, the one set down by ancient “[h]arpours in Bretaine” (597), while Ovid’s text, like his recounting of Orpheus’s death, is a fiction, a half-remembered retelling of the original.

Rather than proof of his ignorance, the poet’s surprising claims about Orphic geography can be seen as consonant with his larger program of revisions to the Classical sources. The Middle English poet imputes to himself privileged access to the “truth” of the Orpheus myth precisely because Orpheus was a king in “Jnglond,” with his royal seat at Winchester, once called “Traciens.” However brazen this geographic fantasy may be, the poet is consistent in its deployment, making a second allusion to Winchester toward the end of the Auchinleck text of the poem; the citation occurs in the description of Orfeo’s flight – in the company of his wife – from fairyland:

So long he hap þe way y-nome  
 To Winchester he is y-come,  
 Þat was his owen cité;  
 Ac no man knewe þat it was he. (*Sir Orfeo* 477-80)

Here, the fusion of Winchester and Traciens is complete: the poet alludes to Orfeo’s capital city only by its English name.

These two mentions of Winchester in the Auchinleck text of *Sir Orfeo* are absent in the later recensions of the poem; at the analogous moments, the Harley text refers only to “Crassens” (47, 441), while the Ashmole text refers to “Tracyens” (41) or “Trasyens” (469). As a result, A. J. Bliss considers the references to Winchester and England in Auchinleck scribal additions to the original exemplar of the poem (*Sir Orfeo* 52, n. 40), and later critics have generally followed suit.<sup>8</sup> Thorlac Turville-Petre, for instance, reads in the identification of

<sup>8</sup> Bliss’s note on the word “Jnglond” in line 40 of the Auchinleck text reads, “The *substitution* of an English milieu has been carried out with some consistency; it involved alteration of the text here and in line 478 [i.e., the second mention of Winchester], and the *addition* of lines 49 and 50 [i.e., the couplet identifying Traciens with Winchester]” (*Sir Orfeo* 52, n. 40; italics mine). Of the latter two lines specifically he writes, “This couplet is unlikely to be genuine, and its omission by H[arley] and [Ashmole] must not be considered evidence of a close relationship between them” (52 n. 49-50).

In the introduction to his edition of *Sir Orfeo*, Bliss identifies lines 49-50 as one of Auchinleck’s few likely deviations from the “original”: “As far as it is possible to judge, the A[uchinleck] version is not far removed from the original and represents it with reasonable accuracy; a probable divergence from the original text is the

Winchester with Thrace a particularly forceful distillation of the Auchinleck compiler's nationalistic concerns: "None of these remarks [about Winchester and England] appear in the other two versions, and it is almost certain that they are interpolations by the Auchinleck scribe. If so, *Sir Orfeo* is an extreme example of the lengths to which the revisers will go to underline the theme of Englishness" (116). The allusions to Winchester and England may well be intended to emphasize "Englishness," as Turville-Petre claims. But Turville-Petre, like Bliss, sees the later two versions of *Sir Orfeo* as representatives of a manuscript tradition related to the Auchinleck text but independent of it – hence his citation of Harley and Ashmole as evidence that these references in Auchinleck are the work of "revisers." As I argued in Chapter Two, however, the two later versions are more probably dependent on Auchinleck, and their lack of any mention of Winchester or England might just as easily have been the result of a deletion original to the Harley-Ashmole exemplar. Such an alteration would be consistent with the tendency towards distortion or effacement of historical and geographic particularities exhibited by the two later texts: as already noted, Harley deletes mention of pagan deities altogether while calling Traciens "Crassens," and Ashmole changes Auchinleck's "Pluto" and "Juno" to "Pilato" and "Yno." Since the two later versions move toward a dehistoricizing lack of specificity in their presentation of details of the Auchinleck text, one cannot discount the possibility that later scribes deleted some aspects of Auchinleck's revision of the Orpheus myth that they found as unlikely as modern critics have.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the depiction of Traciens in *Sir Orfeo* answers more closely to medieval Winchester than it does to medieval descriptions of Thrace, a region in the northeast of ancient Greece. Middle English writers tend to follow Classical sources in portraying Thrace as an intemperate land peopled by a fierce race rather more barbarous than the inhabitants of southern Greece. Chaucer's Knight, for instance, depicts Thrace as a "colde, frosty regioun" in which the temple of Mars is situated, and he compares the ferocity with which Palamon and Arcite attack each other to that of "hunters in the regne of Trace" stalking bear and lions (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* I.1973, I.1638).<sup>10</sup> While such a characterization of Thrace might have

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identification of Traciens with Winchester" (*Sir Orfeo* xv).

I discuss the interrelationships of the three manuscripts and their relevance to this problem in Chapter Two; I will look more briefly at the appropriateness of England and Winchester as settings for the poet's revisioning of the Orpheus story below.

<sup>9</sup> As I noted in Chapter Two, at least one late reader of *Sir Orfeo* may have attempted to move certain aspects of the narrative somewhat closer to its classical origins. Lynne S. Blanchfield argues that Rate, the late fifteenth-century scribe of Ashmole 61, inserted into the Ashmole *Sir Orfeo* a unique couplet that describes the forest animals as not only drawn to but tamed by Orfeo's music: "The bestys of þat forest wyld / Com aboute hym meke & myld" (279-80). Blanchfield comments: "The taming motif foreshadows the conquering of the Otherworld powers by music in both myth and romance, but it is only present in Rate's version, which is thus closer to the classical Orpheus story" ("Romances" 70).

<sup>10</sup> Chaucer is quite consistent in his portrayal of Thrace as a cold, windy and forbidding region. His invocation of Mars in the opening lines of *Anelida and Arcite* offers a parallel to the description of Thrace in the *Knight's Tale*:

"Thou ferse god of armes, Mars the rede,  
That in the frosty contre called Trace,  
Within thy grisly temple ful of drede  
Honoured art as patroun of that place. (Chaucer, *Anelida and Arcite* 1-4)

And in *The House of Fame*, Eolus, classical god of the winds, is depicted as inhabiting "a contree that highte Trace"

suggested to the *Orfeo* poet the possibility of translating the Orpheus narrative from a Mediterranean setting to one in northern Europe, little of the medieval reputation of Thrace is visible in Traciens – a place that enjoys “miri & hot” weather in late spring (58) and boasts a populace versed in the ways of courtly behavior. More tellingly, while Chaucer carefully reflects historical traditions by naming “Trace” a “regioun,” “contree,” or “regne” in his works, Traciens in *Sir Orfeo* is a “cité,” i.e., a walled city (4, 479, 501). I have been unable to find another description in Middle English literature of Thrace as a “city,” but the municipal walls of Winchester were of course a well known feature of the city in the medieval period. The description of Traciens in *Sir Orfeo* is too sparse to permit a claim that the poet specifically modeled Orfeo’s capital on contemporary Winchester, but the English city does provide an unquestionably better fit than ancient Thrace. And perhaps the Auchinleck poet should be allowed the last word on this matter. As if anticipating the disbelief of modern critics, he has supplied an aside in lines 49-50 that seems to indicate that he means what he says when he identifies Winchester with Thrace: “For Winchester was cleped þo / Traciens wiþouten no.”

Scholars who have seen the references to Winchester as adventitious have been no less skeptical about the Auchinleck text’s portrayal of Orfeo as a king “[i]n Jnglond” (40). Both the later texts of *Sir Orfeo* fail to specify the name of Orfeo’s realm, and A. J. Bliss accordingly saw the “substitution of an English milieu” in the Auchinleck text as an “alteration” of the original (*Sir Orfeo* 52, n. 40). But leaving aside for the moment the distinction between “England” and “Britain,” the poem’s insular setting – made clear *solely* by the references to “Jnglond” and “Winchester” – seems unlikely to have been an addition to the text: the explicit placement of the narrative on the island of Britain necessarily provides the enabling fiction behind the poem’s conflation of classical mythology with a recognizably insular brand of fairylore. While Middle English texts do very occasionally conflate figures from classical mythology with fairies, the sustained and detailed attention to aspects of native fairylore in *Sir Orfeo* renders a setting outside of Britain less probable. Critics have long ignored or explained away the Auchinleck poet’s identification of Winchester and England with Thrace, but I suggest that a more valuable approach to this unlikely fusion would be to explore its implications in the poet’s work.

In the present discussion, I have noted a few instances where plot elements of the Orphic source texts are rendered in *Sir Orfeo* in terms of fairylore. Indeed, the poem as a *whole* seems to turn on the poet’s rather sophisticated recognition of striking parallels between the particularities of the Orpheus myth, on the one hand, and features typical of insular fairy narratives, on the other. Both the classical underworld and fairyland appear to be sunless lands underground, accessible through a cavern. In both, certain mortals who no longer walk among living humans may yet lead some sort of shadowy existence. The classical underworld is ruled by a king, and the same is true of fairyland in some accounts from medieval Britain. Orpheus’s charming of the denizens of the underworld with his harp accords well with the fairy predilection for music and entertainment. And just as the myth of Orpheus tells of a husband’s attempted rescue of his wife from the land of the dead, medieval legends tell of those who retrieve a lover or relative from the fairies. In transposing the narrative from Thrace to “Jnglond,” the poet reimagines the plot of the myth in terms of insular fairylore, often introducing elements of fairy belief that have no obvious equivalent in the original tale, such as the affinity of fairies for hunting and hawking. And those aspects of the classical myth that are not consonant with British fairylore – such as the darkness of the subterranean otherworld – generally find no place in *Sir Orfeo*.

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(Chaucer, *House of Fame* 1585).

The equation or even conflation of insular or northern European fairylore with Classical myth or legend is not restricted in medieval sources to *Sir Orfeo* alone. The word “fairy” itself bespeaks the medieval tendency to view the supernatural beings indigenous to the folklore of northern and western Europe in terms of Classical mythology; the English word ultimately derives – via Old French – from the Latin *fata*, “fates,” or the goddesses of fate (Williams 462).<sup>11</sup> And the conflation of fairies with Classical deities begins in insular literature nearly as soon as fairies begin to appear as distinctive entities in the later twelfth-century. In the tale of Eadric Wild, one of the fairy narratives found in Walter Map’s late twelfth-century miscellany *De Nugis Curialium*, the protagonist – an Anglo-Saxon thegn living at the time of the Norman Conquest (Map 154 n. 1) – one night encounters a group of very tall women dancing in a large, isolated building on the edge of the forest. As he contemplates abducting the most beautiful of them, he instantly thinks of familiar Classical narratives about groups of supernatural women and the fates of those mortals who intrude upon them:

Gencium errores audierat, nocturnasque phalanges demonum et mortiferas eorum uisiones, Dictinam et cetus Driadum et Lares, edoctus offensorum uindictam numinum, quomodo subitis eorum uisoribus subitas inferant penas. . . .

[He had heard tell of the fables of the heathen, the nightly squadrons of devils and the deadly vision of them, of Dictynna and the bands of Dryads and Lares, had learnt of the vengeance of the gods when offended, and how they inflict sudden punishment on those who suddenly catch sight of them. . . .] (Map 156-57)

C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors note that Dictynna, though originally a Cretan goddess, “is here used as an alternative name for Artemis or Diana, the goddess of hunting, accompanied by her attendant wood-nymphs (Dryads)” (Map 156 n. 1). Allusions to Diana and her attendants became a learned medieval convention used in references to fairies in general and sometimes more specifically to nocturnal cohorts of supernatural women (Purkiss 142-44; Harf-Lancner, *Fées* 23, 30; Ginzburg 89-121). But here, the mention of Classical accounts viewed through a later Christian lens (*Gencium errores* – “fables of the heathen”) would seem to indicate that Eadric thinks specifically of tales of Diana and her nymphs, and Map may intend to suggest here that the Classical myth of Diana and Actaeon – in which the hunter Actaeon is turned into a stag

<sup>11</sup> Noel Williams offers a useful if skeptical overview of the standard explanation for the etymological processes in Classical and late Vulgar Latin that ultimately produced “fairy”:

Ultimately, [the word “fairy”] would seem to be derived from Latin *fatum* = “thing said.” This gave *fata* = “fate,” a neuter plural which, it is supposed, was misinterpreted in the Dark Ages as feminine singular, *fata* = “female fate, goddess,” and these goddesses of fate were supposedly identified with Greek Lachesis, Atropos and Clotho and subsequently, following the Roman conquest of the Celtic peoples, further identified with various Celtic female deities manifested as tripartite.” (462)

According to the *OED* article on “fairy,” Vulgar Latin *fata* became *fae* in Old French; the latter term in combination with the locational suffix *-erie* gave rise to Old French *faerie*, *faerie*, which seems at first to have denoted variously “enchantment” or “the realm of the supernatural.” It is in those meanings that the term first enters Middle English in the early fourteenth-century. I discuss the meaning of the Middle English word “faerie” in its earliest uses at some length in Chapter Two.

and savaged by his own hounds after he blunders upon the goddess and her followers bathing – occurs to Eadric as he plans the abduction of his victim. At the same time, however, Map’s tale has a number of strong affinities with other accounts from Wales – in both the medieval and modern periods – of fairy women who marry mortal men (Wood, “Fairy Bride”).<sup>12</sup> For instance, as with so many Welsh fairy bride narratives, the woman imposes a condition on her marriage to Eadric, and when he inevitably breaks the taboo, she disappears on the instant (Map 156-59). And Map becomes surprisingly explicit in his description of the woman’s supernatural identity: after Eadric’s marriage to the woman, William the Bastard hears of their story and summons the pair to London; there, her extraordinary beauty is considered “great proof of her fairy nature” (*maximum [. . .] fatalitatis argumentum*; Map 156-57). In this narrative, Map describes a supernatural woman whose appearance and comportment conform reasonably well to the lineaments of not just insular fairylore, but of Welsh fairylore in particular; nevertheless, Map’s portrayal of Eadric’s first encounter with the fairy woman depicts the Anglo-Saxon thegn as needing to draw upon Classical precedents in order to comprehend the situation in which he finds himself.

Rather more surprisingly, characters described as fairies or elves turn up in two medieval romances – one in Old French, and one in Middle English – concerned with the Matter of Troy. A mysterious personage called “Orva la Fee” (i.e., “Orva the fairy”) presents Hector with the gift of a horse in the French *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, probably composed in the 1160s (Harf-Lancner, “Fairy Godmothers” 142-43); in six manuscripts the name “Morgain la Fee” appears in place of “Orva,” and Morgain also appears in a further three manuscripts of the *Histoire de Troie* (Twomey, “Morgain la Fee in *SGGK*” 102).<sup>13</sup> In providing for a young warrior, the two fairies at first appear to be performing functions usually ascribed to goddesses in Classical texts, but both also take on the role of spurned lover and thereby approximate more closely the typical characterization of Morgan in French Arthurian romance. But one of the most startling and entertainingly odd confluences of British fairylore with a Classical context occurs in the Middle English romance *The Seege or Batayle of Troye*; composed in the fourteenth century and perhaps contemporary with *Sir Orfeo*, the *Seege* appears to have the *Roman de Troie* and Dares as its main sources.<sup>14</sup> Before a Trojan assembly, Priam’s son Alisaunder Parys

<sup>12</sup> Juliette Wood calls Map’s tale of Eadric “the most untypical” of the variants of the Welsh Fairy Bride legend she considers in her article, but she also acknowledges that this particular account encapsulates certain characteristics of the Welsh legends, such as the way in which “these stories often function as origin legends attached to unusual families” (“Fairy Bride” 58); later in Map’s account, Alnoth, the son of Eadric and his fairy bride, will prove his worthiness by donating his manor of Ledbury to the bishopric of Hereford (Map 158-59).

<sup>13</sup> Michael W. Twomey presents evidence indicating that the name “Morgain” might actually be authorial despite the larger number of manuscripts employing “Orva,” but he does not ultimately commit himself to that conclusion (102-3). In the same article, Twomey also briefly describes a passage in the thirteenth-century romance *Palamedes* by Rusticiano da Pisa, in which “there is oblique reference to Morgain’s wish to avenge the shame that Hector ‘spoke to her long ago’” (105, and see also 115 n 42).

<sup>14</sup> The four manuscripts appear to have been written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The editor of the poem, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, reports varying dates for the four extant manuscripts of the poem: Harley 525 is assigned to the fifteenth century (ix), Lincoln’s Inn 150 to the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth (x), Egerton 2862 to the end of the fourteenth century (xv), and Arundel XXII to the fourteenth century (xvii). Based largely on meter and what critics often call “internal evidence” – here, the type of armor or weaponry described in the text – Barnicle ascribes the work to “the first quarter of the fourteenth century” (xxx). A date of composition in the first half of the fourteenth century does seem plausible given the date of the earliest manuscripts, but the method of dating employed by Barnicle is problematic; dating based on the assumption that a poet would naturally have depicted clothing, weaponry, architecture, etc., on the basis of contemporary exemplars ignores the possibility that

describes an uncanny experience he had while out hunting. After separating from his hunting companions, he loses his way in the forest when a mist suddenly falls. Overcome with sleep, he lies down beneath a tree and is awakened by “ffoure ladies of eluene land” (*Seege* line 508) who are named “Saturnus,” “Jubiter,” “Mercurius,” and “Venus” (521, 525, 529, 533).<sup>15</sup> They ask him to judge which of them is the most beautiful (541-46), and from there the episode becomes a recognizable variant of the Judgment of Paris. A number of the elements here are typical of encounters with fairies in either romances or folklore: the protagonist’s disorientation while hunting in the forest, the sudden appearance of mist, the nap taken under a tree immediately before the encounter with a supernatural being, and the appearance of fairy women in a group. Certain of these features appear in the account of the Judgment in the *Roman de Troie*, where the encounter is rendered as a dream-vision Paris experiences while out hunting on a warm May day (*Roman de Troie* 3845-3928). On the other hand, the presentation of Greek deities of both genders as ladies from Elfland as well as the substitution of the male gods Saturn, Jupiter and Mercury for Juno and Minerva would appear to be the innovation of the English poet.<sup>16</sup> While the latter change remains difficult to explain, the former may have been inspired by the poet’s recognition of the structural parallels between the conventions of the dream-vision employed in the *Roman de Troie* and those of a fairy encounter in both French and English romance. A similar recognition may underpin the *Orfeo* poet’s depiction of Heurodis’s first trip to fairyland as occurring while she is asleep in the orchard of her palace in Winchester (133-74); the events of Heurodis’s vision seem “actually” to have occurred and are taken seriously by those around her, but to onlookers she appears to have been sleeping the whole time. In any case, the Middle English author of the *Seege* unabashedly assimilates Greek goddesses (and gods) to an insular tradition of supernatural women.

These passages in the *De Nugis Curialium*, the *Roman de Troie*, and the *Seege and Batayle of Troye* suggest that the *Orfeo* poet may have been influenced by a tradition that drew a fairly consistent set of equivalencies between Classical mythology and British fairylore. Seen within the context of that tradition, his conflation of the myth of Orpheus with native accounts of the rescue of loved ones from fairyland seems like an outgrowth of earlier precedents, and his identification of Thrace with Winchester may be the result of a similar kind of logic – rather than the product of inadvertency or ignorance that critics have long deemed it to be.

Nevertheless, the *Orfeo* poet’s particular use of classical texts does not merely represent a *merger* of Classical and insular traditions. I believe Roy M. Liuzza is right to see the poet’s manipulation of the earlier narratives as a *challenge* to the tradition they represent: in *Sir Orfeo*, he writes, “the established and immutable contours” of the original Orpheus narrative “have been revised and *overcome*” (276; italics mine). Furthermore, Liuzza notes that the *Orfeo* poet

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the poet might purposely have chosen to archaize the setting of his work. Until a reevaluation of the dating of this little-studied text appears, it will be necessary to consider the possibility that it was composed at virtually any point in the fourteenth century.

<sup>15</sup> The editor of *The Seege or Batayle of Troye*, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, presents in her edition the text of all four manuscripts of the romance – Lincoln’s Inn 150, Egerton 2862, Arundel XXII, and Harley 525 – and I have chosen to employ the Lincoln’s Inn manuscript for all quotations.

<sup>16</sup> Barnicle reviews the treatment of the Judgment of Paris in a large number of medieval texts and concludes that the main features of the version depicted in the *Seege or Batayle of Troye* have their origins in the *Roman de Troie* (*Seege* lxix).

Before his appearance in the romance as a lady of Elfland, Jubiter also appears as a male deity; he is described in line 326 as “sire Jubiter,” a “false god.” Though various explanations have been advanced for the later shift in gender of Jubiter and the other gods, none of them seems particularly compelling (*Seege* lxviii-lxix n. 6).

insists that “his work is not a version of a classical myth at all, nor derived from commentaries on the *auctores*” (276; italics in the original). But I find Liuzza’s reading of the ultimate use to which these divergences from the Classical texts are put less compelling: he sees the poet as setting up a dichotomy between textuality and orality, or, as he puts it, between “Latin and vernacular, ecclesiastical and courtly, book and song, dead page and living voice” (278). Liuzza believes the poet has aligned himself with orality: “he argues for the superiority of the singer to the writer, of the oral work to the written text” (282); “the king of Fairy,” by contrast, is the antagonist of the poem and “the king of textuality” (282).<sup>17</sup>

I would argue, instead, that through his manipulation of classical sources, the *Orfeo* poet sets an insular literary tradition – whether written or oral – in opposition to a Classical one; in something of a reversal of the motif of *translatio imperii et studii*, he insists on the priority of insular traditions over those of Greece and Rome. Returning briefly to a discussion of Orfeo’s genealogy in lines 43–46 of *Sir Orfeo* may put a sharper point on this claim. In that passage, Pluto, the antagonist in the Classical tale, is represented instead as a forebear of the protagonist in the Middle English text: “His fader was comen of King Pluto” (43). The assimilation of Pluto to the lineage of a mortal, English king may evoke older traditions in which pagan gods were incorporated into the genealogies of historical rulers, but here it also effectively domesticates Greek mythology, aligning it with the realm of the human and the quotidian in the poem.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, the poet reserves for insular fairylore the role of providing the principal source of wonder and supernatural awe in the poem, a role often allotted in medieval literature to classical narratives and their inhabitants. The poet thereby advances the legendry native to his own island as a wellspring of the *merveilleux* that renders classical mythology sublunary by comparison.

Roy M. Liuzza sees the “king of Fairy” in *Sir Orfeo* as allied with the “dead page” of Classical mythology, but belief in fairies almost certainly constituted part of a living – and largely oral – folk tradition in early fourteenth-century Britain (Fletcher esp. 158–62). The fairies in *Sir Orfeo* are not only representative of a native body of lore the poet is at pains to represent as being at least as ancient as Greek mythology, but for this poet fairies may also epitomize an essential Britishness, in the same way that the shared Roman-Greek mythology of classical literature can emblemize that literary tradition in the eyes of medieval audiences. In the third decade of the fourteenth-century, as the Auchinleck compilers self-consciously sought to assemble a group of literary texts in English that at least in part foregrounded the idea of Englishness, *Sir Orfeo*, with its championing of native funds of story over against that of the

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<sup>17</sup> Liuzza acknowledges the counterintuitive nature of a claim that attributes a valorization of orality to a written text, but he considers this an artifact of the poem itself: “The paradoxical fate of *Sir Orfeo* is to be a text about a song, an ultimately frustrated attempt to express the inexpressible” (284).

<sup>18</sup> As noted above, E. C. Ronquist acknowledges that the reference to “King Juno” may be a scribal error, but he sees the shift in the role of Pluto – from the antagonist of the Classical tale to a forebear of the protagonist in the Middle English text – as enabling the *Orfeo* poet’s most dramatic alteration of the Classical text: “[W]ith Pluto it seems clearer why he has been removed from his position as ruler of the underworld (perhaps retaining the ominousness – MS Harley 3810 makes the ancestor ‘Syr Pilato’). With a change in the nature of the underworld and the way in which Heurodis is captured, it will be easier to recover her completely. The place to which she is taken is an other world kingdom of the undead, ruled by a figure less entrenched in tradition than Pluto or Satan” (101). I believe Ronquist is right to suggest that the Middle English poet seeks in this passage to free himself from some of the restraints of the Classical text (while still invoking its *auctoritas*), but, as I make clear above, I think the change in the identity of Pluto has even more profound implications for an understanding of the Middle English poem.

Mediterranean, may have answered to the compilers' desire for a literature that could put England on the map of world literature.

The role of classical narratives in the shaping of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* is undeniable, even as the exact nature of that role remains open to debate. The intermediary steps in the formation of the work are rather less clear. The majority of Middle English romances in the Auchinleck manuscript are translations from surviving works in Old French, but no known precursor to *Sir Orfeo* has been preserved. Three references to a *lai d'Orpheus* do, however, occur in French romances composed between 1150 and 1220, and they are widely accepted as evidence that such a text once existed. A. J. Bliss provides the most influential and sustained discussion of these passages in his edition of *Sir Orfeo*, arguing that they bear witness to "a genuine Breton *lai*," in other words, a musical piece composed by Breton minstrels; Bliss considers this lost work a "primarily instrumental" one that might or might not have included words (xxxii). Ultimately, he hypothesizes, *Sir Orfeo* "was translated from an O[ld] F[rench] or A[nglo] N[orman] narrative *lai* based on the *conte* accompanying a Breton *lai* of Orpheus" (xli).

For Bliss, as for some more recent critics, the three references to the *Lai d'Orpheus* do double duty: they bear witness to a lay fashioned by Bretons that had Orpheus as its main focus, and they also provide evidence for a French text – based on the Breton work – that ultimately gave rise to the Middle English lay. A passage from a recent on-line article by Bella Millet provides a usefully concise overview of the schema sketched out by Bliss, and demonstrates that his narrative of the evolution of *Sir Orfeo* is still very much alive in some critical quarters today:

As the names of the characters suggest, one source of the Middle English romance was the classical legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. Before the narrative was turned into Middle English, however, it had already merged with legends of the Celtic underworld, probably in Brittany. . . . There are references in French romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to a Breton *lai* of Orpheus. . . . Internal evidence suggests that the Middle English version had as its immediate source an Old French narrative *lai* (now lost) in octosyllabic couplets.

Some contemporary scholars probably would not accept uncritically claims for the specifically Breton origins of the poem. Nevertheless, the possibility that *Sir Orfeo* might be a translation from a French original has occasioned surprisingly little skepticism in recent scholarship. For example, Andrea G. Pisani Babich, in a 1998 article on *Sir Orfeo*, refers to the role played in the poem's genesis by "the anonymous poet of the *Lai d'Orpheus*" (477-78). And Jean-Michel Roessli writes in the *postface* to his 1999 French translation of John Block Friedman's *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*: "*Sire Orfée remonte sans doute à une source française perdue, peut-être le Lai d'Orpheus*" ("Sir Orfeo goes back without doubt to a lost French source, perhaps the *Lai d'Orpheus*"; 332). Among recent critics, only Seth Lerer has seriously called into question the existence of a French original of *Sir Orfeo* (99); in response to Bliss's claim that the flying buttresses in the description of the fairy castle ("butras"; 361) are more likely to be the invention of a French poet than an English one, Lerer contends that "[t]he poem's vocabulary grows richly French at this moment not because of the limits of translation, but rather out of the demands of craft" (99). But Lerer's remarks are made only in passing, and no sustained and

critical reexamination of the evidence for the *Lai d'Orpheus* has yet been made.<sup>19</sup> Here, I will review the evidence for the existence of a French precursor to the Middle English poem, and suggest that the French *Lai d'Orpheus* was in all probability a collaborative literary fiction that had no existence independent of its title; the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, then, is likely to have had its genesis as a response to the references to the *Lai d'Orpheus* rather than as a translation of that work.

Before turning to the evidence for the existence of the *Lai d'Orpheus*, I will now briefly examine the linguistic evidence that *Sir Orfeo* was translated from a French text. A. J. Bliss points out four words or phrases that may speak to the existence of a French original: the use of the titles “Dame” (lines 52, 63, 322, etc.) and “Sir” (120, 518, 543, etc.); the name “Traciens” (lines 47, 50), which looks like an Old French adjectival form; the French expression *en exile* (line 493); and the expression “fowe & gris” (line 241), meaning “variegated and grey fur” which seems to be a hybrid translation of the French *vair et gris*, with *gris* preserved to maintain the original rhyme with “biis” in the next line (*Sir Orfeo* xl). Bliss concludes: “Taken singly, none of these points is convincing, but their sum is impressive” (*Sir Orfeo* xl). However, the use of such borrowings from French is very common in Middle English of the fourteenth century; in particular, the employment of “Dame” and “Sir” as titles has to be considered part of English usage by the time of the poem’s likely composition, as Bliss concedes (xl). The occurrence of four such borrowings in a poem that was probably over 600 lines in length in its original form is wholly unremarkable and provides no evidence for the existence of a French precursor. Marie-Thérèse Brouland has recently expanded Bliss’s list to include dozens of terms and expressions. Many of the items she cites as evidence for the influence of French on the language of the poem are unfortunately words already well established in Middle English by the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries, such as “beste,” “castel,” “chamber,” “cité,” “conseyl,” “merci,” “roche,” etc. (373). Unaccountably, she makes no attempt to differentiate such common loan words from more intriguing items like “en exile.”<sup>20</sup> Brouland’s additions to Bliss’s list do not advance his claims, and the argument that the poem bears unmistakable signs of having been translated from French remains unsupported.

The three allusions to a *Lai d'Orpheus* in earlier French romances would appear to provide more compelling evidence for the existence of a French forerunner to *Sir Orfeo*. The earliest reference may be that in *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, written some time after 1150 (D’Orbigny xvii), and this romance has been cited as evidence for the early date of the *Lai d'Orpheus* (Brouland 373). But the scene including the mention of the *Lai d'Orpheus* occurs in a lengthy addition unique to just one of the four extant manuscripts, namely text A (Paris, B.N., fr.

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<sup>19</sup> In his collection *Readings in Medieval Poetry*, A. C. Spearing writes that “[t]he poet of *Sir Orfeo*, [sic] was not ‘a Gaelic or Breton storyteller’; he was an Englishman of the late thirteenth-century who wrote not far from London” (71). However, Spearing does not appear to be challenging the existence of a French original of the poem, but instead insisting on the historical and geographical specifics pertaining to the translator of the English text.

<sup>20</sup> The utter redundancy of the greater part of Brouland’s list also serves to occlude her rather more interesting remarks on the third-to-last line of *Sir Orfeo*, which reads, “Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note” (602). Brouland comments that the line “seems to be a vague recollection of line 886 of the *lai Guigemar* (Bone en est a oïr la note) by Marie de France” (*semble bien être une réminiscence du vers 886 du lai de Guigemar* (Bone en est a oïr la note) *de Marie de France*; 373). *Bone en est a oïr la note* can be translated as “the note is good to hear.”

375, ff. 247v-254b), dated to 1288 (D'Orbigny 5-6).<sup>21</sup> It is unclear therefore whether the passage in *Floire et Blanchefleur* represents the oldest or the youngest of the three witnesses to the *Lai*. The next such allusion appears in the *Lai de l'Espine*, probably composed in the final quarter of the twelfth century (*Lai de l'Espine* 259), and the last occurs in the *Prose Lancelot*, compiled some time between 1215 and 1220 (*Lancelot-Grail* I:xv). The number of references and their persistence over approximately 75 years might seem to indicate a widespread familiarity with the work; Marie-Thérèse Brouland, for instance, comments: *Trois mentions qui ne viennent pas du même poète mais de trois auteurs différents, lesquels ont choisi de le citer dans leur écrits, une sorte d'hommage à un lai populaire digne de remembrance. Ce lai ne semble pas hypothétique, à cause de cette récurrence de nom* ("Three mentions that do not come from the same poet but from three different authors who have chosen to cite it in their writings – [that is] a sort of homage to a popular *lai* worthy of remembrance"; 41).<sup>22</sup> However, an examination of the context of the allusions to the *Lai d'Orpheus* in each of the three romances suggests that the scene involving the *Lai* had become to a certain extent conventional; as I will argue, it is likely therefore that intertextual borrowing rather than widespread familiarity best explains the frequency with which the *lai* is mentioned.

A. J. Bliss identifies the allusion to the *Lai d'Orpheus* in the romance *Floire et Blanchefleur* as the "earliest reference" available (*Sir Orfeo* xxxi), and I will begin my review of the evidence for the *lai* with that work.<sup>23</sup> The plot of *Floire et Blanchefleur* concerns two children: the boy Floire, who is the son of the Muslim king of Spain; and the girl Blanceflor, who is the daughter of a Christian princess taken captive by Floire's father. Born on the same day and raised together, they fall deeply in love, and Floire's concerned parents have him sent away to his aunt while they secretly sell Blanceflor into slavery in the East. Once Floire returns to his father's court, he is told that Blanceflor has died, and he becomes deeply depressed. The king, perhaps seeking to turn the young man's thoughts away from his beloved, hires a magician to entertain the court.<sup>24</sup> Among the wonders the latter produces is a golden statue capable of playing the *lai* of Orpheus on the harp:

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<sup>21</sup> Of the three remaining texts of *Floire et Blanchefleur*, two are complete in themselves: that in B (Paris, B. N., fr. 1447, ff. 1r-20v), dated to the early fourteenth century; and that in C (Paris, B. N., fr. 12562, ff. 69r-89r), dated to the fifteenth century (D'Orbigny 5-6). The earliest remaining text, V (Vatican, Palatinus, lat. 1971, ff. 85r-90v), is fragmentary and dated to the early thirteenth century (D'Orbigny 7).

<sup>22</sup> Compare the comments of George Lyman Kittredge, made almost exactly a century before those of Brouland: "These two passages show that the *Lai d'Orphéus* was well known and popular" (181). Kittredge refers only to the passages in *Floire et Blanchefleur* and *Lai de l'Espine*; he appears to be unfamiliar with the later citation in the *Prose Lancelot*.

<sup>23</sup> Bliss gives the likely date of composition of *Floire et Blanchefleur* as "the third quarter of the twelfth century" (xxxix), apparently basing that information on the 1856 edition of the romance edited by E. du Méril. More recent commentators, such as Jean-Luc Leclanche, whose edition I cite above, tend to place the date of composition at roughly the middle of the twelfth century (D'Orbigny page 11).

<sup>24</sup> The king's motivations for hiring the magician are never made explicit within the text; they are however hinted at by the fact that he calls a halt to the performance when he notices that his son – too overcome with sorrow for the death of Blanceflor to watch the entertainment – has left the hall where it is taking place (D'Orbigny lines 868-73).

Une ymage i avoit formee,  
d'or estoit, grant com un vilains.  
Une harpe tint en ses mains  
et harpe le lai d'Orpheÿ;  
onques nus hom plus n'en oï  
et le montee et l'avalee;  
cil qui l'oënt, molt lor agree. (D'Orbigny lines 852-58)

[He had made a statue there,  
it was of gold, as large as a peasant.  
It has a harp in its hand  
and it harps the lay of Orpheus;  
no man had ever heard in it more  
of a rising and a falling melody;  
it pleases those who hear it.]

The exact nature of the statue's lay as presented here is difficult to ascertain. A. J. Bliss believes that this reference to the *Lai d'Orpheÿ*, as well as the other two, provides evidence that it belonged to the genre of the Breton *lais* – a group of “songs” in which “the music was at least as important as the words” (*Sir Orfeo* xxviii). For those *lais* that had no vocal component, Bliss maintains, the performers would relate *cuntes*, stories “in explanation of their *lais*”; narrative *lais* – such as those of Marie de France – supposedly were based on such *cuntes* (*Sir Orfeo* xxix). But in the passage above, the verb *harper* indicates only an instrumental performance on the harp and would not normally imply vocal accompaniment. In fact nothing in the description of the statue's performance indicates that a text of any kind was associated with the piece.

Admittedly, the manner in which the poet alludes to the lay would appear to indicate that he expects his audience to be familiar with the work, and this has no doubt bolstered critics' belief in its actual existence. The casual introduction of the work's title and the accompanying use of the definite article would appear to mark the lay as a known quantity. And, presumably, if an *instrumental* piece were in some way associated with the myth of Orpheus, it would have to be well known among the statue's fictive audience before its Orphic identity could be easily recognized. However, do we need to assume that this lay was any more “real” than the *ymage d'or* that performed it? The allusion to the composition might well be nothing more than an artifact of the poet's own craft, intended to make his depiction of the Spanish court more believable by embedding it within a set of references to its own (fictional) cultural milieu.

The argument that the reference to the *Lai d'Orpheÿ* represents an extant work familiar to the contemporary audience of *Floire et Blanchefleur* would gain more credence if it could be demonstrated that a knowledge of the actual *content* of the lay would enhance understanding of other aspects of the plot of the romance. On the surface level of the narrative, the naming of the lay in the magician scene seems gratuitous, and it bears no obvious relationship to later events in the text. The allusion may, however, provide a subtext for some of the most important elements in the larger plot of the romance. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has shown that in the French *romans antiques* – the *Roman de Thèbes*, the *Roman d'Enéas* and the *Roman de Troie* – allusions to classical mythology, often in the form of ecphrasis or digression, may allow the prefiguring of

potential elements of the plot, the nuancing of majoring themes, or the surfacing of transgressive elements in the romance (31, 38). The invocation of the myth of Orpheus in *Floire and Blanchefleur* – probably composed around the same time as the earlier *romans antiques* – might be said to fulfill a similar role. Later in the romance, Floire travels to Babiloine to rescue Blanceflor from her captivity at the hands of the *amiraile* or emir, who plans to marry her. Floire and Blanceflor are caught *in flagrante delicto* in the latter’s chamber by the *amiraile* himself and are sentenced to death; it is only after an emotional scene before the assembled court and the intercession of various noblemen that the *amiraile* allows the two lovers to go free not far from the end of the romance. These plot elements obviously find parallels in the myth of Orpheus: Eurydice has already died when Orpheus sets out on his quest and Floire is under the belief that Blanceflor has died when he hears the *Lai d’Orpheu*; in both narratives the male lover attempts to rescue his female beloved from a powerful lord, and in both cases the eventual (if temporary) freedom of at least one of the lovers turns on the compassion of the power figure. The deployment of the myth of Orpheus just as the main plot-business of the romance is about to get underway might serve more than one purpose: it could announce the theme of the perilous rescue of the lover and raise the specter of Floire’s potential failure in his quest; it could also serve to foreground a comparison between the lord of the underworld and the *amiraile* of Babiloine. In any case, access to the potential meanings of the Orphic intertext, as represented by the lay, would not in any way depend on knowledge of the suppositious content of the lay itself; mere familiarity with the Ovidian narrative of Orpheus would be sufficient. Nothing prevents the mention of the lay from enriching the thematic resonances of the narrative even if the *Lai d’Orpheu* is itself fictitious.

If an early dating of this scene of *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur* can be sustained, the use of the sort of allusion to classical mythology represented by the *Lai d’Orpheu* can be seen as typical of the romances produced in the same period. But the question of dating also raises some serious challenges to the role this romance has typically been thought to play in our understanding of the evolution of *Sir Orfeo*. If the scene including the performance of the statue is a genuinely early and integral component of the romance, the fact that the first reference to the *Lai d’Orpheu* occurs within the context of a fictional cultural milieu that is both Spanish and Muslim seems strikingly at odds with the supposed narrative content of the original Breton lay itself, which we would expect to be concerned with Celtic fairylore. Furthermore, despite Bliss’s insistence on the “Breton” origins of the lay, nothing in this scene bespeaks the influence of Brittany or, in fact, of any other Celtic land. One might then be tempted to speculate that the “Celtic” touches included in the two other French romances are a later elaboration upon this scene. If on the other hand the portion of text A in which the lay appears is the invention of a late interpolator, we have to consider the possibility that it may have been composed as late as the manuscript itself, which, as I mentioned above, can be dated fairly precisely to 1288. A date of composition from the late thirteenth century begins to overlap with the likely range of composition for *Sir Orfeo* itself, potentially disqualifying *Floire et Blanchefleur* as a useful source for understanding the provenance of the Middle English poem.

A second reference to the *Lai d’Orpheu* appears in the anonymous Breton lay called the *Lai de l’Espine*, dated to the very end of the twelfth century (*Lai de l’Espine* page 259). The opening of the lay bears a number of structural resemblances to *Floire et Blanchefleur*. The plot concerns two children: the boy is the son of a king of Brittany (or perhaps Britain) and a

concubine; the girl is the daughter of the queen by a previous husband who was also, apparently, a king. Close in age and raised together, these two children also fall deeply in love as they enter adolescence. One day the queen discovers them lying together on the young man's bed, and they are thenceforth kept apart from each other. Soon after their separation, the king and his son attend a courtly entertainment at which an Irish harper plays the *Lai d'Orphey* as well as an otherwise unknown lay called the *Lai d'Aielis*. As reproduced by A. J. Bliss, the passage appears as follows:

Le lai escoutent d'Aielis  
Que uns Ireis sone en la rote;  
Molt doucement le chante et note.  
Empres celui autre encomence,  
Nus d'eus ne noise ne ne tence;  
Le lai lor sone d'Orphei,  
Et quant icel lai ot feni,  
Li chevalier sempres parlerent,  
Les aventures ramembrerent  
Que soventes feiz ont veues  
Qu'en Bretagne sont avenues. (*Sir Orfeo xxxi*)<sup>25</sup>

[They listen to the lai of Aielis  
That an Irishman plays on the rote;  
He sings and plays it very sweetly.  
After that he begins another,  
None of them makes any noise or disturbance;  
He plays the lay of Orpheus for them,  
And when he had finished that lay,  
The knights spoke at once,  
They recalled adventures  
That they had often seen  
That had occurred in Brittany [or Britain]].<sup>26</sup>

Later at the same feast, a young woman tells of the marvelous events that occur annually on the night of St. John's Mass at the *gué de l'Espine* and claims that no cowardly knight could spend the night there at that time. The young man then publicly announces his intention to do just that;

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<sup>25</sup> A. J. Bliss reproduces this passage from the edition of *Lai de l'Espine* by R. Zenker in *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* xvii (1893), 233-55.

<sup>26</sup> The translations here and in the next excerpt from *Espine* are mine, though I have consulted the translation of the same lines by Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook in their edition of the lay in *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays* (lines 176-86; pages 222-25). Burgess and Brook have preferred to use the S text of the lay (page 200), but their transcription differs noticeably from that of Zenker, making it difficult for me to use their text as a translation of the text for the excerpt that Bliss quotes from Zenker's edition of S.

his success in the adventures of the ford will lead to his reunion with the young woman and their marriage.

Here, as in the first passage, the exact nature of the performance of the *Lai d'Orphey* itself remains unclear: the text notes only that the harper *sonne* the *lai* – which could refer merely to playing a melody upon the rote. But – in the version of *Espine* quoted by Bliss – the poet also uses the word *sonne* in reference to the earlier reference to the *Lai d'Aielis*, and there the verb is subsequently put in apposition with the words *chante et note*, suggesting the possibility that *sonner* in the poet's usage can encompass the production of both a vocal line and instrumental accompaniment. It is not impossible, therefore, that the musician also sings to his own accompaniment when playing the *Lai d'Orphey*.

It should be noted, however, that two manuscripts containing *Lai de L'Espine* exist. Bliss cites the 1893 edition of R. Zenker, who employed the S text – Paris, B. N. nouv. acq. fr. 1104 – as the base text for his edition. Dated to the fourteenth century, S is the younger of the two witnesses, while the older B text – Paris, B. N. fr. 1553 – is dated to the late thirteenth century (Löfstedt 253). The latter has a significantly different reading for the same passage:

Le lai escoutent d'Aiëlis  
que uns Irois doucement note,  
mout le sonnë ens en sa route.  
Apriés celi, d'autre conmenche,  
nus d'iaus n'i noise ne n'i tenche;  
le lai lor sone d'Orpheÿ,  
e qant icel lai ot feni,  
li chevalier après parlerent,  
les aventures raconterent  
que soventes fois sont venues  
e par Bretagne sont veües. (*Lai de l'Espine* lines 178-88)

[They listen to the lay of Aiëlis  
that an Irishman sweetly plays,  
he plays it loudly on his rote.  
After that, he begins another,  
none of them makes noise or causes a disturbance;  
he plays the lay of Orpheus for them,  
and when he had finished that lay,  
the knights afterward talked,  
recounted the adventures  
that oftentimes had come  
and that had been seen throughout Brittany [or: Britain]].

In this earlier version of the text, no explicit reference to singing occurs. The verbs *note* (179) and *sonnë* (180) appear in apposition, leaving the possibility, at least, that the performance of the *Lai d'Aielis* is purely instrumental. Mary Prudence O'Hara Tobin notes that manuscript S “is known for its improvements and modifications” (*est connu pour ses améliorations et ses*

modifications; *Lai de l'Espine* page 255). The insistence on a vocal performance of the *Lai d'Aielis* may represent one of these “improvements.” This possibility seems only heightened by the fact that MS Paris, B. N. nouv. acq. fr. 1104 is, somewhat remarkably, a collection of 24 lays (Tobin page 11); the alterations to the text might reflect the fourteenth-century compiler’s own interest in the lay as a coherent genre and his sense of the “proper” performance of a lay. Once again, there is no clear evidence for the association of the *Lai d'Orphey* with a *text* – an unambivalently verbal element – that would reflect the narrative peculiarities of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*

Unlike *Floire et Blanchefleur*, *Lai de l'Espine* explicitly links the performance of the *Lai d'Orphey* with a setting in *Bretaigne* (line 15) and with a Celtic – in this case, Irish – musician (line 179). In *Lai de l'Espine*, as in many Breton *lais* in Old French, the word *Bretaigne* remains stubbornly ambiguous: it could refer either to Brittany or to (Great) Britain, and no internal evidence within the work serves to disambiguate the matter.<sup>27</sup> Generally, scholars have interpreted a naked allusion to *Bretaigne* or *li Bretun* in the Old French lays as a reference to Brittany or the Bretons, and there is no particular evidence to indicate otherwise in *Lai de l'Espine*. It is rather less clear, however, that a Breton setting for *Lai de l'Espine* would necessarily imply a Breton provenance for the *Lay d'Orphey*, as A. J. Bliss has claimed: “In [the first passage from *Lai de l'Espine*] the word *sempres* implies that the knights *went on* recalling the adventures that had happened in Brittany, and this would be meaningless unless the *lai* had been a Breton *lai*” (xxxii). In other words, according to Bliss, the word *sempres* in line 185 indicates that the *Lai d'Orphey* pertains in some way to the *aventures* that occurred in Brittany and that the men of the court are continuing a discussion of those events in their postprandial conversations. Bliss’s interpretation of the meaning of *sempres* seems forced here: the word can mean “immediately, at once,” and Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook render it with

<sup>27</sup> The prologue of *Lai de l'Espine* is interesting in this regard, but not ultimately helpful. The poet claims that proof of the truthfulness of the *lai* is preserved in the church of Saint Aaron at *Carlion*:

les estores en trai avant  
 ki encore sont a Carlion  
 ens el moustier Saint Aaron  
 e en Bretaigne sont eües  
 e en plusors lius conneües. (*Lai de l'Espine* 6-10)

[I bring forward the stories  
 that are still at Caerleon  
 in the church of Saint Aaron  
 and which have been possessed in Brittany [or Britain]  
 and have been known of in many places.]

With *estores* (6), the poet would appear to be referring to written copies of the *lai* or of accounts on which it is based. *Carlion* (7) seems to be a reference to Caerleon, in Wales. Wales itself can, of course, be considered part of *Bretaigne*, in which case lines 9-10 – which claim that these *estores* are well known throughout *Bretaigne* and other places – would be focusing on the familiarity of the accounts beyond Carlion. On the other hand, one could equally interpret the reference to *Bretaigne* in line 9 as an allusion to Brittany, in which case the final two lines of the passage would be emphasizing the familiarity of the accounts in the Celtic lands on *both* sides of the Channel.

“immediately” in their recent translation of the S text (*Espine* line 183; page 225).<sup>28</sup> This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that the earlier B manuscript simply has *apriés*, “afterwards,” in the same position. Nothing in the passage indicates that the content of the *Lai d’Orpheu* necessarily pertains to Brittany or its history.

In an argument similar to Bliss’s, Marie-Thérèse Brouland claims that the passage indicates that both the *Lai d’Aiëlis* and the *Lai d’Orpheu* were propagated by Irish musicians: *Le texte est clair, et ne laisse aucun doute sur le fait que deux lais musicaux, le lai d’Aiëlis et un certain lai d’Orpheu, étaient connus des ménestrels irlandais, puisqu’ils faisaient partie de leur répertoire* (“The text is clear, and leaves no doubt about the fact that two musical lays, the lay of *Aiëlis* and a certain lay of *Orpheus* were known to Irish minstrels, because they made up part of their repertoire”; 42). The text is indeed clear on this point, and yet the fictional nature of the *Lai de l’Espine* should by itself be sufficient to raise doubts about the factuality of any particular aspect of the text.

Furthermore, we need to consider the possibility that the account of the performance of the *Lai d’Orpheu* in both *Floire et Blanchefleur* and *Lai de l’Espine* is part of a larger structural pattern shared between the two romances. As I noted above, both *Floire et Blanchefleur* and *Lai de l’Espine* concern a boy and girl who are raised together and then fall in love as they enter adolescence; in both texts, the parents of the children – a king and queen – attempt to separate them. The resemblance in the plots of the two works does not, by itself, constitute evidence for a close genetic relationship between them: this particular theme appears to have been popular in Old French romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and *Piramus et Tisbé* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* also possess the same basic structure. However, only *Lai de l’Espine* and the A text of *Floire et Blanchefleur* share the reference to the *Lai d’Orpheu*, and in both texts that allusion appears in the context of an evening of courtly entertainment; moreover, in both works the scene of the performance of the *Lai d’Orpheu* serves in some way as a catalyst that leads the young man to undertake actions that lead to a reunion with his beloved. And in both works, one of the two young people prays, shortly after the performance of the lay, that they will soon be reunited: in *Floire et Blanchefleur*, Floire, contemplating his own death by suicide, asks God in lines 911-924 – 56 lines after the mention of the lay – to let him join Blanchefleur *en Camp Flori* (d’Orbigny 923); in *Lai de l’Espine*, the young woman asks God in lines 239-52 – 97 lines after the mention of the lay – to reunite her with her lover. Beyond this point, the plots of the two works begin to differ markedly, but the structural similarities in the beginnings of both texts are so striking that it seems likely one of the two has influenced the other. Therefore, the shared references to the *Lai d’Orpheu* may attest more readily to intertextual borrowing than to the widespread familiarity of a particular lay concerning Orpheus.

A third reference to the *Lai d’Orpheu* occurs in the early thirteenth-century *Prose Lancelot*. Having been accused of treason by another knight for the slaying of Meleagant, the son of King Bademagu of Gorre, Lancelot makes his way to Bademagu’s court on the feast day

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<sup>28</sup> Though Bliss’s reading of *sempres* here seems to me unlikely, it is not impossible that the redactor of the S manuscript has altered the original reading of the text in the hopes of producing one similar to that provided by Bliss. As I noted above, the apparent substitution of *chante et note* in the S manuscript for *sonne* in B might be calculated to present the scene in a manner more nearly aligned with popular notions of the performance of Breton *lais*.

of Saint Mary Magdalene in order to answer his accuser's challenge. Lancelot arrives on the appointed day in the midst of a celebration of the anniversary of the king's coronation:

Et cel jor I fu li rois Baldemagus et tenoit sa cort fors del chastel en une most bele prairie; si voloit celui jor fere molt grant feste, kar c'estoit la remembrance de son coronement, por ce que a celui jor avoit esté coronés: si avoit mandé tos les haus homes de sa terre et ot fet tendre en la prairie ses paveillons por le chaut qui grans estoit si comme en jugnet, et ja avoient mengié et li un et li autre. Et li rois fu a une part en son paveillon qui ert tendus al chief de la prairie, loing des autres, et ot avec lui grant partie de ses haus homes; et il fu assis en .I. fauestuel d'ivoire qui molt estoit riches et devant lui avoit .I. harpeor qui li notoit le lai d'Orfei; si plaisoit tant al roi a escoter qu'il n'i avoit nul qui osast mot dire. Et lors vint Lancelos cele part et conut bien le tref le roi entre les autres a l'aigle d'or qui desus estoit; et ses chevaux qui estoit fors et delivrés, qui n'avoit mie le jor trop traveillié, commença a henir trop clerement. Et lors saillent des paveillons li pluisor; et quant il voient Lancelot, si li corent a l'estrier por lui aidier a descendre; et quant il fu descendus, si vient devant le roi sans oster son hialme, por ce qu'il ne voloit pas que l'en le coneust; si salue le roi et dist si haut que tuit le porent oïr.  
(*Lancelot: roman en prose* 2:241-42)

[King Bademagu was there on the appointed day; he held his court outside the castle in a very beautiful field. He intended to stage a great feast that day because it was the anniversary of his coronation – he had been crowned on that same day. And so he had summoned all the most important men in the land and had tents erected in the fields because of the heat; it was hot, as it was July. Everyone had just eaten.

The king was on one side in his tent, which was erected at the bottom of the field far from the others; he had a large contingent of his noblemen with him. He was seated on a splendid ivory throne; before him was a harpist who played the lay of Orpheus for him. The king took such pleasure in listening that no one dared utter a word.

At that instant, Lancelot appeared and recognized the king's tent among all the others by the golden eagle on top.] (*Lancelot-Grail* 3:66-67)

The thematic relevance of a lay of Orpheus to other aspects of the romance seems rather less marked here than in the other two works I have just examined. The harpist's performance certainly enhances the solemnity of Bademagu's observance of his royal anniversary, but no later events of the romance in the sections involving Bademagu provide a clear parallel to elements of the Orphic narrative. This scene, like those in the two earlier romances, is part of the depiction of a royal entertainment, and it seems likely that by the thirteenth century the *Lai d'Orpheus* had become a recognizable and perhaps even conventional aspect of a romance set-piece involving a musical performance before a king.

Other features of Orfeo's performance before the fairy king also answer to the conventions of the *lai* performance examined earlier in this chapter, and indeed many details of this description echo the performance of the *Lai d'Orpheus* in the *Lancelot en prose*. In the *Lancelot*, the harper's performance takes place in a *paveillon* as King Baudemagus sits upon a

throne; in *Sir Orfeo*, the performance occurs within the fairy king's "halle" (410), as the king and queen sit in a "tabernacle" (412). The significance of the latter word remains somewhat unclear. Of the various secular meanings the *Middle English Dictionary* assigns to "tabernacle," it applies definition 4c – "a canopied dais" – to the occurrence of the word in *Sir Orfeo*. But the passage does not actually state that the king and queen sit upon a raised area, and nothing militates against assigning definition 4b – "a small canopied or roofed structure either freestanding within another structure or projecting from a wall" – to the word as used here; the latter definition would evoke more strongly the *paveillon* of King Baudemagus. In any case, the fairy king's "tabernacle" serves the same function as Baudemagus's throne: it sets the king and queen off from the rest of the court, heightening the sense of authority that attaches to them and emphasizing the degree to which they become the principal focus of Orfeo's performance. Both the human and fairy monarchs derive great enjoyment from the harper's music, and in both passages the respective groups of courtiers pay careful attention to the performance – though Baudemagus's nobles seem most intent upon not interfering with their king's pleasure.<sup>29</sup>

The inventory of parallels between the performance scenes in *Sir Orfeo* and the *Lancelot en prose* may not be sufficient to support a specific claim of borrowing, but the compositional features of this episode in the English poem do seem to respond very particularly to the reputation of the *Lai d'Orpheu* in French romances. Here, as in *Floire et Blanceflor*, the *Lai de l'Espine* and the *Lancelot*, the artistic achievement represented by the figure of Orpheus becomes assimilated to a framework that foregrounds emblems of kingly authority. But precisely by reenacting both the *lai* of *Orpheu* and its associations, *Sir Orfeo* depicts, at its own most climactic moment, the *primal* encounter of king and minstrel – a scene that claims for itself, retroactively, the role of furnishing the template for numerous episodes of courtly entertainment in French and English romance. Moreover, while the French romances can only allude to the lay of Orpheus, the English poem permits access to a primal British past in which the trappings of insular folklore aspire to the status of mythology. *Sir Orfeo* therefore allows the recuperation of the actual text of the archetypal narrative.

Given the striking narrative peculiarities of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* – the poem's insular setting, its substitution of native fairylore for Greek mythology, and its happy ending – one might expect an allusion to the work's ostensible French (or Breton) precursor to remark upon those features. But the three references to a *Lai d'Orpheu* examined above fail to mention the narrative content of the lay in any way. No narrative except that of the classical myth can be shown to have been associated with the *Lai d'Orpheu*. It is therefore possible that before the composition of *Sir Orfeo*, the *Lai d'Orpheu* consisted of nothing more than the title to an

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<sup>29</sup> Commenting on the role of harpers and harping in *Sir Orfeo*, Alan J. Fletcher writes: "Within the narrative, it is granted specifically to harping to retrieve stability and to be the instrument of a deliverance at once private and public" (167). And in a footnote to this comment, he adds, "The attitude of the fairy king to harping might be contrasted: for him, it seems that all that he appreciates in it is its aesthetic surface" (167 n. 71). It's difficult to determine which portion of the text Fletcher is responding to in his assessment of the fairy king's reaction; the latter's appreciation of the performance clearly parallels that of the human king Baudemagus, and the fairy courtiers, unlike their human counterparts, respond directly to the allure of the music. Fletcher's remarks seem to me one more case in which critics have attributed an inherent "superficiality" to fairyland and its inhabitants despite a lack of textual support for that perspective. I address this tendency in *Sir Orfeo* criticism at some length in Chapter Four.

ostensibly prestigious – but wholly fictional – ancient lay, as “lost” to contemporary romancers as it is to us.<sup>30</sup>

The scholarly acceptance of the *Lai d’Orphey* as an actual – if unfortunately irrecoverable – text proceeds from a willingness to accept at face value descriptions of the performance of the *lais bretons* provided in romances and the lays themselves. Christopher Page has challenged the reading of such passages as historical documents, pointing to their highly conventional nature and arguing that they constitute part of an elaborate “myth of the *lais de Bretagne*” that was born of a desire to exploit the twelfth-century vogue for narratives with Celtic associations (96, 106-7). And evidence in support of Page’s perspective can be discovered even in the work of those who espouse a more traditionalist view of the origins of the Breton lay. A. J. Bliss, for instance, notes that in the case of the many Breton lays referred to in romances, “usually nothing more is known than the bare title” (*Sir Orfeo* xxx). Constance Bullock-Davies, too, has expressed wonder that so little knowledge has survived about the actual texts of the original lays sung by the Bretons: “One of the strangest things about Breton lays is the total lack of any mention or definition of the form of the word-content, even by early writers, including Marie de France, who claimed to have known something about them” (25). In light of Page’s remarks, we should take more seriously the possibility that many of the Breton lays mentioned in Old French texts never had an existence beyond their titles, but were instead the product of a collaborative literary fiction. Of course, the texts of certain lays referred to in romances have survived independently of those works: Alfred Ewert notes that the *lai* of *Chievrefueil* by Marie de France is – apparently – referred to a number of times in other works (Marie de France 177); and *Graelent*, a *lai anonyme* for which the text survives, is mentioned in one manuscript of the romance *Anseïs de Carthage* (Foulet, “Marie de France” 183 n. 1). Nevertheless, we cannot always be sure that the composition of a given lay antedates the texts that refer to it. And – more problematically – in some cases an allusion to the title of a particular Breton lay might well have provided the inspiration for the later composition of a text bearing that title. Such a scenario

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<sup>30</sup> Arguments similar to the one I make here have been made about other oft-cited but “lost” lays, but they have not, over all, found widespread acceptance; scholars have generally been unwilling to interpret a relatively large number of references to the title of a given lay as anything but evidence for the existence of that lay. A good example is provided by the critical history of the lay of Guiron/Goron/Gurun. This title is mentioned five times in twelfth- and thirteenth-century French sources, the earliest and perhaps most prominent reference occurring in the *Roman de Tristan* by Thomas (lines 834-47). In *Strengleikar*, the thirteenth-century assemblage of Old Norse *lais* – most of them translated from French originals – there exists a text for a lay called *Gurun*. The brief description of the *lai* given in Thomas clearly refers to a narrative different from that of the Norse work, and the other four references to a lay called *Goron* in Old French provide little more than the title. Scholars have been at pains to reconcile the two sets of references, and in the introduction to *Gurun* in their 1979 edition of *Strengleikar*, Robert Cook and Matthias Tveitane provide the following summary of the two main arguments: “Lucien Foulet [*Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie* 32 (1909): 261-63] suggests that the *Guirun* described by Thomas is a fiction, but, as Ezio Levi argues [*Studi Romanzi* 14 (1917): 150-59], the references to a *lai* of *Goron* in *Anseïs de Carthage*, *Bataille Loquifer* (both twelfth century), Gerbert’s continuation of *Perceval*, and the first branch of the *Roman de Renart*, testify to its actual existence and, indeed, its great popularity” (168). Despite the lack of any detail about the nature of *Goron* in the four later mentions of the *lai* in Old French, Cook and Tveitane accept these references as sufficient testimonial to the familiarity and popularity of the work. Here, as in the very similar case of the *Lai d’Orphey*, one should not discount too readily the possibility that the Norse work – or a lost French text from which it has been translated – represented an attempt to give life to a title that had haunted earlier French literature.

would help to explain why the titles of a number of lays seem to refer to two different works. For example, besides Marie's own poem, there exists a different lyric *lai* also named *Chievrefueil*, as well as two different *lais* named after a Guron or Guirun.<sup>31</sup>

A useful stock feature of the "myth" of the Breton lay, the *Lai d'Orpheus* might have gathered to itself associations with royal entertainments and with narratives involving the rescue of a woman by her male lover. The extant *Sir Orfeo*, then, could have been a product of the desire to capitalize on the prestige of an already legendary but fictional lay by fleshing out the bones of its reputation with an actual narrative. And if *Sir Orfeo* was a work inspired by the *Lai d'Orpheus*, rather than a late version of it, then the poet's engagement with the reputation of the *Lai* can be read not merely as a translation of a particular work, but rather as a response to the myth of the Breton lay in general. Indeed, the scene in which Orfeo plays his harp for the fairy king specifically evokes this link between the poem and the lay genre. Once past the gallery of the undead, Orfeo enters the king's hall proper and offers to play for him; the fairy king challenges him, noting that he had not sent for anyone, but Orfeo, unflappable, merely answers that he is "bot a pouer mistrel" (430), and begins to play:

Bifor þe king he sat adoun	435
& tok his harp so miri of soun,	
& tempref his harp as he wele can,	
& blisseful notes he þer gan,	
þat al þat in þe palays were	
Com to him forto here,	440
& liggef adoun to his fete,	
Hem þenkeþ his melody so swete.	
þe king herkneþ & sitt ful stille;	
To here his gle he haþ gode wille.	
Gode bourde he hadde of his gle;	445
þe riche quen al-so hadde he. ( <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 435-46)	

The text provides no specifics about the melody performed by Orfeo, but the detail of his tuning the harp beforehand – not included in any of the principal classical sources of the Orpheus myth – is reminiscent of scenes of the performance of a *lai* in a number of romances. In the Anglo-Norman *Horn*, for instance, the title character makes a flourish of tuning before playing the *Lai de Guirun*; the French text describes the action with *atempref*, a reflex of the Middle English word, "tempref," used in *Sir Orfeo* (*Horn* 2830; *Sir Orfeo* 437). Lawrence Wright notes that such tuning-preludes, mystifying as they are, appear to be a conventional feature of the description of the playing of a *lai* in particular: "Although tuning is sometimes mentioned in other descriptions of music in Old French, it is a comparatively rare feature in narrative, and the frequency with which it figures in connection with the *lai* suggests that it had a particular importance" (190). Through the small detail of a harp's tempering, the *Orfeo* poet may subtly impute to his own hero the composition of a *lai*. As one of the few Breton lays cited repeatedly

<sup>31</sup> See the previous footnote for a lengthy discussion of the lays named for a Guron or Guirun.

in different Old French romances, the *Lai d'Orphey* appears to have acquired for itself renown as part of a very small body of works whose very names served to evoke the milieu of ancient Celtic Britain. *Floire et Blancheflor*, the *Lancelot en prose*, and *Lai de l'Espine* name only the title of this work, and the apparently irrecoverable nature of the lay's text in these romances serves to enhance a sense of the work's ancientness as well as its associations with the ostensibly distant origins of the Breton lay genre itself. But just as Roy M. Liuzza points out that the hero of the Middle English poem does what the classical Orpheus cannot do by successfully recovering his wife, the text of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* accomplishes what the French romances cannot do by successfully recovering the *narrative* of the lay of Orpheus. The surviving evidence simply does not allow us to decide conclusively whether *Sir Orfeo* was originally composed in French or in English, but, as I argued above, absolutely nothing compels the conclusion that *Sir Orfeo* as we have it today is a translation of a French original. If the poem was first composed in English, as I believe it was, the work may have represented a nationalist challenge to the literary traditions of both the classical languages and French.

The period in which *Sir Orfeo* is likely to have been composed witnessed a marked increase in composition in English and an attendant heightening of English writers' self-consciousness about the relationship between French and English literatures. Although the majority of the romances included alongside *Sir Orfeo* in the Auchinleck manuscript are translations from the French, scholars have recently underscored the significance of the predominance of English in the codex as a whole; Thorlac Turville-Petre claims that the use of English in Auchinleck "does not simply answer a social need but is an expression of the very character of the manuscript, of its passion for England and its pride in being English" (138). In the first half of the fourteenth century, the need to reconstitute a native vernacular literary tradition through translation from French might implicitly acknowledge the past cultural supremacy in Britain of the latter tongue, but it also afforded opportunities for the reappropriation by English writers of icons of "Britishness." A striking example nearly contemporary with the Auchinleck manuscript is provided by Robert Manning of Brunne in his *Chronicle*. Writing some time between 1327 and 1338 (Mannyng 16), Manning notes that the deeds of Arthur are more often recorded in French than in English:

In alle londes wrote men of Arthoure;  
his noble dedis of honoure,  
in France men wrote & 3it write;  
here haf we of him bot lite. (10415-18)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I have here followed the base text given by Sullens in her edition of Mannyng's *Chronicle* (the P manuscript: London, Inner Temple Library, MS Petyt 511), but at this point in the text, the L manuscript (London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS Lambeth 131) furnishes interesting verses not available in P:

Bot herd haue we of him bot lite.  
There fore of hym more men fynde  
In farre bokes als ys kynde  
Than we haue in thys lond  
That we haue ther men hit fond. (Mannyng, page 341)

At the end of a description of a series of Arthur's campaigns in France, Manning notes once again that in that country Arthur's deeds are better known than in his native land:

Per haf men bokes, alle his life,  
þer ere his meruailes kid fulle rife;  
þat we of him here alle rede,  
þer ere þei writen ilk a dede.  
Pise grete bokes, so faire langage,  
writen & spoken on France vsage,  
that neuer was writen þorgh Inglis man [. . .] (10765-71)

In reference to these passages, Turville-Petre comments:

Two things are happening here. One is that Arthur's victory over the French is being associated with current anxieties over Anglo-French relations and the dominance of the French. The other is that Manning is laying claim, as La3amon had done, to Arthur as a hero for 'Englischemen'. He is a hero of 'þys land', and not to be appropriated by the French. (84)

Of course, Arthur has not been appropriated by the French, but is instead "reappropriated" for England by Manning. The *Orfeo* poet, who may have been a contemporary of Manning, undertakes a similar endeavor when he reclaims for "Jnglond" and the English language the oft-cited lay of Orpheus.

Scholars interested in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* have tended to see the references to the *Lai d'Orphey* as nothing more than evidence for the existence of French and Breton precursors to the Middle English poem. One aspect of the deployment of allusions to the *Lai d'Orphey* may provide us with a clue to the thematic resonances that this lay evoked for the original composer of *Sir Orfeo*: the *Lai* quite consistently thematizes the notion of kingship wherever it appears in Old French literature. In all three of the passages I have examined here, the *Lai* is performed before a king within the context of a courtly entertainment. In the *Lancelot en prose*, especially, the presentation of the *Lai d'Orphey* serves as the central element in a thick clustering of the emblems of Baudemagus's sovereignty: it takes place on the anniversary of his coronation, in a tent marked off as the king's own by its position and the royal golden eagle on the top, and before an audience that includes, along with the king, many of his noblemen (*grant partie de ses haus homes*; *Lancelot: roman en prose* 241); the king sits upon an ivory throne (*faudestuel*; 241) during the performance; and the cautious silence of the king's courtiers in the meantime (*n'i avoit nul qui osast mot dire*; 242) provides an index of both the pleasure the king takes in the piece and the degree to which that pleasure seems to be his in particular. The presence of noblemen during the performance – and the ties of political interdependence between the aristocracy and the king that their presence implies – also figures notably in the other two passages. The king in the *Lai de l'Espine* also listens to the *lai* in the company of a number of courtiers (*maint chevalier cortois* 176), and the solemnity accorded the performance of the piece in the *Lancelot en prose* finds an echo in *Espine*, as the courtiers seem to quell their

impulse towards fractiousness while the Irishman plays (*nus d'iaus n'i noise ne n'i tenche* 182). In *Floire et Blanchefleur*, the poet lays much greater emphasis on the description of the magician's marvels than on the audience itself, but even there we learn of the presence of the king's barons in the audience (*baron* 966, 970). However, the *Lai d'Orphey* does consistently evoke the theme of royal sovereignty everywhere that it occurs, and in the two texts that underscore this theme most emphatically – the *Lancelot en prose* and the *Lai de l'Espine* – it is precisely *British* kingship that is at issue: Baudemagus is a king in Britain, and the king in the *Lai de l'Espine* is (apparently) a king of Brittany.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the potential Orphic significance of the *Lai* seem less fully engaged with in these latter two texts. The royal associations of the *Lai* may nevertheless have their origin in the myth of Orpheus as depicted in Ovid or Virgil: at the heart of that narrative lies Orpheus' performance on the lyre before the lord of the underworld. *The Lai d'Orphey*, then, can be seen as an instance of *mise en abyme*: the performance of a musician before the human, mortal king reflects that of Orpheus before a lord who wields the power of life or death over humankind.

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<sup>33</sup> It is admittedly unclear to me exactly *why* the author(s) of the *Lancelot en prose* should lay quite so much emphasis on Baudemagus' kingly authority in the scene involving the *Lai d'Orphey*. The thematic appropriateness of the *lai* to the *Lai de l'Espine* is not, by contrast, as difficult to explain. There, the young man is the son of the king and a concubine (*nes de soignant* 17) and his fitness for the kingship is open to doubt. The young man's success against the fairy knights in the adventure of the ford – which he learns of almost immediately after the performance of the *lai* – dispels any concerns about his abilities. The motif of the recognition of a young man's prowess or nobility as the result of an encounter with faëry is a familiar one in Old French texts – *Lanval*, *Le Bel Inconnu* and other texts participate in the tradition.

## Chapter Four: Reading Fairy Difference

The nature of the relationship between the human and fairy worlds in *Sir Orfeo* remains a central question in scholarship on the poem. The text underscores parallels between the human and fairy kingdoms while simultaneously presenting relations between them as largely antagonistic. It is unsurprising, then, that an important stream of the modern criticism on *Sir Orfeo* views the two realms as standing in some sort of opposition to each other. George Kane was the first to articulate this perspective at any length; writing in 1951, he framed the contrast between the two worlds in decidedly ethical terms: “[T]he mortal characters in the romance are made good and loyal while a boundless suggestion of unexplored evil is ascribed to the otherworld and its inhabitants” (81). The stark, Manichaean complementarity sketched here by Kane admittedly represents an extreme, but many later scholars – generally, though not exclusively, Americans – have tended to view fairyland in an unambivalently negative light. In an article published in 1972, Peter J. Lucas notes that while the human world in the poem “is marked by the strong emotional bonds of private reciprocated love and public loyalty,” the apparent allure of fairyland is deceptive: “The fairy world is described in terms of dazzling artificial beauty (351-76), but behind this attractive façade it is in fact menacing and cruel” (6). And exactly a decade later, Sharon Coolidge added to Lucas’s notion of the superficiality of fairyland the sense that it is essentially unnatural: “The light in this world is derivative; the appearances are false; and all is as unnatural as the negative connotations of the *ympe* tree” (2). Moreover, driving straight toward the conclusion only implied by Kane, Coolidge claims that the nature of the “underworld” in *Orfeo* is “decidedly demonic” (68). In a very influential paper published in 1985, Seth Lerer seems in effect to synthesize the critical perspectives I have already summarized: “This [fairyland] is a world of illusion, whose technical tricks and decorative richness fail to conceal the moral vacuity of its inhabitants” (101). Even R. H. Nicholson, who seemingly rejects a strictly ethical basis for the comparison of the two realms, still sees the poem as founded on a “purposeful opposition of two worlds”; in an essay published the same year as Lerer’s, Nicholson frames the contrast in terms of an orderly, rational society and its irrational counterpart: “[T]he human world of Orfeo’s court [is] a good society deserving of its king; and the faerie world [is one] whose operations are intelligible up to a point, but always as irrational, extra-human force” (178). My sampling of critics who have seen in the poem a contrast between a largely positive depiction of the human realm and a largely negative portrayal of fairyland could be greatly expanded, and later in this chapter I will have cause to examine some recent examples of the same basic perspective; for the present, however, it will suffice to note that a view of the poem characterized by a marked and ethically inflected opposition between its two worlds remains dominant in scholarly commentary.

There are, of course, dissenters – most of them British. Explicitly taking exception to Kane’s view of fairyland as “evil,” Bruce Mitchell, writing in 1964, maintains that “all the evidence apart from the courtyard scene [in the fairy castle] suggests that the faery world is a pleasant place” (156), and on this basis he proposes to read the offending episode, with its gallery of horrors, as “an interpolation by some scribe or minstrel” (157). In an essay from 1973, Edward E. Foster states that “[t]he king of faery is not a representative of malignant evil” (24). Three years later Felicity Riddy goes rather further, declaring that “the poet seems to see the fairy court in no less flattering terms [than the human one]; nowhere in fact does he betray an

attitude towards the fairies that is anything other than approving or awed or a mixture of both” (5). And Corinne Saunders, writing in 1993, stands aside from analyses rooted in an ethical perspective as she calls fairyland “characterized by game-playing and amorality rather than evil” (*Forest* 141). Ruth Evans, too, has recently plotted something of a middle course between the polarities that dominate the criticism; in remarks on *Sir Orfeo* written in 2002, she notes that “while the fairy world is sometimes represented as sinister it is not completely ‘other’ to the kingdom of England” (188). The paper by Riddy is cited with some frequency, but neither her opinion on the relationship between humans and the fairies nor that of the other critics quoted in this paragraph seems to have been widely influential.

The detailed depiction of fairyland in *Sir Orfeo* finds few close parallels in either French or English romance. For the most part, the supernatural characteristics of a fairyland that is described in some detail in a given romance will be muted, and such a realm tends to be comparable in many ways to the mortal lands it adjoins. The rationalized fairylands of longer romances like *Le Bel Inconnu*, *Partonopeus de Blois*, or Chrétien de Troyes’s *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* are typically presented as exotic but terrestrial realms, accessible from and more or less in communication with the world at large; such romance fairylands are often ruled over by a person possessed of magical knowledge, but in other ways indistinguishable from most mortals. By contrast, fairies in most of the Breton lays in both French and English retain much of the alterity ascribed to them in folkloric accounts, and their realms tend to be difficult of access by humans and are generally not described at any length in the text, if at all. In a number of these works, such as *Lanval* by Marie de France, or the anonymous Old French Lays *Graelent* and *Tydorel*, the fairy characters visit the human realm, and the reader is never vouchsafed a sight of the otherworld. Even in a lay like *Yonec* by Marie de France, which depicts a human’s experience of a fairy kingdom, the otherworld retains its mystery and much about it remains unexplained. One Breton lay may admittedly offer counter-evidence for the argument I am making here: in *Guingamor*, the fairy realm is difficult to reach from mortal lands but seems in many ways another rationalized fairyland, virtually indistinguishable from many human kingdoms depicted in romance. Even there, however, the supernatural passage of time in the fairy realm in *Guingamor* – in which every day represents a hundred years in mortal realms – effectively isolates the two worlds from each other.

By comparison with the foregoing examples, *Sir Orfeo* is unusual in that the sense of alterity of faëry in the poem remains very strong even as the fairy king’s domain is described in terms strongly reminiscent of Orfeo’s human realm of Traciens. Indeed, as portrayed in the text, Traciens and fairyland are in many ways mirror images of each other: each realm is ruled by a royal couple, hawking and hunting are courtly pursuits in both lands, minstrels entertain both kings, and a concern for truth ultimately proves to be a defining principle of both courts. More strikingly, over the course of hundreds of lines of the poem the *Orfeo* poet employs a pattern of very specific verbal echoes in which the physical features and social institutions of the two lands are described in nearly identical terms. For instance, when Dame Heurodis is abducted the first time, the fairy king grants her a vision of his land’s wealth, including “castels & tours, / Riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours” (159-60). Somewhat later in the text, when Orfeo is living in self-imposed destitution in the forest, the poet provides an inventory of what he has lost in virtually the same words: “castels & tours, / Riuer, forest, friþ wiþ flours” (245-46). After first returning from fairyland, Heurodis goes mad, and “[d]amisels sexti & mo” (90) come running to her aid in the orchard in Traciens. Similarly, she herself is later one of the “[s]exti leuedis” (304) in the

fairy hawking party Orfeo sees in lines 303-30. And when Orfeo is first attempting to protect Heurodis from abduction by the fairy king, he surrounds her with “ten hundred kni3tes,” “[i]ch y-armed, stout & grim” (183, 184). Later, during his forest exile, Orfeo observes a fairy army on the march; not only does that host contain the same number of knights, but the soldiers’ equipment and appearance are described in nearly the same terms: “Wele atourned, *ten hundred kni3tes*, / *Ich y-armed* to his ri3tes, / Of cuntenance *stout & fers*” (291-93; italics mine).

Beyond these more obvious verbal parallels, there are moments in the poem that seem to be structured by a very subtle balancing of symmetries between the two worlds. For instance, in the scene where Heurodis first makes contact with the fairy realm while in a dream-state, she is lying asleep under a tree with two of her female attendants – “to maidens of priis” (64). Only many lines later do we discover that in the dream itself, meanwhile, Heurodis is approached by two male messengers sent by the fairy king – “to fair kni3tes” (135). Two pairs of attractive courtiers – one set female and human, the other male and fairy – are held up against each other in this scene; and Heurodis’s place at the focal center of this pairing serves to underscore her role as the linchpin that brings the two worlds together in *Sir Orfeo*. The internal symmetries of the poem’s structural logic seem virtually to demand such recurrent mirrorings.

A. C. Spearing has maintained that the verbal parallels between Traciens and fairyland are likely to be the product of traditional formulas and therefore of “no special significance at all” in interpreting *Sir Orfeo* (*Readings* 69). And Susie I. Tucker has argued that the number “sixty” may be formulaic when referring to an indeterminately large host in at least four earlier Middle English romances: *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Firumbras*, *Havelok the Dane* and *Otuel and Roland* (152-53). However, a phrase search of the *Middle English Dictionary* produces no clear parallels for the phrase “ten hundred kni3tes” or for some version of the phrase “castels & tours, / Riuer, forest, friþ wiþ flours.” Even if these phrases could be shown to be conventional formulas, their deployment here seems too elaborately patterned to be without interpretive significance. Each phrase is used exactly twice in the course of the poem, once in reference to the fairies, and once in reference to the humans. The three pairs of phrases highlight some of the most basic commonalities shared by the two lands: their physical features (159-60, 245-46), and the social roles filled by the men (183-84, 291-93) and women (90, 304) of the two different courts. Simultaneously, in each case the second occurrence of a particular phrase serves to recall the loss of wealth or prestige suffered by Orfeo or his realm. Rather than unselfconsciously employing traditional formulas, the *Orfeo* poet has quite programmatically exploited the structural potential latent within the formulaic to emphasize the similarities between Traciens and fairyland.

Over the course of the poem as a whole, the elaborateness with which the poet deploys this system of parallels introduces an unusual degree of comparability between the two kingdoms, effectively “racializing” the difference between them. Even as the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* unquestionably retain certain supernatural characteristics, the stress the poet lays on the familiarity of patterns of governance and social organization in fairyland allows fairy alterity to be seen – to an admittedly circumscribed degree – as the product of the expected cultural difference that exists between two races and/or cultures that share a common humanity. This process of racialization is only heightened when the poet aligns characters in the text with familiar and specific placenames. The identification of Traciens with Winchester and England in the Auchinleck recension of *Sir Orfeo* also invokes on behalf of Orfeo, the king of Traciens, the sympathies of the poet’s contemporary English audience. Simultaneously, for a late thirteenth-

or early fourteenth-century audience the opposition of Traciens and fairyland might well evoke that between England and Wales.

For medieval audiences of romance, fairies may have had strong associations with the ancient British past as well as with contemporary Brittany and Wales, and, occasionally, Ireland. Today, modern scholars routinely refer to fairy motifs in medieval literature – particularly in romance – as having a “Celtic” provenance, but the actual origins of insular fairies as represented in both the popular tradition and the literature of the Middle Ages are probably multifarious and certainly irrecoverable; Germanic elflore, brought to Britain by the Anglo-Saxons, likely mingled with the Celtic fairylore of the native British, and the traditions emerging from this fusion were, in their turn, probably impacted by influence from both Scandinavian and Classical sources.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, authors of medieval romance, like the modern scholars who study them, appear to have strongly associated fairylore with Celtic lands. Breton lays in Old French often claim for themselves origins in ancient Brittany or Britain, and a high proportion of such lays feature fairies. Of Marie de France’s twelve lays, two – *Lanval* and *Yonec* – include fairies or fairy-like beings as central characters. And the proportion is considerably higher among the anonymous Old French narrative lays; of the 11 lays that Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook collect in their recent edition *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, six – *Desiré*, *Espine*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor*, *Tydorel* and *Tyolet* – have fairy characters. The same association seems to have held sway in the Middle English Breton lays: seven English lays – *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Lay le Freyne*, *Sir Landevale*, *Sir Launfal*, *The Franklin’s Tale*, and (arguably) *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* – are thought to have been composed in the fourteenth century or earlier; fairies are central to all but *Lay le Freyne* and *The Franklin’s Tale*.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the most detailed descriptions of popular fairy belief in medieval Britain come from the pens of the Anglo-Welsh writers Walter Map and Gerald of Wales. In fact, critics of *Sir Orfeo* have occasionally sought in Map’s narratives of King Herla (Map 26-31, 370-71) or the “knight of Lesser Britain” (Map 160-

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<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship on medieval fairylore seems almost consciously to avoid drawing explicit connections between Anglo-Saxon and Norse elflore, on the one hand, and later medieval accounts of fairies from Britain and France, on the other. Alaric Hall’s *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England* (2007), a very substantial contribution to the understanding of Anglo-Saxon elflore, often uses later fairy narratives as a source of comparison, but discussion of the genetic links if any between the Anglo-Saxon and later medieval traditions clearly lies outside Hall’s conception of the brief of his study. Diane Purkiss’s *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (2000) claims for itself a historical perspective in its subtitle, but it skips from a discussion of nymphs and other Classical supernaturals in Chapter One to a discussion of the later medieval fairy tradition in Chapter Two without much mention of the intervening Anglo-Saxon tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Fairies are also absent from all three of the Middle English Breton lays composed in the fifteenth century: *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther* and *Erle of Tolous*. These later lays stand apart from earlier examples of the genre in a couple of important ways. First, while nearly all of the earlier lays are composed in rhyming couplets, these later works employ tail rhyme stanzas. (*Sir Launfal* does use the tail rhyme stanza, but it is based in part on the the earlier *Sir Landevale*, which is composed in rhyming couplets.) Second – and perhaps more telling for the present discussion – the fifteenth-century lays do not display the interest in early British origins so typical of their fourteenth-century counterparts, and none of the three has a recognizably British setting. While the absence of fairies may reflect changing literary tastes, it is also possible that the associations of fairies with the ancient British past made them less relevant to the genre of the Middle English Breton lay as it evolved.

Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* does not explicitly identify itself as a Breton lay, and it is therefore excluded from this generic category by some scholars.

61, 344-45) the origins of *Sir Orfeo* itself;<sup>3</sup> while such efforts fail to recognize that the resemblances between the Breton lay and Map's tales are more likely due to the resemblances generally shared by fairy narratives rather than to descent from a common ancestor, they do provide a measure of the degree to which *Sir Orfeo* embodies fairy traditions congruent with those of Wales and perhaps Brittany.

Like Walter Map's tale of King Herla, *Sir Orfeo* sets itself apart from the mainstream of medieval fairy romances through the sheer density of its fairy motifs, many of them rarely encountered in other such texts; the *Orfeo* poet, unlike most other authors of fairy romance, appears to have had access to a living tradition of fairylore, and the emphasis on these aspects in his lay may have been intended to heighten the apparent "Britishness" of the text. Certain elements of the poem's portrayal of fairies do represent commonplaces of romance in both French and English, such as a mortal's encounter with a fairy under a tree, the fairies' unearthly beauty, their white garb and horses, their insistence on promise-keeping, the luminescence of the fairy castle, and the depiction of the fairy women as carrying hawks. These motifs appear to have been stock conventions of the portrayal of fairies in both French and English romance; while certain of them have clear analogues in the folk tradition, their presence in a given romance offers no guarantee that the romancer had any sort of access to a living tradition of fairy belief. However, a surprisingly large number of the fairy motifs encountered in *Sir Orfeo* appear relatively infrequently within the romance tradition but are more common in the folk traction of the medieval or modern periods. Among these are the abduction of humans by fairies, the depiction of fairyland as a subterranean world, the association of fairy abduction with pregnancy and drowning, artifacts carved from a single precious stone, the transformation of a human into a fairy-like being, or the fairy interest in music.<sup>4</sup> A detailed analysis of all these motifs would be beyond the scope of the present discussion – see the preceding footnote for additional

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular A. J. Bliss (*Sir Orfeo* xxxii-xxxiii), Roger Sherman Loomis ("Sir Orfeo" 28-30), and Constance Davies ("Notes" 354-57). Neil Cartlidge has very recently drawn comparisons between the tale of Herla in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* and the fairy hunt in *Sir Orfeo* in his article "Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld: Courting Chaos?" (esp. 203-12). He disavows any genetic link between the two works (211), but sees both works as part of "a long tradition in medieval literature of reading the fairies' incursions as a symbol of moral or social disorder" (200).

<sup>4</sup> I discuss the first three of these motifs in more detail in the next paragraph. In medieval texts, the architecture of otherworldly edifices – fairy and otherwise – often involves crystal or precious gems (Patch 39-40, 205, 219). The fairy king's crown – "It nas of siluer, no of gold red / Ac it was of a precious ston" (150-51) – seems unusual even in such otherworldly company, but it has a surprisingly close parallel in Walter Map's tale of King Herla in the *De Nugis Curialium*. There, the fairy servants who attend Herla's guests at his wedding serve food and drink from vessels "each made of a single precious stone" (*uasis ex lapidibus preciosis et integris*; 26-27). Given the courtly settings of romance, the fact that the fairy interest in music is not more frequently represented in the medieval literature of France and England seems simply puzzling. The presence of music and/or musicians is routinely mentioned in folk narratives describing fairy feasts, and at least one medieval account includes such an instance: William of Newburgh's *The History of English Affairs* recounts the story of a countryman who is walking between two villages late at night when he hears the sound of voices singing (*voces cantantium*) as if at a feast; exploring further, he enters a door in a hillside into a scene of celebration, where he is offered liquid refreshment; he pours out the liquid and flees from the fairy hill with the cup (118-21). A descendant of the romance of *Sir Orfeo* appears to survive in the ballad "King Orfeo" (Child 19), collected in the Shetlands in the late nineteenth century. There, the text appears to have been altered in accordance with Scottish fairylore. The bagpipe is the favored instrument among Scottish fairies, and the hero of "King Orfeo" is a piper rather than a harpist: "Dan he took out his pipes ta play, / Bit sair was his hert wi döl and wae" (*English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1.298, stanza 6).

commentary – but a closer examination of the first two motifs mentioned above will serve to highlight the exceptionality of *Sir Orfeo* in this regard.

Some aspects of the characterization of fairyland in *Sir Orfeo* have no real equivalent in other romances or lays – and, often, few close analogues in insular medieval texts of any kind.<sup>5</sup> Most prominent among such themes is the abduction of mortals by the fairies. Although a hallmark of folk narratives concerning fairies, this motif occurs fairly infrequently in romance, where giants are generally the otherworldly abductors of choice. When it does occur in romance texts, the motif is almost always presented in a rationalized form, thoroughly assimilated to the themes and conventions of the genre. Beyond the idea of kidnapping itself, few if any of the most common traditional folkloric details of the motif remain; for instance, while newborns and nursing mothers are the most frequent victims of fairy abduction in traditional fairy narratives in Britain, those kidnapped in romance tend to be knights or other members of a royal court. Examples of rationalized versions of fairy kidnapping include the carrying away of members of Arthur’s court by the otherworldly knight Meleagant in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* by Chrétien de Troyes, Morgan’s repeated attempts to kidnap Lancelot and other knights in the *Lancelot en prose*, or the kidnapping of Arthur’s knights in the *Marvels of Rigomer*. In *Sir Orfeo*, by contrast, the description of those humans “taken” by the fairies in lines 387-404 retains many of the aspects typical of similar narratives collected from oral tradition in the early modern and modern periods. In this passage, Orfeo observes within the walls of the fairy castle an assemblage of kidnapping victims held in some kind of stasis – all of them retaining the postures they had assumed at the time of abduction. Though some of the persons described in these lines do not

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<sup>5</sup> Fairy motifs that appear in *Sir Orfeo* but are rare in other romances include the potential invisibility of fairies – occasionally suggested but rarely described in romance – and the assumption of characteristics reminiscent of fairies by a human they have long held. The group of fairies that first captures Heurodis vanishes amidst all the armed men assembled by Orfeo (191-94), and later in the poem Orfeo encounters his wife when she is just one of a group of sixty fairy ladies out hawking (303-30). Both motifs occur in the tale of Malekin, found in the early thirteenth century *Chronicon Anglicanum* by Ralph of Coggeshall. Captured as an infant by supernatural beings in Suffolk, the brownie-like Malekin haunts a local estate where, despite her invisibility at most times, she befriends a serving-girl and communicates her longing for a return home (120-21).

The idea of a human becoming a fairy also seems to be present in the verse epistle “Letter from King Arthur to Henry, King of the English” (“*Epistola Arturi regis ad Henricum regem Anglorum*”) a portion of the mid twelfth-century *Draco Normannicus* by Etienne de Rouen. Perhaps drawing on the *Vita Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Etienne has Arthur portray himself in the letter as having been taken to the island of Avalon after the final battle with Mordred, where his sister

Suscipit hic fratrem Morganis nympa perennis,  
curat, alit, refouet, perpetuumque facit.

[Morganis the everlasting nymph, received her brother here,  
cured him, nourished him, revived him and made him immortal.] (Etienne de Rouen lines 242-43)

At the opening of the letter, Arthur styles himself – according to the translation of Mildred Leake Day – as “Arthur the Great, everlasting by the law of the fays” (*Arturus magnus, fatorum lege perennis*; Etienne de Rouen line 50). Of course, one could translate *fatorum lege* as “by the law of the Fates.” Still, Morgan’s reputation as a supernatural – first really suggested in this work – would seem to justify Day’s translation.

represent the usual targets of fairy kidnapping, three of the groups listed – the mad (394), the drowned (397), and mothers in childbed (399-400) – are indeed characteristic of the types of humans most vulnerable to the fairies in folk narratives recorded in the modern period (Allen 105, Brouland 105-8).<sup>6</sup> I do not believe that a similar account of fairy abduction so thoroughly grounded in folk narrative occurs anywhere else in French or English romance. As I noted in Chapter Two, the four lines describing these particular groups constitute four of the five verses in Auchinleck 387-404 that are deleted in the equivalent passage in the late fifteenth-century Ashmole manuscript. It is tempting to speculate that Rate – the Ashmole scribe and the redactor of the text of *Sir Orfeo* that appears there – might have recognized these lines as references to specific fairy beliefs and deleted them out of a desire to avoid evoking folk superstition in his revision of the poem. In any case, this passage highlights the Auchinleck poet’s intimate familiarity with details of fairy belief not appearing elsewhere in the romance tradition, as well as his interest in heightening the associations of his poem with aspects of popular fairylore. Given the purported “Celtic” associations of fairylore in his time as in our own, the sheer density of fairy motifs employed here may have been intended to underscore the “Britishness” of his text.

At the same time that the poet makes use of a great deal of traditional fairylore unrepresented in romance convention, he also employs motifs that may have had associations for a medieval audience with Wales, the Welsh marches or ancient Britain; this possibility is perhaps most notable in the poet’s portrayal of fairyland as a twilight subterranean realm entered by an opening in a cliff or hillside. Towards the middle of the poem, Orfeo encounters his wife among a party of fairy ladies out hawking, and then follows them into fairyland:

In at a roche þe leuedis rideþ,  
 & he after, & nou3t abideþ.  
 When he was in þe roche y-go  
 Wele þre mile, oþer mo, 350  
 He com in-to a fair cuntray,  
 As bri3t so sonne on somers day,

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<sup>6</sup> Alan J. Fletcher has recently raised doubts about the degree to which the popular discourse of fairyland is left “intact” in this passage. In particular, Fletcher compares the description of the abducted in *Sir Orfeo* to a brief passage in the early fourteenth-century preacher’s handbook entitled the *Fasciculum Morum*, in which “elves” are described as transforming men and women into animals and taking them with them into fairyland. Fletcher suggests that because the passage in *Orfeo* makes no mention of bestial transformation, the “discourse of fairyland” in the poem may have been, in Fletcher’s fairylore-derived terminology, “taken” (161). In other words, the gallery of the undead seen by Orfeo would invoke for a contemporary viewer certain contemporary discourses – including fairy belief – but could not be explained by those discourses; in Fletcher’s view, this scene thereby calls into question the explanatory power of discourses such as the fairy faith, as well as early fourteenth-century Christian doctrine and astrology. Fletcher’s argument is weakened by the fact that he bases his view of the contemporary “discourse of fairyland” on nothing but the single very brief passage from the *Fasciculum Morum*. The reference in the passage to the presence of the pagan goddess Diana at fairy dances (159-60) clearly betrays the learned, classical influences that shaped the presentation of fairylore in this brief excerpt, and should serve as a red flag for anyone attempting to recover the details of early fourteenth-century fairy belief. Diana Purkiss has warned that we should be “mildly suspicious of any text in which the name Diana occurs in connection with night riders or good folk [i.e., fairies]; the goddess may be tacked on by the learned Christian in an interpretation of popular culture which harmonizes well with church history” (*At the Bottom* 143).

Smoþe & plain & al grene  
 – Hille no dale nas þer non y-sene.  
 Amidde þe lond a castle he si3e, 355  
 Riche & real & wonder hei3e:  
 Al þe vt-mast wal  
 Was clere & schine as cristal;  
 An hundred tours þer wer about,  
 Degiselich & bataild stout; 360  
 The butras com out of the diche  
 Of rede gold y-arched riche;  
 The voursour was auowed al  
 Of ich maner diuers aumal.  
 Wiþ-in þer were wide wones, 365  
 Al of precious stones;  
 Þe werst piler on to biholde  
 Was al of burnist gold.  
 Al þat lond was euer li3t,  
 For when it schuld be þerk & ni3t 370  
 Þe riche stones li3t gonne  
 As bri3t as doþ at none þe sonne. (*Sir Orfeo* 347-72)

For the purposes of comparison with other medieval narratives, the most salient features of this description are the entry into the fairy realm through a rock, the apparently dark and lengthy passageway, the flat subterranean landscape illumined through artificial means, and the dazzling impressiveness of fairy architecture. As E. B. Lyle notes, this representation of the otherworld, “though common enough in folk-tales, is not of frequent occurrence in romances” (“*Sir Orfeo*” 65). A number of folkloric representations of an underground world similar to that in *Sir Orfeo* are found in the works of late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century authors writing in Latin, namely the Anglo-Welsh writers Walter Map and Gerald of Wales, the English Ralph of Coggeshall and William of Newburgh, and the English-born Gervase of Tilbury. John P. Frankis has also argued that the same trope inflects one scene in La3amon’s Middle English *Brut* (73-77). With only one exception, the setting of all these narratives is an insular one: Map, Gerald and La3amon all locate their tales in Wales or the Welsh Marches. Ralph and William, who tell versions of the same tale of the “Green Children,” ascribe it to Suffolk, while Gervase’s story is set in the far north of England. Gervase of Tilbury also tells a second such tale with a setting in Sicily. Intriguingly, those writers who explicitly associate the subterranean world with supernatural beings – Map and Gerald, and arguably La3amon – are also precisely those who give their tale a setting in Wales or the Welsh Marches; it may not be a coincidence Map’s description is among those accounts that most closely resemble that of *Sir Orfeo*.<sup>7</sup> These

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<sup>7</sup> Map’s account is drawn from his narrative of King Herla in section i.11 of the *De Nugis Curialium*. I have already presented all of i.11 in Chapter One, but for the sake of comparison it may be useful to print here just that section of the Herla narrative that describes the entry into the pygmy king’s realm:

Cauernam igitur altissime rupis ingrediuntur, et post aliquantas tenebras in lumine, quod non

medieval accounts from non-romance sources have some correspondence to modern Welsh fairylore. Folk narratives collected in Wales in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries most typically locate fairy dwellings at the bottom of lakes; however, Welsh folklorist John Rhŷs has noted that among the particular characteristics of Welsh fairies is “their dwelling underground” (2.660), and fairly recent support for this claim is available.<sup>8</sup> By contrast with these folkloric accounts, the majority of romance texts involving fairies either avoid a direct portrayal of fairyland, or else mark its boundary with a water margin: some set it on an island while others locate it in a land lying on the other side of a river.<sup>9</sup> Of romances composed contemporaneously with or prior to *Sir Orfeo*, only a very small body of texts – all of which were probably composed in England – portray the fairy world as an underground domain. Two of these works are Breton lays that claim for themselves a setting in ancient Britain: *Yonec* by Marie de France,

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uidebatur solis aut lune sed lampadarum multarum, ad domos pigmei transeunt, mansionem quidem honestam per omnia qualem Naso regiam describit Solis.

[The party entered a cave in a high cliff, and after an interval of darkness, passed, in a light which seemed to proceed not from the sun or moon, but from a multitude of lamps, to the mansion of the pygmy. This was as comely in every part as the palace of the Sun described by Naso.]

(Map 28-29)

Map’s description is far more concise than that in *Sir Orfeo*, but its fundamental features are essentially the same as those in the English lay: an entry into fairyland through a cliff or rock, a passage through darkness, and the entry into an artificially illumined landscape featuring dazzling architecture.

<sup>8</sup> W. J. Gruffydd has contested Rhŷs’s claim, calling the idea that a subterranean fairyland may be part of native Welsh fairylore “a misconception” (11), and Rhŷs’s own collection of folklore does not, as far as I know, counter Gruffydd’s note. But Rhŷs’s point may be borne out by a fairy midwife tale collected in Wales in the mid 1960s. A section of the narrative, recorded in March, 1966 from 81-year-old Martha Williams of Llandanwg, North Wales (Gwyndaf 193 n. 31), bears a striking resemblance to the description of the underground fairylands in both *Sir Orfeo* and Walter Map’s tale of King Herla from the *De Nugis Curialium*. In the tale, a girl at the Harlech fair is approached by a stranger on a white horse who is seeking a midwife for his pregnant spouse; she agrees, and is led by the stranger through a split in a rock into an apparently subterranean city. Here I present only the portion of the tale that describes the entrance into the otherworld and the city itself:

“And she had gone through a lot of paths – the horse was going – and had come to a big rock, and the rock had split in two, and he had gone into a cave, and he and she were on the back of the white horse. And she was going through darkness, and after going quite a distance through this darkness she came out in a fine city, a grand city, grand houses and the people were grand, and there was plenty of everything there. She had never been as happy anywhere.” (Gwyndaf 179-80)

After this point, the tale becomes a more typical fairy midwife narrative, with the fairy’s injunction not to rub her own eyes with the fairy ointment she applies to the baby, the midwife’s accidental transgression of the ban, and the revelation of fairyland’s true nature as a small, dark place. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, the most striking feature of the tale is the similarity of the initial description of fairyland to those in medieval accounts: the opening in a rock, the lengthy passage through darkness, and the sight of a dazzling building or city are all in place.

<sup>9</sup> Among the romances portraying fairyland as separated from the human realm by a water margin are the following: *Graelent*, *Guingamor*, *Parthonopeus de Blois*, *Lanval*, perhaps *Lai de l’Espine*, and *Le Bel Inconnu* in Old French; and *Landevale*, *Sir Launfal*, and – perhaps – *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Middle English. Interestingly, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*, a comparatively early Latin work written in England, also portrays fairyland – in this case Avalon – as lying on an island.

a poem apparently set in South Wales (Marie de France, *Lais* 179 nn.13-16), and of course *Sir Orfeo* itself.<sup>10</sup> The two remaining romances – the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic* and its Middle English translation *Guy of Warwick* – might arguably constitute an exception to the pattern I am highlighting here. as neither of them is linked to Wales or ancient Britain. E. B. Lyle has noted a number of striking resemblances between the representations of fairyland in *Sir Orfeo* and *Guy of Warwick*, which, like the former poem, appears in the Auchinleck manuscript; Lyle rather tentatively suggests that “it may be that it is *Sir Orfeo* that is the debtor” (“*Sir Orfeo*” 68), but indebtedness to a shared tradition might also explain the similarities.<sup>11</sup> In any case, few reliable records of folk belief survive from medieval Britain, and traditional motifs, by their very nature, are prone to migrate; it is impossible therefore to attribute the origin of a given motif exclusively to a particular locality. But the type of fairyland depicted in *Sir Orfeo* appears to have had a strong associations in the medieval period with Britain in general, and with Wales and the Marches in particular.

Given the great stress laid upon a recuperation of insular origins in *Sir Orfeo*, the fact that its fairy kingdom is located underground may lend it an aura of historical priority in

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<sup>10</sup> A small number of romances composed after *Sir Orfeo* also employ this motif: the late fourteenth-century French prose romance *Mélusine* by Jean d’Arras, as well as Middle English versions of the same poem in both prose (*Mélusine*) and verse (*The Romans of Partenay*); and the late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century Middle English romance *Thomas of Erceldoune*. E. B. Lyle, who provides references for all the romances listed here, argues for the inclusion of the early sixteenth-century romance *The Turk and Gawain*, found in the Percy Folio (“*Sir Orfeo*” 65 n. 4). The nature of the “otherworld” in that text – if it truly does represent a portrayal of the otherworld – is never made clear.

<sup>11</sup> E. B. Lyle has the following to say on the connection between the two texts:

The resemblances illustrated here suggest that the treatments of recovery from a fairy captor in *Sir Orfeo* and *Guy of Warwick* may be linked, either directly or through an intermediary. Since [A. J.] Bliss finds (p. xxxv) that there are no extended analogues to *Sir Orfeo* but that “it is more profitable to seek for parallels to individual episodes in the poem,” it may be that it is *Sir Orfeo* that is the debtor, and that the description of the entrance into the otherworld and the expressions of surprise that a mortal has voluntarily made his way there, as in *Guy*, served as the models to be drawn upon at appropriate points in the creation of the narrative lay. (“*Sir Orfeo*” 68)

Lyle does not fully explain why *Sir Orfeo* is the likely “debtor” if there is a genetic connection between the two poems; she appears to claim, puzzlingly, that Bliss’s observation about the lack of precise analogues for *Sir Orfeo* as a whole somehow suggests the conclusion that description of fairyland in *Sir Orfeo* is borrowed from *Guy of Warwick*. Presumably, she has in mind the fact that the analogous scene is also found in the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic*; since *Gui* likely predates the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, the latter text is the probable borrower. This conclusion indeed seems quite possible, but a number of factors preclude certainty. First, the age of *Sir Orfeo* is difficult to estimate, and guesses about the date of its first composition – in either French or English – range all the way from the mid twelfth century to the early fourteenth. As I made clear earlier in Chapter Three, I personally am skeptical about the existence of a French *Lai d’Orpheus* that bore any close resemblance to the Middle English text, but the possibility simply cannot be ruled out. Second, with all other things being equal, the unusual density in *Sir Orfeo* of fairy motifs well attested in the folk tradition might suggest that this passage could easily have originated with *Sir Orfeo*; indeed, the “fairyland episode” in *Guy of Warwick* seems oddly out of place in a long romance that otherwise has relatively little truck with magic or the supernatural. Finally, the similarity of the description of fairyland in Walter Map’s twelfth-century *De Nugis Curialium* to the analogous passages in both *Sir Orfeo* and *Guy of Warwick* might suggest the persistence of a surprisingly coherent folk tradition about an underground fairy world that both romance authors may have drawn upon.

comparison with the human kingdom of Traciens, one that may well evoke the historical priority of the Welsh in relation to the English. George Kane has claimed that the poem’s depiction of fairyland “conveys . . . an impression of contact with another existence older, colder and less happy than our own” (81). While I would maintain that the perceived “coldness” and “unhappiness” of the fairy kingdom can be challenged, some aspects of the fairy world do seem to be strikingly primitive, and to speak to an age prior to the more modern world of Traciens. In particular, the underground location of the fairy kingdom hints at its status within the poem as a realm barely emerged into a historicized world in which the natural and the cultural are sharply differentiated. Even as “[t]he enamel work of the fairy castle would have suggested to a contemporary audience the latest in decorative technique” (Lerer 98), the subterranean location of the fairy world immures it within the natural world, implying an atavistic interpenetration of nature and culture foreign to the human realm of Traciens. This aspect of the fairy world is perhaps most strikingly embodied in the coronal of the fairy king; in her description of it to Orfeo, Heurodis notes that “[i]t nas of siluer, no of gold red, / Ac it was of a precious ston” (150-51). This emblem of the fairy king’s sovereignty is no product of the technology of metallurgy, but more strictly a natural object transformed through fairy craft. The working of an entire crown from a single gem is clearly a fairy marvel, one probably beyond the craft of mortal gemsmiths, but it simultaneously bespeaks a spurning on the part of faëry of certain arts that define human modernity. The illumination of the fairy world through gemstones may provide another example of such an atavism. In the absence of a subterranean sun, the radiance of precious stones provides a substitute source of light:

Al þat lond was euer li3t,  
 For when it schuld be þerk & ni3t 370  
 Þe riche stones li3t gonne  
 As bri3t as doþ at none þe sonne. (*Sir Orfeo* 369-72)

Sharon Coolidge has claimed that the light in the fairy world of *Sir Orfeo* is “derivative” and thereby unnatural (68), but one might more readily argue that by ascribing the fairy illumination to a natural source, rather than to human technology, the poet urges a particular propinquity of the fairies to the earth and to nature.<sup>12</sup> For all the cultural achievement of the fairies, their characterization in *Sir Orfeo* retains a hint of a pre-human, pre-historicized world that stands in contrast with – and prior to – that of Traciens. As I argued earlier in this chapter, the *Orfeo* poet subtly effaces the Galfridian myth of the Trojan origins of Britain, attributing directly to an English king origins in classical mythology. Simultaneously, however, the poet euhemerizes and historicizes the Greek gods that stand at the head of Orfeo’s lineage; while the beginnings of the England Orfeo represents are to be sought in the distant past and are only accessible through the ostensibly “oral” documents of the Breton lays, those origins can nevertheless be fixed, humanized and named. By contrast, the fairies – in this text and elsewhere – remain a people without origins. The popular myth of Albina provided an originary narrative even for the giants

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<sup>12</sup> And this is one feature of the description of fairyland in which the account in *Sir Orfeo* departs from that in Walter Map’s tale of Herla in his *De Nugis Curialium*. There, Map attributes the illumination of the pygmy king’s realm to light seemingly produced “by a multitude of lamps” (*lampadarum multarum*; Map 28-29).

who possessed the isle of Albion before the advent of Brutus, filling an obvious gap in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* (Evans, "Devil in Disguise" 185). But despite the frequency with which fairies are mentioned in romance – and to a lesser extent in chronicle – no similar narrative explicitly sets out to explain their presence on the island; they are always already a precursor to humanity. And in this matter they resemble to a degree the historical position of the Welsh themselves in the history of the island. Whatever the political status of the Welsh nation after the conquest of Wales by Edward I in 1282, the historical priority of the Welsh as inhabitants of the island of Britain remained an undeniable historical fact. English attempts to legitimize power through recourse to historical origins were inevitably problematized by the stubborn persistence of the Welsh as a people apart.

I do not intend to imply here that *Sir Orfeo* embodies a sort of ethno-political allegory in which Orfeo and his kingdom represent England and the fairies represent Wales. To a certain extent, the Celticity implicit in the poet's representation of fairyland is an artifact of his attempt to reappropriate for the discourse of English national identity the already-conventional figure of the literary fairy. The poet found in the fairies of French romance and the Breton lay a ready-made emblem of insular antiquity, one that could be made the thematic focus of his attempt to devise an originary narrative of insular kingship. The fairies of *Sir Orfeo* are both a stand-in for the access to the British past that Welsh culture and tradition represent, and they are simultaneously a way of substituting for the troubling Welshness of the Welsh a token of the British past that had already been made familiar to English audiences through French and English romance. I contend that the *Orfeo* poet brings these tensions implicit in the figure of the fairy into play throughout the lay. In the remainder of the chapter, I will look at a number of key scenes in the romance where the poem seems slowly to disassemble the idea of fairy otherness, offering the reader what seem at first to be conventional interpretive paradigms that are then slowly but progressively subverted over the course of the poem. The work's elaborate system of parallels between the human and fairy realms allows the poet by the end of the work to reveal the concept of a shared ideal of British kingship as a ground of commonality between the three rulers portrayed in the work.

The poet thematizes the problematics of reading fairy difference in the contrast between the first encounters with faëry experienced by Orfeo and Heurodis. As I noted above, Heurodis's dream-vision of fairyland frames it in terms homologous with those of a human realm. Just before she wakes up, the fairy king threatens to kill her if she does not prepare herself to be physically borne off to fairyland on the very next day:

“Loke, dame, to-morwe þatow be	165
Ri3t here vnder þis ympe-tre,	
& þan þou schalt wiþ ous go,	
& liue wiþ ous euer-mo;	
& 3if þou makest ous y-let,	
Whar þou be, þou worst y-fet,	170
& to-tore þine limes al,	
Þat noþing help þe no schal;	
& þei þou best so to-torn,	
3ete þou worst wiþ ous y-born.” ( <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 165-74)	

If the fairy king is peremptory and menacing in this scene, his rhetoric of violence is wholly comprehensible in human terms. Upon awakening, Heurodis is brought back to the palace in a state of delirium. Orfeo manages to calm her, and she explains the nature of her vision. Despite the oddity of the manner in which the fairy king’s vow to abduct Heurodis is communicated, Orfeo’s response demonstrates that he envisions the threat in strictly human terms:

Amorwe þe vnder-tide is come  
 & Orfeo haþ his armes y-nome,  
 & wele ten hundred kn3tes wiþ him,  
 Ich y-armed, stout and grim;  
 & wiþ þe quen wenten he 185  
 Ri3t vnto þat ympe-tre.  
 Þai made scheltrom in ich a side,  
 & sayd þai wold þere abide  
 & dye þer euerichon,  
 Er þe quen schuld fram hem gon; 190  
 Ac 3ete amiddes hem ful ri3t  
 Þe quen was oway y-twi3t,  
 Wiþ fairi forþ y-nome.  
 – Men wist neuer wher sche was bicomē. (*Sir Orfeo* 181-94)

Orfeo attempts to protect his queen from the fairies by mobilizing the same kind of military guard with which one would fend off an attack by a human army, but Heurodis is “oway y-twi3t / With fairi forth y-nome” (192-93). While the precise meaning of “fairi” at various points in *Sir Orfeo* is debatable, Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury are probably right in glossing the word with “enchantment” in this instance (*Middle English Breton Lays* page 30, line 193).<sup>13</sup> Heurodis, in other words, simply vanishes, carried off by a disembodied force that betrays nothing of its own nature. While Heurodis’s first experience of the fairies would appear to frame the threat they pose in human terms, Orfeo’s own first encounter with fairy power initially dehumanizes his supernatural opponents. The stubborn illegibility of fairy nature is foregrounded here in the contrasting experience of the two main human characters.

A reader well-versed in the conventions of fairy romance might have expected that the abduction of Heurodis would prove to be the prelude to her rape by the fairy king. In Breton lays in particular, a woman’s encounter with a male supernatural under or near a tree almost inevitably presages sexual violation. The earliest example of the motif occurs in the anonymous late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Breton lay *Tydorel*, composed in Old French. In that text, the king and queen of Brittany, married for ten years, remain childless. One summer day, the queen and her female attendants go to amuse themselves in an orchard (*vergier*; *Lay de Tydorel* 23); the queen, employing one of her young women as a sort of couch (*sor une meschine apuiee*;

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<sup>13</sup> Similarly, J. R. R. Tolkien, in the glossary he provides for Kenneth Sisam’s *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, defines “fairi” in line 193 of *Sir Orfeo* as meaning “magic” (page 339, “Fairi”). A. J. Bliss defines “fairy” in general as meaning “faery, enchantment” (*Sir Orfeo*, page 62, “fairy”), but he does not provide a line-by-line breakdown for these two potentially different meanings. I discuss the meaning of “fairi” in the early fourteenth century in greater detail in Chapter Two.

32), falls asleep beneath an *ente* or grafted tree (30). The queen awakens while her companion remains asleep, and she then encounters a knight mounted on a white horse; tall and extraordinarily handsome, the knight professes his love for her. While implying that he will not take her against her will, he makes it clear that a curse will be laid upon her if she does not accede to his desires:

‘Je vos ameré loiaument,  
Et si ne puet estre autrement,  
Je m’en irai, vos remaindrez;  
Sachiez, ja mes joie n’avrez.’

[‘I shall love you loyally,  
And if it cannot be otherwise  
I shall leave, and you will remain behind;  
Be aware of this, that you will never again know joy.’] (*Tydorel* 65-68)

The queen herself falls in love with him (*angoisseusement l’aama*; 71) and agrees to become his lover. He then provides her with proofs of his supernatural status, and predicts that as a result of their union she will have two children; her daughter will, in turn, be the ancestress of Count Alain and his son Conain, apparently historical figures (Donovan, *Breton Lay* 78-79).<sup>14</sup> The knight then “has his way with her” (*toute sa volonté en fist*; 152), and the lady becomes pregnant; his predictions about her lineage appear to come true, and her eldest child, a son, becomes the protagonist named in the title of the lay. The fact that the queen in *Tydorel* falls asleep beneath an *ente* in particular establishes a link with *Sir Orfeo* itself; *ente* is a borrowing into Old French of the English *ympe*, the word used to describe the grafted tree beneath which Heurodis first encounters the fairy king.

In *Tydorel*, the degree to which the queen is compelled to become the lover of the fairy is made ambivalent; he threatens her with a loss of joy should he refuse her, but the poem also makes it clear that his desire is answered by her own. In Middle English Breton lays that employ the trope of an encounter between a human female and a male supernatural beneath a tree, the motif almost always involves sexual violation of the woman. The oldest text of *Sir Degaré*, like the oldest version of *Sir Orfeo*, appears in the early fourteenth-century Auchinleck manuscript; the poem never identifies itself as a lay, though scholars have often considered it a member of the genre, and it unmistakably shares certain attributes with some of the other Middle English Breton lays.<sup>15</sup> In the poem, the king of Brittany is widowed, and his only child is a daughter; the demands he makes upon her suitors prevent her from marrying. One day, the princess and two of her ladies become separated from a party with which they are traveling. They lie down beneath a “chastein” or chestnut tree (*Sir Degaré* 74), and the two other women fall asleep while the princess wanders off picking flowers. She encounters a handsome “fairy knight” (100) who

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<sup>14</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan contends that *Tydorel* “has the appearance of an occasional poem” (*Breton Lay* 78), and he tentatively identifies Conains as Conan III, the ruler of Brittany from 1113 to 1148 (79).

<sup>15</sup> Although it does not call itself a lay, *Sir Degaré*, like many Breton lays in Old French and unlike most other English lays, has a setting in Brittany. The only other Middle English lay set there is Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*.

declares his love and his intention of making her his lover no matter what her own desires are:

“Iich have iloved the mani a yer,  
And now we beth us selve her,  
Thou best mi lemman ar thou go,  
Wether the liketh wel or wo.” (*Sir Degaré* 105-8)

The fairy knight rapes the princess while she weeps and cries out, and then he predicts – accurately – that she will become pregnant with a male child who will grow into the titular protagonist of the poem. The fifteenth-century Breton lay *Sir Gowther* stands somewhat apart from the other narratives I have discussed here since the male supernatural being involved is described as a “felturd fende,” i.e., a shaggy fiend (*Sir Gowther* 74), and the child he gets upon an Austrian duchess is indeed diabolical during much of the lay. But the tale begins in a manner that should be quite familiar by now. The duke and duchess have been married more than ten years without producing an heir. One day the lady prays to Mary to give her a child, and she then goes to walk in the orchard. Meeting a man who has the semblance of her husband, she lies down with him “undur a tre” (71). Immediately upon consummation of the act, the fiend springs up in his true form and predicts the birth of the male child who will become the protagonist of the poem. Sir Gowther eventually weds the daughter of the Emperor of Germany, but the lay does not tell us whether they have children. Finally, this motif is alluded to somewhat telegraphically at the beginning of the Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*. Though the Wife – like the narrator of *Sir Degaré* – never calls her tale a lay, it has many of the features shared by other members of the genre, and is sometimes included in that category by scholars (Laskaya and Salisbury vii).<sup>16</sup> In her text, the Wife describes how friars have driven out fairies by blessing every precinct of the land, but the friars themselves have replaced the supernatural males as those who will do women “dishonor” beneath a tree:

For ther as wont to walken was an elf  
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself  
In undermeles and in morwenynges,  
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges  
As he gooth in his lymytacioun.  
Wommen may go saufly up and down.  
In every bussh or under every tree  
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,  
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour. (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* III.873-81)

The conjunction in the passage’s final lines of an incubus, a tree and the dishonor done to a woman who finds herself beneath it render the allusion to the motif outlined above unmistakable. However, the Wife’s bare-bones evocation of the theme may signal its familiarity for fourteenth-century audiences; the Wife clearly expects her auditors to recognize the pattern without further explanation.

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<sup>16</sup> For a more skeptical view on *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* as a Breton lay, see Archibald (“Breton” 55).

The coherence of this peculiar motif across four works written over a period of one hundred and fifty to two hundred years is somewhat remarkable. In all these texts except the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the principal details of the theme are in place. The continuity of a noble lineage is threatened, either by barrenness or, in the case of *Sir Degaré*, by the apparent sexual jealousy of the princess's father. In each case, the woman whose reproductive potential remains unrealized encounters a handsome man, usually a knight; they typically meet under a tree or right after the woman has lain beneath one. The man cajoles or forces her into sex and then predicts both her pregnancy and the gender (and sometimes fate) of her children. Here, as in a good many other medieval texts, fairies or other supernaturals fulfil the role of a fertility principle, guaranteeing the continuity of a notable human lineage (Le Goff 218-19).

The deployment of this motif in *Sir Orfeo* obviously subverts a number of its most salient features. The issue of the continuity of Orfeo's lineage is never explicitly raised, and in a surprising variant on typical romance structure, Orfeo and Heurodis die apparently childless while the rule of Traciens passes into the hands of Orfeo's faithful steward. I will examine the problem of genealogical discontinuity in *Sir Orfeo* towards the end of this chapter. For the present discussion, however, the most notable feature of the poet's handling of this motif of a subarboreal encounter is the absence of any hint of sexual violation. In fact, as critics have often noted, the fairies' motivation for the kidnapping of Heurodis is unclear since the fairy king apparently does not intend to make her his lover. The fairy king's threat to disembowel Heurodis if she does not offer herself up for abduction may represent a displacement of the violent energies of the original motif, but the poem offers no evidence that Heurodis has erotic relations with any inhabitant of fairyland during the long years of her captivity. This seems to me to be one of a number of points in the romance when the plot of *Sir Orfeo* is held in tension between the poet's two main sources: the classical tale of Orpheus, on the one hand, and traditional folkloric narratives of the kidnap of a woman by an otherworldly being, on the other. In the classical narrative, Eurydice's captivity at the hands of Pluto implies no erotic intent on the part of the latter, but merely reflects his functional role in the mythology that structures the tale; as the guardian of the dead, he does not need a further motivation for holding Eurydice captive. In folklore, on the other hand, the king of the fairies does not typically seem to fill the role of Pluto, but sexual desire is among the chief factors motivating the abduction of a human by a supernatural being.<sup>17</sup> Constance Davies has sensibly explained that "Heurodis was not snatched away for love; the fairy king had his own queen" ("Classical Threads" 162). And Ruth Evans has recently noted that "the successful resolution of Orfeo's quest to get Heurodis back requires that she be a courtly and unpolluted prize worth retrieving, so that she can enable the poem's deployment of the traditional medieval analogy between proper marriage and proper kingship"

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<sup>17</sup> Critics of *Sir Orfeo* have indeed made the identification between Dis or Pluto and the fairy king. Constance Davies, for instance, notes that the Fairy King "is not so much the king of Fairyland as the king of the Dead, who is the only king who sends for us without stipulating his reason" ("Classical Threads" 161). But the fairy king's lack of an obvious motivation for the kidnapping of Heurodis does not constitute proof that fairyland in the poem is essentially the Underworld; a hint of circularity plays about Davies's argument in this case.

One medieval text does identify Pluto as the king of fairyland: Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* refers to "Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye" (*Canterbury Tales* IV.2227). This reference has been variously explained (*Canterbury Tales* page 888, notes to lines IV.2038-41), but one might argue that in this narrative Pluto is not so much the king of the dead as the king of fairyland. The influence of Chaucer's portrayal of Pluto and fairyland appears to be reflected in Henryson's fifteenth-century *Orpheus and Eurydice*.

(188). Evans's point is well taken and no doubt accurate; nevertheless, the *Orfeo* poet could have staged the abduction of Heurodis without invoking a motif that almost certainly suggested the possibility of her sexual "pollution" for a medieval audience. The readerly expectations set up by such a coherent and well defined narrative pattern are rather pointedly defeated here, drawing our attention to the fact that the fairy king, unlike his Middle English romance analogues, eschews the sexual violation of his captive.

After the abduction of Heurodis, Orfeo appoints a steward to rule in his place and goes barefoot into self-imposed exile in the wilderness with no possessions except a pilgrim's mantle and a harp (204-232). While there, he leads a life of abject penury, living on roots, fruits and berries, sleeping under a covering of leaves and grass or on a bed of moss, and occasionally harping for the birds and animals on fine days (241-80). During this period he observes the doings of the fairies in the forest. The text presents Orfeo's observation of the fairies' activities as four different but textually contiguous "visions": the fairy king's host hunting with hounds (281-88); grim-visaged fairy knights marching to war (289-96); fairy knights and ladies dancing (297-302); and finally a party of fairy women – which includes his wife Heurodis – hunting with falcons (303-30). To make the divisions between the four sections more readily visible, I have introduced line breaks between them here:

He mi3t se him bisides 281  
(Oft in hot vnder-tides)

Ʒe king o fairy wiþ his rout  
Com to hunt him al about  
Wiþ dim cri & bloweing, 285  
& houndes also wiþ him berking;  
Ac no best þai no nome,  
No neuer he nist whider þai bi-come.

& oþer while he mi3t him se 290  
As a gret ost bi him te,  
Wele atourned, ten hundred kni3tes,

Ich y-armed to his ri3tes,  
Of cuntenaunce stout & fers,  
Wiþ mani desplaid baners, 295  
& ich his swerd y-drawe hold  
– Ac neuer he nist whider þai wold.

& oþer while he sei3e oþer þing:  
Kni3tes & leuedis com daunceing  
In queynt atire, gisely, 300  
Queynt pas & softly;  
Tabours & trunpes 3ede hem bi,  
& al maner menstraci.

And on a day he sei3e him biside  
Sexti leuedis on hors ride,

Gentil & iolif as brid on ris; 305  
 Nou3t o man amonges hem þer nis;  
 & ich a faucoun on hond bere,  
 And riden on haukin bi o riuere.  
 Of game þai founde wel gode haunt,  
 Maulardes, hayroun & cormeraunt; 310  
 Þe foules of þe water ariseþ  
 Þe faucouns hem wele deuseþ:  
 Ich faucoun his pray slou3.  
 Pat sei3e Orfeo, & lou3:  
 ‘Parfay!’ quaþ he, ‘Þer is fair game; 315  
 Þider ichil, bi Godes name!  
 Ich was y-won swiche werk to se.’  
 He aros, & þider gan te.  
 To a leuedi he was y-come,  
 Biheld, & haþ wele vnder-nome, 320  
 & seþ bi al þing þat it is  
 His owen quen, Dam Heurodis.  
 3ern he biheld hir, & sche him eke,  
 Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke,  
 For messais þat sche on him sei3e, 325  
 Pat had ben so riche & so hei3e.  
 Þe teres fel out of her ei3e:  
 Þe oþer leuedis this y-sei3e  
 & maked hir oway to ride  
 – Sche most wiþ him no lenger abide. (*Sir Orfeo* 281-330)

Before turning to the thematic concerns of this passage, it is worth noting that a carefully elaborated pattern of verbal repetitions underpins the four-part structure of the passage. The four scenes are all first presented in explicitly visual terms: in the first line of the first two sections, we are provided with a description of scenes that Orfeo “mi3t se” (281, 289); in the first line of the third and fourth sections, we are told of things that Orfeo “sei3e” (297, 303). Correspondingly, the first and second sections both end with a reference to Orfeo’s ignorance about where these first two fairy hosts are headed: “No neuer he nist whider þai bi-come” (288), “Ac neuer he nist whider þai wold” (296). In all four tableaux, Orfeo watches as a group of fairies passes “bi” or “bisides” him: “bisides” (281), “bi” (290), “bi” (301), “biside” (303).

Scholars have tended to see the first three of these fairy tableaux – the king’s hunting party, the soldiers, the dancers – as constituting a unitary whole that serves to characterize the fairy court and fairyland. While the *types* of activity ascribed to the fairies in the first three visions resemble those typical of human courtiers, the *nature* of those activities as described there tends to be seen as establishing the terms of fairy difference from humanity. In a study of the use of fairylore in the poem, Dean R. Baldwin claimed that Orfeo “should recognize” those he observes in the forest as fairies – although he fails to – since their actions conform to “three well-known fairy traditions”: hunting, travelling in armed hosts, and dancing to musical accompaniment (140). Baldwin does not however specify which aspects of the fairy doings he

sees as signaling the essential alterity of the fairies.

Other critics – particularly those of the last three decades – have seen in these first three episodes the foregrounding of aspects of fairyland that are at once mysterious and negative. E. C. Ronquist, for instance, writes: “The other [i.e., fairy] kingdom has the same courtly pursuits as Orfeo’s – hunting, music, assemblies of knights and ladies – but with the distinction that its games are purposeless and evanescent” (102). Seth Lerer claims the fairies “seem to mimic the trappings of decorum” of Orfeo’s human realm (97). Roy M. Liuzza’s comments on the scene constitute virtually a fusion of the sentiments expressed by Ronquist and Lerer: the fairy courtiers Orfeo observes “have an unreal quality, a shadowy existence that only mimics that of their counterparts in the earthly realm – their actions have no effect, no completion” (279). And – in what is probably the most extreme example of such views – Christina M. Carlson has more recently written that “[t]he fairies are unable to act, to make an impact on the physical world. . . . [T]he kingdom of Fairy is set up as a feminized world, a world of silence, beauty, and passivity, in contrast to the ‘real’ world of kings and speaking subjects” (69). For these critics, fairy difference inheres in an air of the uncanny that has as its hallmarks the purposelessness or mere mimicry of fairy actions.<sup>18</sup>

In my examination of Orfeo’s four visions of the fairies, I will contend that the *Orfeo* poet engages precisely with the expectation of difference that modern critics have brought to the interpretation of these episodes. If racial stereotypes can be said to shape and structure our understanding of the behavior of the human Other, the best-known motifs of fairylore can be seen to fulfill the same role in the encounter with the fairy Other. In each scene of the passage, patterns of traditional lore that might have been recognizable to a fourteenth-century person reading or listening to the poem appear at first to be invoked; the poet seemingly invites the reader to deploy familiar folkloric themes as interpretive paradigms for this sequence of visions. Over the course of the four episodes, however, the match between the expectations engendered by a knowledge of fairylore and the actual descriptions offered by the poet progressively declines, and the boundaries between the categories of the “fairy” and the “human” – by which I mean the mortal representatives of courtly culture – dissolve scene by scene.

The first tableau of the passage, in which the fairy king and his courtiers go hunting on hot afternoons (281-88), evokes the mysterious or the uncanny more strongly than any of the other fairy visions that follow. Although the fairies “often” (282) pursue their quarry with a great deal of clamor – “dim cries,” the blowing of horns, the barking of dogs (285-86) – they ultimately take “no beast” (287), and the object of the fairy hunt remains unclear. The final line of the scene – “No neuer he nist whider þai bi-come” – might be read as describing the fairies’ eerie disappearance into thin air (288). Even the language of the episode presents interpretive difficulties: when the fairy king comes “to hunt him al about” (284), should “him” be read as referring to Orfeo as the direct object of “hunt”? Or is Orfeo the object of the prepositional

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<sup>18</sup> The critics quoted here published their work on *Sir Orfeo* between 1985 and 1999 – Ronquist and Lerer in 1985, Liuzza in 1989, Carlson in 1999 – but earlier critics also saw in the first three fairy tableaux evidence of the lack of agency of fairyland. George Kane, writing in 1951, claimed that the fairies “marshal their armed knights only for show, and . . . [they] lack the power to take life” (83). He contrasted the fecklessness of the fairy king’s courtiers with the success of the female falconers, whom he considered to be “the mortal women who have been carried off”; the latter “never fail when they cast their hawks at waterfowl” (83). Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis called the forest of Orfeo’s exile “a purgatory of repetitious, purposeless activity” (248).

phrase “all about” – so that the fairy king is going hunting all around the area where Orfeo observes the hunt? Or is “him” used here as a reflexive pronoun referring to the fairy king instead?<sup>19</sup>

The uncanny qualities of the scene no doubt influenced A. J. Bliss in his comparison of the fairy king’s hunt with the spectral “fairy hunt” or “wild hunt” of traditional folklore (*Sir Orfeo* xxxvii-xxxviii).<sup>20</sup> Many critics have followed Bliss’s lead since, and the occurrence of the Wild Hunt in *Sir Orfeo* has become one of the commonplaces in the scholarly literature on the poem.<sup>21</sup>

While I will contend that Bliss’s identification of this first scene as an instance of the Wild Hunt proves ultimately to be useful, the difficulties inherent in defining the theme of the Hunt itself have complicated the attempts of critics to understand its significance in *Sir Orfeo*. The topos occurs in many varieties in the folklore of most northern European lands, and it spans a period of time ranging from the Middle Ages to the Modern era. As I noted in Chapter One, no one characterization can possibly encompass every local articulation of this protean motif, and scholars often differ as to whether a given narrative truly represents an occurrence of the Wild Hunt.<sup>22</sup> To provide just one example with particular relevance to the present discussion, Bliss cites the tale of Herla from Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium* as an example of the Wild Hunt motif that bears a particularly close resemblance to the first fairy hunting scene in *Sir Orfeo* (*Sir*

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<sup>19</sup> In his glossary under “He,” Bliss does not list the occurrence of “him” in this line. Since he appears to provide an exhaustive list of the uses of “him” in the *reflexive*, the implication might be that he sees the pronoun functioning as a direct object here and therefore likely referring to Orfeo; Bliss’s notes make no mention of this possibility, however. Marie-Thérèse Brouland’s explicit claim that Orfeo himself must be the fairy king’s quarry would seem represents a minority viewpoint.

While I believe all three of the options I have outlined above are possibilities, at least, it will become clear from my reading of Orfeo’s four fairy visions that I believe the fairy king is hunting “all about” Orfeo.

<sup>20</sup> As early as 1886, George Lyman Kittredge drew a parallel between the “hosts of fairy knights with flying banners and gleaming arms” observed by Orfeo, and Walter Map’s account of spectral soldiers driving herds of horses and cattle at night (189). Kittredge fails to mention the “Wild Hunt” specifically even though the passage he cites from Map occurs immediately before Map’s brief recap of the tale of Herla, a narrative routinely cited as one of the earliest recorded instances of belief in the Hunt.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in an article on the poem published quite recently (2002), Enrico Giaccherini briefly refers to Orfeo encountering the “wild hunt” during his time in the wilderness (5).

<sup>22</sup> I provide references for studies of the Wild Hunt more generally, and for the related *Mesnie Hellequin*, in Chapter One.

The most recent study of the Wild Hunt in Middle English texts – that of Anne Rooney (34-39) – does not include the passage from *Sir Orfeo* among examples of the motif. Rooney’s definition of the hunt in its most folkloric form emphasizes the demonic affiliations of the Hunt’s leader: “The traditional Wild Hunt motif concerns a fiendish huntsman, sometimes with many followers and a pack of hellish hounds, who hunts the sinful, or damned souls, or unfortunate individuals who cross his path” (34). As a result, Rooney includes as representatives of the motif only two Christian didactic works, *Jacob’s Well* and *The Desputisoun Bitwen the Bodi and the Soule*, along with the famous *Peterborough Chronicle* entry from 1127 (35, 36-39). The absence in Rooney’s study of precisely those medieval texts most often cited as parallels to the Hunt scene in *Sir Orfeo* – the passage from Orderic Vitalis’ *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the tale of Herla from Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*, and the account of King Arthur as leader of the Hunt found in the *Otia Imperialia* by Gervase of Tilbury (Gervase 336-37), not to mention *Sir Orfeo* itself – provides an indication of the difficulties inherent in defining this motif.

*Orfeo* xxxvii-xxxviii). However, in a study on the use of the Wild Hunt in the *De Nugis*, Helaine Newstead notes that the account of Herla as presented there lacks some of the typical features of the theme, such as an explicit reference to night-time hunting and the baying of hounds (“Some Observations” 107).<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, as mentioned in Chapter One, many medieval accounts of the Hunt can be said to possess some or all of the following features: the relentless pursuit of a victim (often a human) by a mounted host led by a rider with otherworldly connections; the shouts of the riders, the baying of hunting dogs, and the blowing of horns; the presence of persons known to have died; and a night-time setting.

The identification of the first hunting scene in *Sir Orfeo* with the Wild Hunt motif has had consequences for critics’ understanding of the role of the fairies in the text for two reasons. First, the supernatural associations of the Hunt only serve to heighten the sense of the uncanniness of the fairies evoked by other aspects of their depiction. Second, and more specifically, the leader of the Wild Hunt often has demonic affiliations; as a result, the identification of this scene with the Hunt motif would seem to license decidedly negative readings of the fairies and imply their alignment with forces inimical to humanity. A better understanding of the role supernatural forces play in this scene will require an examination of the types of Hunt narratives accessible to a contemporary audience, and a closer scrutiny of the depiction of the hunting fairies in the *Orfeo* text.

Whatever the *specifics* of a given narrative, virtually any account of the Hunt features elements that set it apart as uncanny or supernatural – such as the unusual size or appearance of the riders and their mounts, the presence among them of dead persons known to the mortal witness of the Hunt, the ability of the huntsmen to fly through the air or disappear suddenly, the great and terrifying clamor attendant upon the proceedings, etc.<sup>24</sup> In most cases, a number of such features will be combined in a single account. Besides *Sir Orfeo*, at least six medieval texts with strong connections to England have been cited as offering an example of the Wild Hunt or a closely related phenomenon: the famous *Peterborough Chronicle* entry from 1127, which tells of the appearance of ominous black hunters between the towns of Peterborough and Stanford (page 50, lines 63-74); the legend of the *familia Herlechini* in Brittany in the late twelfth-century Latin work *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Orderic Vitalis (iv.236-51); the tale of the wanderings of the *familia Herlethingi* from Walter Map’s late twelfth-century Latin miscellany *De Nugis Curialium* (370-73); the account of King Arthur as leader of the Hunt found in the early thirteenth-century Latin text *Otia Imperialia* by Gervase of Tilbury (336-37); and the accounts of the Devil pursuing damned souls in the fourteenth-century Middle English didactic works *Jacob’s Well* (page 166, line 23 to page 167, line 25)<sup>25</sup> and *The Desputisoun Bitwen þe Bodi and*

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<sup>23</sup> I examine Walter Map’s account of Herla at some length in Chapter One.

<sup>24</sup> There exists no single definitive, up-to-date account of the Wild Hunt in the British Isles. Other than the treatment of the motif by Rooney (discussed in note 23 above), the most useful studies known to me are those by J. D. Bruce, Archer Taylor, Kemp Malone, Helaine Newstead, Hilda Ellis Davidson, and (especially informative) Patricia Lysaght.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Rooney’s discussion of this scene in her monograph *Hunting in Middle English Literature* is, as far as I know, the only treatment of this portion of *Jacob’s Well* in recent critical literature. The reference she gives for the passage in note 18 on page 37 of her book is inaccurate. There the location of the exemplum employing the Wild Hunt motif is said to be on “p. 105, lines 23-4” of the EETS edition of *Jacob’s Well*; the reference should instead be to “p. 166, line 23 to p. 167, line 25.”

*þe Soule* (lines 467-72, 531-44 (Laud)). In five of the six, the supernatural nature of the Hunt is made unmistakable.<sup>26</sup> For example, in all three of the passages where the depiction of the Hunt has a strong didactic flavor – the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, *Jacob’s Well*, and *The Desputisoun Bitwen þe Bodi and þe Soule* – the presence of the Devil or one of his representatives is unmistakable; in the latter two works, the pursued victims are explicitly presented as damned souls. The riders in the account from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are huge and black and loathsome, and some of them are mounted on bucks. As I noted in Chapter One, in Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*, the members of Herla’s host have been alive for hundreds of years, the spirits of the recently dead appear to some witnesses in the second version of the narrative, and in both accounts the host as a whole has the ability to disappear into a river or to rise up suddenly into the air.

The account of the fairy king’s hunt in lines 281-88 of *Sir Orfeo* does exhibit a number of the traditional features of the Wild Hunt. The rout is led by the otherworldly figure of the fairy king (283), followed by a noisy host (283-85) and baying hounds (286). As short as the account in *Sir Orfeo* is, it may possess some degree of the eerie atmosphere of other medieval Hunt narratives: the hunters’ movements seem frenetic and repetitious as they “hunt him al about [i.e., all around Orfeo]” (285), and a relative surfeit of aural imagery in a single couplet – the “dim cri” and “bloweing” of the hunters (285) and the “berking” of their dogs (286) – adds a hint of confusion to this picture of apparently directionless energy.

However, apart from the fairy nature of the riders, which is made explicit in line 283 (“þe king o fairy wiþ his rout”), nothing in the *literal* presentation of this scene indicates that the hunt undertaken by the fairy court involves any feature that must necessarily be deemed otherworldly. The descriptions of the riders and their hounds bear no mark of the supernatural, and the actions of the hunters in the chase, however frenzied, could as easily be those of mortals. Furthermore, while in most accounts the Wild Hunt typically takes place at night – a feature that all by itself

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<sup>26</sup> In the account of King Arthur as leader of the Hunt in Book II, Chapter 12 of Gervase of Tilbury’s *Otia Imperialia*, no feature of the passage smacks unambiguously of the preternatural. The relevant passage reads as follows:

Sed in siluis Britannie maioris aut minoris consimilia contigisse referuntur, narrantibus nemorum custodibus (quos *foristarios* quasi indaginum ac uiuariorum ferinorum aut regionum nemorum uulgus nominat) se alternis diebus circa horam meridianam et in primo noctium conticinio sub plenilunio luna lucente sepiissime uidere militum copiam uenantium et canum et cornuum strepitum, qui sciscitantibus se de societate et familia Arcturi esse affirmant.

[Moreover, similar things are reported to have happened in the forests of Great Britain or Brittany. The keepers of the woods (whom the people call foresters, that is, keepers of the parks and game preserves or royal woodlands) recount that, some days at about noon, and other days soon after nightfall when a full moon is shining, they very often see a band of knights out hunting, accompanied by the din of dogs and horns. If they are questioned, these knights claim to be of the company and household of Arthur.] (Gervase 336-37)

Here only two details *potentially* indicate the uncanny nature of the hunters: they sometimes hunt at night, by the light of the full moon, and they claim to be of Arthur’s court. The latter point may even signal a hint of skepticism on Gervase’s part; his choice of the verb *affirmant* (“claim”) leaves the door open to the suggestion that poachers might have exploited the credulity of the locals for their own purposes.

bespeaks the uncanny – the text of *Sir Orfeo* portrays the Fairy King and his court as hunting “in hot vnder-tides” (282). Admittedly, two other medieval English descriptions of the Hunt recount its appearance at noon (Map 370-1; Gervase 336-7), but by opting to portray the fairy hunt as taking place during the daytime rather than at night, the *Orfeo* poet chooses a temporal setting of ambivalent, rather than unambiguous, otherness. While familiar tropes of the Hunt appear in this scene, the poet actually seems to avoid the inclusion of recognizably supernatural features in his narrative.

The end of the scene may conceal a veiled allusion to one of the most terrifying aspects of the Wild Hunt, however. In line 287, the narrator explains that for all the vigor of the fairies’ pursuit of their quarry, “no best þai no nome.” Once again, the literal interpretation of this line would appear to be clear enough: the fairy king and his followers are habitually unsuccessful in their attempts at hunting. And for perhaps the majority of critics of *Sir Orfeo*, a literal reading of line 287 provides evidence of the fairies’ lack of agency; I examine these claims in more detail below. But such a conclusion fails to harmonize with the depiction of fairy hunters elsewhere in this and other texts. For instance, less than thirty lines later, Orfeo encounters sixty women, apparently fairies out hawking; each of them carries a falcon, and their birds enjoy an absurdly high rate of success in bringing down their quarry: “Ich faucoun his pray slou3” (313). Similarly, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain visits the fairy castle of Bertilak; in a celebrated triptych of hunting scenes, Bertilak and his courtiers successfully pursue and butcher deer, a boar, and a fox on successive days. If the fairy king’s hunters are actually poor hunters, their lack of success would represent a striking anomaly in medieval portraits of their kind. Other critics have however suggested an alternate reading of these lines: the fairies may take no “beast” precisely because their quarry is human (Brouland 23; Laura Hibbard Loomis, “Chaucer” 127). This notion gains some support from the fact that the fairies are described as hunting “in hot vnder-tides” (282), the same time of day at which Heurodis is abducted (cf. 133, 181).<sup>27</sup> And we are told later in the poem that the injured, mad or unconscious mortals on display in the antechamber to the fairy king’s palace have been “in this world y-nome, / With fairi þider y-come” (403-404). Whether or not the fairies are unsuccessful in the pursuit of wild animals, they prove themselves to be rather accomplished at abducting humans, and it seems likely that line 287 should be read as an allusion to that practice.

Ultimately, Bliss would appear to be right in linking the first of Orfeo’s four fairy visions to the theme of the Wild Hunt. When taken together, the presence of the otherworldly fairy king, the determined pursuit of quarry, and the clamor of the riders and their hounds all *suggest* an invocation of this traditional motif; but it is the subtle allusion to the abduction of humans that clinches the matter. In the final analysis, the poet does not shy away from representing the fairies as “other,” but his presentation of the scene more forcibly highlights the commonalities of human and fairy cultural practice. While a canny observer may detect in these lines a hint of the menace

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<sup>27</sup> When recounting her first vision of the fairy king and his courtiers to Orfeo, Heurodis tells him that she first saw the fairies when she “lay þis vnder-tide / & slepe vnder our orchard-side” (133-34). On the next day, Orfeo surrounds Heurodis with a thousand knights in the orchard when “the vnder-tide is come” (181).

While some seek to attach a demonic significance to the hour of Heurodis’ abduction (cf. Friedman, *Orpheus* 187-90; Friedman, “Eurydice” 22-29), the citations in the *Middle English Dictionary* make it clear that the term carried little temporal specificity in Middle English; any time from the late morning to the early afternoon might be referred to by “vnder-tide.”

that the fairy king potentially represents, he comes to that realization only after having confronted the degree to which the two kingdoms resemble each other in significant ways.

One final aspect of this scene seems to invoke the supernatural. Referring to the fairy hunters, the text notes that Orfeo “No neuer he nist whider þai bcome” (288). Taken literally, this line would seem simply to imply that the fairy king and his followers have passed beyond Orfeo’s line of sight and that he therefore doesn’t know where they have gone. The comment has however been widely read as evidence that the fairies vanish into thin air, and such a viewpoint receives some support both from other scenes in *Sir Orfeo*, and from passages in other Middle English narratives involving fairies.<sup>28</sup> First, line 288 appears to echo the earlier scene of Heurodis’ abduction by the fairies, in which Heurodis does truly seem to disappear along with her fairy kidnapers:

þe quen was oway y-tvi3t,  
Wiþ fairi forþ y-nome  
– *Men wist neuer wher sche was bcome.* (192-94; italics mine).

Given that Orfeo had earlier surrounded the queen with a thousand armed knights, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the fairies have vanished. Furthermore, as I mentioned above, the very next scene after the description of the fairy king’s hunt – that of the spectral-seeming fairy army on the march – ends with a similar comment: Orfeo “neuer . . . nist whider þai wold” (296).

A number of other medieval English texts report the sudden disappearance of otherworldly beings. The earliest example I have found occurs in the late twelfth-century *De Nugis Curialium* of Walter Map; there, the ancient British king Herla holds a conversation with a goat-footed pygmy king who suddenly vanishes at the end of the encounter.<sup>29</sup> Closer in both time and circumstance to the text of *Sir Orfeo* are two late fourteenth-century sources that employ phrases strikingly similar to those used there in describing the manner of departure of otherworldly beings. Near the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight rides away from Arthur’s court with his head in his hand, and the narrator comments, “To quat kyth he becom knwe non þere, / Neuer more þen þay wyste from queþen he watz wonnen” (*Sir Gawain* 460-61). Towards the end of the poem, Gawain and the Green Knight part ways after their final interview, the text noting that Gawain heads back to the “kynges bur3” (2475-76) while the Green Knight goes “[w]hiderwarde-soeuer he wolde” (2477). In their edition of the poem, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron call these phrases “a ‘fairy’ formula” (*Sir Gawain* page 224, n. 460f.; see also page 298, n. 2477f.), and they cite lines 288 and 296 of *Sir Orfeo* in support of this notion. Andrew and Waldron stop short of claiming that Bertilak has disappeared,

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<sup>28</sup> Marie-Thérèse Brouland notes that similar tag-lines in medieval Irish works appear to signal the otherworldly nature of a character, and she postulates that their use in *Sir Orfeo* may indicate a survival of a similar narrative tradition (157-59). Surprisingly, she mentions no analogues in Middle English texts.

<sup>29</sup> Map’s text reads: *[E]i trygride uelocius et terga uertit et se rapuit ab oculis eius.* [“[S]wifter than a tiger, he turned and disappeared from view”] (Map 26-27). Even here, in the earliest occurrence of the “fairy departure formula” known to me, ambivalence plays about the motif. Brooke and Mynors translate *se rapuit* as “disappeared,” but the Lewis and Short *Latin Dictionary* provides “to hasten, hurry, tear one’s self” as the meaning of *rapio* with the reflexive; it is not clear that the pygmy king’s disappearance is to be understood as instantaneous.

however, and such an interpretation would depend on the comparison with *Sir Orfeo*.

In a similar fashion, Laura Hibbard Loomis has drawn attention to the parallel between line 288 of *Sir Orfeo* and a scene that occurs early in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* ("Chaucer" 123-24). As the protagonist of the tale nears the end of the period of a year and a day in which he must find "[w]hat thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905), he comes upon a group of women dancing; when he tries to approach them, they disappear: "But certainly, er he cam fully there, / Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where" (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* III.995-96). Once more, characters who appear to be fairies (Quinn 214) are linked with a phrase expressing a witness's ignorance about where they have gone. However, this is the only example of the fairy departure "formula" in which the text makes it unambiguously clear that the fairies have suddenly "vanysshed." Loomis sees this passage not as evidence of Chaucer's use of traditional motifs, but as a mark of the influence of *Sir Orfeo* on his work: "The English lay seems best to account for most of the fairy lore which, so sparingly, Chaucer did admit to a few of his tales" (123).<sup>30</sup> If lines 288 and 296 of *Sir Orfeo* did provide the inspiration for the analogous lines in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* – a point that remains unprovable – it seems likely that Geoffrey Chaucer interpreted them much as modern critics have; nevertheless, we cannot know whether his understanding of the earlier poem was grounded in traditional lore or was instead the product of surmise.

One cannot finally say for certain whether lines 288 and 296 in *Sir Orfeo* and the analogous passages in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* refer to the actual and sudden disappearance of the fairy characters or should instead be taken at face value. A case can readily be made for the latter option, although critics have generally failed to do so. Both Gawain and Orfeo have solid grounds for a lack of interest in the destinations of the other characters. Just before their parting, the Green Knight invites Gawain to celebrate New Years with the Knight's wife and Gawain's aunt Morgne la Faye; apparently unwilling to confront both the women and his failure, Gawain refuses and sets out alone to return to Camylot (2467-78). The fact that the narrator tells us that Gawain heads back to the king's city while the Knight goes wherever he wishes may reflect Gawain's own perspective and his lack of any further interest in the doings of the northern court, or it may be intended to signal the gulf that remains between the human realm and the otherworld. Likewise, Orfeo's ignorance about the destination of the fairy hunters and soldiers may be just that – a lack of knowledge born of the apathy that characterizes his exile.

In Orfeo's second vision, that of the fairy soldiers (289-96), a great host of ten hundred grim-visaged knights passes by him, carrying banners and drawn swords. No overt hallmarks of the supernatural appear in the scene, though two of its features may introduce a hint of the uncanny: the fairy soldiers traverse open ground with already-drawn swords even though no enemy seems to be present; and the vision closes with the "fairy departure formula," already discussed in some detail above.

This scene has been compared to the folkloric motif of the fairy army, another topos rather difficult of definition. Part of the problem lies in the potential overlap between the themes of the "fairy army" and the "Wild Hunt." A. J. Bliss for instance refers to Walter Map's tale of

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<sup>30</sup> And yet Chaucer employs one of the most characteristic fairy motifs – that of the Fairy Queen ring-dancing with her attendants – even though it appears in neither of the fairy romances (*Sir Degaré* is the other) that Loomis cites as the sources of Chaucer's knowledge of fairylore; also see below.

Herla – mentioned above – as an instance of both the “fairy horde” (*Sir Orfeo* xxxvii) and the “fairy hunt” or “wild hunt” (*Sir Orfeo* xxxviii). The apparent conflation of these two notions may actually result from the artificiality of such categories. In its restless wanderings and the presence of the dead, Herla’s band does share some elements with the hosts of the Wild Hunt. On the other hand, humans react to the *familia Herlethingi* as an attacking army in the second of the two accounts of the Wild Hunt given by Map. In section iv.13 Map writes of the final appearance of the host on the border of Wales and Hereford:

Qui tunc primi uiderunt tibiis et clamoribus totam in eos uiciniam concitauerunt, et ut illius est mos uigilantissime gentis statim omnibus armis instructa multa manus aduenit, et quia uerbum ab eis extorquere non potuerunt uerbis, telis adigere responsa parabant. Illi autem eleuati sursum in aera subito disparuerunt.

[Those who saw them first raised the whole country against them with horns and shouts, and as is the wont of that most alert race, a large force came equipped with every weapon, and, because they were unable to wring a word from them by addressing them, made ready to extort an answer with their arms. They, however, rose up into the air and vanished on a sudden.] (Map 370-71)

In this passage Herla’s band seem most to resemble a phantom militia and their disappearance into the air renders places a firm stamp of the supernatural on their nature. A number of similar tales have medieval Ireland as their setting. In his *Expugnatio Hibernica*, Gerald of Wales notes that an army that included the nephew’s of Gerald’s kinsman Robert fitz Stephen was attacked in its campsite at night by a phantom host that disappeared once the mortal soldiers attempted to engage it (Mullally). Evelyn Mullally has identified the “phantom army” as a motif of some frequency in Irish sources; there the phenomenon is generally revealed as an illusion attributable to the supernatural powers of a human, most often a woman; when challenged the spectral soldiers often vanish (Mullally, see esp. 94).

By contrast with traditional tales of ghostly armies, little in the description of the armed fairy host in *Sir Orfeo* seems uncanny. While the fact that the fairy knights march with drawn swords may reflect odd martial practices on the part of the fairies, or it may instead indicate simply that Orfeo observes them immediately before they join battle with their enemy; the sparse presentation of the episode in the text does not allow us to decide between these options. And as I mentioned above, the only other potentially supernatural feature of this scene – the apparent disappearance of the fairy host in the last line – is equally ambivalent.

In the third of Orfeo’s fairy visions (297-302), he observes a group of elegantly clad fairy knights and ladies dancing skilfully to the strains of tabors, trumpets and other instruments (297-302). The briefest of the four tableaux, this episode offers no overt evidence of the supernatural.

Katherine Briggs has called dancing “[t]he festive exercise most widely attributed to the fairies, large or small” (*Encyclopedia* 88), and a number of accounts of this characteristic practice survive from the English Middle Ages. The earliest descriptions of fairy dancers appear in two different narratives in Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*, each of which focuses on the capture of an otherworldly bride. In Map’s first tale – that of the Briton warrior Gwestin Gwestiniog – the latter

uidisse per tres claras a luna noctes choreas feminarum in campo auene sue, et secutum eum eas fuisse donec in aqua stagni submergerentur, unam tamen quarta uice retinuisse.

[saw on three clear moonlight nights bands of women dancing in his field of oats, and followed them till they plunged into the water of the lake; but on the fourth night he caught one of them.] (Map 148-49)

In the second tale, Eadric Wild, the ostensible Anglo-Saxon lord of Lydbury North during the period of the Norman Conquest, gets lost in remote country while coming back late at night from a hunting trip; on the edge of a forest he encounters a large building in which he observes a group of women dancing:<sup>31</sup>

[U]idissetque lumen in ea, introspicens multarum nobilium feminarum maximam coream uidit. Erant autem pulcherrime aspectu, uenustoque habitu eleganter culte lineo tantum, maioresque nostris et proceriores. . . . Circuibant leui motu gestuque iocundo, et castigata uoce, reuerendo concentu sonus audiebatur exilis, at non erat sermo earum intelligibilis.

[[S]eeing a light inside, [he] looked in and saw a great dance of numbers of noble ladies. They were most comely to look upon, and finely clad in fair habits of linen only, and were greater and taller than our women. . . . They were circling with airy motion and gay gesture, and from their subdued voices singing in solemn harmony a delicate sound came to his ears; but their words he could not understand.]

(Map 154-55)

The account of fairy dancers composed closest in time to *Sir Orfeo* is that contained in the *Fasciculus Morum*, a preacher's handbook that has been dated to around 1300. There the narrator discusses the spiritual dangers attendant upon a belief in fairies:

Set rogo quid dicendum est de talibus miseriis et supersticiosiis qui de nocte dixerunt se videre reginas pulcherrimas et alias puellas tripudiantes cum domina Dyana choreas ducentes dea paganorum, que in nostro vulgari dicitur *elves*?

[But I ask, what shall we say of those superstitious wretches who claim that at night they see the most beautiful queens and other girls dancing in the ring with

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<sup>31</sup> Map's description of ring-dancing fairies making low, indecipherable sounds is strikingly paralleled by a late seventeenth-century account reputed to be from the pen of John Aubrey. There, a grammar school instructor returning home over the Wiltshire downs in the evening chanced upon a fairy ring: "Comming over the downes, it being neer darke, and approaching one of the fairy dances, as the common people call them in these parts, viz. the greene circles made by those sprites on the grasse, he all at once sawe an innumerable quantitie of pigmies or very small people, dancing rounde and rounde, and singing, and making all maner of small odd noyses" (Briggs, *Encyclopedia* 12). John Rhys also records nineteenth-century narratives of Welsh fairies who seemed to be communicating in a language other than either Welsh or English (1.277, 1.279).

Lady Diana, the goddess of the heathens, who in our native tongue are called *elves?*] (*Fasciculus* 580-81)

Finally, Geoffrey Chaucer provides two brief mentions of the motif of dancing fairies in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. In the first, the fairies seem to be invoked as an emblem of “th’olde dayes of the King Arthour” (*Canterbury Tales* III.857): “The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye, / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede” (*Canterbury Tales* III.860-61). Chaucer’s second allusion to dancing fairies has a greater role in the plot of the *Tale*; immediately before the protagonist encounters the old hag who will provide the answer to the question posed by the queen, he comes upon a ring of dancing fairies at the edge of the forest:

And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,  
In al this care, under a forest syde,  
Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go  
Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;  
Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,  
In hope that som wysdom should he lerne,  
But certainly, er he cam fully there,  
Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where. (*Canterbury Tales* III.989-96)

All of these accounts share at least one striking feature: all the fairy dancers described here are female; male fairies are never mentioned. The nature of the dance performed and its setting, at least where recounted, also seem consistent from work to work. Map and the anonymous author of the *Fasciculus Morum* portray the fairies as engaging in ring-dances (*choreas*), which, as “fairy rings,” become a commonplace of both folkloric and literary fairy narratives in later centuries. In all of these accounts except for Map’s tale of Eadric Wild, the dances are held outside. Both Eadric and Chaucer’s protagonist are portrayed as encountering the fairies at the edge of a forest in wild country. And except in Chaucer’s tale, the fairy dancers appear at night.

As with the subjects of other fairy-related motifs I have examined here, the fairy dancers bear clear marks of their alterity in each of these narratives. Map’s account of Eadric’s encounter, for instance, becomes virtually an inventory of techniques with which to signal difference. Spatially and temporally, the setting of the dance witnessed by Eadric is marginalized, emphasizing its apartness from the settings in which one would expect to encounter *human* activities of this type: the building Eadric comes upon lies in lonely wild country (*deuia*, lit. “lying off the high-road”), at the edge of a forest (*hora* [i.e., *ora*] *nemoris*), and the dance itself takes place after midnight (*media . . . nocte*) (154-55). The physical appearance of the ladies immediately distinguishes them from their human counterparts: they are “most comely to look upon” (*pulcherrime aspectu*), and “greater and taller than our women” (*maioresque nostris et proceriores*) (154-55). The cultural difference of the women, too, is underscored by the fact that their clothing is of linen only (*habitu . . . lineo tantum*) and that their language is unintelligible to

Eadric (*non erat sermo earum intelligibilis*) (154-55).<sup>32</sup> Similarly, if the use of a moonlit oat-field as the venue for a dance by the women in Map's tale of Gwestin Gwestiniog only *hints at* their alterity, their subsequent disappearance into the depths of the lake clinches the matter. Likewise, the night-time setting of the dance in the *Fasciculus Morum* and the (presumably identifiable) presence of the goddess Diana underscore the uncanniness of that account, while the sudden disappearance of the fairy dancers in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* neatly presages the otherworldly powers of the hag whom the protagonist encounters immediately afterwards.

The description of the fairy dance in lines 297-302 of *Sir Orfeo* would seem almost studiously to avoid the most familiar features of this motif: men and women dance together, the actual form of the dance is never specified, and while the wilderness setting of the passage recalls most other instances of the theme, these dancers perform by daylight rather than by moonlight. The courtly elegance so often attributed to fairy activities does indeed assert itself here: the fairies dance "gisely" (299) and with "[q]ueynt pas" (300), just as those described by Map in his tale of Eadric Wilde dance *leui motu gestuque iocundo* (154-55). But this description could be applied just as aptly to human dancers. Not only are the uncanny or supernatural details present in all the other narratives of the fairy dance absent here, but the tableau of the dancing fairies – in contrast to the earlier two visions in this passage – does nothing to evoke familiar folkloric motifs of any type. Even the scene-closing reference to Orfeo's ignorance about the final destination of the fairies – at best, an ambivalent marker of fairy difference in the two preceding episodes of this passage – makes no appearance here. Except for its wilderness setting, nothing in the scene of dancing witnessed by Orfeo in this third fairy vision indicates that the actors are not mortals.

In the fourth and final vision (303-42), and the longest of the sequence, Orfeo sees sixty women on horseback hunting waterfowl with falcons (303-10). Each of the hunting birds lands its prey; Orfeo, moved to laughter by the sight of such "fair game," heads toward the women but stops short when he recognizes his wife among them (311-22). The two gaze silently upon each other for a moment, but the women hustle Heurodis away (323-30). Orfeo, ashamed at his inability to act, vows to follow the women, come what may (331-42). As with the preceding vision, very little here points to the presence of the uncanny. Indeed, as already noted, at least one critic, George Kane, has argued that the women are mortals held captive in fairyland.

While I have been unable to find any other example of an all-female fairy hunting party, the association between fairy women and the accouterments of hawking are well established. The possession of hawks and falcons appears to have been a familiar marker of fairy identity in French and English romances, particularly within the tradition of the Breton lay. In *Lanval*, a Breton lay by Marie de France, the description of the hero's fairy mistress as she enters King Arthur's court concludes with the trappings of the hunt, including a sparrowhawk, with which she surrounds herself:

Un espervier sur son poin tient,  
e un levrer après li vient. (*Lanval* (Ewert) 573-74)

[She had a sparrowhawk upon her wrist,

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<sup>32</sup> In twelfth- and thirteenth-century romances in particular, fairy women are regularly described as being tall and dressed in white, cf. *Guingamor* (430, 489), *Lanval* (Marie de France 559-60).

and a greyhound followed behind her.] (*Lanval* (Burgess and Busby) 80)

The association of fairy women and hawks seems to have been familiar to later English audiences; the detail of the *espervier* is retained in both the Middle English versions of Marie's text: "A sparowhauke she bare vpon hir hand" (*Landevale* 447); "A gerfawcon sche bar on her hond" (*Sir Launfal* 961).

While the strongly gendered hawking scene in *Sir Orfeo* seems to be unique, fairy women are regularly portrayed as members of mixed hawking parties in earlier romances. In the early thirteenth-century Breton lay *Guingamor*, a large party of three hundred knights (*chevaliers*; 507), each of whom has brought his mistress (*Chascuns de ceus menoit s'amie*; 513), comes to meet the hero of the lay upon his entry into fairyland (507-25); the group includes servants holding hunting birds:

Vallez I ot a espreviers,  
O biaux ostors, sors et muiers [. . .]

[There were young men carrying sparrowhawks  
And beautiful goshawks, unmoulted and moulted [. . .] (*Guingamor* 515-16)

In the romance *Le Bel Inconnu* by Renaut de Bâgé, dated to around the same period, the protagonist Guinglain encounters a group of men and women described in nearly identical terms when he returns to Ille d'Or, the home of his fairy mistress:

Espreviers portent, et faucons  
ostoirs, tercels, esmerillons,  
car il venoient de jebiers.

[These people had with them sparrowhawks and falcons,  
goshawks, tercels and merlins,  
for they had just come from hunting birds.] (*Renaut de Bagé* 3939-41)

When Guinglain meets the fairy herself – La Pucele as Blances Maines – for the second time, the description provided of her echoes that of the fairy mistress in *Lanval*:

En son puing porte en esprevier  
de trois mues; molt l'avoit cier.

[On her hand the lady bore a hawk  
that had moulted three times and which she greatly prized.]  
(*Renaut de Bagé* 3993-94)

The portrayal of hawking as a characteristic pastime of fairy women seems to have achieved the status of a romance convention; the description of Heurodis' companions in Orfeo's final fairy vision might well have signaled the presence of fairies for an audience well versed in the genre. And yet as in the scene of fairy dancing, very little here bespeaks the supernatural and uncanny; if

the portrayal of the fairy women’s hawking party answers to the some of the conventional depictions of fairy ladies in romance, it allows an ambivalence of identity that the poet will exploit.

One detail, however, may betray the uncanny nature of the hawking party. Sixty women let their hawks fly at river-fowl, and sixty birds bring down their prey. Much earlier in the text, the fairy warriors had proved to be absolutely invincible even when confronted with the full martial might of Traciens, and the fairy women in this scene display a similar level of omniscience, as their hawks achieve a success rate that is almost absurd even by the idealized standards of romance. Nevertheless, though fairy alterity may have been elided by this juncture in the narrative to a small pinpoint of the uncanny, it is precisely this detail that leads Orfeo to the recovery of his own identity as a king in “Jnglond.”

I noted above that in each one of the four scenes of Orfeo’s fairy visions, the fairies are depicted as having passed “bi” or “bisides” Orfeo. The poet seems quite carefully to highlight here Orfeo’s position as a consistently passive observer, an unmoving center about which fairy motion and activity flows. The once-active king of Traciens, who could summon and lead a one-thousand-strong army at a day’s notice, is here reduced to a state of unkingly apathy, even when constantly confronted with the characteristic actions of another royal court. I noted above that E. C. Ronquist – typifying a surprisingly strong current in *Orfeo* criticism – remarked that the actions of the fairies seem to be “evanescent.” Such an impression is no doubt founded on the idea – in the first two visions, at least – that the fairies appear to vanish into the distance: Orfeo “neuer [. . .] wist whider þai bi-come.” In those two scenes, the note on Orfeo’s lack of knowledge about the fairies’ destination might seem to be an instance of a “fairy departure formula,” once again marking the alterity of the supernatural. But the formula itself evanesces after the first two of these four scenes, while the poet insistently reminds us throughout of Orfeo’s sedentary apathy with that constant repetition of the words “bi” and “bisides.” By the end of the fourth fairy vision, the poet has made it clear that Orfeo quite literally doesn’t know – and doesn’t care – where the fairies are headed simply because he remains inactive and unmoving. Above, I quoted Christina M. Carlson as remarking that in *Sir Orfeo* the “fairies are unable to act.” But the true center of inaction here is the former King Orfeo; by the advent of the hunting party of fairy women, the most uncanny creature in the wilderness beyond Traciens is the king who has lost all interest in courtly activities and will not move.

Orfeo’s recovery of his royal identity begins with his observation of the fairy women participating in the aristocratic sport of falconry. Noticing the women’s success, he excitedly hurries toward them as memories of his own aristocratic past remove him from his position as a staid observer. For once, Orfeo actually cares where the fairies have gone:

‘Parfay!’ quap he, ‘þer is fair game;	315
þider ichil, bi Godes name!	
Ich was y-won swiche werk to se.’	
He aros, & þider gan te.	
To a leuedi he was y-come,	
Biheld, & hap wele vnder-nome,	320
& seþ bi al þing þat it is	
His owen quen, Dam Heurodis. ( <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 315-22)	

One aspect of Orfeo's royal past – the practice of hawking, and the joy he once took in a successful day of such sport – brings him face to face with that part of his royal identity that is most sorely missing: his queen. And yet he is spurred on to this rediscovery within himself of an interest in human society and activity by precisely the uncanny success of the fairy falconers, the last remaining trace of fairy difference in the sequence of four visions. The essence of Orfeo's own selfhood seems to merge in this episode with the alterity of his supernatural antagonists. In Chapter Two, I discussed the subsequent scene of Orfeo's first entry into fairyland, where he is confronted with the gallery of the undead human captives in what appears to be a courtyard just within the walls of the fairy castle. That episode reminds us of the raw, primeval power of the fairy king and his realm; it also serves to define human mortality and the vulnerability of the human body to mischance as an ineradicable line of demarcation between human and fairy identity. But before we are confronted with that reminder of difference, the poem opens up into the possibility of at least a partial reconciliation of self and other. Shared royal identity becomes the linchpin about which the end of the lay will revolve. And that royal identity will be held in common among three icons of British kingship: a fairy monarch whose race is so strongly associated with the British origins of England in the Breton lay; an English king whose near-divine ancestry places him in an Englished analogue of Geoffrey of Monmouth's near-mythic vision of an ancient and marvel-haunted Britain; and a more fully human steward, whose lack of the uncanny – as opposed to both the fairy king and Orfeo himself – seems to mark the poem's final emergence from myth and legend into history.

The last few lines of the poem's narrative proper – immediately before the epilogue (597-605) – recount the end of Orfeo's tale with lightning speed. After Orfeo's recognition by the steward and the other lords of Traciens, Orfeo and Heurodis are crowned anew, and the steward later succeeds them:

Now King Orfeo newe coround is, & his quen, Dame Heurodis, & liued long after-ward,	595
& seþþen was king þe steward. Harpours in Bretaine after þan Herd hou þis meruaile bigan, & made her-of a lay of gode likeing, & nempned it after þe king.	600
þat lay 'Orfeo' is y-hote: Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note. þus com Sir Orfeo out of his care: God graunt ous alle wele to fare! Amen!	
Explicit ( <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 593-605)	605

The grounds for the steward's rule of Traciens are carefully laid out much earlier in the poem. After Orfeo's failure to prevent the abduction of Heurodis by the fairy king, he summons his nobles and announces his resignation of the throne, outlining a program for the disposition of the kingship after his own death:

'Lordinges,' he said, 'Bifor 3ou here

Ich ordainy min hei3e steward 205  
 To wite mi kingdom afterward;  
 In mi stede ben he schal  
 To kepe mi londes ouer-al,  
 For now ichaue mi quen y-lore,  
 Þe fairest leuedi that euer was bore, 210  
 Neuer eft y nil no woman se.  
 In-to wildernes ichil te,  
 & liue þer euermore  
 Wiþ wilde bestes in holtes hore;  
 & when 3e vnder-stond þat y be spent, 215  
 Make 3ou þan a parlement,  
 & chese 3ou a newe king  
 – Now doþ 3our best wiþ al mi þinge.’ (*Sir Orfeo* 204-18)

By the time that Orfeo rescues Heurodis and returns to Winchester from fairyland, the steward has ruled in his place for over ten years. During the scene of feasting in the steward’s hall, Orfeo, disguised as a poor harper, claims to have taken his instrument off the body of a man he found in the wilderness ten years before, evoking from the regent a spontaneous and abject demonstration of grief. Now convinced that his second-in-command “was a trewe man” (554), Orfeo makes a long speech that ultimately reveals his identity as the lost king. Although all his remarks in this speech are couched in the conditional, Orfeo acknowledges that he has returned to Winchester to “asay” the “gode wille” (568) of the steward. Orfeo then effectively promises the steward the future kingship of Winchester while simultaneously enunciating the nature of the punishment he would otherwise have endured:

Sikerlich, for loue or ay,  
 Þou schust be king after mi day;  
 & 3if þou of mi deþ hadest ben bliþe  
 Þou schust haue voided, al-so swiþe. (*Sir Orfeo* 571-74).

Although the poet carefully provides Orfeo with a well articulated motivation for his generosity, the succession of a steward to the kingship at the end of a romance remains fairly anomalous.<sup>33</sup> As Rosalind Field notes, the plot of *Sir Orfeo* offers a modification of the exile-and-return pattern common in both Anglo-Norman romance and many of the earliest Middle English romances (“King” 46); typically, the protagonist, after a period of time in exile overseas or in the wilderness, returns to his home and overcomes obstacles in order to reassume control of lands from which he or his father had been wrongfully ousted. Although Orfeo’s exile is self-imposed, the poem conforms for the most part to the details of this plot structure (Field, “King” 48); nevertheless, while the endings of most exile-and-return romances lay stress upon the

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<sup>33</sup> R. H. Nicholson does however note that the situation is not unheard of in Middle English romance, and he cites an instance from the fifteenth-century *Generydes* (169 n. 12). Intriguingly, in that romance the steward – like his analogue in *Sir Orfeo* – becomes king of Thrace.

perpetuation of the protagonist's own dynasty, *Sir Orfeo* swerves decidedly away from this familiar pattern at the very end of the narrative by allowing the royal couple to die childless.

Oren Falk has recently drawn attention to the dynastic interruption embodied in the final lines of *Sir Orfeo*. "For a medieval audience," Falk writes, "Orfeo's lack of an heir of his flesh effectively undermines all his other achievements" (248). Furthermore, he argues that this "dynastic tragedy" (248) represents "a personal catastrophe for Orfeo and an atrocity for the institution of feudal monarchy" (261). Falk himself sees in the poem a tale of byzantine palace intrigue only obliquely hinted at in the actual text; he claims, for instance, that Orfeo's failure simply to confirm the steward as his successor upon his departure from Traciens betrays his own ulterior motives: "By appointing a regent, drawing on his fading authority to create an inherently unstable government and investing it with sanction until further notice, Orfeo hopes to create a tense equilibrium, a stalemate in which every potential usurper holds the others in check" (254). Ultimately Falk attempts to read the poem in the light of an early fourteenth-century *Realpolitik*, asserting that "*Sir Orfeo* alludes to the political atmosphere and actors of the 1320s" (264). He compares the disruption of Orfeo's dynastic line to the threats made by the enemies of Edward II early in 1327 to install someone other than his son on the throne (260-61); while Orfeo's situation shares "nothing of the pathos" of Edward's, Falk claims, the fictional king's prospect may be "the grimmer of the two" since he must allow "a stranger [to] reap the fruits of his labors and enjoy his patrimony" (261). Falk does not make clear why the steward must be considered a "stranger" rather than a trusted and efficient servant of many years' standing; and it is equally unclear why we should hold a Breton lay set in the near-mythological British past to the strict criteria of political verisimilitude that Falk's interpretation attempts to impose upon it. While it is true that historical English kings did not generally advocate having their regents succeed them, their wives were just as unlikely to be kidnapped by fairies. Nevertheless, the lay's final departure from well established patterns of the romance calls attention to itself and demands an explanation.

The ending of *Sir Orfeo* provides no indication whatsoever that the steward's assumption of rule represents a disaster for either the kingdom of Winchester or the protocols of royal succession. On the contrary, the swiftness with which the poem's final events are presented seems rather pointedly to deny the possibility that its outcome is debatable. The steward's ultimate reward is undeniably that: a recognition that he demonstrated, upon Orfeo's return, his willingness to choose ethical principle over his own self-interest by immediately acknowledging Orfeo as his lord and king. And the politically extraordinary fact of his succession confirms Orfeo himself as adhering to the same generous principles of good rule that characterize his regent. The "marvelous" qualities of both rulers may, in fact, be highlighted in the epilogue. Immediately after line 596, which notes the fate of the steward, the poem's epilogue begins with the words "Harpours in Bretaine after þan / Herd hou þis meruaile bigan" (597-98). While "þis meruaile" clearly refers to all the many wonders recounted in the poem, the juxtaposition of the latter couplet with four lines detailing the settlement of rule in Winchester cannot help but suggest that the munificence of both Orfeo and the steward should be counted among the tale's wonders; the very last lines of *Sir Orfeo* effectively enshrine virtuous rule as belonging to those matters celebrated by ancient "harpours in Bretaine." But Orfeo and the steward are not, in my opinion, the only rulers recognized in the poem for their kingly virtue. I will argue in the next few pages that the fairy king – for all his menacing haughtiness – is actually the first of a succession of three rulers whose generosity and loyalty to principle are celebrated in the text.

The king of Traciens and the king of fairyland do not finally encounter each other until

Orfeo follows his wife and the fairy ladies back to the latter king's realm. Disguised – for the first of two times in the poem – as merely a poor harper, Orfeo gains admission to the fairy king's hall, and once there he insists on playing for the fairy court.

Bifor þe king he sat adoun	435
& tok his harp so miri of soun,	
& tempreþ his harp as he wele can,	
& blisseful notes he þer gan,	
Þat al þat in þe palays were	
Com to him forto here,	440
& liggeþ adoun to his fete,	
Hem þenkeþ his melody so swete.	
Þe king herkneþ & sitt ful stille;	
To here his gle he haþ gode wille.	
Gode bourde he hadde of his gle;	445
Þe riche quen al-so hadde he. ( <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 435-46)	

The king and his subjects are greatly pleased by Orfeo's harping, and the king offers Orfeo what the critical literature calls "a rash boon" – in other words, he lays no stipulations upon the reward Orfeo might ask for. Orfeo understandably asks for Heurodis:

When he hadde stint his harping	
Þan seyð to him þe king:	
'Menstrel, me likeþ wel þi gle.	
Now aske of me what it be,	450
Largelich ichil þe pay:	
Now speke, & tow mi3t asay.'	
'Sir,' he seyð, 'Ich biseche þe	
Þatow woldest 3iue me	
Þat ich leuedi, bri3t on ble,	455
Þat slepeþ vnder þe ympe-tre.'	
'Nay!' quað þe king, 'Þat nou3t nere!	
A sori couple of 3ou it were,	
For þou art lene, rowe & blac,	
& sche is louesum, wiþ-outen lac:	460
A loplich þing it were, forþi,	
To sen hir in þi compayni.'	
'O, Sir!' he seyð, 'Gentil King!	
3ete were it a wele fouler þing	
To here a lesing of þi mouþe:	465
So, Sir, as 3e seyð nouþe	
What ich wold aski haue y schold,	
& nedes þou most þi word hold.'	
Þe king seyð: 'Seþþen it is so	
Take hir bi þe hond & go:	470

Of hir ichil þatow be bliþe!  
 He kneled adoun & þonked him swiþe.  
 His wiif he tok bi þe hond  
 & dede him swiþe out of þat lond,  
 & went him out of þat þede; 475  
 Ri3t as he come þe wey he 3ede. (*Sir Orfeo* 447-76)

When the king refuses, Orfeo reminds him of his royal obligation to honor his own word. The fairy king cedes the point, grants Orfeo Heurodis, and wishes him happiness with her. Immediately after this scene, the couple hurries back to Winchester (477-80).

For the most part, critics' assessments of the fairy king's behavior in this scene have been quite harsh and surprisingly uniform. Once again, George Kane's opinion about the nature of fairyland appears to have been seminal; he views Orfeo as exposing the dishonesty of his fairy counterpart: "[Orfeo] emerges victorious when he rebukes the king for failing to honour his promise" (83). Peter J. Lucas introduces into the criticism the idea that Orfeo's success is part of a process of the humanization of fairyland: "Through the power of the harp . . . the fairy king is forced to adopt the human virtue of keeping his word (463-68) and to be polite (469-71)" (6). Edward D. Kennedy grudgingly concedes that the fairy proves true, but he also repeats Kane's most damning characterization of the fairies: "[Orfeo] contrasts sharply with the other king in the story, the king of the fairies. The best that can be said for the latter is that he keeps his word: he permits Orfeo to take Heurodis out of his kingdom once he has committed himself to giving Orfeo whatever reward he wants for his harping. But otherwise he represents what George Kane has called the 'unexplored evil' of the Other World and its inhabitants" (104). R. H. Nicholson seems to echo Lucas's claim that in this poem truth-telling is an exclusively human virtue: "In effect, sharp-witted Orfeo insists on [the fairies] accepting the rules of his own society, especially the necessity of truth to the given word, a virtue which works to confirm the important communal relationship between people" (165). And in what is probably the most influential essay of the last three decades on *Sir Orfeo*, Seth Lerer sees nothing morally redeeming in either fairyland or its ruler: "If the poet's description [of the exterior of the fairy castle] reveals the hollowness of fairy artifice, then the moral vacuity of the king himself is clearest in his attempt to renege on his promise to the minstrel" (104).

The characterization of fairyland that emerges from these comments stands in stark contrast to the reputation of fairies in both medieval and modern folklore. Fairies are usually represented there as possessing an obsessive, even legalistic concern for truth-telling. Though typically manipulative of humans and quite willing to mislead them, fairies almost always have a high regard for their own word, and they also value the same quality in humans. Speaking of the British fairy tradition in general, folklorist Katharine Briggs notes that "All Good Fairies love humans to be free, open and generous in their dealings. A hospitable nature is perhaps the chief qualification for winning fairy favour, and truth in word and deed is esteemed" (*Vanishing People* 157). Briggs's depiction of the fairy concern for veracity finds one of its earliest illustrations in the late twelfth-century *Itinerarium Cambriae* of Gerald of Wales; there, the Welsh boy Elidurus encounters a race of small, subterranean fairies. In his depiction of the fairies' obsession with the truth, Gerald offers a critique of human society:

Juramenta eis nulla; nihil enim adeo ut mendacia detestabantur. Quoties de superiori hemisphaerio revertentur, ambitiones nostras, infidelitates, et inconstantias exspuebant,. Cultus eis religionis palam nullus: veritatis solum, ut videbatur, amatores praecipui et cultores. (*Itinerarium* 75-76)

[They never gave their word, for they hated lies more than anything they could think of. Whenever they came back from the upper world, they would speak contemptuously of our own ambitions, infidelities and inconstancies. They had no wish for public worship, and what they revered and admired, or so it seemed, was the plain unvarnished truth.] (*Journey* 134)

The boy Elidurus frequents the fairy world at the fairies' own invitation, but once he attempts to steal a golden ball at his mother's urging, he finds himself incapable of ever returning. What Peter J. Lucas sees as the "human virtue of keeping [one's] word" becomes instead firmly identified with the fairies in Gerald's narrative. And the instances of Welsh fairy bride narratives told by Gerald's contemporary and colleague Walter Map in his *De Nugis Curialium* (sections ii.11 and ii.12) underscore the same perspective on the fairy tendency toward promise-keeping and the human tendency toward promise-breaking. For instance, as I noted above, in the tale of Eadric Wild in *DNC* ii.12, the protagonist one night encounters a building full of unusually tall and beautiful women dancing and singing together in a remote area. Smitten by the beauty of one of them in particular, Eadric abducts her and then uses her sexually for three days while she maintains silence. When she finally speaks on the fourth day, her words are a chilling mixture of affectionate welcome and cold-blooded menace:

‘Salve, dulcissime mi, et saluus eris, et prospero statu persone rerumque gaudebis, donec improperaueris michi aut sorores a quibus rapta sum, aut locum aut lucum unde, aut aliquid circiter illud; a die uero illa decedes a felicitate, meque sublata detrimento frequenti deficies, diemque tuum inopportunitate tua preuenies.’

‘Hail to you, my dearest! and whole shall you be, and enjoy prosperity in body and affairs, until you reproach me either with the sisters from whom you snatched me, or the place or wood or anything thereabout, from which I come: but from that day you will fall away from happiness, and when I am gone you will fail with successive losses, and anticipate your day of doom by your own impatience.’

(Map 156-57)

Eadric immediately agrees to the implied condition on their marriage: “He vowed by every assurance possible to be firm and faithful in his love” (*Ille se stabilem fore fidumque semper in suis amoribus quacunque potest securitate promittit*; 156-57). Many years later, when she fails to appear promptly after Eadric has returned from a late hunting trip, he addresses her with an angry look:

‘Nunquid a sororibus tuis tam diu detenta es?’ et cetera iurgia fecit in aerem; nam illa soro/ribus auditis disparuit, Penituit ergo iuuenem excessus tam enormis et

dampnosi, locumque petit unde raptum fecerat; sed nullis eam fletibus, nullis eiulatibus reuocare potuit.

[‘Was it your sisters that kept you so long?’ The rest of his abuse was addressed to the air, for when her sisters were named she vanished. Bitterly did the youth repent his perverse and disastrous outbreak, and he sought the spot where he had made her captive, but by no tears nor outcries could he regain her.] (Map 158-59)

The narrative of Eadric and his supernatural spouse follows the larger pattern of the traditional Welsh fairy bride narrative, in which a human suitor agrees to a condition on marriage set down by the fairy female, but inevitably breaks it, occasioning the immediate and permanent disappearance of the woman. The structure of this legend sets into opposition, on the one hand, the unbending and legalistic attention to the details of a contract on the part of supernaturals, and on the other, the human tendency to allow resolutions and promises to be effaced over time. A similar pattern is found in the Breton lay tradition, as the human males in *Lanval* (143-52, 331-36), *Graelent* (332-44, 485-502), and *Guingamor* (564-70, 637-48) all break the injunctions of their fairy girlfriends. Given the representation of fairies in romance as a whole, critics’ repeated claims that honesty is alien to the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* seems suspect. I argued earlier in this chapter that the representation of fairyland in *Sir Orfeo* departs in interesting ways from some aspects of the romance tradition, but a fairy culture in which truth-telling and promise-keeping are virtually unknown simply does not square with well-established and essential patterns of fairy behavior in folklore and romance, and in the Breton lay tradition in particular.

Furthermore, the rash boon scene in *Sir Orfeo* is a conventional one that participates in a much larger tradition; a reading of the episode performed in the light of analogous scenes from earlier and contemporary romances produces an interpretation rather at odds with that current in the criticism on *Sir Orfeo*. Kings or rulers who offer a supplicant a “rash boon” – as the fairy king does – almost inevitably have cause to regret their generosity, and they generally offer a clear expression of that regret. One example from the earlier Breton lay tradition itself can be found in the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century French romance *Guingamor*. In the relevant episode of the lay, the titular hero, who is the nephew and heir of the king of Brittany, approaches his uncle and asks that he grant him a boon, begging him not to refuse; the king replies that he will grant whatever Guingamor might wish for. Having secured the king’s pledge, Guingamor then explains that he would like the loan of the king’s precious hunting animals in order to go in pursuit of the dangerous white boar that has decimated the ranks of the king’s knights (200-206). The king refuses, objecting that he would see neither his beloved nephew nor his hunting animals again if he granted this boon:

Li rois oï que ses niés dist  
Et la requeste que il fist.  
Molt fu dolent, ne set que fere,  
De l’otroi se voloit retraire,  
Et dist qu’il le lessast ester,  
Ne li doit pas ce demander;  
Ne souffreroit qu’il I alast  
Por qoi le blanc sengler chaçast,

Qui son pesant d'or li donroit,  
Car ja mes ne repereroit.

[The king heard what his nephew said  
And the request which he made.  
He was very unhappy and did not know what to do,  
He wanted to retract his promise  
And said that Guingamor should drop the matter;  
That he should not ask it;  
He would not permit him to go there  
To hunt the white boar  
Even for his own weight in gold,  
For he would never return.] (*Guingamor* 207-15)

However, the queen then joins her entreaties to Guingamor's, and the king finally relents, not only granting his nephew all he had asked for, but escorting him to the edge of the woods as well (225-68).

In *Guingamor*, the king of Brittany, like the fairy king of *Sir Orfeo*, at first refuses to honor his word, but finally gives in to his supplicants as they become more importunate. Nothing in the text of the lay indicates reproach for the king's initial hesitation to fulfil his vow. In fact, the text clearly expects us to understand that Guingamor bases his strategy in dealing with his uncle on a prior knowledge of the king's largesse and willingness to indulge him. And in the end, all the king's concerns prove to have been well-founded. Guingamor's hunting expedition leads him to fairyland, and 300 years pass by during the two days he spends there; the king never sees his nephew or his hunting animals again. The accuracy of the king's predictions can in retrospect be seen to validate the reasons he originally gave for rejecting his nephew's request. The rash boon scene in *Guingamor* does not serve to expose the "moral vacuity" of the king of Brittany, as Seth Lerer claims in the case of the fairy king, but – quite to the contrary – it emphasizes both the king's native generosity and the contradictions inherent in the courtly code of honor: here in *Guingamor*, the king's duty to protect his knights from their own recklessness collides with his duty to honor his word.

The emphasis placed upon the royal obligation to uphold the truth in *Sir Orfeo* finds an even more striking parallel in the early thirteenth-century French Arthurian romance *Le Bel Inconnu*. In that narrative, an unfamiliar young knight – dubbed the "Fair Unknown" – requests an unspecified boon of King Arthur. The latter agrees, but when the Fair Unknown later asks to be sent on an adventure that requires the court's best knight, Arthur balks, citing the young man's inexperience. But the knight reminds Arthur of his earlier vow:

“Par le covent que tu m'en as,  
te quier le don que m'as proumis.  
Raisson feras, ce m'est avis:  
rois es, si ne dois pas mentir  
ne couvent a nului faillir.”

[“By the agreement you made with me,

I now ask for what you have promised.  
To my mind you will be doing right to grant me this,  
for you are a king, and so should never speak falsely  
or fail to keep faith with anyone.”] (*Renaut de Bagé* 218-22)

When the Fair Unknown invokes Arthur’s royal obligation to speak the truth and honor his pledges, the king immediately accedes to the young man’s wishes and goes one step further, formally retaining the knight as a companion of the Round Table.

The last two lines of the Fair Unknown’s speech here are strongly reminiscent of Orfeo’s declaration that lies are all the more foul when they come from a royal mouth. But Arthur’s hesitation to fulfill his original promise earns him no lasting opprobrium. In fact, by offering the knight the unlooked-for boon of membership in the Round Table, Arthur only enhances his reputation for fair play and liberality. In the analogous moment in *Sir Orfeo*, the fairy king lays his blessing on Orfeo and Heurodis, wishing Orfeo happiness with her. Critics have often seen the latter statement in a threateningly ironic light; however, in view of the parallels with *Le Bel Inconnu*, it seems likely that the fairy king’s benison was intended to be seen as genuine and part of a larger tradition.

Ethical ambivalence always plays about the motif of the rash boon – if only temporarily – but most occurrences of the topos concern a king whose honor is in no way doubtful. The motif of the rash boon is necessarily founded on a character’s willingness to dispense largesse, a quality rarely accorded to morally dubious actors in romance. While critics read the fairy king’s momentary hesitation to honor his word as an index of his moral outlook, the king’s counterparts in other romances are generally not the antagonists of the text in question. One exception to this rule of thumb occurs in the Middle English romance *Horn Childe and the Maiden Rimmild*, which, like *Sir Orfeo*, is found in the latter section of the Auchinleck MS; the second item following *Sir Orfeo* in the volume, *Horn Childe* appears on ff. 317va-323vb. At the beginning of the rash boon scene, Horn, the principal character of the romance, returns to Brittany after seven years in Ireland. Discovering that his beloved, Rimmild, is about to marry King Moïoun, he disguises himself as a crazy beggar and goes in search of the king. When he finds the latter on horseback, he grabs the horse’s bridle, but Wikard – now a retainer of the king but once a companion of Horn’s who betrayed him – beats the “beggar” bloody. The king is horrified by this and grants Horn whatever he should wish for, but retracts the offer after Horn states his request:

Moïoun King was ful wo  
that he [i.e., Wikard] hadde smiten the pouer man so  
& seyde, ‘Lat mi bridel be!  
Wiþ þi þou lat mi bridel be,  
What so thou wilt aski me,  
Blepelich 3iue Y the.’  
‘Peter!’ quaf Horn, ‘þatow wilt  
3iue me Maiden Rimmild,  
þat is so fair & fre.’  
þe king was wroþ & rewe his 3ift:  
‘þou askest wrong & noþing ri3t,  
Sche may nou3t þine be.’ (*Horn Childe and Maiden Rimmild* 913-24)

Unsurprisingly unwilling to surrender his bride-to-be, Moïoun ignores Horn's entreaty that Rinnild be delivered to him, at which point Horn escapes punishment for his impudence by feigning madness (925-36). He then asks to be fed in the King's hall, which Moïoun does grant (937-48), and there Horn comes face to face with Rinnild (973-1002). Finally, disguised once again, Horn beats the king's men in a tournament and recovers his beloved; he cleaves Wikard's head in two (1088) but chooses not to slay the king (1086).

The parallels between the rash boon scenes in the two texts are strong. Orfeo is a former king, and Horn is heir to a usurped throne. Attired in tattered clothing, both men are offered a boon by a king who is holding their beloved; both name the beloved as their reward and are at first refused. But both heroes end by leaving the king's hall in the company of their female companions. Significantly, however, Moïoun never accedes to Horn's initial wish, while the fairy king, like most of his counterparts, finally does.

At first blush the close parallels between *Sir Orfeo* and *Horn Childe* might appear to support Lerer's claims about the fairy king: Moïoun, like his fairy analogue, goes back on his word and soon after suffers ignominious defeat in battle, lying "under his hors fete" (1085) at the end of an ensuing tournament against the romance's protagonist. However, the difference in the fates of Moïoun and Wikard points to a different meaning of the rash boon scene here. If their respective fates are a reliable index of their moral characters, Moïoun comes off rather better than his henchman: the king is unquestionably humiliated, but he escapes with his life; the traitor Wikard, meanwhile, meets a terrible end. Horn's willingness to spare Moïoun is clearly an acknowledgment of the king's earlier display of kindness to him during the rash boon scene. Moïoun does technically betray his word, and unlike other makers of rash promises, he never makes good on his initial vow. Nevertheless, his rash offer is born of the laudable impulse to compensate for the boorish behavior of those around him. The principle function of the rash boon in *Horn Childe* is not to impugn the king's loyalty to his own word, but to distinguish him from his morally reprehensible courtiers; ultimately this scene casts Moïoun as an ill-counseled king, surrounded by villains who lead him unfortunately astray.

In the romance tradition at large, the reputation of a king or ruler does not appear to be compromised *later* in the narrative by his *initial* unwillingness to honor a rash promise. In fact, in most of those texts where a woman is the object of the supplicant's request – such as Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot*, the Auchinleck *Sir Tristrem* or the Welsh Mabinogi text *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet* – a king earns the reproach of a member of his own retinue (or of the woman herself) precisely *because* he has handed over his wife to another as the result of a rash boon.<sup>34</sup> The situation is of course somewhat different in *Sir Orfeo*, where the fairy king has apparently had no erotic designs upon Heurodis. But in general, balking at a request once its precise terms have been enunciated would appear to be a stock feature of the motif, and – if it communicates anything about the character of the person offering the boon – it seems most forcefully to bespeak prudence and an awareness of the competing claims on one's honor.

Perhaps more importantly, the feature of the rash boon most potent as a medium of characterization is the initial *unconditional* offer. The rash boon motif allows a narrative to foreground the notion of kingly or noble largesse and, implicitly, the power that makes such generosity possible. As Philippe Ménard has written, *Le 'don contraignant' est une manifestation*

<sup>34</sup> Strikingly, the Auchinleck manuscript has three texts – *Sir Tristrem*, *Horn Childe*, and *Sir Orfeo* – in which the possession of a woman becomes the focus of a rash boon episode.

*de courage et de puissance. Il exprime un goût de la gloire et un sens de l'honneur* (“The ‘rash boon’ is a manifestation of courage and of power. It expresses a taste for glory and a sense of honor”; “Don en blanc” 50). Ménard’s portrayal of the motif’s force accords well with the evidence we have just examined, but is at odds with much of the critical literature on *Sir Orfeo*. However peremptory or menacing the fairy king may appear in earlier parts of the poem, during his encounter with Orfeo he displays a willingness to honor his own word that is worthy of Arthur himself. But as Ménard remarks, that display of a concern for honor is also a display of power.

I noted above that Orfeo’s words to the fairy king seem to echo those of the Fair Unknown to Arthur in the French romance *Le Bel Inconnu*. The resemblance is not sufficiently strong to justify a claim that one of the poems has borrowed from the other. But this link between them usefully underscores the “Britishness” of the rash boon theme. The motif appears frequently in French Arthurian texts; each of the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, for instance, possesses one or more instances of a scene involving the *don contraignant* (Frappier, “Motif” 8-22). Jean Frappier traces the origin of the rash boon to Celtic sources, and claims that “the appearance of the rash boon coincides with that of the Matter of Britain in French literature” (*l’apparition du <<don arthurien>>* [i.e., the rash boon] *coïncide avec celle de la matière de Bretagne dans la littérature française*; “Motif” 38). He contends further that where the motif appears in texts that do not focus on the Matter of Britain, “they give every appearance of having borrowed this convention from it” (*lui ont selon toute apparence emprunté cette coutume*; “Motif” 7). Philippe Ménard convincingly challenges Frappier’s claims about the Celtic origins of the rash boon, finding good examples of the motif in Classical narratives such as the myth of Semele; but Ménard acknowledges, too, its strong associations with Arthurian themes in French literature (“Don en blanc” 46-48). Fernando Carmona Fernández, building on the work of both earlier scholars, has argued that over the course of the thirteenth-century French texts increasingly employed the motif in non-Arthurian and non-courtly milieux, prompting it to shed its earlier associations and become effectively *desceltizado* (“de-Celticized”; “Motivo” 436). In Middle English literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the rash boon certainly appears in texts that have no Arthurian connections, e. g. in the tail-rhyme romance *Sir Amadace*. Nevertheless, its Arthurian associations do remain legible; the motif appears in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, as the ancient hag offers to tell the rapist-knight of Arthur’s court what women most desire in exchange for an unspecified repayment (*Canterbury Tales* III.1009-12). And if Gawain’s pact with the Green Knight constitutes an example of what Richard Firth Green has called more generally “a rash promise” rather than the rash boon *per se* (293-335), the similarity between the notions and their function remains clear.<sup>35</sup> It may be fair to say, however, that in fourteenth-century Middle English literature the associations of the rash boon theme were more strongly “British” than Arthurian since it appears with some frequency in texts associated with ancient “Breteyne” but not with the court of Arthur. For example, the motif famously appears in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*, which identifies itself specifically as a Breton lay and is set in a carefully historicized ancient Brittany. And as I have noted above, it appears, intriguingly, in a cluster of texts in the Auchinleck manuscript that are set in the distant British or English past: *Sir*

<sup>35</sup> In a typical instance of the rash boon proper, the person offering the boon does so before the nature of the supplicant’s request has been specified. In the case of the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is of course aware of the terms of the pact he makes with the Knight before giving his assent to the beheading game, but, as Richard Firth Green has pointed out, everyone in the poem “understands that an agreement to exchange successive lethal blows is inherently impossible” (320).

*Tristrem*, *Horn Childe and Maiden Rimnild*, and of course *Sir Orfeo* itself. For an early fourteenth-century audience, the motif of the rash boon likely evoked not just the furthest recesses of insular history but also an interest in the moral character of the ancient British who had given rise to the contemporary English.

When the fairy king refuses to give Orfeo “what it be,” the latter prefaces his retort with the words “Gentil king!” (462). Given critics’ near-consensus on the interpretation of this scene, it would be easy to ironize Orfeo’s words and seek in them one more allusion to the native perfidy of the fairy monarch. Within the Breton lay tradition, however, the word “gentil” and two other conceptually related terms – “curteis” and “noble” – have specific associations with the ancient Britons themselves. Chaucer’s Franklin opens his lay with a brief portrait of the “gentil” Bretons, the original makers of the lay he relates:

This olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes  
Of diverse aventures made layes,  
Rymyed in hir firste Briton tonge,  
Which layes with hir instrumenz they songe  
Or elles reden hem for hir plesaunce. (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* III.709-13)

Chaucer has his character participate in a long-standing tradition. Marie de France, writing in the third quarter of the twelfth century, refers in the epilogue of her lay *Eliduc* to its first authors as *li anciën Bretun curteis* (1182). And for Marie, “noblesse” not only characterized the rulers of Brittany, but it also provided the impulse for the Breton lays themselves:

Mut unt esté noble barun  
Cil de Bretaine, li Bretun.  
Jadis suleient par prüesce,  
Par curteisie e par noblesce  
Des aventures que oiënt,  
Ki a plusur gent aveneient,  
Fere les lais pur remembrance,  
Que [hum] nes meist en ubliance. (*Equitan* (Ewert) 1-8)

[The Bretons, who lived in Brittany, were fine and noble people. In days gone by, these valiant, courtly and noble men composed lays for posterity and thus preserved them from oblivion. These lays were based on adventures they had heard and which had befallen many a person.] (*Equitan* (Burgess and Busby) 56)

The Middle English lay *Landevale*, which may be contemporary with *Sir Orfeo* itself, refers to the nobility of ancient Britain in similar terms: “Sothly, by Arthurys day / Was Bretayne yn grete nobylé” (1-2).

More than simply a commonplace recurrent in the prologues or epilogues of Breton lays, the concern for *gentillesse* or *curteisie* appears to have been a defining feature of the genre as a whole. While Kathryn Hume considers “love-interest” to be the principal characteristic of the lays, she calls *gentillesse* “almost as important,” and notes that certain lays “tell of the testing of *gentillesse* and of its triumph despite great hardships” (“Why Chaucer” 367). Speaking of the

Middle English Breton lays in particular, David V. Harrington also considers the greatest challenges faced by the protagonists of lays “tests of gentleness” (“Redefining” 83), but he broadens the range of values that concern the lays, highlighting the sense that such principles were perceived of as essentializing the British past: “[T]he English writers called their works lays to identify a combination of positive values, attitudes, ethical striving, and harmonious outcomes, attributes that they wanted to communicate and recommend and may have thought of as more common in stories by the ancient, peace-loving Bretons, as the prevailing spirit ‘in the good old days’” (“Redefining” 75). Within the texts themselves, Harrington sees these ethical concerns embodied in particular moments that test the selflessness of a protagonist and simultaneously provide a defining aspect of the lays as a genre: “A crucial difference between the hero of a lay and of a typical romance or the *chanson de geste* arises as the protagonist at a key moment in a lay determines his/her fate by a generous act of sacrifice, patience, humility, or scrupulousness” (“Redefining” 83).

In *Sir Orfeo*, the self-denial identified by Harrington as a crucial feature of the lays seems most obviously to be represented by Orfeo’s regent, who not only displays abject sorrow upon hearing of Orfeo’s supposed death, but also immediately relinquishes power when Orfeo finally reveals himself as king. But the fairy king, too, chooses principle over his own desires. His motivations for the original abduction of Heurodis remain obscure, and the stakes involved in his surrender of her are no more obvious. But elaborate force was marshalled in her original abduction, she has been held for ten years, and the king’s reluctance to relinquish her is unquestionable. One might question, however, exactly why Orfeo’s ploy succeeds. The fairy king’s first words to Orfeo are “What man artow / that art hider y-comen now?” (421-22). And the query foregrounds Orfeo’s status as an impoverished outsider – in the most absolute sense – without social ties to anyone in the fairy court except the sleeping Heurodis; Orfeo’s real claims upon the honor of the king, if any, are small. Orfeo’s unlikely success serves not as a rebuke to the fairy king, as critics have suggested repeatedly, but instead highlights his willingness to cleave to that selfless sense of royal honor that the text implicitly claims was shared by all the rulers of ancient Britain.

This analysis seems to be confirmed by the work of Richard Firth Green, who has come to a similar conclusion – if only in passing – by very different paths. Green has examined instances of the “rash promise” in Middle English literature in the light of medieval jurisprudence; he concludes that while fourteenth-century canon courts would have held any promise binding, the fairy king’s vow would have been void of legal force in either common or civil courts of the period (306-7). Somewhat later in the same volume, Green discusses how Chaucer, in the *Franklin’s Tale*, and the *Gawain* poet, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, engage with the idea of trothplight while conscious of the widening disjunction between morality and law in late fourteenth-century England; both writers, he says,

turn instinctively to an idealized fairy-tale past – to a world where the equation of truth and honor can still be made to seem unproblematical and the assaults of petty legalism to break harmlessly against the chivalric virtues of courtesy, generosity and noblesse oblige. As with the fairy king in *Sir Orfeo*, the less Dorigen [i.e., the female heroine of Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*] is legally bound by her promise, the more honor she is finally able to demonstrate by keeping it. (334)

In the three texts alluded to here – all of which, incidentally, call themselves “lays” and are set in ancient Britain or Brittany – Green usefully focuses attention on the way in which both the fairy king and Dorigen attain honor by observing scrupulously an agreement that might reasonably be challenged. If a sense of selflessness constitutes a defining factor in the characters in the Middle English Breton lays, as David V. Harrington contends, then *Sir Orfeo* has, in the fairy king and the steward, two personages who embody this “British” virtue.

Scholars of *Sir Orfeo* do not appear to have drawn lines of ethical equivalency between the forbidding supernatural king and Orfeo’s welcoming regent, but the poem itself seems to go to great lengths to underscore the structural analogy between the final scenes in which each of them appears, as a very elaborate series of parallels links the poem’s two final climactic episodes. J. Burke Severs has laid out these parallels in painstaking detail:

[T]he two climactic episodes – recovery of Heurodis and recovery of the kingdom – are bound together by an unusual series of parallels which it is interesting to draw critical attention to. (1) Both climactic episodes are laid in a royal court. (2) In both Orfeo comes to court in the guise of a minstrel. (3) In both his appearance in old and ragged clothing plays a part. (4) In both he is seeking something from the ruler, who has power to grant or withhold what he is seeking. (5) In both he has a right to the thing which he seeks. (6) In both he plays his harp for the ruler, and the playing leads to the climactic incident. (7) In both he employs a strategy of misrepresentation, or at least a withholding of the whole truth, and it is through the exercise of his wit that he proceeds. (8) In both the reader knows the true situation, but the ruler does not. (9) In both he succeeds in winning what he is seeking. (10) In the first episode, at the beginning he possesses both wife and kingdom [sic];<sup>36</sup> in the second, at the end he once again possesses them both. (“Antecedents” 201-2)

As exhaustive as Severs’s list would appear to be, a couple of details might be added to it. Orfeo tests the honor of both the fairy king and the steward, even as the earlier scene constitutes a *de facto* testing of his own sense of kingly decorum: in the court of the fairy king, he probes the fairy’s generosity and willingness to keep his promises, while in his own court he assays the steward’s “gode wille” and feudal loyalty.<sup>37</sup> And even very small details have their equivalencies across the two scenes: in fairyland, at the very end of his interview with the king, Orfeo demonstrates his gratitude to the fairy ruler when “[h]e kneled down & þonked him swiþe” (472); in the later scene the steward, immediately after Orfeo’s speech in which he promises the former the throne, “fel adoun to [Orfeo’s] fet” (579). But the most telling parallel may be that between

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<sup>36</sup> This appears to me to be a copy-editing error. Surely the first clause of Severs’s tenth “parallel” should emphasize the fact that Orfeo has *lost* both Heurodis and Traciens by the time that he appears in the fairy court; Severs perhaps intended something like this: “In the first episode, at the beginning he possesses *neither* wife *nor* kingdom.”

<sup>37</sup> The word “asay” may provide a further link between the two scenes in which Orfeo puts the truth-keeping of a sitting ruler to the test. The word occurs in only two places in *Sir Orfeo*. In the later instance, in line 568, Orfeo informs the steward outright that he has come to “asay” the latter’s good will. Earlier in the poem, in line 452, the fairy king promises Orfeo whatever reward he might desire, and then tells him “to speke & tow mi3t asay.” The king’s choice of “asay” seems peculiar within this context – the conditionality it encodes is somewhat at odds with the nature of the offer. But Orfeo’s immediate response does indeed put the king’s sense of honor to the test, helping to highlight further the connections between the two rulers Orfeo confronts.

the two acts of royal largesse. In both episodes, a rightful king rewards another person extremely lavishly for services rendered: the fairy king offers Orfeo whatever he might request, while Orfeo – having become the functional equivalent of the fairy king as he reveals his true identity – promises in his final monologue to make the steward king after himself.

If latter-day critics have made little of Sever's list of resemblances between the two scenes, an early reader of the poem may have recognized them. Immediately following Auchinleck line 468, where Orfeo insists that the king "most [his] word hold," the Harley and Ashmole versions of the poem both have an additional couplet:

'Pou sayst soþ,' sayde þe king þan,  
For-soþe, pou art a trewe man! (*Sir Orfeo*, Harley 430-31)

The ryche kyng spake wordys þan  
And seyde: 'Pou arte a trew man!' (*Sir Orfeo*, Ashmole 456-57)

The presence of the new couplet in both later recensions, combined with its absence in Auchinleck, indicates that it was most likely an addition made to the Harley-Ashmole exemplar. Derek Pearsall has recently written that this addition mars the sense of grudging obligation that he ascribes to the fairy king at this point in the original narrative:

The Harley and Ashmole MSS both miss this point resoundingly by having the king admit that what Orfeo has said is true and having him further congratulate Orfeo on being a true man (H 430-31, cf. A 456-57). This is no part of the proper behaviour of the lord of unreason, who must be shown to be 'bound' to do what he does. ("Madness" 60)

But perhaps it is Pearsall who has missed the point here. The redactor's new couplet heightens the structural symmetry of the two scenes by providing a complement to Orfeo's statement, made during his final speech in Winchester, that the steward had proven himself to be "trewe" (569). In the Harley and Ashmole recensions, a capacity and concern for "truth" explicitly becomes the linchpin upon which the scenes in *both* fairyland and Winchester turn. The redactor's addition makes it clear that Orfeo and his supernatural counterpart both possess a firm grasp of the workings of royal honor. In his quick-witted responses to the fairy king, Orfeo, like his intertextual counterparts, exploits a code of honor he assumes will already be in place in the fairy court. He assumes correctly, and thereby reveals the depth of his own moral insight to the fairy king. I would argue, furthermore, that an emphasis on the trothplight of all three rulers – the fairy king, Orfeo, and the steward – is an aspect of the final scenes latent in the original text and merely highlighted by the redactor, rather than a reading somewhat awkwardly imposed on the Auchinleck version by a later poet. In a deeply insightful 1975 article rarely cited in recent criticism, N. H. Keeble writes: "[O]ur tale has been one in which the virtue of integrity has been central: to the characters of all three protagonists [i.e., Heurodis, Orfeo and the fairy king]. . . . We have seen it in marriage, monarchy and in Faerie. We meet it now in the steward" (205). In all three manuscripts of the poem – and in both human and fairy courts – great rewards await those who have demonstrated an understanding of and loyalty to ancient British traditions of royal honor.

The three different rulers depicted in *Sir Orfeo* provide a sort of group portrait of insular monarchy. In a sequence that starts with the imperious (but honorable) fairy king and finishes with the loyal and warm-hearted (but clumsy) steward, they trace an arc beginning in mythology and ending in history, one that has its origins in “Breteyne” and “Traciens” and its final destination in an “Jnglond” in which a “parlement” (216) in Winchester might choose the next king. The fairy ruler in particular represents an atavistic template of British kingship. Jeff Rider has characterized him as “the terrible fairy king” (358), and Rider’s own moral evaluation of Orfeo’s opponent seems to be more or less in line with the prevailing current of criticism on the poem.<sup>38</sup> But his label serves to highlight the role of the supernatural king as a primal embodiment of royal power. The fairy king’s demeanor is uniformly imposing throughout the poem – sometimes menacing, sometimes bumptious. In the first of his speeches quoted by Heurodis, he warns her that she will be abducted the next day and disemboweled if she does not cooperate: “[P]ou worst y-fet / & to-tore þin limes al” (169-70). The fact that this threat is never realized although Heurodis arguably violates the king’s injunction has its own significance: “The king of faery is not a representative of malignant evil. Regal and peremptory, he is not inherently vicious. His threat to tear Heurodis apart if she resists is never carried out despite her unwillingness to go” (Foster 24-25). But the fairy’s first hostile and high-handed statement to Heurodis is part of a larger pattern consistent throughout the text: when Orfeo appears in the fairy court, the king declares him “fole-hardi” (426) for having come without a summons, and in response to Orfeo’s request for Heurodis, he declares that it would be a “loplich þing” to see the two of them together. The king is not, however, an example of a ruler who is all bark and no bite; his often-haughty words are matched by an ability to marshal great power when he so desires and to put that power rather effectively on display. Orfeo’s inability to protect Heurodis with a show of military force – even when allowed advance warning of the kidnapping – underscores just how irresistible the might of the fairy king can be. And if the dazzling architecture of fairyland observed by Orfeo (355-64) has an equivalent in Traciens, the text fails to notify us of that fact. The gallery of the undead Orfeo discovers just within the walls of the fairy castle (387-408) highlights the fairies’ ability to kidnap humans at will; it simultaneously showcases the outrages of accident and sudden death to which humans are vulnerable, while implying – quietly but forcefully – the fairy immunity to the same. R. H. Nicholson views the humans frozen in position as so many colonial artifacts, equating them with the walls of the castle as icons of fairy power: “The disposition of the fairy folk’s defences (including their palace grounds display of the fruits of their imperialism – the grotesque bodies like so many Elgin marbles) convince us of the extraordinary strength of this king” (164-65). In an earlier section of this chapter, I noted how the poem slowly disassembles over its course most aspects of fairy alterity, clearing the ground for the climactic showcasing of virtuous kingship as a point of commonality between the fairy and human realms of ancient Britain. But the grisly gallery of the “taken” ultimately retains the physical invulnerability of the fairies as a source of their difference and power, one necessary to allow the poem access to the mythological. And the very last glimpse of fairyland the poem offers us reinforces this sense of fairy superiority; even after Orfeo has succeeded in winning back Heurodis, he departs from the fairy king with a gesture of gratitude and reverence: “He kneled adoun & þonked him swiþe” (472). As I noted above, a number of critics have mentioned the

<sup>38</sup> Rider nevertheless carefully avoids the theologically reductive reading of the fairies found in other critics: “Faërie was never hell in medieval literature and fairies were never devils. There was, it is true, a certain uneasiness about their identification, but the uneasiness itself indicates a distinction” (357).

fairies' alleged lack of efficacy, and Christina M. Carlson in particular has insisted that “[t]he fairies are unable to act, to make an impact on the physical world” (69). Such claims are rendered nonsensical by the plain facts of the text, and their persistence in the face of overwhelming counter-evidence is nothing short of puzzling. The fairies – and in particular their king – clearly represent an incarnation of naked power that partakes of the human but is not circumscribed by the limitations that regularly fetter human agency.

In the preceding paragraphs, I might seem to have been flirting with self-contradiction, ascribing to the fairies and their king both a courtly sense of honor and a tendency towards a haughty brandishing of power. The apparent ambivalence inherent in such a characterization is paralleled by the representation of the ancient Britons in both historiography and romance. Discussing the portrayal of that people in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*, Michelle R. Warren writes: “Conquered conquerors (like the English), the Britons provoke ambivalent judgments of aggression: each time they embark on colonial expansion, Geoffrey both glorifies and laments their ambition” (*History on the Edge* 25). The blend of aggression and glory attaching to the Britons is found intact two hundred and fifty years later in the late fourteenth-century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which, like *Sir Orfeo* itself, claims to be a “laye” (30) set in the distant British past. The second stanza of the poem explicitly traces the descent of “the most courteous” Arthur from his fractious and violence-prone British forebears:

Ande quen þis Bretayn watz bigged bi þis burn rych  
 Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden,  
 In mony turned tyme tene þat wro3ten.  
 Mo ferlyes on þis folde han fallen here oft  
 Pen in any other þat I wot, syn that ilk tyme.  
 Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kinges  
 Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle.

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 20-26)

On the initial reading, this first half of the stanza would appear to plot an evolutionary narrative that optimistically sees the flower of all chivalry sprung from trouble-makers and lovers of strife; in retrospect, given the ending of the work, the lineage of Camelot offered here seems to call Arthurian self-identity into question. The Green Knight himself appears to embody the ambivalence of the British temperament; attired with courtly elegance but verbally abusive to Arthur and his courtiers, he first appears at Camlyot carrying “in his on honde . . . a holyn bobbe” (206) and “an ax in his oþer, an hoge and unmete” (208). He helpfully glosses the meaning of the holly-bob for the court: “3e may be seker bi this braunch that I bere here / that I passe as in pes and no ply3t seche” (265-66). Presumably, the significance of the huge ax is clear enough, or will be soon. The Knight is described at one point as “an alusch mon” (681), and like the fairy king he later proves himself to be – in terms of courtesy and honor – at least a match for his human counterpart in the poem.

In my earlier discussion of the rash boon motif, I noted that Orfeo's words to the fairy king parallel those of the Fair Unknown to Arthur in the French romance *Le Bel Inconnu*. It is impossible to say whether the *Orfeo* poet would have been familiar with the latter work in particular; however, given the similarities of the two speeches and the strong association of the rash boon with Arthurian and Celtic milieux, it seems likely that the Middle English poet adapted

this scene from an earlier text in which a supplicant reminded a British or Celtic king of his royal obligations. By substituting for the human king a fairy ruler recognizable as such from insular folklore, the poet seeks to situate his poem at the meeting-point of mythology and history, and thereby to recover the originary condition of a uniquely British kingship and literature that can be appropriated for contemporary England. This strategy renders the fairy king of *Sir Orfeo* not merely an intertextual double of King Arthur, but rather a prefiguration of him. If the alterity of the fairy king seems to dissipate just a bit in his encounter with Orfeo, it is not because the latter functions as a sort of courtly missionary bringing human standards of comportment to fairyland. Rather, the poem exposes the commonalities that link the rulers of two very different races of ancient Britain, revealing the allegiance both owe to a fundamental concept.

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