

Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld: Courting Chaos?

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RECENT CRITICISM of the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* has tended to insist on the essential inscrutability of the relationship between the real world and the world of “fairi” into which Orfeo’s wife, Heurodis, is so dramatically removed at the beginning of the poem.¹ As A. C. Spearing puts it, “The fairies in *Sir Orfeo* are part of a brilliant imaginative creation, fascinating and disturbing, and we do the poem no service at all by attempting to reduce them to some more familiar and manageable concept.”² For Derek Pearsall, the Fairy-King’s Otherworld is so utterly unknowable as to be in itself a symbol of “unknowableness”—the expression of “a supernatural power that was neither part of Christianity nor, like classical mythology, by tradition systematically allegorized.”³ Such approaches in effect deny even the possibility of a categorical answer to such questions as whether those people taken

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¹*Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2nd ed. (1966; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); all citations are from this edition.

²A. C. Spearing, “Interpreting a Medieval Romance,” in *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 56–84 at 78. In a more recent essay (“*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender,” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert [Harlow: Longman, 2000], pp. 258–72), Spearing has argued that the mysterious experience of the kidnapped queen Heurodis is essentially feminine: so that, symbolically at least, Orfeo’s recovery of her depends on his capacity to cross the boundaries of gender and participate in the Otherworld of feminine sensibility.

³Derek Pearsall, “Madness in *Sir Orfeo*,” in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays in Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills*, ed. Jennifer Fellows, Rosalind Field, Gillian Rogers, and Judith Weiss (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 51–63 at 54–55.

away by the fairies ("with fairi forth ynome") can properly be said to be dead;⁴ whether the Fairy-King is in any sense an evil or devilish figure;⁵ and whether either Orfeo or Heurodis ever fall into any state of mind that could be diagnosed as delusion or insanity.⁶ They make the boundary between this world and the world of "fairi" a kind of event-horizon, beyond which the normal laws of our semiotic universe simply do not apply. From this perspective, perhaps all that can be said for sure about the role of the Otherworld in *Sir Orfeo* is that, in taking Heurodis beyond that horizon, the fairies are responsible for divorcing her from her husband, her kingdom, and herself in so final but indefinable a sense that we can only experience her eventual restoration to all three as a marvel.⁷

While Spearing and Pearsall are probably right to insist that the symbolic significance of Heurodis's abduction is ultimately indeterminable, the very suggestiveness of this event clearly depends to a large extent on our willingness to interrogate it, to try to find "familiar and manageable concepts" by which to make sense of it. Simply to rest content with the incomprehensibility of the fairies' engagement with Sir Orfeo's world is to deny the experience of trying to resolve the uncertainty that makes it effective as a narrative figure. It is only reasonable that we should ask about the place of death, evil, and madness in the Fairy-King's world, since these are the questions that the structure of the tale—as a kind of journey of revelation and restoration—invites us to ask. Even if we eventually decide that this Otherworld is conceived in terms other than these, the very possibility of their presence in the imaginative landscape of the text—no matter how briefly or provisionally they are entertained—effectively colors our perception of its contours. The difficulty for the literary critic is to explain how such concepts are kept alive as presences within the imagined world of "fairi," without at the same time

⁴See Peter J. Lucas, "An Interpretation of *Sir Orfeo*," *Leeds Studies in English* NS 6 (1972): 1–9 at 3: "Despite these clear statements [i.e., *Sir Orfeo*, lines 389–90] that, however dead they may appear, the personages in the Other World are living, not dead, some critics have persisted in writing about *Sir Orfeo* as if Death were involved."

⁵See Mary Hynes-Berry, "Cohesion in *King Horn* and *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum* 50 (1975): 652–70 at 655: "Although [the Fairy-King] steals the queen, he is not really presented as evil; he seems to operate as much outside our judgment as he does outside of the human realm, in which he seems to have very little real interest."

⁶See J. K. Knapp, "The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 29 (1968): 263–73: "It is highly unlikely that the author of *Sir Orfeo* would have so anticipated modern techniques as to present a sophisticated treatment of insanity by making the objective surface of the poem's world dependent on the hero's distorted, and distorting, point of view."

⁷*Sir Orfeo*, line 598. Only the Auchinleck copy uses the term "mervaille."

unduly narrowing its field of connotation. To negotiate this problem, we perhaps need to be prepared to consider *Sir Orfeo* according to more flexible hermeneutic models than those that are normally applied to Middle English romances.

Recently, two readings of *Sir Orfeo* have been proposed that claim to discover its significance only in what it fails to say—that is, in its deliberate and dramatic rejection of inferential patterns that it initially seems to sustain but eventually rejects. Oren Falk has argued in this way that the happy ending of this Middle English version of the Orpheus-story (in which it departs so strikingly from its classical antecedents) may seem to celebrate the glorious restoration of the social and political harmony of Orfeo's kingdom, but it is actually more "euphemistic" than it might appear, in that the cost of Heurodis's recovery turns out to be the failure of the dynasty in the couple's childlessness.⁸ Falk points out that "Heurodis remains barren and silent, producing no heir for Orfeo to bequeath his hard-earned kingdom to"; and it is here, as he puts it, that "the starting point" of his reading of the poem lies, in the lacuna left by "Orfeo's missing son, the absent heir apparent" (p. 248). The justification for this reading is that "a concern with progeny was central to fourteenth-century political thinking, in the realms both of romance and of reality, charging *Sir Orfeo's* silence on the issue with significance"—making it impossible, in other words, for fourteenth-century readers of the poem not to be disturbed to some degree by the poem's tacit acknowledgment of the end of the Orfean line in the succession of his apparently faithful steward. Falk even draws an analogy between Orfeo and the doomed Edward II, suggesting in particular that the steward's appearance of good faith in the poem might have been undermined in reality by the rebellious behavior of such titular or actual royal stewards as Thomas of Lancaster, Simon de Montfort, and Bartholomew Badlesmere (pp. 254–55). Such a reading implies that the story of *Sir Orfeo* is riddled with deliberate gaps and blanks—resonant spaces within the narrative that actually encourage the reader to project onto them his or her own sense of what should properly belong there. It has the advantage of allowing for the importance of the unknowable in the text, while at the same time defining more precisely where the unknowable fits into its structure. In effect, it assumes a dramatic disjuncture (or a

⁸Oren Falk, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 (2000): 247–74.

series of disjunctures) between the text and the contexts of thought in which it might naturally be located. The fundamental problem with this kind of approach is that it depends on an assertion of the necessary priority of certain contexts (in Falk's case: dynastic ideology, a background of supposedly topical events and the politics of historical "stewards"), which may or may not be convincing to other readers of the poem. In this sense, the particular historical background that Falk sketches for *Sir Orfeo* might be seen not as its "dark subconscious" (as he puts it at p. 249) but simply as its unenlightening "unconscious"—the text's blank indifference to the ideas that he thinks it so dynamically resists.

A more comprehensive interpretation of *Sir Orfeo* has been proposed by Alan Fletcher, who offers a reading of the poem that is based on an observation of the way in which different hermeneutic strategies, which he calls "discourses," might be said to become deformed as they approach the event-horizon of the text.⁹ Fletcher argues that each of these strategies (which he defines as the discourses of Christianity, of astrology, and of fairyland) would have been available to a medieval reader of *Sir Orfeo*, and perhaps even invited by it to some extent, but that, as the story unfolds, they gradually become sustainable only at the expense of such a disturbingly high level of distortion that in the end each of them has to be abandoned. Again, what is attractive and innovative about this mode of approaching the text is its implicit acknowledgment that the poem's dramatic power might depend not on an inner consistency of form and sense but on a calculated inconsistency. The difference is that Fletcher, unlike Falk, is prepared to consider that the significance of the poem might lie less in the text's own contradictions than in the reader's recognition of his or her inability to resolve them according to *any* of the interpretative registers likely to be available. In other words, Fletcher not only allows for the possibility that the power of *Sir Orfeo* is rooted in its very intractability to critical exegesis (even of the deconstructive kind practiced by Falk): he also suggests that the reader's inevitably frustrated attempts to impose some sort of rational and significant framework on the text are themselves the substance of its drama. The contextual priority of the strategies that Fletcher chooses to impose on the poem (Christian, astrological, and otherworldly) might be contested,

⁹ Alan J. Fletcher, "Sir Orfeo and the Flight from the Enchanters," *SAC* 22 (2000): 141–77.

as is the case with Falk's analysis of the poem, but here the point is not that *Sir Orfeo* is dramatically discordant with any particular strategy of interpretation, but with all and any of the strategies that anyone might think to apply.¹⁰ Indeed, Fletcher says only that there are "at least three authoritative discourses . . . mobilized and challenged" (p. 143) by the poem—which implies that there could be others, or that these three could be defined differently.¹¹ However they are identified, "these captured discourses in *Sir Orfeo*," Fletcher suggests, "resonate incomplete, incapable of satisfactorily containing chaos in one totalizing explanation" (p. 162). It is this experience of a kind of narrative aporia that forces the reader into what he calls "the flight from the enchanters"—which, as I understand it, is the attempt to come to terms with the "existential confusion" stimulated by the text.¹²

If this narrative aporia is indeed the experience of the text, then the reader is clearly threatened with a disorienting relativism of perception and value, and with this comes the risk of "moral vacuousness" (p. 164)—a vacuousness that Fletcher insists thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century readers might have been prepared to entertain momentarily but not indefinitely (pp. 164–66). Therefore, he argues, they must inevitably have sought an interpretative refuge of some kind, and perhaps found one in the "performative culture" represented by the poem's imagery of harping (pp. 166–69).¹³ This is where my own reading di-

¹⁰This would presumably include Falk's reading of the poem in terms of dynastic ideology.

¹¹The "discourse" that seems to me most obviously missing here is the "classical" one. The apparent identity of Orfeo and Heurodis with Orpheus and Eurydice seems to offer a clear pattern by which to understand the significance of the romance, but in the end the incomplete analogy only raises more questions than it answers. Similarly, "the extraordinary chamber of horrors" (*Sir Orfeo*, lines 387–404), with which Fletcher begins his investigation, is curiously anticipated by Virgil's description of the "vestibule" of the Underworld in the *Aeneid*, 6:264–84 (*P. Vergili Maronis: Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors [Oxford: Clarendon, 1969; rpt. 1985], pp. 235–36). Not only do we find here a gallery of human sufferings in life and death analogous to the one in *Sir Orfeo*, but also a mysterious tree (in this case an elm), which, like Heurodis's *ympe-tre*, is presented as a seat of dreams. Yet the connection between *Sir Orfeo* and the *Aeneid* is impossible to define or explain; and Constance Davies, at least, was prepared to consider that even these remarkable correspondences between them could be "fortuitous" ("Classical Threads in *Sir Orfeo*," *Modern Language Review* 56 [1961]: 161–66 at 66).

¹²In the Middle English *Melusine*, ed. A. K. Donald, EETS ES 68 (London, 1895), pp. 2–5, "the thinges that men call ffayres" are explicitly classed as "secrets of God, abysmes without ryuage and without bottom."

¹³The importance of music as a theme in *Sir Orfeo* has often been stressed. See, for example, Seth Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum* 60 (1985): 92–109 at 93: "The poem argues for the place of artistry in civilization and for the place of music and poetry in life."

verges from his—not because I disagree about the force of musical performance as a symbol of social harmony in the poem, but because there seem to me good grounds for thinking that medieval writers and readers were more robust in the face of the moral and cognitive entropy the fairies represent than Fletcher assumes.¹⁴ Indeed, by the fourteenth century there was a long tradition in medieval literature of reading the fairies' incursions as a symbol of moral or social disorder; and the power of this symbolism depended to a large extent on the continual and deliberate cultivation of the fairies' Otherworld as an embodiment of chaotic signification. Medieval writers made this a resonant image not by refusing to attempt to define it—to “reduce it to some more familiar and manageable concept”—but by repeatedly pretending to do just that, to limit it to some particular field of meaning (including those of death, hell, and madness). In doing so, they were often ironically conscious of the provisionality and artificiality of offering to determine the meaning of so obviously indeterminable a concept, but in practice such interpretative gambits only enriched the symbolic force of the Otherworld by effectively gathering further associations to it. From this perspective, *Sir Orfeo* is not the uniquely problematic text that it might seem to be—and certainly not so threatening in its use of the fairies to mark a point of cognitive no-return, for which some kind of refuge must necessarily have been provided—but just one of a long series of texts to exploit the disorienting suggestiveness of the fairies' Otherworld as a figure for some sort of experience of entropy.

These are points that the remainder of this essay is designed to illustrate, drawing its examples from twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts belonging both to clerical and to vernacular milieux. Even so, it is precisely because the tradition of writing about fairies is so extensive in medieval culture, and at the same time is so complex and so susceptible to such a range of purposes and interpretations that the very attempt to illustrate it can only seem both cursory and selective. Some of these texts may seem remote from *Sir Orfeo* in context and purpose, but that only makes their similarity in imaginative scope and suggestiveness all

¹⁴It is precisely the lack of any moral framework that sharply differentiates the fairies' Otherworld from the explicitly minatory and purgatorial “Afterworlds” described in monastic visions-literature: on which, see Takami Matsuda, *Death and Purgatory in Middle English Didactic Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), and Thomas Ehlen, Johannes Mangei, and Elisabeth Stein, eds., *Visio Edmundi monachi de Eynsham: Interdisziplinäre Studien zur mittelalterlichen Visionsliteratur*, ScriptOralia 105 (Tübingen: Narr, 1998).

the more striking. I make no attempt here to provide a comprehensive survey that could define the absolute limits of the fairy kingdom's realm of connotation: only the opposite, in fact—I have chosen a sample to suggest something of the characteristically uncontained and uncontainable quality of fairies in the symbolic register of medieval narrative.

From the very beginning, medieval writers appropriated apparently folkloric ideas about otherworldly visitants precisely in order to moralize them in ways that only highlighted the gap between the narrowness and specificity of the literary purposes into which they were being press-ganged, and the depth and universality of their suggestiveness in oral culture. So, for example, the *Peterborough Chronicle* records that in the year 1127:

sægon 7 herdon fela men feole hundes hunten. Ða hundes wæron swarte 7 micele 7 ladlice, 7 here hundes ealle swarte 7 bradegede 7 ladlice, 7 hi ridone on swarte hors 7 on swarte bucces. Þis wæs segon on þe selue derfald in þa tune on Burch 7 on ealle þa wudes a wæron fram þa selua tune to Stanforde; 7 þa muneces herdon a horn blawen þet hi blewen on nihtes.¹⁵

[“many men saw and heard many huntsmen hunting. The huntsmen were black and huge and loathsome, and their hounds all black and wide-eyed and loathsome, and they rode on black horses and on black billy-goats. This was seen in the very deer-park of the town of Peterborough, and in all the woods there were from that same town to Stamford; and the monks heard the horns blow that they blew in the night.]

Here, as in *Sir Orfeo*, the Otherworld breaks into the everyday world in the form of a hunt-without-prey. Just as Sir Orfeo has visions of the Fairy-King chasing across the wilderness accompanied by “dim cri and bloweing / And houndes also with him berking” (lines 284–85), so the monks and “honest men” of Peterborough hear ghostly horns blowing and see a strange rout of hunters accompanied by hounds. This hunting

¹⁵*The Peterborough Chronicle, 1070–1174*, ed. Cecily Clark, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 50. This passage is also edited by J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, in *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 204. For a translation, see Michael Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: Dent, 1996), p. 258. An account of this incident also can be found in *The Chronicle of Hugh Candidus: A Monk of Peterborough*, ed. W. T. Mellows (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 101.

party is more obviously forbidding ("black and huge and loathsome") than is the Fairy-King's—but then it is perhaps precisely because of the resonance of the Fairy-King's otherworldly hunt with such accounts of the ghostly Wild Hunt as this one that the scene in *Sir Orfeo* still seems sinister, despite the Middle English romancer's insistence on the beauty, rather than the loathsomeness, of the strange visitants. Indeed it might be argued that the emphasis on the uniform whiteness and brightness of the fairies and their livery is so studied as to provoke at least the suspicion of some sort of camouflaging of horrors—a literal whitening of something sinisterly sepulchral.¹⁶

Yet it is not the inexplicability or the arbitrariness of this sudden and fearsome incursion from another world that makes the event seem so disturbing in the Peterborough Chronicle—no matter how marvelous ("sellice") the chronicler admits it might appear. Indeed, he clearly suggests that the event had a particular meaning for the people of Peterborough, noting that the apparition came soon after the Sunday in the year when the psalm-verse "Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord?" is sung as part of the Mass—as if the hunting horns of the Wild Hunt are meant to be understood as a graphic representation of this clarion cry for God's help.¹⁷ Moreover, the Wild Hunt's apparition in 1127 is directly associated with a particular occasion, the nepotistic appointment of Henry of Poitou to the abbacy of Peterborough, and so firmly as to suggest that this event was precisely what created a need for such divine intervention in the affairs of humanity.¹⁸ The implication, perhaps, is that the Wild Hunt is a disturbance in nature as extreme as the disturbance in society caused by the imposition of a corrupt, alien abbot on the monks of Peterborough, or else that the Hunt is itself a manifestation of God's indignation about the perpetration of so heinous an injustice in a human community particularly important to him. Whichever is the case, the otherworldly image of the Wild Hunt is effective as a means of condemning the election of Henry in part because it is so spectacularly

¹⁶White also has its own horrors, as Herman Melville memorably points out in *Moby Dick* (1851; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 205: "There yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights the blood."

¹⁷Psalm 43:23, which, according to Swanton (258 n. 1) is "the introit appointed for mass on the second Sunday before Lent (6 February that year)"—that is, 1127. The horns are also suggestive of doomsday: see, for example, I Corinthians 15:52, cited below.

¹⁸*The Peterborough Chronicle*, ed. Clark, pp. 48–49.

excessive, so magnificently overdetermined as to demonstrate the extremity of the author's feelings. This is not a mere dispute over personnel, he seems to be saying: this is an injustice deep enough to rend the very fabric of reality. Far from leaving the interpretation of this terrifying tear in the fabric of reality to the imagination of his readers, the chronicler carefully directs their reading of this incident so as to make the cause of the fairies' invasion all too obvious. At the same time, the deeper suggestiveness of the folkloric motif of the Wild Hunt continues to assert itself in such a way as to make this very act of interpretation seem dangerously narrow, to the point that the chronicler's decision to interpret the dark riders as evidence for the wickedness of Henry's appointment itself becomes a symbol of violence. Here the strain of attempting to confine the tumultuously unconfinable significance of the Otherworld only serves to suggest something of the author's own sense of stress in the face of what he regards as an act of profound wickedness. In this text, then, as in *Sir Orfeo*, the Otherworld allows the author to court chaos as a mood and as an idea—but yet to do so without losing control of its force as a metaphor within a particular context.

An even more strikingly willful application of the Otherworld as a metaphor can be found in Walter Map's *De nugis curialium*, in which it serves as one of the concepts central to the book as a whole, and in particular as a means of defining and intensifying the infernal qualities of the King's Court.¹⁹ This court, Map says, is just like the Court of Hell in being a place of punishment ("locus penalis": p. 14) and he teasingly suggests that if King Henry's court is not the same as the Devil's, then this is not for want of outward similarity: "I do not however say that it is hell; that does not follow: only that it is almost as much like hell as a horse's shoe is like a mare's" ("Non dico tamen quod infernus, quia non sequitur, sed fere tantam habet ad ipsum similitudinem quantum equi ferrum ad eque": pp. 14–16). This homely illustration of the difference between a literal and a figurative reading could

¹⁹ Walter Map, *De nugis curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. and trans. M. R. James, revised by C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). The comparison between *Sir Orfeo* and *De nugis* has been made before: see, for example, R. S. Loomis, "Sir Orfeo and Walter Map's *De nugis*," *Modern Language Notes* 51 (1936): 28–30; Helaine Newstead, "Some Observations on King Herla and the Herlethingi," in *Medieval Literature and Folk Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 105–10. Such studies tend to treat Map only as a bridge to *Sir Orfeo*'s "Celticity"—and little more.

perhaps be taken as a facetiously irreverent restatement of one of the basic principles of Augustinian sign theory.²⁰ It implies Map's emphatic awareness of the idea of symbolism itself, and the possibility of stress or slippage in the use of symbols, even as he sets about trying to create a symbolic "similitude" that is, even by his standards, audacious. The comparison between the Angevin Court and hell is clearly shocking, if only because it is so grossly disproportionate, but Map's reminder that it is merely symbolic is not at all the apology it might appear; rather it is a rhetorical maneuver designed to underline just how deliberately it has been created—to emphasize rather than conceal the intellectual effort that his metaphorical practice requires.

Yet even as he reminds us that symbols exist to be manipulated, he implicitly admits their provisionality; and in this way he leaves open the possibility that Henry's court possesses attributes that are best illustrated by its association with yet other symbols. So he goes on to overlay his initial comparison between the royal *curia* and the infernal one with another one, this time with the Otherworld, and here with the particular intention of conveying his sense of the infinite and maddening unquietness ("inquietas": p. 24) of the King's Court. This, he says, is characteristically "changeable and various, space-bound and wandering, never continuing in one state" ("mutabilis et uaria, localis et erratica, nunquam in eodem statu permanens": p. 2), in such a way as to render the courtier, unavoidably and to some extent paradoxically, an alien or exile ("alienus"). It is specifically in order to illustrate this nightmare of unbelonging, this essential quality of tantalizing and terrifying inconstancy that he sees in the Angevin Court, that he goes on to tell the story of

²⁰See Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), Book 3, v. 9 (20), p. 140: "Nam in principio cavendum est ne figuratam locutionem ad litteram accipias. [. . .] Ea demum est miserabilis animae servitus, signa pro rebus accipere et supra creaturam corpoream oculum mentis ad hauriendum aeternum lumen levare non posse" ("To begin with one must take care not to interpret a figurative expression literally. . . . It is, then, a miserable kind of spiritual slavery to interpret signs as things, and to be incapable of raising the mind's eye above the physical creation so as to absorb the eternal light"). See also Hugh of St. Victor, *Commentarium in Hierarchiam Caelestem S. Dionysii Areopagite secundum interpretationem Joannis Scoti* . . . Libri X, in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier Freres and J.-P. Migne, 1844–64) (henceforth *PL*), 175: 923–1154: "Aliud enim est veritas, atque aliud signum veritatis; quia signum veritas non est, etiam cum veritatis signum est, et verum est" ("For the truth is one thing and the sign of the truth another; because a sign is not the truth itself, even when it is a sign of truth, and is true"); quoted from Charles Dahlberg, *The Literature of Unlikeness* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1988), p. 62.

the endless ride of King Herla, whose court, he says, is the one and only truly like our own to be found in any story ("unam tamen et solam huic nostre curie similem fuisse fabule dederunt": p. 26). This is essentially an etiology of the widespread folkloric motif of the Wild Hunt already employed by the Peterborough Chronicle, but also, like *Sir Orfeo*, a story about a journey into the Otherworld at the bidding of a sinister and supernatural king. Map's telling of this tale is traditionally adduced by scholars as one of the analogues to the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, but even though Map's work has often been used as evidence for the kind of oral traditions that might have conditioned the development of the story told in *Sir Orfeo*, critics have tended to ignore the particular purposes for which he himself employed what he represents to be folkloric motifs.²¹ It seems to me that Map's work is clearly analogous to *Sir Orfeo* not just in terms of shared material, but also in terms of the shared sophistication with which that material is deployed.²²

Map's Herla is an ancient King of the Britons who one day encounters a weird dwarfish king, who is described in a manner simultaneously suggestive both of the dwarfs of courtly romance and of the Devil himself—he is red-headed, red-bearded, rides a goat and has goat's hoofs ("pedes . . . caprinos": p. 26)—though in fact the comparison that Map chooses to make explicit is with the classical figure of Pan. This grotesque little monarch claims to be a mighty king sent willingly to Herla in recognition of his great renown and in order to honor his wedding to the daughter of the King of the Franks. The two kings agree to a pact in which the dwarf will attend Herla's wedding if Herla will attend his in return in a year's time.²³ Accordingly, as Herla takes his place at his

²¹ See, for example, Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*, pp. xxxvii–xxxix.

²² Cf. Kathryn S. Wetherby, "A New Look at the Role of the Fée in Medieval French Arthurian Romance," in *The Spirit of the Court: Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 373–85 at 373: "The fée of medieval French Arthurian romance shares many of her characteristics with the fairy women of myth and folklore, particularly that of Celtic origin. It is therefore sometimes assumed that her role in the romances can be defined and explained solely by reference to such sources. Unfortunately this approach tends to result in critic and reader losing sight of the medieval texts themselves." This remark seems to apply equally well to the use of Map's *De nugis curialium* as a "source" of Middle English romance. On Map's sophistication, see Robert Levine, "How to Read Walter Map," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 23 (1988): 91–105; and Siân Echard, "Map's Metafiction: Author, Narrator, and Reader in *De nugis curialium*," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 287–314.

²³ There are parallels here with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, revised by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967; rpt. 1985)). Like Gawain, Herla undertakes a reciprocal contract in which his own obligations are deferred by exactly a year; the contract involves him in a journey to a court

feast, the dwarf reappears along with a vast crowd of equally diminutive retainers, who bring such a magnificent supply of food and drink along with them that none of Herla's own provisions need to be touched. All of this is served in vessels of gold and jewels, some of them made from just a single precious stone (p. 26)—a detail that immediately recalls the crown of the Fairy-King in *Sir Orfeo*, which is similarly fashioned from a single stone (lines 149–52). Like the Fairy-King's retinue, the Dwarf-King's is characterized by the luminous beauty of its livery ("preciositate uestium gemmarumque quasi luminaria . . . accensi": p. 28). A year later, the dwarf reappears and demands restitution according to their agreement; and Herla duly equips himself with supplies adequate to make an equivalently lavish recompense, before following the dwarf into a cave in a high cliff ("cauernam . . . altissime rupis": p. 28)—a description of the otherworldly threshold that clearly recalls the passage "in at a roche" taken by Orfeo (line 347). Then "after an interval of darkness, [they] 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" ("post aliquantas tenebras in lumine, quod non uidebatur solis aut lune sed lampadarum multarum, ad domos pigmei transeunt": p. 28). This again broadly resembles the three miles into the rock traveled by Orfeo and his eventual emergence into "a fair cuntray, / As bright so sonne on somers day" (lines 351–52).

The Dwarf-King's wedding is celebrated and Herla departs for home laden with gifts—horses, dogs, hawks, and other equipment for hunting (all the accoutrements, in other words, of the Wild Hunt). Just before they reach the dark passage, the dwarf gives Herla a small bloodhound to carry, telling him that on no account must he allow any of his party to dismount until the dog jumps down of its own accord. When Herla reaches the sunlight again, he meets an old shepherd, who makes it clear that many years have passed since the king followed the dwarf into the cliff. Like the Seven Sleepers or Rip van Winkle, Herla has returned to his own land only to find that centuries have passed, leaving him untouched.²⁴ At this point, some of his retinue dismount and are in-

strangely similar to his own in a land that is dramatically remote; and Map's red-bearded dwarf might be regarded as at least a counterpart to the romance's green-bearded giant.

²⁴For the Seven Sleepers, see the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman hagiography by Chardri: *La Vie des Set Dormanz*, ed. Brian S. Merrilees, Anglo-Norman Text Society 35 (London, 1977); and Merrilees's "La Vie des Sept Dormanz en ancien français," *Romania* 95 (1974): 362–80. For Washington Irving's "Rip van Winkle," see *American Gothic: An Anthology, 1787–1916*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 19–29.

stantly turned to dust—as if in a graphic reassertion of the rights of mortality. Herla, remembering the dwarf's injunction, orders the rest of his band to stay on their horses until the dog leaps down, but, says Map, it never has:

Vnde fabula dat illum Herlam regem errore semper infinito circuitus cum exercitu suo tenere uesanos 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 Herefordiae flumen. Quieuit autem ab illa hora fantasticus ille circuitus, tanquam nobis suos tradiderint errores, ad quietum sibi. (p. 30)

[“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.”]

Map explicitly associates this tale of King Herla with the Wild Hunt of contemporary folklore, linking together the idea of the unearthly riders in the wilderness with a kingdom in the Otherworld presided over by a strange, sinisterly inhuman king—just as in *Sir Orfeo*. He does so in such a way as to suggest that this Otherworld and its king are at least figurally parallel with hell and the Devil; and that the state to which Herla and his followers are condemned is at least like death, for the fate of the followers who step down from their horses and turn to dust strongly implies that the riders are all in some essential respect already dead.²⁵

Yet even if the “fantasticus circuitus” of Herla is *like* a kind of living death or living hell—or “ad ipsum similitudinem quantam equi ferrum ad eque”—the likeness does not amount to identity. This concept of a paradoxical state of endless undying death is carefully constructed from a number of different elements and Map is careful to draw our attention to them. What the allusion to the Otherworld, as opposed to hell, par-

²⁵See Stephen Cosacchi, “Herlekin and ‘Danse Macabre,’” in *Makabertanz: Der Totentanz in Kunst, Poesie und Brauchtum des Mittelalters* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1965), pp. 357–96.

ticularly adds to this mixture is the idea of a sinister enchantment of perception and will. It is generally understood that there is no loss of identity in hell—indeed for Virgil and for Dante, hell is a place in which the inhabitants are eternally marked by the characteristics that give them a historical identity—but in Map's Otherworld, by contrast, to be “with fairi forth y-nome” is to be trapped in a perpetual state of alienation, in which any sense of self-control is lost in a blur of enervating motion.²⁶ This conceptualization of the Otherworld is perhaps less like hell than the description to be found in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* of *this* world—the earth as opposed to heaven—as a “land of unlikeness” (“regio dissimilitudinis”), a place where we necessarily forfeit what is the essential part of our identity: that is, our innate likeness to God.²⁷ Map perhaps explicitly evokes the Augustinian nightmare of infinite alienation by quoting the *Confessions* at the beginning of the very passage in which he embarks on his comparison between the court and hell: “‘In time I exist and of time I speak,’ said Augustine, and added: ‘What time is I know not.’”²⁸ Augustine does not himself use the story of Orpheus in hell as an illustration of this sense of being a stranger in a strange land—a place in which we are, as it were, abducted from our true selves and our true abode—but Boethius does so in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Here hell represents *this* world, the world we live in, and Orpheus's escape from hell is a figure of the soul's ascent, not back to the world of the living, but to a different kind of upper world—to heaven.²⁹ In line with this model, Map remarks that the only court that is genuinely free of “unquietness” is to be found only in a world beyond this world, in the Lord's own city, “which is promised to us as an ‘abid-

²⁶In this sense, Herla's enchantment is less similar to any infernal torment than it is to the kind of punishment imposed on the Dancers of Colbek, as described, for example, by Robert Mannyng, in *Handlyng Synne*: ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS OS 119 (London, 1901), lines 8987–9260, pp. 283–90; ed. Kenneth Sisam, in *Fourteenth-Century Verse and Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921; rpt. 1985), pp. 4–12; ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Text Studies, 1983), lines 9011–9257, pp. 225–31.

²⁷Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. James J. O'Donnell, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 7:10 (16), pp. 81–82. For this motif in medieval literature, see Dahlberg, *The Literature of Unlikeness*.

²⁸“‘In tempore sum et de tempore loquor,’ ait Augustinus, et adiecit: ‘nescio quid sit tempus’” (James, Brooke, and Mynors, p. 2); cf. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. O'Donnell, 11:25 (32), p. 160.

²⁹Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library 74, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), Book 3, meter 12, pp. 306–11.

ing city’’: that is, the heavenly Jerusalem.³⁰ From this perspective, it is probably no coincidence that the author of *Sir Orfeo* chooses to depict the Fairy-King’s realm in terms of the gold, enamel, and precious stones typical of medieval representations of the heavenly city (lines 355–76), even though the Fairy-King’s citadel is only a mockery of it—the capital of a world that is, like our own, significantly unlike the world that is our true home. The *Sir Orfeo*-poet even says that this city seemed like “the proude court of Paradis” (line 376), a comparison that invites the reader to recognize how remote it is from the true reality of heaven.

Elsewhere in his book, Map describes the Wild Hunt again, this time referring to its members as the Herlethingi (p. 371), and here the parallels with *Sir Orfeo*’s fairies can be extended further. Map makes the Herlethingi noontide visitants (cf. the *vndrentide* of the romance, line 65); and he dramatically describes their invulnerability to armed force (cf. the ineffective shield-wall employed by Orfeo at lines 181–94). Yet he also deliberately breaks Spearing’s injunction and explicitly reduces King Herla’s encounter with the Otherworld to “some more familiar and manageable concept.” The ancient British king’s curse, as Map sees it, has been passed on to the court of King Henry II, so that now it is “our own court” that is governed by the curse of endless, ghostly wandering (that is, King Herla’s “fantasticus . . . circuitus”), though he adds that is also true of almost all the courts of great princes (“non solum in nostra sed in omnibus fere potentum curiis”: p. 30). Yet while Map uses the fairies’ Otherworld primarily as a symbol of all that he dislikes about King Henry’s court, he returns to the idea of otherworldly “fantasmata” so frequently in such a range of different contexts as to make it a kind of leitmotif of *De nugis curialium* as a whole. At some moments he is prepared to entertain the idea that such supernatural incursions as these might be seen as manifestations of God’s power: at others, he identifies tales about demonic nocturnal hosts (“nocturnas phalanges demonum”: p. 156) with heathen superstition (“gencium errores”). Even so, his general tendency is to insist on the way in which the instability and futility of the Otherworld is incarnated, sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically, in the contemporary world.

This is one reason why Map is so deeply concerned with the progeny of unions between human beings and demons or fairies (p. 159)—as,

³⁰“Quam Dominus regit ciuitas pacem habet, et illa nobis manens promittitur,” p. 24. For the “abiding city,” see Hebrews 13:14.

for example, in the story of the knight of Lesser Britain routinely cited in critical accounts of *Sir Orfeo's* literary ancestry (p. 344), and in the stories of Toothy Henno (pp. 344–48) and Eadric Wild (pp. 154–58), in which the protagonists acquire beautiful brides in mysterious encounters with fairy women. These two tales are clearly related to Marie de France's lay of *Lanval*, which was translated into Middle English as *Sir Launfal*—a text often grouped with *Sir Orfeo* as one of Middle English literature's so-called Breton lays and one in which the action of the narrative is again significantly located on the boundary line between the ordinary world of humanity and the Otherworld of the fairies.³¹ In each of the stories that Map tells, the crossing of that line leads to a productive union between a human man and a fairy woman, but only—in contrast with the tale told by Marie de France—at the cost of the woman's forced abduction from the fairy world. Abduction is very difficult to distinguish from rape in medieval texts, for the term that was used to describe it, *raptus*, implied either or both so interchangeably that it is often impossible to be sure precisely which was meant in a particular context.³² Map's recurrent dramatizations of the idea of such relationships between human beings and fairies are disturbing not just because such miscegenation is, as he suggests, a violent breach in the laws of nature, but also because that breach is effected quite literally by violence—by rape.³³ This problematization of these liaisons between humans and fairies is at least suggestive for the nature of the threat Heurodis faces at the beginning of *Sir Orfeo*. Even though the reader cannot know exactly what will happen to her in the realm of the Fairy-King, abduction was so closely associated in the medieval taxonomy of crime with what we would call rape, that her violent removal from Or-

³¹Thomas Chestre: *Sir Launfal*, ed. A. J. Bliss (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1960); and ed. Johnson and Williams, pp. 22–62. For *Lanval*, see *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Alfred Ewert (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), pp. 58–74; and *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 73–81.

³²See Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001); Christopher Cannon, "Chaucer and Rape: Uncertainty's Certainties," *SAC* 22 (2000): 67–92, and "Raptus in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 75–94; and Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

³³In other words, Map makes the same observation about the stories circulating in his time that Corinne Saunders makes about Middle English romances such as *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degarvé*, and *Sir Gowther*: "What is most striking in all these works is the association of the otherworld with sexual violence or desire for possession of the woman's body" (*Rape and Ravishment*, p. 233).

feo's orchard almost inevitably implies a threat of violation, even though the Middle English romancer carefully avoids making that threat explicit, as well as making any suggestion that it was ever realized. Yet Map is much more concerned with fairies as *succubi* rather than as *incubi*—that is, as mothers and victims rather than as fathers and victimizers—and he consistently focuses on the outcome of human/fairy unions, as it is expressed in the consequences for the children born of them. As he says, “We have heard of demons that are *incubi* and *succubi*, and of the dangers of union with them; but rarely or never do we read in the old stories of heirs or offspring, of them, who ended their days prosperously” (“Audiimus demones incubos et succubos, et concubitus eorum periculosos; heredes autem eorum aut sobolem felici fine beatam in antiquis hystoriis aut raro aut nunquam legimus”: p. 158).³⁴ By problematizing the idea of supernatural descent in this way, Map is deliberately literalizing a powerful mythical motif—not only denying the glamour of otherworldly ancestry, as it was claimed for such figures as Merlin and Godfrey of Bouillon, but also highlighting the violence to the social and symbolic orders implicit in such claims. In this way, he suggests that the natural order is constantly and perhaps increasingly vulnerable to disruption by supernatural forces—a tendency to disorder that in turn justifies his pretensions, as a satirist, to prophetic urgency.

De nugis curialium did not circulate widely and is unlikely to have served as a source of any kind for *Sir Orfeo*. It is adduced here, like the Peterborough Chronicle, not so much for the information it provides about the immediate cultural context of the Middle English romance, but as an example of how self-consciously and creatively the idea of the Otherworld could be used by medieval authors in general. Far from shying away from a recognition of the risk of moral or cognitive entropy in exploiting the symbolic force of the Otherworld in too wide a range of different contexts, Map uses it in just such a way as to deepen and extend its significance, while at the same time constantly drawing attention to the danger and artificiality of doing so. His use of King Herla's eternal wanderings as a figure of King Henry's hellish, but also other-

³⁴Map's anxiety is reflected most closely in Middle English romance by *Sir Gowther*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973), pp. 148–68; ed. Karl Breul (Jena and Leipzig: Wilhelm Gronau, 1885). For other aspects of medieval anxiety about *incubi* and *succubi* (besides the consequences for their offspring), see Dyan Elliott, “From Sexual Fantasy to Demonic Defloration: The Libidinous Female in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 35–60.

worldly, court is clearly intended to shock, precisely because it is so extravagant a way of making the point. Similarly, his seemingly scrupulous concern for the morality and legacy of sexual unions between human men and fairy women only tends to emphasize the violence implicit in the very idea of such unions. Far from seeking to foster the mystery of the fairies and their world, Map characteristically demystifies them, elaborately scrutinizing the social and physical consequences of their manifestations in this world, and refusing to allow us to defer their significance to another dimension—whether that of literary fiction or of popular superstition. It might be said, then, that while his book clearly depends to some extent on the established resonances of fairy-myth, it also demonstratively pushes ideas about fairies to their limits. It might also be said that, in using the Otherworld so variously as a symbol of danger, fracture, and disorder, Map actually comes close to celebrating it as such—enjoying rather than evading the idea of cosmic anarchy.

At the same time, Map's exploitation of the Otherworld as both an idea and a source of energy in his text is not so innovative as it might seem, for he himself seems to be working within what was probably an already established tradition of using such references to the fairies' realm, not just as symbols in their own right, but also as a means to mark the limits of symbolic order. So, for example, the dominant, or at least primary, assumption of Map's *De nugis curialium*—that the courts of the great are like hell—is well established in medieval satire even before Map wrote, so that he might be seen as exploiting, as much as developing, an already resonant metaphor. In this tradition otherworldly visitants recur intermittently in such a way as to suggest that they were never far from people's minds in this context. So, for example, Map's contemporary Peter of Blois refers to Herlekin—that is, Herla or Harlequin—in his own exposition of the hellish qualities of courtly life:

Pro hac vanissima vanitate militant hodie nostri curiales *in labore et aerumna, in vigiliis multis, in periculis magnis, periculis maris, periculis fluminum, periculis pontium, periculis montium, periculis in falsis fratribus* [II Corinthians 11:26–27], *in mortibus frequenter, in confractione et lassitudine corporis, atque in aliis vitae discriminibus, in quibus gloriam martyrii mererentur, si haec pro Christi nomine sustinerent. Nunc autem sunt martyres saeculi, mundi professores, discipuli curiae, milites Herlekini. Per multas siquidem tribulationes* [Acts 14, 21]

intrans justi in regnum coelorum; hi autem per multas tribulationes promerentur infernum.³⁵

[“On account of this vainest of vanities our courtiers today are on the march in toil and trouble, in continual vigils, in great dangers—dangers of the sea, and of rivers, of bridges and mountains, and of false comrades; often with casualties, exhaustion and physical breakdown, and all the other hazards by which they would deserve a martyr’s glory, if they endured all this in the name of Christ. Now however they are martyrs to this world, professors of worldliness, disciples of the court, soldiers of Herlekin. Only after many tribulations will the righteous enter the kingdom of the heavens: yet for all their tribulations these people deserve only hell.”]

Just as in *De nugis curialium*, the story of King Herla is brought into play here in order to invest the idea of hell with the more specific qualities of the fairies’ Otherworld—that is to say, anxious, endless movement and vigilance like that of a host constantly on the march, together with a profound sense of sickness and distortion. Peter also associates hell with the insidious enervation of life at court in another work, this time a poem, the “Dialogus inter dehortantem a curia et curialem” (“Dialogue between a Warner against the court and a Courtier”).³⁶ Here the Warner asks:

Quid te iuvat vivere
si vis vitam perdere?
In anime
dispendio
nulla est estimacio:
si vis ut te perhennibus
absorbeant suppliciiis
mors et inferna palus,
confidas in principibus
et in eorum filiis—
in quibus non est salus.

³⁵Peter of Blois, *Epistola* 14B, in *The Letter Collections of Peter of Blois: Studies in the Manuscript Tradition*, ed. Lena Wahlgren (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1993), pp. 152–65 at 155; cf. *PL* 207: 42–51 at 44B–C. See also E. C. Higonet, “Spiritual Ideas in the Letters of Peter of Blois,” *Speculum* 59 (1975): 218–44 at 229–31.

³⁶Ed. and trans. Peter Dronke, “Peter of Blois and Poetry at the Court of Henry II,” *Medieval Studies* 28 (1976): 185–235; reprinted in *The Medieval Poet and His World* (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 1984), pp. 281–339 at 304–7.

{str. 7: "What use to you is living / if you mean to lose your life? / In the expense / of spirit / there's no dignity. / If you want to be swallowed up / in lasting torment / by death and the marsh of hell, / then put your trust in princes / and in their sons—/ they won't bring you salvation!"}

Once again it is suggested that life at court can be seen as a distortion of life—"an expense of the spirit" in its way more profound than the extinction of the body in death. This mockery of existence that is life at court is explicitly said to lead directly to the "marsh" ("palus") of hell—which is a strikingly topographic way of referring to hell, and one that certainly recalls the tangible, landscaped quality that the Otherworld often possesses in medieval literature.³⁷ Moreover, the Courtier's reply makes it absolutely clear that he has understood the Warner's remarks specifically in the context of stories about people who have defeated death by coming back from some kind of Otherworld:

Neminem ab inferis
 revertentem ab inferis—
 certa non relinquimus
 ob dubia;
 sompniator animus
 respuens presencia
 gaudeat inanibus—
 quibus si credideris,
 expectare poteris
 Arturum cum Britonibus!

{str. 8/8–17: "We've never seen anyone / coming back from the world below—/ we shan't abandon certainties / for dubious tales; / let the spirit sunk in dreams / reject the life that's here / and enjoy empty hopes—/ if you can believe in those, / you might as well expect the return / of Arthur with his British legions!"}

The first two lines of this quotation might be taken as a direct allusion to the Orphean legend. In effect, they say precisely what the steward

³⁷This wetland imagery is also linked to the idea of a loss of "corpus, rem et animam" in another lyric ascribed to Peter of Blois, "In lacu miserie," ed. A. Hilka, O. Schumann, and B. Bischoff, *Carmina Burana: Die Lieder der Benediktbeurer Handschrift: Zweisprachige Ausgabe* (Munich: DTV, 1979), no. 29, pp. 66–69. Here Peter's terms explicitly evoke Psalm 39:3.

says at the end of *Sir Orfeo*, when it seems that Orfeo has been killed: "It nis no bot of mannes deth" ("there is no remedy for a person's death"). As the Courtier recognizes, the notion that death is always final and unambiguous is directly contradicted by popular stories about people who substitute some kind of temporary enchantment for death—such as those about the return of King Arthur, and, implicitly, of Herla or Heurodis—but he uses the very fabulousness of such stories as a means to discredit any belief in the reality of an escape from death. The conclusion that the Courtier draws is that since there is no such thing as the Otherworld, the Warner's attempt to make use of it as a means of characterizing the court is implicitly invalid.³⁸ Yet in denying the force of the Warner's argument in this way, the Courtier makes the Warner's allusion to traditional stories about revenants from another dimension seem very much more explicit than the Warner himself makes it. This suggests once again that the idea of the fairies' world as a realm of timeless, deathless, demoralizing stasis is key to a network of ideas about hell, death, demons, and demonic possession that medieval authors could simultaneously draw on and add to at any point. At the same time, one senses an awareness on the part of both Walter Map and Peter of Blois that to make use of this imaginative complex in a literary text is always a provocatively rhetorical maneuver, especially in a literary milieu as obviously remote from popular folktales as their distinctly learned brand of curial satire.

Even so, a number of texts in French medieval romance also employ otherworldly motifs in just the same self-consciously determined way. In the Old French prose *Lancelot*, for example, Morgan la Fée entraps knights in a place that seems to be an otherworldly paradise, but that is called the "Val sanz Retor"—a denomination that clearly links it to the biblical imagery of death.³⁹ This enchanted prison is clearly analo-

³⁸In Jehan Le Fèvre's *Livre de Leïsee*, Orpheus's journey to the Underworld is dismissed in a similar way as a "fable de bourde arroussée" on the grounds that "Ce seroit contre nature, / S'une mortel creature/ Après sa mort venoit a vie." Jehan then goes on to use Orpheus's music as a figure not of fidelity, but of futility: "Quant l'ame est hors du corps ravie, / Il convenroit bien flajoler / Et violer et citoler, / Qui pour ce la porroit ravoir!" See *Les Lamentations de Matheolus et le Livre de Leïsee de Jehan Le Fèvre de Resson*, ed. A.-G. van Hamel, 2 vols. (Paris: Bouillon, 1892, 1905), II:65, lines 2089–97.

³⁹*Lancelot: Roman en prose du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Alexandre Micha, 9 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1978–83), I:275: "Ce dist li contes tor avant que li vals estoit apelés le Val sans Retor et li Vals as Faus Amans. Li Vals sans Retor avoit il non por ce que nus chevaliers n'en retornoit; et si avoit non li Vals as Faus Amans por ce que tuit li chevalier i remanoient, s'il avoient fausé a lor amies de quel que meffet que ce fust, neïs de pensé." ("It's already been said that the valley was called the Valley of No Return and the Valley of False Lovers. It's called the Valley of No Return because no knight ever returns from there;

gous to the "verger" of the "Joie de la Cort" in Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, which is named in such a way as to recall the link made so insistently by Walter Map and Peter of Blois between courtly living and otherworldly "inquietas."⁴⁰ Similarly, the famous Sword-Bridge in Chrétien's *Lancelot* by which the protagonist crosses to the land of Gorre for the sake of Queen Guinevere is suggestive (and potentially subversively so) precisely because it is a secular doublet of the saw-edged bridge found in some medieval accounts of the landscape of Purgatory.⁴¹ In each of these examples, the suggestive force of the Otherworld as a motif depends not on the absence of interpretative clues but on the all too immediate availability of possible courses of rationalization, even in terms that seem provocatively simplistic. Such instances, which could easily be multiplied, have often been explained as fossilizations of themes and ideas incompletely absorbed from earlier sources, but there was perhaps nothing casual or accidental about the retention of such problematically predetermined elements in the imaginative register of romance. Indeed, it is precisely because such narrative motifs enter romance without completely casting off their previous associations that they are capable of creating such dramatic tensions with the contexts in which they find themselves. In this context, a particularly interesting analogue to *Sir Orfeo* is the thirteenth-century French romance *Amadas and Ydoine*.⁴² This is not only another tale about a woman's abduction

and it's called the Valley of False Lovers because all knights remain there who have deceived their ladies in anything that they have done, even in thought").

⁴⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. Mario Roques, *Classiques français du moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1990), lines 5551–6358; trans. D. D. R. Owen, *Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances* (London: Dent, 1985), pp. 74–84; for further discussion, see my *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100–1300* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 55–58.

⁴¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, ed. Mario Roques, *Classiques français du moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1958), lines 3003–3135; trans. Owen, *Chrétien de Troyes*, pp. 225–27. See Howard Rollin Patch, *The Other World: According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (New York: Octagon, 1970), pp. 302–6; D. D. R. Owen, *The Vision of Hell: Infernal Journeys in Medieval French Literature* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1970), pp. 203–5; Jeff Rider, "The Other Worlds of Romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 115–31 at 115–16. For the appearance of the Sword-Bridge in an interestingly "promiscuous context," see Barbara Nolan, "Promiscuous Fictions: Medieval Bawdy Tales and Their Textual Liaisons," in *The Body and the Soul in Medieval Literature: The J.A.W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Tenth Series, Perugia 1998*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 79–105 at 90–93.

⁴² *Amadas et Ydoine*, ed. John R. Reinhard, *Classiques français du moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1926); trans. into modern French, Jean-Claude Aubailly (Paris: Champion,

and enchantment by the fairies and her rescue by her lover from a state like death; it also seems to me another good example of the way in which medieval narratives deliberately sustain an understanding of the Otherworld in literalistic and sometimes remarkably physical terms. Once again, the effect of this text's apparently deliberate attempt to impose a series of all too limited explanations on the participation of the otherworldly in the plot only serves to emphasize the gap between the explanations themselves and the power of the figures they propose to explain.

As in *Sir Orfeo*, otherworldly involvement in the events of the tale is expressed in two parts—first, there is an attack by a fairy-knight, in which an abduction is threatened without being effected, and then there is the abduction itself, in which the captive is trapped in some kind of coma or enchantment. In *Amadas*, the initial attack on Ydoine takes the form not of a dream, as in *Sir Orfeo*, but of a direct physical assault. As the heroine and her party are passing through a narrow valley ("un petit vaucel," line 4627), they are met by a tall, handsome knight girt with a long sword, who knocks one of Ydoine's attendants to the ground, throws Ydoine herself over the neck of his horse, and rides away at a gallop. The rest of Ydoine's companions give chase and duly succeed in cutting off the abductor's escape, at which point he releases the lady and, without saying a word, vanishes into thin air—a detail that is at least suggestive of the invisible assailants who cause Heurodis's disappearance from under the grafted tree in *Sir Orfeo* (lines 191–94). Unlike Heurodis, Ydoine at first seems to feel no ill effects from her encounter with an otherworldly visitant. Indeed she appears all the better for it, so beautiful in fact that the poet compares her with a fairy herself—"Ne fu ausi bele trouvee, / Se ne fu figure de fee" (lines 4697–98). Yet suddenly that evening Ydoine is taken violently ill:

A la contesse prent uns maus
 Si tresangousseus et si grief
 Que trop li deut et cuers et cieuf.
 Tous pert les membres, os et ners;
 Li vis li torne et devint pers.

(lines 4756–60)

1986); trans. into English, Ross G. Arthur, *Garland Library of Medieval Literature 95B* (New York: Garland, 1993). Translations here are my own. For a study, see Reinhard's *The Old French Romance of Amadas et Ydoine: An Historical Study* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1927).

["The countess was seized with a disorder so violent and so serious that she could scarcely bear the pain in her heart and her head. She lost all feeling in her limbs, in all her bones and nerves; her face was altered, and turned blue."]

Crying out in pain and sorrow (like Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*, lines 77–96), she is brought to her chamber, and here, in a private conference with her beloved Amadas, she tells him that she is about to die and tries to console him, without success, for her imminent loss. He replies by insisting on his fidelity and refusing to accept that they can ever be parted:

Ne sui mie si desloiaus
 Que je voelle après vous avoir
 Confort n'en vie remanoir,
 Ne vivre a droit ne a tort.
 Si vous morés, par mi la mort
 Irai a vous a terme brief.
 (lines 4944–49)

["I am not so disloyal that I would ever wish to have any comfort or remain alive without you, and carry on existing either for good or ill. If you die, I will follow you into death in a very short space of time."]

In its general shape, and in some points of detail, this passage clearly resembles the equivalent scene in *Sir Orfeo*, lines 97–130, but there is one fundamental difference: even though Ydoine, like Heurodis, already knows that she is going to be taken away by the fairy-knight, she specifically describes this fate as death, something that Heurodis does not do. Indeed, the author even has Ydoine give a speech about the inevitability and impartiality of death (lines 4866–92). Yet this consolatory discourse on death eventually turns out to be no more than a red herring, for the fate that she actually suffers is to be, again like Heurodis, "with fairi forth y-nome." Even so, Ydoine's interpretation of being stolen away by the fairy-knight undoubtedly deepens the resonance of this motif of otherworldly abduction as something equivalent to death, at least at an imaginative level.

At the same time, the very fact that what happens to Ydoine can be defined only in terms of what it is *not* serves as a reminder of the deep instability of the Otherworld as a symbol. It might even be argued that the author of *Amadas* makes use of the Otherworld in this way precisely

in order to destabilize those categories that we generally perceive as being fixed. So, for example, having told us (misleadingly) that Ydoine is dead (at line 5299), he goes on to muse on the necessary separateness of the living from the dead, two states that he refers to, significantly, as two different “orders”:

Tant com li hom est sains et vis,
 Si soit amés com estre doit,
 Et quant est mors, o les mors soit
 Remés, car el estre ne puet;
 Par estavoir faire l'estuet:
 Li vis au vif, li mors au mort;
 Par ce viennent tuit li deport
 De cest monde, ce m'est avis,
 Et firent et feront toudis.
 Vous savés que ou recorder
 A mult grant paine et ou conter
 De ces deus ordres, mais assés
 En ai dit: che est verités
 Qu'après la mort convient a vivre
 A ceus qui sont sain et delivre,
 Que c'est li usages du mont.
 (*Amadas et Ydoine*, lines 5364–79)

[“As long as a man is alive and in good health, he ought to be loved as he deserves to be, but when he is dead, he should be placed among the dead, because there can be no other way. This is necessarily how it must be: the living with the living, and the dead with the dead. All our comfort in this world, it seems to me, depends on this, as it always has and always will. You know that it is very difficult to discuss or talk about these two orders, but I have said quite enough about them: it’s the truth that after a death it’s fitting that those who are left healthy and free should go on living, for that’s the way of the world.”]

In the context of Ydoine’s eventual return to life, the effect of this passage can only be to problematize the categorical distinction between life and death, in much the same way that the Steward’s assertion of the irreversibility of death at the end of *Sir Orfeo* (line 552) is ironically juxtaposed with the fact that Orfeo not only is still alive but is standing in front of him. The difference between life and death, in other words,

might be just as much a matter of degree and purpose as the difference between the various "orders" or estates of medieval society. The point perhaps is that all such orders are always open to the possibility of disorder, here represented symbolically by the ever-present threat of disturbance from the Otherworld. In effect, the fairies are the catalyst for a process that suspends the absoluteness of the distinction between life and death. For medieval authors to entertain the possibility of collapsing some of the fundamental categories of existence in this way is possibly not quite so un-medieval as it might seem, for a disruption of those categories is essential to the narrative of Christianity itself, which insists on the eventuality of resurrection in a way that is deliberately oxymoronic.⁴⁵ As Saint Paul puts it: "The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall rise again incorruptible: and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption; and this mortal must put on immortality. And when this mortal hath put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory" (I Corinthians 15:52–54). From this perspective, a romance that courts the disordering of the absolute antithesis between the orders of life and death is merely re-expressing a paradox that is implicitly central to Christianity.

There is another way in which *Amadas* extends the symbolic resonance of Ydoine's "death" at the hands of her fairy-abductor. Recognizing that she is unable to console Amadas for her loss, and in order to turn his thoughts away from suicide, Ydoine decides to deceive him in such a way as to make him esteem her less highly—an Alcestian sacrifice the narrator describes as an "extraordinary lie about herself, motivated by loyalty and great fidelity" ("estrange mençoigne de soi, par loiauté et par grant foi": lines 4967–68). What she tells him is that, far from being a virgin, as he has believed (and is in fact the truth), she has actually had three extended affairs with other men previous to falling in love with Amadas. In each case, so she claims, these men were first cousins ("cosins germains," line 5032), and as a result of these three relationships she became the mother of three healthy children ("trois biaux enfans," line 5038). Now that death is upon her, she says, she feels she has to confess to Amadas (in preference to any churchmen) so

⁴⁵ Christ's disruption of the natural order forms the basis for a whimsically subversive analysis of the concept of death in the fourteenth-century "Discussio litis super hereditate Lazari et Marie Magdalene," ed. Hans Walther, *Das Streitgedicht in der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Munich, 1920), reprinted with additional material by Paul Gerhard Schmidt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1984), pp. 234–48.

that he can give alms for the release of her soul from hell, where she says it is inevitably bound. This is because she has secretly murdered all three of her children at the Devil's instigation:

Selonc la miue entencion
 Ne lairai riens que ne vous die
 Por ce que, quant serai fenie,
 Que vos grans aumosnes faciés
 Por moi, amis, car bien saciés
 C'autrement en infer irai,
 Que les enfans que mar portai,
 Que j'oi de mes cousins germain,
 Tous trois les ocis de mes mains.
 Trop ai mesfait, mais c'est li pis,
 C'onques a prouvoire nel dis;
 Par l'art de l'anemi l'ai fait,
 Qui de tous maus est en agait,
 Et tout par sen atisement.

(lines 5096–109)

["I intend to leave nothing hidden from you, so that, when I'm gone, you'll perform great works of charity in my memory, for I know very well that otherwise I'll go to hell, because I killed with my own hands all three of the infants that I bore so wickedly to my cousins. I have sinned badly enough, but what makes it worse is that I have never confessed to a priest. I was instigated to it by the Devil, who lies in wait for every wickedness, and it was entirely at his prompting."]

Ydoine's "death," in other words, is explicitly imagined to lead to her imprisonment in hell. Even though nothing of what she says is true, this account of her fictional crimes and their infernal punishment necessarily colors the way in which we think of the pseudo-death that she goes on to suffer. The insertion of this alternative account of her passage into another world makes her captivity at the hands of the fairy-knight at least imaginatively equivalent to her confinement in hell. Similarly, her invention of a past history of sexual transgression to explain the inevitability of her journey to hell makes the enchantment into which she actually falls seem all the more threateningly physical. The sexual relationships that she chooses to "confess" are not only clandestine; they also are technically incestuous, for a union between first cousins was

within the degree of relationship forbidden by canon law. In this way, like Map, *Amadas et Ydoine* links the disturbance in the order of things caused by the manifestations of fairies in this world with the disruption of the genealogical order. Even though there is no direct link between Ydoine's abduction by the fairy-knight and the lie she tells about her illegitimate children, the text nevertheless seems to connect the idea of possession by the fairies with anxiety about miscegenation between human beings and supernatural beings, in a fashion that recalls *De nugis curialium*. The role of the cousins german in Ydoine's story, in other words, is exactly that of the *incubi* of tradition.

Ydoine's grotesque fantasy of broken taboos and depravity justly punished undoubtedly makes the fairy-knight's assault on her seem darker and more sexually threatening. Her suggestion that she undertook these crimes while driven by the Devil also invites the reader to consider her clearly unnatural death as the result of demonic possession. By blurring such different registers of thought, the text subtly deepens and complicates what it means for Ydoine to be abducted and enchanted by the fairy-knight. Rather than denying the relationship between captivity in the Otherworld and punishment in hell or between enchantment by a fairy and possession by a demon, the text clearly invites the reader to make such connections. It is impossible to explain for sure what happens to Ydoine only because the narrative offers so many ways of doing so—not because the reader is asked to refrain from the attempt. Far from recognizing the need to provide some sort of moral refuge from the interpretative uncertainty this method creates, *Amadas et Ydoine* is triumphantly subversive of the established order of moral authority in medieval culture. So, for example, Ydoine declares herself more willing to confess her sins to her lover Amadas than to any hermit or priest (lines 5067–73)—and this is no levity in the context of an imminent (albeit imagined) descent to “infer le puant.”⁴⁴ *Sir Orfeo* is by no means as explicit about the possibilities that it evokes, or as frankly heterodox, but in the light of *Amadas et Ydoine* it would be difficult to deny that medieval romance *could* work by suggesting and then deliberately blurring such concepts as death, hell, and demonic possession in a spirit of conscious insubordination.

⁴⁴In setting love against the torments of hell in this way, *Amadas et Ydoine* recalls the well-known passage in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, in which Aucassin declares that he would rather be in hell with all the beautiful people than in Paradise without Nicolette: see *Aucassin et Nicolette*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), cap. 6, p. 58.

As it turns out, Amadas does succeed in rescuing his beloved—not from hell, as she so self-sacrificingly suggests is necessary—but from a state that is at least formally equivalent to hell. In this sense, the story told in *Amadas et Ydoine* might be said to be Orphean in its essential structure, in that it celebrates a lover's recovery of his lost beloved through the sheer force of his devotion. Just as Orpheus's ability to rescue his wife seems to stem from his inability to accept her loss, so Amadas's ability to rescue Ydoine results from his inability to accept her death. In the middle of the night after Ydoine's death, Amadas goes alone to her tomb to grieve for her. At length he hears a great commotion of people and horses on all sides of him and, thinking that these must be demons come to steal his beloved away ("li anemi / Qui le cors en voellent porter," lines 5604–5), resolves to defend her to the death, even if all the devils of hell are assembled there ("se d'infer tuit li mauffé / Estoient illoec assamblé," line 5607–8). This is a moment that perhaps recalls the similarly reckless resolve of Sir Orfeo to follow the host of sixty ladies (and his wife among them) that he meets in the wilderness, since, as he says, "Of liif no deth me no reche" (line 342). Like the different groups of otherworldly visitants that Orfeo encounters in his exile, the fairies who come to Ydoine's tomb are not devils, at least in appearance, but rather a representative selection of recognizably courtly men and women ("Clers, chevaliers, dames, puceles, / Et damoisaus et damoiseles," lines 5619–20). With them they bring a white palfrey—white like the fairies' horses in *Sir Orfeo*—apparently with the intention of providing Ydoine with a mount once they have retrieved her from her tomb.⁴⁵ It seems that she, like Heurodis, will be forced to ride in some uncanny host like the Wild Hunt or the party of ladies out hawking encountered by Orfeo in the wilderness.

As Amadas watches, a knight on a swift warhorse emerges from the crowd and, spurring his horse, jumps over the wall of the cemetery. Finding Amadas at the tomb, this strange knight rudely challenges him, accusing him of being a fool or a madman for getting between him and his "amie"—that is, the apparently dead Ydoine, lying in her tomb. Certainly Amadas's dedication to his seemingly dead bride is extreme enough here (like Orfeo's in the wilderness) to be reasonably labeled

⁴⁵See Elizabeth Williams, "Sir Amadace and the Undisenchanted Bride: The Relation of the Middle English Romance to the Folktale Tradition of 'The Grateful Dead,'" in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 57–70 at 68–69.

folly or madness, but he carries on defying the stranger and is reassured to hear him swear by God (line 5720)—which he accepts as proof that the stranger cannot be a devil, even though this only raises further questions about his origins and purpose.⁴⁶ The hero's resolution is momentarily shaken by the strange knight's declaration that Ydoine had been unfaithful to him—a declaration the knight attempts to confirm by exhibiting a ring that Ydoine had received from Amadas as a token of their love. Bitterly disappointed, Amadas compares himself to a series of famous men who he suggests were similarly victims of feminine betrayal—Tristan, Paris, Achilles, Ulysses, Floris, Roland, Alexander, Solomon, and Samson—and then goes on to a long diatribe against female hypocrisy and faithlessness.⁴⁷ Eventually he pulls himself together and admits that it is wrong of him to doubt Ydoine's reputation on the word of just a single accuser, especially when she is not in a position to defend herself. The two knights fight, and after a long struggle Amadas conquers by cutting off his opponent's arm. At this point the fairy-knight confesses that he was the stranger who attacked Ydoine before, and that when he did so he managed to steal the ring from her finger and replace it with his own ring of enchantment ("un autre anel faé," line 6406). It is this magical ring that has caused Ydoine to fall into a sleep like death and that, once removed, allows her to be resuscitated. This battle at the tomb is oddly reminiscent of the scene in *Romeo and Juliet* in which Romeo and Paris contest possession of the body of Juliet, who is similarly trapped by a false death ("d'une fainte mort," line 6414);⁴⁸ and it might also be taken as a conscious subversion of the well-known misogynistic tale "The Widow of Ephesus," in which a bereaved wife invigilating at the tomb of her husband not only allows herself to be seduced by a soldier guarding the bodies of criminals crucified nearby, but also allows him to use her husband's corpse in place of one stolen while he was neglecting his duty.⁴⁹ In the context of *Sir Orfeo*, the scene is structurally parallel to the minstrel-king's use of his harp to win back his wife, for in both *Amadas* and *Sir Orfeo* the hero engages in a conflict with a malevolent otherworldly being for possession of a corpse—in *Amadas*

⁴⁶For another example of a magical knight who proves his Christianity, see Marie's *Yonec* (ed. Ewert, pp. 82–96), lines 136–64.

⁴⁷Cf. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 2414–28.

⁴⁸*Romeo and Juliet*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), V.3.49–73.

⁴⁹*C. Petronius Arbitrator: Satyricon*, ed. P. Burmann, 2 vols. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1974), caps. 111–12, I:659–76.

a corpse literally entombed, in *Orfeo* a corpse that is to all appearances an effigy in a gallery of the dead—and in winning the fight succeeds in restoring the lost beloved to life. The difference between the two is that while Sir Orfeo's victory is located in a place that is imaginatively remote, Amadas's occurs in a setting that is quite specific and explicit in its significance—a graveyard. *Amadas et Ydoine* thus repeatedly concretizes its otherworldly motifs, narrowing and explicating them, but often in ways that make them more rather than less complex. Indeed, as in the other texts already cited, it is the abundance of explanations proffered, not their paucity, that makes interpretation so difficult, in such a way as to seem to threaten the validity of some of the basic terms by which we understand our world.

Sir Orfeo, similarly if not quite so explicitly, provides a number of more or less contradictory keys to unlocking its meaning. For example, the Steward's affirmation of the power of death and Orfeo's own invented narrative of his death by wild animals certainly provoke us to think of the romance as being in some sense about death. At the same time, the Fairy-King's arbitrary cruelty and the barely suppressed suggestion that Heurodis has been possessed by him in some way, either sexually or psychologically, could equally well support a reading of the romance as a dramatization of the threat of demonic incursion. Similarly, Heurodis's uncanny sleep, her subsequent hysteria, and Orfeo's self-enforced privations in the wilderness might be taken as pointers to an interpretation of the fairies' Otherworld in terms of madness or hallucination. Literary critics have tended to evade the implications of this very excess of interpretative strategies suggested by the poem, preferring to establish some sort of hierarchy of terms in which the Otherworld "should" be understood, or else insisting on its insusceptibility to interpretation at all. Yet it is precisely by deliberately prompting so many different registers of interpretation at once, without actually authorizing any of them, that the text brings us so effectively to the brink of moral and interpretative entropy. This is by no means as anachronistic an aesthetic as it might at first appear, and the *Orfeo*-poet was hardly alone in subscribing to it. As I have argued, medieval authors not only persistently offer to rationalize the Otherworld; they also manipulate its significance so explicitly that they almost inevitably provoke a certain anxiety about signification itself. Through the gradual accretion of such distinct and even contradictory layers of interpretation as those to be found in *De nugis curialium* or

in *Amadas et Ydoine*, the Otherworld gradually came to acquire so uneven but yet so polished a symbolic surface as to seem almost infinitely capable of refraction—and in this way it is disturbingly insusceptible to any stable analysis.

The *Sir Orfeo*-poet exploits this literary inheritance to make his version of the Otherworld in *Sir Orfeo* every bit as disturbingly refractive as it is in its analogues. This is not only in the sense that the fairies' realm is explicitly presented as a mirror-image of Orfeo's own, albeit an uncannily distorted one,⁵⁰ but also in the sense that it is capable of combining a whole range of essentially incompatible images. So it is that the poem's Otherworld is defined simultaneously by beautiful courtesy and insouciant cruelty; by confinement in the body and existence beyond the body; by infinite turbulence and utter torpor; by undying life and unliving death. In this way, presenting an experience of this Otherworld so implicitly paradoxical and so uncontainably beyond expression, *Sir Orfeo* undoubtedly creates in most of its readers a feeling of profound and troubling uncertainty—an experience that could indeed be reasonably described as "existential confusion." It is perhaps the escape from this provided by the wholly artificial convenience of Heurodis's restitution to her kingdom, as much as the restitution itself, that we find ourselves celebrating at the end of the tale.

⁵⁰ See *Sir Orfeo*, lines 159–60 and 245–46. Jeff Rider's analysis of the Otherworld in medieval romance strongly emphasizes its role as an opposite or foil to the world of the aristocracy: "A romance's other world was a fictive world created to stand over and against the equally fictive world of its central aristocratic society" (p. 116).