MORAL CHALLENGE AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: FAIRY CHAOS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

by

Arielle C. McKee

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THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Dr. Michael Johnston, Chair

    Department of English

Dr. Dorsey Armstrong

    Department of English

Dr. Robyn Malo

    Department of English

Dr. Paul Whitfield White

    Department of English

Dr. Shaun Hughes

    Department of English

Approved by:

    Dr. Manushag Powell

        Head of the Graduate Program

To all those who saw the terrains of other lands in the bumps on their bedroom walls,
Who hid from the dark in a story of their own making,
Who imagined when they should have been napping.

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ABSTRACT

Author: McKee, Arielle, C.. PhD
Institution: Purdue University
Degree Received: May 2019
Title: Moral Challenge and Narrative Structure: Fairy Chaos in Middle English Romance.
Committee Chair: Michael Johnston

Medieval fairies are chaotic and perplexing narrative agents—neither humans nor monsters—and their actions are defined only by a characteristic unpredictability. My dissertation project investigates this fairy chaos, focusing on those moments in a premodern romance when a fairy or group of fairies intrudes on a human community and, to be blunt, makes a mess. I argue that fairy disruption of human ways of thinking and being—everything from human corporeality to the definition of chivalry—is often productive or generative. Each chapter examines how narrative fairies upset medieval English culture's operations and rules (including, frequently, the rules of the narrative itself) in order to question those conventions in the extra-narrative world of the tale's audience. Fairy romances, I contend, puzzle and engage their audiences, encouraging readers and hearers to think about and even challenge the processes of their own society. In this way, my research explores the interaction between a text and its audience—between fiction and reality—illuminating the ways in which premodern narratives of chaos and disruption encourage readers and headers to engage in a sustained, ethical consideration of the world.

In the end, fairies' potential to shake up even the most entrenched notions, to imagine new ways of being and doing, and to raise audience awareness of social constructs and conventions makes them, in a word, revolutionary. Premodern fairies were imbricated in and with their culture in productive and complex ways, and my thesis explores some of this richness, indicating not only the sophistication, thought, and artistry characterizing many otherworld romances, but also the complex, social and ethical thinking being done in and by medieval narratives more generally. In so doing, my work contributes to current conversations within the field of medieval studies that are pushing back against both "dark ages" rhetoric and the deliberate misunderstanding and misappropriation of the medieval and early modern past in support of retrograde positions regarding the treatment of historically underrepresented populations.

CHAPTER 1.   INTRODUCTION: FAIRIES FIND A WAY

In the fifteenth-century, a group of protestors "stole deer from the deer park of the Duke of Buckingham at Penshurst" in Kent, striving to maintain their anonymity in part by referring to themselves as servants of the Fairy Queen. Moreover, this is only one of several such instances of what Diane Purkiss terms the "theatrical use of the symbolic figure of the fairy queen as a signifier of rebellion"[1] in the fifteenth century. For example, "The name 'servants of the Queen of the Fairies' had [also] been used in January 1450 by the leader of another conspiracy, and the later servants of the Queen were in turn carrying on from the rising of April 1451, which may have been caused by the threat of further repressive measures in the wake of Cade's rising."[2] Indeed, Jack Cade appears to have been referred to as the Queen of Faerie, and, as Richard Firth Green suggests, "evidently the discourse of fairyland offered the rebels a shared language that they felt they could use against their oppressors."[3] Similarly, Mary Ellen Lamb argues that: "Allusions to the fairies in matters of property functioned more explicitly as a weapon of the weak to intervene in the unequal power relationships supported by the juridical systems and values of the dominant culture," and that, as such, "early moderns … used fairies to refer to forms of social protest ranging from revolt to property crime."[4] The socially destabilizing potential of Faerie is made evident in these attempts to adopt or proclaim an affiliation with an *other*, non-human world and to use its power both as protection—disguise—and as an assertion of might that differs from and resists the dominant culture. Indeed, if the deer at Penshurst belong to Faerie, then is not the Duke of Buckingham the one in the wrong, the one who is a thief, whereas the servants of the Queen of Faerie are merely loyal vassals returning to the otherworld what rightly belongs to it? These sorts of complicated

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[1] Diane Purkiss, "Old Wives' Tales Retold: the mutations of the Fairy Queen," in *'This Double Voice': Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, ed.s Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 106-107 [103-122]. Similarly, I.M.W. Harvey's description of this raid, noting that the group "followed the poacher's practice of painting their faces and of wearing long beards for the purpose of anonymity," going on to suggest that "It was perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek that they hid their identity behind the description 'servants of the queen of the fairies' in a clear echo of Thomas Cheyne, the hermit Bluebeard, who had risen in Kent during the previous January." I.M.W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 138.

[2] Purkiss, "Old Wives' Tales Retold," pp. 106-107. Harvey also discusses the January 1450 uprising, led by Thomas Cheyne, in which the "leaders hid their identities behind names such as 'King of the Fairies', 'Queen of the Fairies', and 'Robin Hood', a trick used by poachers." Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450*, p. 65.

[3] Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 22.

[4] Mary Ellen Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.3 (2000): 289-291 [277-312].

counter-arguments and socially destabilizing points of view are, I would suggest, also a defining element of fairy romances and the thinking they can prompt in and for their audiences.

1.1   Our Fairies, Ourselves—or, What are Fairies, Anyway?

Fairies are often characterized by eternal, or at least significantly extended, youth and life; by vast and usually uncategorizable magical powers; by the ability to transform their own shape or the shapes and/or statuses of others; and often by incredible beauty of person, residence, and/or possessions. However, as the many qualifiers in the previous sentence suggest, fairies are also, and perhaps most fully, defined by their undefinableness; the fay are difficult to pin down, possessing what Green terns an "innate volatility": "they can be any size (or shape) they wish, and … their color is inherently unstable."[5] As such, in this section I will provide an overview of qualities common to the fay, but I will not attempt to arrive at a totalizing definition of fairies or otherworldly creatures, because, as with the genre of "romance," fairies represent a slippery, evolving, and changeable set.

One of the reasons that otherworldly beings are so resistant to definition and categorization is that they are known to us only through their commerce with our human world, and yet their interactions with us do not define the whole scope of their lives any more than those interactions adhere to or follow our human society's rules, norms, or mores. Further, past fairy behaviors, as detailed in narratives, vernacular beliefs, and/or chronicle accounts, are only ever of partial assistance in predicting what the next fairy may or may not do in a similar situation. The fay are fundamentally independent of both human rules and expectations, possessing an "ultimate autonomy from the human worlds they intrude upon,"[6] and, as such, it is the fairies' unpredictable and inexplicable wills and desires that drive their encounters with us and our sphere. In addition, otherworldly beings commonly choose when and how they interact with the human realm and its residents, and their choices range widely and unpredictably. For instance, sometimes they give gifts of riches or prophetic sight and other times they impose difficult-to-follow taboos upon their human beneficiaries; sometimes they enter into sexual and/or romantic relationships with humans and other times they abduct individuals to ride with the Wild Hunt or Horde; sometimes they act to heal human bodies and other times they choose to replace healthy, human babies with sickly

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[5] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 4.
[6] James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p. 15.

changelings. The result of this variation is that fay actions can appear, from a human perspective, to be capricious, chaotic, and even frightening.

While fairies do give some of the humans they encounter gifts or boons, they should not ever be mistaken as "nice" or "sweet." As the catalog above suggests, the fay operate under a moral code that differs from our own, a code that at times may lead them to help and at other times to hurt the humans they encounter.[7] James Wade describes the otherworldly as "adoxic" beings, noting that, "unlike humans, fairies are hardly ever 'evil'," they "exis[t] in a 'state of exception' outside orthodoxy without also being strictly unorthodox…. And [they] therefore [stand] in a position to be used to reflect and question those establishments, but they [do] so without contradicting or even directly opposing, such orthodoxies."[8] For the majority of the Middle Ages, fairies were not often or consistently rejected as evil or demonic, but instead occupied a position outside of such strict dualities. One reason for this was the prevalence of fairy belief in and across medieval society. On the one hand, Green notes that there were elements—such as the "overt sexuality of fairies; their fecundity; their morality; and their prescience"—that made the fay unpalatable to the "great tradition"[9] (by which he means that small, elite group of educated individuals who should be contrasted with the rest of society, who instead represent the "little tradition"[10]). On the other hand, genuine belief in otherworldly beings was common across ranks in medieval society,[11] a fact that Green contends made it difficult, if not impossible, for the great tradition to outright isolate or eradicate fairy belief in the little tradition.[12] Further, attempts to make fairies into neutral angels—those who refused to take sides in the war between Heaven and

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[7] Evidence that fairies do have a moral code includes their imposition of taboos and their desire to keep their words, as can, for example, be seen in the Fairy King of *Sir Orfeo* who, when reminded of his vow, keeps his promise and allows Heurodis to return with Orfeo to the human world.

[8] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, pp. 14-15.

[9] "While many other elements in the popular conception of fairy nature (such as youthfulness, courtliness, and conspicuous wealth) must have galled representatives of the great tradition, four things caused them particular difficulties: the overt sexuality of fairies; their fecundity; their morality; and their prescience. None of these qualities is easy to reconcile with the notion that fairies were really demons." Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 56-57.

[10] Green borrows the distinction between "great" and "little" traditions used here from early modern scholar Peter Burke, arguing that Burke's schema can also be applied to late medieval society. See Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 42-43; and Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, rev. ed. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), pp. 23-24.

[11] For instance, Green notes that he does not restrict fairy belief to the lower classes, but instead views "medieval aristocrats" as "perfectly capable of entering into the belief system of the little tradition as fully participating members." Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 44.

[12] Green, in fact, argues that, "Not only were fairy beliefs so ubiquitous that they could not be quarantined in ghettos and leprosaria or made the targets of self-serving crusades, but they also touched (as we shall see) the higher levels of secular society (and even penetrated the church itself), so that focused persecution was infeasible." Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 8.

Hell at the beginning of creation—were, Green shows, not terribly popular among either the clergy or the laity.[13] As a result, fairy belief came to "occup[y] an anomalous status in the official culture of the later Middle Ages. While scholastic theology may have regarded them as demonic, at the pastoral level they were far too deeply entrenched in the vernacular consciousness to be easily extirpated, and an uneasy truce was maintained."[14] In addition, because, as Helen Cooper has argued, "belief in fairies did not normally seek theological explanations, and few writers bothered about doctrinal specificity,"[15] it seems likely that the both liminal and labile status of the otherworldly within medieval vernacular tradition in turn influenced the ways in which the fay were used in narrative. This is not to say that fairies are antithetical to human morality, but rather that they possess their own ethical codes and are thus "free from the moral scruples humans are expected to abide by and operate within,"[16] a characteristic that then gives them unique narrative consequence and capabilities. One particular result of this moral difference and its existence outside the reach of our human understanding is that fairies and their actions can often seem to humans to be arbitrary, uncontrollable, and/or chaotic. The like but unlikeness of the fay and their unpredictability together not only fix attention on fairy actions within a narrative, but also serve to foreground and often defamiliarize the human institutions and ontologies with which the otherworldly interact. In particular, fairy disruption of human ways of being and doing brings audience attention and thought to bear on the elements and organizations that have been unsettled by fay actions, prompting readers and hearers to consider how and why the human world works as it does. This, moreover, makes the fay particularly useful to and within narratives interested in both morality and the effects of temporal instability.

Further, because the fay frequently possess both human-like bodies and supernatural powers—intruding on our human reality but belonging, ultimately, to a world outside of our own—our understanding of them as beings and as a society is limited to our own, this-worldly encounters with them (though, of course, interactions with the human realm are surely not all that constitutes

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[13] "This attempt to offer an acceptably anodyne version of the demon/fairy conjunction ultimately satisfied no one. Scholastic theology could not accept the idea that there were degrees of guilt among the followers of Satan…. Vernacular tradition too seems to have balked at the idea of fairies as neutral angels." Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 24-25. For medieval texts that indicate that fairies might be "neutral angels" see the *South English Legendary* and Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*, among others.

[14] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 28.

[15] Helen Cooper, "Introduction," In *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed.s Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, Michelle Sweeney, Christianity and Culture 3 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010): p. xvi [xiii-xxi].

[16] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 14.

fairy culture, and, as with anthropologic studies, the very fact of observation changes the thing being observed). The result of this epistemological distance, moreover, is that otherworldly beings frequently appear strange and erratic to human audiences. James Wade, Helen Cooper, and Corinne Saunders have all discussed the sort of unpredictability and uncertainty that consistently adheres to the otherworldly, with Wade noting that: "A fairy's motivations … are more difficult to pin down," and thus they "carry with them a certain arbitrariness, a certain lack of logical motivation";[17] Cooper claiming that: "If there is a single defining quality of the fairy monarch, of either sex, it is not sexuality but power: power that may well be exercised in the cause of justice, but which is primarily characterized by its arbitrariness";[18] and Saunders suggesting that: "Romances repeatedly raise questions of intention and morality in relation to otherworldly encounters, and draw attention to the difficulties of distinguishing different aspects of the supernatural—divine, demonic and faery."[19] In addition, Tara Williams has suggested that the "specific type of magic" that fairies use and represent "has proven resistant to classification,"[20] aligning with Green who argues that "fairy taxonomy" is, as a whole, illusive.[21] Capricious behavior and resistance to categorization makes fairies intriguing; in particular, their opposition to clear or stable definition and their epistemological elusiveness multiplies the possibilities regarding their motivations, their present and future behaviors, and their effects on the human realm.

Fay unpredictability and disruption of human norms and mores also raises questions regarding otherworldly morality and cosmological positioning. Williams, for instance, suggests that, as a genre, fairy narratives are defined not simply by the presence of magic, but also by one of two different "moral aspect[s]."[22] Of these "two opposing traditions on fairies' morality," Williams contends that: "In one, they are amoral, which is another marker of their difference from

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[17] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 16.

[18] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 178.

[19] Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Studies in Medieval Romance 13 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 180.

[20] Tara Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), p. 13.

[21] Green writes that, "In my view[,] … any attempt at a totalizing definition [of fairies and what they are] will prove illusory," a sentiment with which I agree and, while I will, of necessity, attempt to sketch some parameters defining fairies and the otherworld in relation humanity and monstrosity, I would argue that such parameters be treated always as fluid and changeable. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 2-3.

[22] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 14.

humanity and a warning for those who might encounter them. In the other, they dispense justice … or facilitate a moral education."[23] I would, however, take Williams' argument a step further and propose that fairies' resistance to classification—even moral classification—suggests that fairy morality could, in any narrative, in fact waiver between these two moral categories, rather than belonging solely to one or the other. On the one hand, fairies are amoral in the sense that they do not intentionally reflect or ascribe to human ethical and moral codes, but, on the other hand, neither do they intentionally refute or combat those codes. They are not demons[24] and can often fit, albeit gingerly, into the realm of Christianity, as is evident both in the bird-knight of *Yonec*'s ability to take the Eucharist[25] and in Tryamour and her maiden's invocations of Christian rhetoric in *Sir Launfal*.[26] The fay can "dispense justice" by enforcing their taboos or in ways that align more obviously with human mores and ethics, but this occurs within the context of a broader, fairy morality that largely eludes human understanding. Indeed, fairies are not held to human behavioral and ethical codes, and thus their actions can be, at times, generous or just, and, at others, violent or disruptive. In the end, however, I would argue that fairies' seemingly unruled actions— behaviors which can appear to humans to be arbitrary and amoral, but also, at times, decent and

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[23] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 14.

[24] Keith Thomas has argued that the "word 'fairy' was itself used … to convey the idea of a malignant disease of spiritual origin which could be cured only by charming or exorcism," contending that Anglo-Saxon charms against "elf-shot," along with the association of madness or ensorcellment with being "fairy-taken," indicated that "elves, goblins and fairies were frequently thought of as highly malevolent." However, I would instead argue that these fairy qualities differ from demonic or monstrous malevolence. The fay are certainly disruptive and cause distress to the humans effected, but fairies' association with gift-giving, supernatural love, and healing, as well, indicates that a more complex and irreducible quality adheres to medieval otherworldly beings. They cannot, as such, be dismissed as merely or solely malevolent, but should be understood, rather, as capricious and disruptive. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973 [1971]), p. 725.

[25] Marie de France, "Yonec," *Les Lais de Marie de France,* ed. Jean Rychner, Classiques Français du Moyen Âge. 93 (Paris Honoré Champion, 1971), line 186, p. 108 [102-119]. Wade notes that "the swearing test and the Eucharist test.… are not necessarily fairy tests, but demon tests, as demons, within the imaginative networks in which these romances and chronicles participated, could never utter the name of God, nor could they withstand the presence of any Christian rituals. In nearly all instances, however, fairies have no problem encountering Christian paraphernalia or swearing in the name of God." Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 31.

[26] For instance, when Launfal first sees Tryamour's maidens, he salutes them with a Christian blessing: "He was curteys, & aȝens hem goth, / And greette hem myldelyche. / 'Damesels,' he seyde, 'God yow se!' / 'Syr knyȝt,' þey seyde, 'well þe be!'" (ll. 251-4) There is no sense in this exchange that Launfal's "God yow se!" (*protect, l.253) is incongruous with or inappropriate to these maidens' nature. Rather, they accept him gladly and do not shy away, a response which suggests that, not only are they not demonic, but also that God is an acknowledged and accepted part of their cultural system, just as he is of Launfal's. In addition, Tryamour's greeting of Launfal similarly tangles the religious with the otherworldly. She calls: "'Launfal, my lemman swete, / Al my joye for þe y lete, / Swetyng paramour! / Þer nys *noman yn Cristenté* / Þat y loue so moche as þe, / Kyng neyþer emperour!'" (ll. 301-6, emphasis mine). All quotes from *Sir Launfal* are taken from *Sir Launfal*, ed. A.J. Bliss, Nelson's Medieval and Renaisance Texts (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1960).

honorable—produce a chaos that disrupts human institutions or ways of being in what, I argue, are thoughtfully, ethically, and morally productive ways.

One final point, I will be using "fairy" and "fay" to refer to what is actually a large group of "otherworldly" beings who vary in size, shape, magical ability, interest in the human realm, and so forth; as such, the word "fairy" is itself somewhat more complex than is often recognized. I adopt the term because it is familiar enough to conjure for all audiences a sense of the type of supernatural beings that I will be discussing; however, it is important to note that "fairy" and "fairies" in actuality refer broadly to the residents of the land or lands of Faerie or the otherworld.[27] *The Middle English Dictionary* (MED), for instance, defines "fairie" as "the country or home of supernatural or legendary creatures"; "such a creature"; and a "supernatural contrivance; enchantment, magic, illusion … something incredible or fictitious, a figment."[28] It is important to note that fairies are beings defined by and in relation to their *lands*, lands that are different or "other" to the human world, but which are, at the same time, also contiguous enough that both humans and the fay can cross between worlds—a distinction or differentiation thus "not always given [firm physical] boundaries."[29] Nonetheless, there are tropes that often signal an opening or passage to an otherworld. For instance, the fay realm can often be accessed by crossing a special body of water or by entering a hillside; Faerie is usually a land of beauty and one often full of precious gems; in many instances, the otherworld is lit by an ever-present glow; and time in the otherworld frequently moves differently than does time in the human world, with human visitors occasionally returning to their lands decades or even centuries after they had first left.[30] Because fairies are, in essence, the residents of Faerie/the otherworld(s)—lands which, like their residents, can vary extensively in layout, character, and degree of difference from the human world—the term "fairy" ultimately refers to a wide array of supernatural creatures who include not only to the

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[27] The spelling of all these terms tends to vary.

[28] *The Middle English Dictionary* (MED), "fairīe (n.)," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?size=First+100&type=orths&q1=fairie&rgxp=constrained, Accessed January 18, 2019.

[29] Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, p. 179. That is, of course, until the fairies build a wall and make us pay for it.

[30] Aisling Byrne details the following common otherworld tropes: "The motifs the poet uses are typical of medieval accounts of what we usually term 'the otherworld'. The entry through the hillside, the land's beauty, copious quantities of precious stones, and rich materials, even the freedom from night-time darkness wrought by an unnatural light source, are all highly conventional motifs. In other narratives, otherworld spaces often feature beautiful gardens, fountains, fruitful trees, refined bird song, a beautiful palace, or a pavilion. A distortion of spatio-temporal rules is also frequent." Aisling Byrne, *Othterworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1.

aristocratic fay encountered in many romances, but also elves of various sizes, Robin Goodfellow, brownies, goblins, púca, selkies, fauns, nymphs, satyrs, and so on. In addition, a number of these beings have been, upon occasion, discussed in prior scholarship not as fay or otherworldly creatures, but as monsters. As such, further discussion of both the overlap and the distinctions between otherworldly and monstrous beings is necessary, and I will return to this point toward the end of this introduction.

1.2   @FayChaos and #MoralThinking: Fairy Narratives Get Social

As Green has shown, fairy belief was more accepted and widespread in medieval England than has often be recognized in previous, scholarly discussions of the otherworld and its cultural functioning; as such, Green argues, scholars "will make real progress only when we learn to treat magic, or at least its manifestations in medieval literature … less as tenor and more as vehicle…. The first task is not to establish what such *ferlies* represent or exemplify or epitomize, but rather to ask what they *are* and what cultural work they are doing."[31] One of my endeavors in this project is to bring fairy narratives into conversation with the cultural circumstances, institutions, and thinking of late-medieval and early modern England in order to examine why and how fairies were useful in and to the romances of those times. If fairies are taken to be physical entities, beings who were believed by many medieval people to exist in a land adjacent to their own, human world, then the fay must also be acknowledged to resist allegorical or metaphorical use because they are, in fact, willful and desiring individuals. Thus, rather than seeking here to determine which human experiences or concepts a fairy or fairies might represent in any given narrative, I instead focus on uncovering the elements of human society that the otherworldly destabilize, disrupt, or upend in each of the works considered. Moreover, because of their capricious nature, I would suggest that arguments regarding fairies as metaphors are difficult to sustain, primarily because the otherworldly are so likely to slip out of easy association, categorization, or definition.

Though rarely straightforwardly symbolic, fairies are inherently thought-provoking. One almost cannot help wondering why Morgan le Fay sent the Green Knight to scare Guinevere to death, why the Fairy King chose Heurodis to abduct, or when Arthur will return from Avalon, and, as readers and/or hearers of these tales, we often invent our own explanations to and for the

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[31] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 12.

questions that the fay and their narratives raise, thereby creating our own, individual versions of each otherworld tale. The caprice and nearly boundless power of the fay is thus both arresting and mentally stimulating. Further, Williams has shown that the semi-visual and affect-producing elements which appertain to fairies and other late-Middle English marvels both "command attention and require responses that combine the immediate with the reflective, the affective with the cognitive."[32] As such, the mental participation and imaginative contributions generated by narrative fairies are not solely a result of the fay's slippery like and unlike-ness, but are also a product of the spectacle the otherworld generates, a spectacle that also encourages moral engagement in and with the text. In particular, Williams argues that marvels "In fourteenth-century literary texts, … [work to] facilitate moral contemplation rather than being straightforwardly didactic."[33] Resultingly, "Although wonder and enchantment may begin as passive reactions, they lead to active engagement: marvels make us think."[34] Narrative texts, therefore, represent not merely entertainment or *solace*, but ought also to have meaning, *sentence*, and sociopolitical and/or ethical import. That a text could both entertain and edify is, of course, not a new observation regarding medieval writings;[35] however, I would suggest that what is important here is that fairy narratives possess an openness that encourages thought but does not dictate particular or approved answers.[36] The human-likeness of the fay, paired with their sudden, jarring dissimilarities, function as foci for readers and hearers' intellectual engagement, encouraging them to consider why human

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[32] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 1.

[33] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 6.

[34] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 26.

[35] For instance, Eleanor Johnson argues that "the aesthetic power of literary language—its power to make ideation sensory and hence experiential through form and style—is fundamental to late medieval experimentation with ethically transformative writing," noting that scholars in addition to herself have also shown that *prosimetrum*, for many medieval writers, works because "meter confers pleasure and delight, while prose is useful." For instance, Johnson contends that, in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, "Sensation matters in Philosophy's practice of teaching ethics to Boethius because it ultimately produces 'assent' and 'consent' in him, literally the 'feeling toward' and 'feeling with' her assertions that are necessary to his learning." Further, Jessica Rosenfeld has noted that "Medieval commentators considered poetry to be an ethical genre, typically referring to poetry's interest in human behavior and moral choices to justify this classification." In particular, Rosenfeld notes that "the medieval emphasis on love as a central ethical concern meant that—from the moment of the 'birth' of the vernacular literature of love—philosophy and poetry were yoked together," going on to discuss how late-medieval knowledge of Aristotle then influenced this tradition of thought and engagement. Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 3-4, 5, 26; and Jessica Rosenfeld, *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love after Aristotle, Cambridge Studies* in Medieval Literature 85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1.

[36] Indeed, Williams suggests that there was a debate at this time regarding "the moral significance of literary texts, especially romances," a discussion that, Williams suggests, "helped to encourage readers' moral engagement at various levels without indicating that edification would be an automatic result." Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 6.

institutions, organizations, and beliefs operate the way they do or are constructed the way they are. These, moreover, are moral questions because they deal on some level with human conduct and the personal and interpersonal effects that the codes, organizations, and institutions that structure human interactions and societies have on the individuals dwelling in and interacting with those cultures. Placing the openness produced by the otherworld alongside the querying prompted in and by fairy narratives encourages a work's readers and hearers to consider human systems and ways of being without imposing prescriptive responses, thereby making these works not only imaginatively engaging, but also intellectually and morally generative.

Another way in which I would argue otherworldly marvels encourage moral and ethical thinking in their audiences is through the fay's creation of new possibilities. Because they are neither governed nor limited by the social, moral, or physical rules of the human world, fairies are capable both of solving problems that might otherwise seem to be unsolvable and of creating problems within seemingly perfect human systems or organizations. Part of this disruptive potential stems from fairies' status as "otherworldly." Because they are "like humans," audiences are often able to perceive the oddities in fairy values, behaviors, and societies—their "unlikenesses," if you will—drawing rapid comparisons between fairy civilizations and our own, for, as Byrne similarly notes, "When contrasting worlds are brought together they inevitably prompt comparisons between them."[37] Thus, the human-like-ness of the fay not only makes the differences between humans and fairies perceptible, it also makes them intriguing, producing questions about why such variances exist between fairy and human worlds, why things do not operate so in our lived-realities, and so on.[38] The questions that they fay generate in and through narratives, moreover, are open-ended and encourage "imaginative engagement" with the work,

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[37] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, p. 27.

[38] Indeed, several scholars have suggested that the otherworld serves as a sort of mirror to and for human society. For instance, Aisling Byrne suggests that an "otherworld account holds up a mirror to the other realms depicted in the texts in which it features and introduces an extra perspective from which to view reality itself," and, moreover, that the depiction of "literary otherworlds" has the capacity to act on or "impact the actual world[,] rather than constitute[ing] an escape from it." Similarly, Tara Williams contends that, because "fairies are not human, but neither are they undoubtedly divine or demonic," the distance generated "between the fairy and the human paradoxically enables the mirroring effect between the two worlds in *Sir Orfeo* upon which critics have remarked," a mirroring effect which, moreover, extends to many other fairy romances as well. In addition, Katherine McLoone has noted that "Scholars have established that the otherworlds of Arthurian romances and *lais* act as representations of the travails of 'real' life and that the most fictional realm, that of fairies, offers the most precise engagement with questions of politics, identity, and like concerns." Byrne, *Otherworlds*, p. 23; Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 14; and Katherine McLoone, "Strange Bedfellows: Politics, Miscegenation, and *Translatio* in Two Lays of Lanval," *Arthuriana* 21.4 (2011): 4 [3-22].

providing audiences with an "openness" that "romance authors can use … to provoke wonder and encourage speculation."[39]

Ultimately, otherworldly disruptions of or intrusions onto specific human organizations, institutions, and/or structures serve, I would argue, to focus and direct the audience's moral and ethical thinking, drawing attention to the operation of those human political, theological, and/or cultural systems that the fay have destabilized and encouraging the romance's readers and hearers to consider those institutions and their operation more closely. If fairies' moral difference—the unknowableness of their values and ethical codes—makes their actions seem to be unpredictable and chaotic, those qualities also prompt readers and hearers to question fay morals in relation to our own human values, considering why those differences exist and whether the human system is, in fact, the superior one. It is fairies' "difference from ordinary humanity, or even heroic humanity—their freedom from the pains and limitations of mortality; their ability to break the rules of nature and time and physical space"[40] that not only "gives [fairies] their narrative interest,"[41] but that also, I would contend, makes them useful to think with. In essence, then, the tendency otherworldly beings have to both upset human organizations and institutions and to, then, encourage audiences to imagine new ways of being, makes the fay useful to authors who wish to encourage moral and ethical thinking in their audiences. Further, this capability suggests that narrative fairies possess a revolutionary potential, one that enables romances to explore traditional and powerful organizations and ways of being—such as honor and chivalry—without offering definitive prescriptions, pronouncements, or criticisms. Instead, audiences are simply encouraged to ask (sometimes directed) questions about these institutions and/or to consider them in a new light or from a new perspective.

Lastly, medieval science's understanding of the brain and the processes of memory indicate that the emotions of wonder, fear, and desire (which, as I show in what follows, fairies often produce in their audiences) have a potency that makes narratives regarding these beings and their actions difficult to forget. Emotion generally plays a key role in medieval conceptions of memory formation; for instance, in Avicenna's work, emotion and/or experience are important to the processes of "memory-image" formation because we do not remember things "neutrally," instead

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[39] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 26.
[40] Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, p. 173.
[41] Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, p. 173.

"Form and *intentio*"—the "opinion about or reaction to something"—are "stored together as a single memory-phantasm."[42] These emotional components then aid the human brain with recollection of form, content, and also of affect. As a result, memory, with its connection to emotional evocation, was thought to have an ethical component, to be involved "in the shaping of moral judgment and excellence of character."[43] Ultimately, memory-images, Mary Carruthers emphasizes, are "emphatically fabricated" and the processes of memory, thought, and imagination—the "*Fantasia*, *estimativia*, and *vis formalis* [imagination]"—"are all agents … not just recording devices"; "memory, like thought and imagination, is also a *vis*, an agent, a power, not just a receptacle."[44] In particular, once a memory-image is formed, it is stored in and by the memory and can be recalled again through the action of *cogitation*, meaning that thinking and memory are inherently interrelated and reciprocal.[45] As such, the characteristics that fairies, *as fairies*, bring to a narrative are imaginatively engaging, thought-producing, *and* emotionally evocative, a combination that both encourages contemplation of human society—its norms, its organizations, and its values—and that is also predisposed to make those considerations memorable and mentally potent.

1.3   You Fay You Want a Revolution: Are Medieval Fairies Agents of Resistance?

While fairies may hold a productively disruptive and at times revolutionary potential, this is not to say that they are always used in radical or constructive ways. As with most tools of resistance or destabilization, there are also instances in which the supernatural and imaginative power of the fay is co-opted and directed toward the maintenance of the dominant culture. I would suggest that *Sir Degaré* can be read as one such example. In this Middle English Breton lay, Degaré's exceptional parentage—in particular his fay paternity—seems designed to add the sheen of exceptionality and narrative-worthiness to his actions, seeking to align him with figures like Richard Coeur de Lion, who, in romance, has an ambiguously supernatural mother; Alexander the Great, whose birth is sometimes said to be the product of sorcery; and the Welsh hero Pryderi fab Pwyll, whose mother, Rhiannon, is a powerful fairy. In the opening of Degaré's eponymous romance, the only daughter

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[42] Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edn., Cambrdige Studies in Medieval Literature 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 65.
[43] Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 85.
[44] Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 68.
[45] Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 68.

of a king who was "Of gret poer in all thing" (ll. 10),[46] and who is herself said to possess "gentiresse and here beauté / … moche renound in ich countré" (ll. 21-22), gets lost in a forest and encounters a fairy knight. At first the knight seems like other fairy lovers: he possesses extraordinary beauty and appears initially to be both *gentil* and courteous: "Toward hire comen a knight, / Gentil, yong, and jolif man; / A robe of scarlet he hadde upon; / His visage was feir, his bodi ech weies; / Of countenaunce right curteis; / Wel farende legges, fot, and honde: / Ther nas non in al the Kynges londe / More apert man than was he" (ll. 90-97). In addition, like Launfal's fairy mistress, this knight seems drawn to something exceptional in Degaré's clearly exceptional mother, telling her, "'Iich have iloved the mani a yer'" (l. 105). However, the knight then rapidly turns from fairy lover to rapist, informing the princess that: "'Thou best mi lemman ar thou go, / Wether the liketh wel or wo'" (ll. 107-108), proceeding to seize her despite the fact that she "wep and criede and wolde fle" (l. 110) and then to "d[o] his wille, what he wolde. / He binam hire here maidenhood" (ll. 112-113). Fairy interactions with humans can be disruptive, upsetting, and, at times, even violent (as I will discuss in later sections), and this episode does in some ways reflect the Fairy King's abduction of Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*, with both fairies informing a royal woman that she will be taken no matter what she wills and then proceeding to seize her despite her lamentations and against her personal desire. However, the extreme emphasis on masculine sexual desire in *Sir Degaré* (as opposed to *Orfeo*'s Fairy King's more ambiguous and aesthetic desire); the princess' accentuated helplessness and despair; and the fact that little to this point outside the knight's claim that he is a fairy knight has made this event different from a human assault and rape, together have the effect of differentiating this interaction from the one in *Orfeo* and from most other narrative encounters with fairy lovers.[47] Moreover, the way in which the romance then proceeds to unfold reinforces the sense that Faerie is being used here to make the domination of women and "other" lands appear heroic.

For instance, Degaré's father, after raping and impregnating his mother, proceeds to deliver a prophecy touting his son's coming and linking Degaré's future to both martial pursuits and

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[46] All quotes from *Sir Degaré* are taken from *Sir Degaré*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed.s Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 101-144.

[47] There is also a rape in *Thomas of Erceldoune*, but in that tale the fairy woman is raped by the human man (an alteration to the specifics and results of the assault, but not to the general horror of the act itself). A similar event occurs in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, however, the young lady who is raped is never clearly fay (though there are indications both textual and intertextual that she may be).

physical violence through the bestowal of a sword that has fought and defeated a monster (in this case a giant):

> "Mid schilde I wot that thou schalt be; / Siker ich wot hit worth a knave; / Forthi mi swerd thou sschalt have, / And whenne that he is of elde / That he mai himself biwelde, / Tak him the swerd, and bidde him fonde / To sechen his fader in eche londe. / The swerd his god and avenaunt: / Lo, as I faught with a geaunt, / I brak the point in his hed; / And siththen, when that he was ded, / I tok hit out and have hit er, / Redi in min aumener / Yit paraventure time bith / That mi sone mete me with: / Be mi swerd I mai him kenne." (ll. 116-131)

Not only is the sword a gift made special by its defeat of a giant—a monster of excess, as discussed below—but the pains taken here to make heritage and descent traceable through the (prominently gendered) passage of goods (a concern which appears again in Degaré's mother's later establishment of a glove test) serves, with the sword, to foreground and reinforce the importance of violence and conquest in this tale, as well as its connections to the construction of masculinity and patrilineal dynasty. In addition, the far-from-subtle gendering of the sword and the gloves reinforces the sense that men are meant to dominate and women to be dominated, an implication that is consistently reiterated and reinforced as the lay unfolds.

Like many romance heroes, Degaré goes through several adventures to prove his worth— a value tied to might and martial conquest through, for example, the besting of a dragon, rather than through a display of *largesse* or honor—before eventually reuniting his parents and creating a "home" space to which the family returns. Degaré's adventures, however, do not only foreground martial power and conquest, they also make evident the connections being made in this lay between women's bodies and other lands or kingdoms, so that possession of one is tied to possession of the other. For instance, the damsel that Degaré saves and eventually marries thanks him for his assistance and, for a reward, offers that "'al mi lond ich wil the give, / and miselve, whil that I live'" (ll. 976-977), implying that lordship over her body and over her country are synonymous. In addition, the damsel later provides Degaré with rich gear, including a "helm riche for the nones, / [that] Was ful of precious stones / That the maide him gaf" (ll. 1016-1018): goods that aid him in his adventures, the advancement of his reputation, and his eventual triumph and allegedly happy ending.

In the lay's conclusion, the marriage of Degaré's parents and Degaré's combination of their lands with the lands he acquires through marriage to the damsel, are together meant to indicate a happy ending: "Now went forth Syr Degaré; / Wyth the kyng and his meyné, / His father and his

mother dere. / Unto that castel thei went infere / wher that wonnyd that lady bryght / That he had wonne in gret fight, / And weddyd hur wyth gret solempnité" (ll. 1094-1100). However, this happiness is founded on masculine dominance, the maintenance of gender norms, and the unquestionable primacy of patrimony and lineage. Indeed, the lines: "Unto that castel thei went infere / wher that wonnyd that lady bryght / That he had wonne in gret fight" are, I would argue, intentionally difficult to parse, making unavoidably clear the degree to which the "castle" and the "lady bryght" have been collapsed into one another, so that, in winning one, Degaré has in fact won both and may now celebrate his colonial successes. While partial fairy parentage is often a marker of heroism, much as the demi-gods of Greco-Roman myth are distinguished from other humans as heroes because of their partial divinity, in this lay the imaginative and otherworldly power wielded by the fay is put to use propping up the might of the already powerful. This, I would argue, is one of the reasons the lay of *Sir Degaré* lacks the feeling of openness, imaginative engagement, and even narrative satisfaction that characterizes the romances examined in this dissertation. As *Sir Degaré* makes clear, fairy romances and cultural beliefs ought not always be read as transgressive; however, even when the fay serve regressive ends, the narrative and cultural impact of the otherworldly differs from those of another, commonly discussed supernatural being: the monster.

1.4   Here there be…eh?: Monstrous Continuums and the Inclusion of the Otherworld

It is not uncommon for scholarship to discuss otherworldly beings in relation to concepts of monstrosity and/or Monster Theory,[48] particularly when, as in the rape scene in *Sir Degaré*, the fay behave in ways that are violent and upsetting. In many ways this makes sense, particularly because fairies and their otherworld kith and kin are supernatural—usually magical—and, at times, genuinely unsettling to humans and human society. Indeed, toward the end of the Middle Ages, fairies' became increasingly associated with witchcraft and Satanic rites—a connection that really

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[48] For instance, Marcia Dalbey characterizes the Pluto and Proserpina of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* as: "the devil and his queen, embodiments of these vices [sensuality and lust]," who, in the *Tale*, "do not merely parallel their human counterparts. They control them." Though acknowledged to be described by Chaucer as "fairies," Dalbey's argument casts Pluto and Proserpina, their behavior, and, in particular, their influence as demonic/monstrous, further contending that "The lust for earthly pleasure which ruled the actions of Pluto and Proserpine, the devil and his queen, also rules the lives of the human characters. January, May, and Damyan, blindly following the path of earthly lust, finally put themselves, both spiritually and physically, under the devil's control." Marcia A. Dalbey, "The Devil in the Garden: Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 75.3 (1974): 415 [408-415].

hit its stride in the early modern period.[49] Further, the medieval supernatural, fairies included, are often associated in some way with forms of alterity,[50] including geographic, sexual, religious, and/or racial alterity. For instance, though the otherworld can and often does have a King, the Fairy Queen is a powerful ruler who appears in numerous fay texts, her commanding presence and authority upending the typical or expected political status quo.[51] In addition, though the otherworld is often located in an ambiguous space somewhere to the West,[52] the fay frequently exhibit a sort of unmoored globality, often also possessing numerous goods and riches from India, the Middle East, and so forth. For instance, the father of Traymour, the fairy mistress in *Sir Launfal*, is declared to be a "kyng of Fayrye, / Of occient, fer & myȝte" (ll. 280-281), yet Tryamour is first encountered in a pavilion that "was wrouth, forsoþe, ywys, / All of werk of Sarsynys" (ll. 265-266). The description of the pavilion is certainly meant to foreground Tryamour's extensive wealth—a quality that allows her to contrast notably with the impoverished knight, Launfal, whom she loves—but her connection to distant lands and peoples, both the folk of Faerie and the Saracens, also makes clear her difference from the whole of Launfal's and Arthur's world. The fairy connection to alterity likewise makes it difficult, at first, to separate the narrative functions of the fay from those commonly performed by monstrous beings. As such, it is helpful, I think, to look a little more closely at the type of cultural work monsters typically do and to consider how and why

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[49] In his book, Green argues that vernacular fairy tradition(s) were eventually subject to an increasing association with witchcraft and the demonic, so that "from the fifteenth century onward, as education began to close the cultural gap between clerical and secular authorities, the control of vernacular belief became more and more exacting, culminating in the terrible witch hunts of the early modern period." In addition, Green shows that "the discourse of early modern witchcraft was riddled with medieval fairy lore," and that it was not uncommon for fairies and witches to be, at times, conflated. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 8-9, 194-195.

[50] For example, John Lindow contends that, especially in Scandinavian folk belief, "from the very first, notions of ethnicity and social boundaries have been associated with the supernatural," citing the tendency for Norse-Icelandic literature to associate magic with the Finns (for instance), and noting that "people tended to ascribe supernatural abilities to those who were different." Lindow also raises the question of ambiguously supernatural beings in describing "human beings, *mennskir men*," who are "regularly and logically juxtaposed against *menn* [people] who are not *mennskir* [human] …; in other words against those who have human form but are not human, namely supernatural beings." John Lindow, "Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millenium of World View," *Scandinavian Studies* 61.1 (1995): 11-12, 15 [8-31]. For a related discussion of what he terms "human human beings" and "non-human human beings," see Shaun Hughes, "Reading the Landscape in *Grettis saga*: Þórhallur, the *Meinvættur,* and Glámur," in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400,* ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Press, 2018), pp. 70-71 [369-406].

[51] "A traditional definition of the value of fiction is that it allows its audience to imagine being other than what they are…. Otherworld narratives can emphasize the problem of difference, by presenting it at its most acute, and it is unsurprising that such narratives are quite frequently interested in issues of gender. Unsurprisingly, the 'other' of the narrative otherworld is usually female," including, I might add, the powerful Fairy Queen, herself. Byrne, *Otherworlds*, pp. 53-54.

[52] Cooper, for instance, notes that fairy romances often "associate them with a direction, often the west, rather than [with] a place." Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, p. 180.

otherworldly beings need to be, to some extent, distinguished within or with respect to monstrosity and Monster Theory.

"Monster" has, much like "fairy," proven to be a difficult term to define; however, most classifications focus on physical appearance, geographic or conceptual positioning, and/or behavior. With respect to monstrosity and appearance, Dana Oswald has, for instance, outlined three types of monsters: "monsters of excess, monsters of lack, and hybrid monsters,"[53] positing that "monstrosity is a primarily physical and visible category," and that "monstrous bodies are those that exceed human norms," so that, "in order to be monstrous, one must manifest a clear and usually visible physical difference from that which is 'normal.'"[54] Certainly there are fairies who could fit this description: loathly ladies, for example, who regularly have fairy connections, could be described as monsters of excess, and Robin Goodfellow is at times depicted like a satyr, a hybrid human-animal with incredibly hairy legs.[55] However, there are many other instances in which a fairies' appearance is so human that their otherworldly nature cannot be readily detected. For example, in *The Man of Law's Tale*, Donegild's allegations—that Custance has given birth to a "horrible … feendly creature," and that Custance herself is "an elf" (II.751, 754)[56]—work because of the general understanding that not all fay creatures are immediately distinguishable from humans. In addition, at the other end of the spectrum from loathly lady and hybrid fay are those fairies who are so exceptionally beautiful that they are, as in *Thomas of Erceldoune*, at first taken to be Divine.[57] As such, otherworldliness is not consistently visually or physically identifiable, meaning that appearance cannot always be counted on to distinguish fairies from humanity. At the same time, however, the fay may and often do have physical differences, including those of excess

[53] These three categories refer to three different types of different or "monstrous body," ones that are "more than human," ones that are "less than human," and ones that are "human plus some other element not intrinsic to an individual human body." Dana Oswald, *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 6.

[54] Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 5.

[55] See, for example, the woodcut from the title-page of *Robin Good-Fellow: His Mad Prankes and Merry Jests* (London: Thomas Cotes, 1639). Available from the British Library, C.57.b.55, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/robin-goodfellow-his-mad-pranks-and-merry-jests-1639, Accessed January 10, 2019.

[56] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

[57] "He hir mette at Eldone tree. / He knelyde downe appone his knee, / Vndir-nethe þat grenwode spraye; / And sayd, 'lufyly ladye! rewe one mee, / Qwene of heuene als þou wele maye!' / Than spake þat lady Milde of thoghte, / 'Thomas! Late swylke words bee; / Qwene of heuene ne am j noghte, / Ffor j tuke neuer so high degree. / Both j ame of ane oþer countree," (Thornton MS, ll.84-93). All quotes of *Thomas of Erceldoune* are taken from: *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, ed. James A.H. Murray, Early English Text Society Original Series 61 (Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint, 1987).

and/or hybridity, that could be classed as monstrous. Moreover, like monsters, fairies are also understood primarily in relation or comparison to the human world,[58] and, likewise, both often evoke not only alarm, but also desire.[59]

In addition to and, at times, in contrast with the suggestion that monstrosity is characterized by appearance and embodiment—that monstrosity is a physical state—is the second indicator of monstrosity, the monster's conceptual and/or geographic positioning beyond or outside the human community. In his now formative essay, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, for instance, that monsters serve as a sort of cultural and conceptual marker of limits, defining those behaviors, identities, and so forth that are socially proscribed and therefore devalued and pushed outside the definition of humanness: "The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself…. the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible."[60] Similarly, Bettina Bildhauer contends that monstrosity is usually not located in the monster's "misshapen or hybrid body," but rather in "its relation to other bodies, social or individual," and, in particular, to the monster's position at the edges. Monsters, Bildhauer contends, "always live on the fringes of the known world, outside human society and yet part of it, alien and yet somehow familiar."[61] Notably, this positioning does not refer to one specific geographic location that is definable as "Monster World"; rather, it links ideological and geographic outside-ness so that monstrosity is denoted not a "specific location, but rather, … [by occupying a] position at the very

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[58] As noted, fairies are accessible and knowable to humans only via comparison, an epistemological limitation that enhances the seeming chaos and caprice of their behavior. Monsters, as Oswald argues, by their definition also define what "humanness" is, primarily in terms of how "normal" is defined for and in relation to the human form: "the category of monstrous humans depends upon its relation to the category of humanity…. Thus, this definition requires a certain level of agreement regarding what it means to be human." Michael Uebel expands on this general idea, suggesting that "When twelfth-century writers push the monster to the edge, force it to discursive thresholds, collective identity emerges, but it does so only under the constant threat of the monster it created," so that "The monster becomes joined to the 'human,' constituting its limits and haunting those borders as the persistent possibility of their transgression and unmaking." Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 7; Michael Uebel, "Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth-Century Responses to Saracen Alterity," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 267 [264-291].

[59] Regarding monsters' relationship to both fear and wonder, Oswald notes both the medieval cultural fear of monstrosity as dangerous and contaminating, but also that "humans like Alexander [the Great still] desire contact with the monstrous and find its very liminality fascinating and inviting. These two problems are fundamentally related: humans are both fascinated and repelled by monstrous forms." Oswald, *Monsters*, pp. 1-2.

[60] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 12-13 [3-25].

[61] Bettina Bildhauer, "Blood, Jews, and Monsters in Medieval Culture," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 75-76 [75-96].

edge of our knowledge," a place "on the periphery, beyond the pale, at the edge of the world."[62] Indeed, I would suggest that this peripheral-ness and its tendency to go hand in hand with solitude or lack of community is behind the impetus to make monstrosity so readily visible in the ways that Oswald describe, particularly because doing so serves as a way to reinforce the separateness of that which is "beyond the pale."

As with observable, physical excess or hybridity, monsters and the otherworldly both exhibit some locational distance from human civilization, so that the distinction between the monstrous supernatural and the otherworldly supernatural seems to merely be one of degrees. On the one hand, Cohen contends that monsters are wholly "outside" or "other" to humanity, suggesting that the "monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—*must* not— be crossed."[63] Certainly, monsters can be interacted with and they can invade human space, but, as Cohen makes clear, they are treated as though distinct and, indeed, opposed to humanity. In contrast to this radical opposition, otherworld narratives are, instead recognizable in part through their regular emphasis on border crossings by both fairies and humans. Though the fay quite literally belong to *another* world, in fairy narratives journeying to that otherworld does not signal an unequivocal resignation of one's humanity or a one-way trip from which a human is unable to return. As such, while humans may be permanently taken by the fairies or, like King Herla and his men, trapped into riding for centuries with the Hellequin,[64] other humans, like Orfeo or Thomas of Erceldoune, are able to remain in the otherworld for a time and then return to their own lands without human lifetimes having passed.[65] Similarly, changelings can occasionally be reclaimed— as is suggested by the elaborate rituals intended to appease the fairies and redeem taken children[66] —and fairies and humans can occasionally be, at least for a time, successfully incorporated into their beloved's this-world or otherworld court, as are Rhiannon,[67] Dame

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[62] Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, "Monsters and the Exotic in Medieval England," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Elaine Treharne, Greg Walker, and William Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 682 [677-706].

[63] Cohen, "Monster Culture," p. 13.

[64] See, for example, Green's discussion of the *familia Herlequini* or *la mesnie Hellequin* in *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 172-178.

[65] Pro-tip, never eat the food.

[66] See, for example, the "ritual of recovery" linked to Saint Guinefort and described by Green in *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 116-188 and further, Jean-Michel Doulet,, *Quand les démons enlevaient les enfants. Les changelings: étude d'une figure mythique,* Traditions et Croyances (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), 65-93.

[67] A powerful fairy who appears in the first and third branches of the *Mabinogi*.

Ragnelle,[68] and, more happily, Sir Launfal. Thus, whereas monsters are more fully outside or "other," living as "solitary creatures who inhabi[t] the wilderness," the otherworldly are liminal and often marginal beings, existing "at the fringes of the human lifeworld and interact[ing] intermittently with human[s]."[69] Crossing otherworld borders thus has variable results, potentially leading either to harm or to extraordinary gifts. As a result, the border-policing function ascribed to monsters is complicated and often outright rejected by the fay, suggesting that these two "brands" of supernatural creature can and may serve different conceptual and ideological functions.

The third way of suggesting or denoting monstrousness is through destructive, monstrous behavior. Contrasting with that of more otherworldly beings, the "threat of the monsters is," as Alaric Hall suggests, more "chaotic and final," whereas the otherworldly (in Hall's discussion here, the Norse gods) serve instead "to punish transgressions of acceptable behaviour,"[70] suggesting that elves, gods, and the otherworldly in general might serve a more course-correcting function. Monsters, then, might be seen as broadly destructive: they are not simply disruptive of human actions or society, they instead obliterate large and significant portions of the human realm. While Hall's arguments might be expanded to suggest behavior and destructiveness as distinguishing markers of monstrosity, Oswald instead contends that actions do not make the monster, but that "deviant behavior" can "serve to emphasize or exaggerate monstrosity."[71] Behavior cannot, per Oswald, on its own define monstrosity "because actions are temporary and can be changed…, whereas a monstrous body allows far less possibility of such modification."[72] While, I would argue, the role of behavior in signaling monstrosity can (and should) be considered further, I would argue, based on Oswald's premise, that the otherworldly are both like and unlike monsters: they are identifiable based on appearance or location, but only upon occastion, whereas their behaviors

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[68] From the Gawain romance: *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*.

[69] Green suggests a distinction between fairies, giants and their ilk, and household spirits, writing that he is "concerned primarily with that class of numinous, social, humanoid creatures who were widely believed to live at the fringes of the human lifeworld and interact intermittently with human beings. In this they differed from those solitary creatures who inhabited the wilderness (giants and the like) or the social creatures who lived among humans (the various kinds of household spirit)." I, however, view the household spirits described as a class of otherworld beings if read not on a spectrum of closeness to human society but instead on a continuum of human-ness to monstrosity. Creatures like brownies, Robin Goodfellow, household "bugs," and so on, I would argue, are generally human-like but supernatural, their attentions are rarely expansively destructive, and they exist at the margins of the household space. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 4.

[70] Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2007), p. 52.

[71] Oswald, *Monsters*, pp. 6-7.

[72] Oswald, *Monsters*, pp. 6-7.

most often proclaim their difference from humanity, doing so primarily in and through *effect*. As Helen Cooper has noted, otherworldly beings routinely lack interiority: "Those of supernatural origin know of hidden things directly, by a privileged form of consciousness unlike ordinary forms of thought. It follows that they are almost never portrayed from the inside: we are not shown what kind of thought-process produces such knowledge."[73] That humans are unable to access knowledge regarding fairy thought-processes means that persons who encounter fairies cannot expect to understand or predict fay action; however, as humans, we can observe the *effects* of those actions as they unfold. These effects, like the actions that precede them, range widely and can be only partially comprehended, and then only in relation to the human world and our experiences. Fairies may give boons and heal human bodies or they may inflict punishment and abduct persons; their actions do not fit any human sense of predictability because they are, literally, other — belonging to a different world and a different way of thinking, doing, and being. As such, it is useful to sketch out how consideration and recognition of the otherworldly in relation to humanness and monstrosity productively complicates not only the ways in which all three ambiguous categories are defined, but also how the cultural use of monstrosity in a narrative can be further investigated and nuanced through a recognition of the possibilities and complexities introduced when we attend to the category of otherworldliness.

Why then are the fay so like and unlike monsters as well as humans? The primary reason for this related but distinct difference is the medial position between humanness and monstrosity that otherworld beings occupy. Like monsters, the fay are supernatural, but, unlike monsters, they are less easily distinguishable from human beings and the human world. Most commonly, fairies share human physical characteristics, so that, as noted, some fay cannot be easily or readily distinguished from humans; however, the otherworld itself also often appears like the human world in terms of social organization, with many romances describing fairy castles and courts that seem to be reflections, or at least burlesques, of human courts and their organization. In sketching out the relationships between human-ness, Faerie, and monstrosity, then, I would argue for the extension of Hall's explication of otherworldliness in relation to Old English and Old Norse elves to likewise assist in the classification of later otherworldly beings. In distinguishing elves from monsters, Hall contends that the otherworldly are beings who are both supernatural and human-

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[73] Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, p. 189.

like—creatures who are "Non-monstrous but supernaturally empowered"[74]—a descriptor I believe nicely encompasses fairies as citizens of the otherworld. Moreover, if "otherworldly" is taken to refer to all beings who are both supernatural and "human-like," then fairies and elves are not the only ones who need to be re-thought in relation to monstrosity. The category of "otherworldly" is capacious and ever-shifting, existing, in Hall's diagram, in the space where human(like) and supernatural overlap and adjacent to the (also supernatural) sphere of the monstrous.[75] As such, one of the functions that the otherworld can serve in and for a text is that of spectrum-making. Rather than opposing human and monster or using the monster to define the human, the otherworldly suggest a more complex spectrum of like and un-likeness,[76] calling attention to the difficulties of truly or easily drawing and maintaining exclusionary boundaries. One ultimate result of the fact that the otherworldly share characteristics with both humans and monsters, as well as of the labile boundaries between categories on this or any spectrum is that, while monsters, as Oswald suggests, "demand their viewers appraise the status of their own humanity, and the integrity of their bodies and identities," thereby "remind[ing] humans of what it means to be human,"[77] fairies' unfixed and changeable situation with and in relation to the ostensibly distinct categories of human and monster instead encourages humans to *question* what it is to be human and how human society is and ought to function.

By recognizing that there is, in fact, a spectrum of human-ness and supernatural-ness—which includes not only the otherworldly but also magical humans and unstable monsters—we are better able to consider the representation and treatment of alleged or constructed difference in medieval narrative and culture. For example, medieval werewolves—who are generally thought to be monsters—arguably sit more comfortably in the otherworldly category, or, at the very least, resist definitive categorization as monsters. Further, when considered in relation to the spectrum posited above, monstrous difference comes to speak to or represent the narrative of the dominant majority told from a perspective of distance and privilege. Arguably, otherworldly beings instead reject or complicate that distancing effect and offer a more unfixed and liminal narrative and social

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[74] Hall, *Elves*, p. 52.

[75] Hall, *Elves*, p. 32.

[76] K.M. Briggs has proposed a further division of otherworldly or fay beings into "types" which include not only "trooping fairies" and "guardian spirits" but also "water spirits" and monsters. For more, see K.M. Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge, 1959), pp. 13-16.

[77] Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 3.

position. To make a group monstrous is to intentionally, and maliciously, reject their humanity, a rhetorical move often leveled at those whom the powerful view as threats or whom those with privilege wish to position outside of their regular sphere of contact; conversely, otherworldliness has the power to make diversity more visible and empowered, representing status one may, as with the Penshurst protestors, elect to adopt. In the end, however, monsters must, at some level, maintain a degree, quality, or aspect of human-ness because it is the alteration of or contrast with this familiar element that makes them horrifying and that differentiates them from animals. Here again Hall is of use in distinguishing the otherworldly, to a degree, from their monstrous cousins, suggesting the importance of considering the aforementioned effects of monstrous or otherworldly actions on the human world—in this case, attending particularly to the degree of damage to society that the being poses or accomplishes.

As we have seen, Hall suggests otherworldly creatures can and often do offer a "threat" to society, generally serving as chastisement of and caution against social "transgressions,"[78] a peril that Hall contrasts with the more "chaotic and final" hazard posed by monsters. Expanding on this, I would argue that otherworldly beings may also be chaotic, but that their influence is disruptive. Whereas monsters are totalizingly destructive, the appearance of the fay destabilizes or upsets some aspect of human society but does not eradicate it outright. A monster's actions obliterate essential elements of human society, generating chaos and often death, and the destruction wrought by monsters generally prompts a violent reinstatement of humanity's superiority through the heroic extermination of the monstrous creature. The otherworldly are instead dangerous and disruptive, but they do not effect sweeping devastation; as such, they are often able to serve, within narratives, as a means of commenting on or even challenging the constitution and operations of a society, destabilizing without destroying. Ultimately, monsters are arguably conservative creations in the sense that they often work, through threat and opposition, to safeguard certain human ways of being and doing, a preserving function that is often used explicitly to protect or maintain traditional sources of power. The otherworldly, on the other hand, are harder to distinguish from "humanity" and they are thus often able to serve more revolutionary functions, effectively unsettling and/or questioning the same established value systems and organizations that monsters often protect. This is, of course, a slightly oversimplified outline of the social functions served by both otherworldly beings and monstrous ones in and across medieval texts—one in need of further, scholarly

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[78] Hall, *Elves*, p. 52.

explication—and, certainly, as with any technology of resistance and revolution, fairies and their ilk are, as in *Degaré*, at times coopted to support rather than query systems of power. However, the spectrum sketched here indicates additional ways of employing and developing Monster Theory, an approach that necessarily and importantly engages with other forms of alterity and their treatment in and by various cultural products.

1.5   Looking Forward

Otherworldly creatures appear in works spanning the globe and reaching across several genres. Many of the studies preceding this one ably provide a wide-ranging and extensive engagement with this wealth of texts, often focusing on a selection of works that treat with a key fairy trope, motif, or trait. In this dissertation, however, I take a slightly different tack, concentrating each chapter instead on an in-depth reading of one or two texts, thereby seeking to show the narrative and moral effects of fairy intrusion at the multiple, interconnected levels of language, plot, structure, and sociocultural context. Because fairies are capricious and chaotic, their narrative and social functions can vary from text to text, account to account.[79] As such, each chapter of this dissertation creates its own framework for analyzing fairy chaos and its effects, linking to one another through an understanding of fairies as labile, unpredictable, and fascinating: beings who destabilize human institutions simply by interacting with them. The romances that I discuss are connected by a recognition of and engagement with the productivity of fairy chaos, though the importance of fairies to some of these tales' artistry and meanings have been only occasionally or cursorily recognized. Finally, I focus on late-medieval and early modern English works in part because I agree with Tara Williams that these texts are particularly engaged with and generative of moral and/or ethical thinking,[80] but also because examining English fairy texts adds to our understanding—as scholars and twenty-first century readers—of the sociocultural investments, concerns, and values of both late-medieval Insular storytellers and their readers and hearers.

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[79] James Wade also notes this fact, arguing that "what is most interesting and significant about fairy representations are in fact the variations," and posing "possible worlds theory" as a means of "conceptualiz[ing] these differences across romance" and "consider[ing] the potentialities of alternative worlds within romance." Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 2.

[80] Williams argues that "magical spectacles can provoke forms of wonder that lead to moral actions by characters and open up moral reflection for the audience, particularly on the limits and limitations of ethical systems," further contending that "this configuration of features appears to be characteristically Middle English. The marvels appear in English texts that distinguish themselves from their sources and analogues in French, German, and Latin by adding magical and moral elements or enhancing those already present." Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, pp. 1-2.

In chapter two, I discuss Thomas Chestre's adaptation of Marie de France's lai of *Lanval*, arguing that, in foregrounding and opposing the two influential women in the lay—Arthur's queen, Guinevere, and Launfal's fairy mistress, Tryamour—Chestre generates a corresponding moral competition between the types of honor each woman represents. In opposing Guinevere's code of surface honor, which comes to characterize the moral order of the human court as a whole, to Tryamour's appreciation of internal honor, generosity, and *trothe*, Chestre's *Launfal* generates two home courts and, by extension, two competing romances, with Launfal venturing away from both courts and moving between encounters with these two, opposed "others," before finally electing to return "home" to Faerie and its superior value system. In this way, the lay of *Sir Launfal* presents its audience with a moral opportunity, a choice between dual forms of honor, with Chestre's addition of Launfal's annual return at the end of his lay serving to open the moral test related in the narrative to the romance's audience, encouraging them to joust with the choices offered by the opposed human and Faerie courts and to select for themselves how they will define honor.

Turning next to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, chapter three examines the interactions occurring between horizontal and vertical actions in the poem, arguing that the synthesis of the two orientations produces a three-dimensional, cosmic structure for the work, one that reinforces and furthers the work's merciful message. The horizontal plot—which encompasses the terrestrial action, focusing primarily on Gawain's testing and return to Arthur's court—conveys the moral point that human perfection is unachievable, replacing the unattainable code of the Pentangle with the girdle as a symbol of becoming, a process of perfecting the self and the soul which is a reflection of the order of the Divine plan which is immanent and observable in nature. This horizontal plot is, moreover, encompassed by the vertical action of the poem, wherein numerous otherworldly beings—who occupy spheres of influence at one or more removes from the terrestrial action and whose organization mirrors the structure of the medieval cosmos—work on the terrestrial world and horizontal plot. The cosmic operation of the poem, reinforcing as it does the sense that the Divine plan, which is immanent in the terrestrial world, involves process and becoming as a means of redemption and return to the Divine, thus structurally reflects and furthers the action and message of the horizontal plot of the poem.

The fourth chapter tackles not one but two seemingly disparate texts, *Sir Orfeo* and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, arguing that the treatment of human, physical bodies in both of these works is reflected in and elaborated by the treatment of metaphoric bodies, most prominently the

body of the text itself. In particular, the fairies in both tales act on human forms in ways that comment on human society's privileging of perfection and wholeness, suggesting, instead, that both corporeal and narrative bodies benefit instead from the incorporation of instability, openness, and indeterminacy. In *Sir Orfeo*, fairy intrusion highlights the vulnerability and importance of the queen's body, with the fay's disruption of ostensible perfection in the forms of the kingdom, the queen, and the narrative acting as a narrative wound that parallels the actual tearing of Heurodis' physical form. I argue that this wounding, operating at both the human and narrative levels of the work, productively destabilizes overly determined and perfected systems—from the overly perfect form of the romance's early moments and the idealized body of the queen to the unforgiving system of patrilineal succession—substituting, instead, an openness and flexibility that admits and even celebrates difference and lability. The fairies in *The Merchant's Tale*, conversely, are associated not with wounding but with narrative and physical healing. I contend that the *Tale* draws on generic expectations and their affiliation with socially prescribed gender roles, foregrounding these narrative and physical systems of control and perfection only to destabilize their definition and effectiveness through the magical and linguistic power of the feminine and the fay. In the end, I suggest that the ostensibly "perfect" ending of the *Tale* has the effect of playfully mocking the human and narrative desire for wholeness, control, and complete resolution, using the questions that subtly dangle from the *Tale*'s final knot to suggest the (unavoidable) productivity of open and "imperfect" forms and endings.

Looking forward into the early modern period, the final chapter of this study examines Shakespeare's adaptations of medieval playing and fairy traditions in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Pulled in numerous directions by iconoclastic discourses, qualified royal acceptance, marginal geographic placement, and powerful market forces, early modern theatre occupied a somewhat more vexed sociocultural position than did medieval playing. In this chapter, I argue that Shakespeare's use of spatial relationships and fairy spectacle speaks to this complicated position and serves, subtly, to theorize the power of playing and its place in early modern society. The play shows not only that the theatre can "body forth" the essence of lived, human reality on stage, presenting it for comprehension and mental engagement, but also that imagination cannot be contained in or by the playhouse, extending instead, productively, into the primary reality and experiences of the play's players and audience. The forest otherworld and the fairies who occupy it certainly represent a ludic space and a productively chaotic force that is easily aligned with

playing and imagination, but, whereas scholars at times suggest that the sylvan action within this play can be read as separate from the "reality" and "reason" represented by Athens, I would suggest that Athens and reality come to be necessarily intertwined with art, creativity, and imagination. That spatial enmeshment, moreover, is developed and extended beyond the space of the playhouse itself, suggesting the inseparability of various levels of "imagination" and "reality" within the playhouse and in the playhouses' relationship to its own cultural context, thereby subtly commenting on the impossibility and undesirability of maintaining a distinction or separation between art, imagination, and creativity on the one hand and "reality," human experience, and quotidian happenings on the other.

CHAPTER 2.   RIVAL REALITIES AND HUMAN FAILINGS: THE TRIUMPH OF THE OTHERWORLD IN THOMAS CHESTRE'S *LAUNFAL*

In *Sir Launfal*, Thomas Chestre's reimagining[1] of Marie de France's *Lanval* and of *Sir Landevale*, an earlier Middle English translation of Marie's text,[2] a recently-impoverished knight journeys into the woods where he meets and receives gifts from a fairy mistress whose favor and generosity enables his return to Arthurian society with his status renewed. Soon thereafter, however, the knight finds himself propositioned by Arthur's queen. In fending off her royal advances, Launfal, like his earlier iterations, rashly violates the fairy's taboo that he not boast of her. The thoughtless assertion of his mistress' superior beauty both loses the knight his fairy love and affronts the queen, resulting in Launfal being tried for treason. When all seems lost, however, the fairy returns, proves the truth of her knight's boast, and rides away with him to the otherworld.

Sir Launfal exemplifies the complexity and perplexity typical of fairy narratives, with Chestre making several small, yet transformative, changes to his source texts,[3] changes that further his romance's intricacy. One of the most prominent such alterations is Guinevere's heightened

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[1] A.J. Bliss, "Introduction," in *Sir Launfal*, ed. A.J. Bliss, Nelson's Medieval and Renaissance Texts (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1960), p. 41 [24-46]. All quotations to the poem are from this edition. Chestre's *Launfal* has, for quite some time, been thought, by scholars, to be unsophisticated and/or "highly derivative"; however, recent scholarship—such as that of James Weldon, Tory Pearman, Myra Seaman, Timothy D. O'Brien, Katherine McLoone, Dinah Hazell, and James T. Stewart, to name a very few—has pushed against this reading, generating a counter-conversation to which I seek to contribute.

[2] Though many scholars have argued that Chestre did not use Marie de France's lay directly in composing his version of the romance, Timothy D. O'Brien in "The 'Readerly' *Sir Launfal*," notes the "marked sensitivity about the fictionalizing act itself" that famously appears in the "self-reflexiveness" of Marie de France's lays and that is also present in *Sir Launfal*. This commonality, O'Brien argues suggests that: "Though it is not certain, Chestre may very well have known Marie's *Lanval*, or others of her popular lays, and thus have sensed the self-consciousness of her story-telling" (34). As I discuss in the full chapter, I similarly find interesting connections in Chestre's opening to not just *Sir Landevale* but to *Lanval* as well, a blending that suggests that Chestre may at least have known Marie's text existed. Timothy D. O'Brien, "The 'Readerly' *Sir Launfal*," *Parergon* 8.1 (1990): 34 [33-45].

[3] While Chestre's sources cannot be determined with absolute certainty, scholars generally consider *Sir Launfal* to be based on a combination of the *Lanval* story, the lay of *Graelent*, and possibly also an episode from Andreas Capellanus' *The Art of Courtly Love* (Laskaya and Salisbury 201-202). For a brief list of scholars who have discussed Chestre's sources, see: Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, Studies in Medieval Romance 13 (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 186; A.J. Bliss, "Introduction"; Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Sir Launfal: Introduction," in *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1995), pp. 201-209; Elizabeth Williams, "*Lanval* and *Sir Landevale*: A Medieval Translator and His Methods," *Leeds Studies in English* 3 (1969): 85-99; David Carlson, "The Middle English *Lanval*, The Corporal Works of Mercy, and Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouv. Acq. Fr. 1104," *Neophilologus* 72 (1988): 97-106; Myra Seaman, "Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and the Englishing of Medieval Romance," *Medieval Perspectives* 15.1 (2000): 105-119; James Weldon, "Jousting for Identity: Tournaments in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*," *Parergon* 17.2 (2000): 107-123; and Earl R. Anderson, "The Structure of *Sir Launfal*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 13.2 (1977): 115-124.

involvement in and significance to the lay's narrative action, a change which sets up a clear and distinct contrast between Arthur's queen and Tryamour, Launfal's fairy mistress. Chestre foregrounds the opposition between these two women and builds his poem's narrative around the struggle between them—a competition based on the dichotomy between their two, respective ideals. On the one hand, Guinevere's values—which become the values of Arthur's court as a whole—place primacy on external appearances, performances of "surface 'honour,'"[4] and on giving for show, while Tryamour and her fairy court, on the other hand, value internal *trothe*[5] and true *largesse*. Further, the polarity generated by setting the two women (and their divergent values) up as contrasting figureheads operates, within the circular structure typical of romance, to encourage a moral reading of the tale.

As scholars like Northrup Frye and James Simpson note, romance—especially medieval romance—typically follows a circular path,[6] with the hero going out from the court in search of adventure, encountering some foe or other obstacle, and then returning to the court to relate what has occurred. Within the context of these circles, polarizations like the antagonism Chestre creates between Guinevere and Tryamour often serve a moral function, drawing clear distinctions between "the demonic or regressive and [its] clear separation from whatever is progressive in the story."[7] In *Sir Launfal*, Chestre foregrounds this opposition and condemns the superficial values of Guinevere, drawing attention to the harm her standards wreak. Guinevere's values and their destruction of community and true honor, however, contrast with the influence of Tryamour, who exhibits and seems to value justice, *largesse*, and internal *trothe*, at one point even facilitating Launfal's generous and decidedly Christian giving. Dinah Hazell argues that Chestre is a "social

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[4] E.M. Bradstock, "'Honoure' in *Sir Launfal*," *Parergon* (1979): 10 [9-17].

[5] The distinction I discuss here between types of *trothe* (superficial, external displays of nobility, which I shall, as noted, call "surface honor" and the contrasting model of true *trothe*, or internal and genuine honor) draws in part on the polysemous and evolving nature of the term, particularly in later medieval England, as discussed by Richard Firth Green in *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[6] Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Northrup Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); James Simpson, "The Comic," in *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, The Oxford English Literary History 2 1350-1547 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 458-501. See also, Jerold C. Frakes, "Metaphysical Structure as Narrative Structure in the Medieval Romance," *Neophilologus* 69.4 (1985): 155-323, and Shearle Furnish, "Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays," *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought, and Religion* 62 (2007): 83-118.

[7] Frye, *Secular Scripture*, p. 139.

critic" who "questions how the individual can survive in a culture ruled by self-interest,"[8] a self-interest and superficiality that I suggest characterizes Guinevere's value system. Moreover, while Hazell sees Chestre as a pessimist[9] expressing woe about his contemporary culture, I view him as an artist composing a complex narrative designed to engage audiences in a moral choice—the same choice between the two women and their respective value systems that is posed to the human court within the romance. Further, though the typical romance pattern of departure, encounter, and return usually focuses on adventurous conflict with the Other, I would argue that, in *Sir Launfal*, the competition between opposed courts set up by Chestre instead generates two overlapping, polarized circular structures built around dual (and dueling) adventures, with the fairy court ultimately cast—through both contrast and content—as superior to Arthur's human court, displacing human civilization as the place of return.

In this way, *Sir Launfal* differs from more typical romances wherein the court from which the hero departs serves as the moral focus of the tale—a sort of home or central space that represents a specific chivalric code or ideal to be contrasted with the difference denoted by the adventures and adversaries the knight encounters outside the court. James Simpson argues that, in "these romance narratives[,] the 'civilized' order … survives only by entering into, and having commerce with, all that threatens it."[10] In other words, the hero or heroine maintains the order and values of his/her home space by encountering adventures beyond the court and either overcoming or incorporating the "threat" into the allegedly more "civilized" space of the court. This general pattern raises interesting questions about the role of the fairy court and the definition of "civilization" in Chestre's *Launfal*.

Guinevere's additional presence in and influence over Chestre's narrative complicates the romance's value system as well as its formal structure, so that, of the three versions of the *Lanval* story, Chestre's *Sir Launfal* most explicitly sets in opposition the human and Faerie courts. As a result, Chestre's lay, through this prominent polarization, heightens and calls attention to its complex narrative structure, while also using that structure to critique the human court and its

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[8] Dinah Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwennere: Thomas Chestre as Social Critic," *Arthurian Literature* 20 (2003): 123 [123-143].

[9] Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwennere," 123. I am indebted to Hazell's insightful piece, whose focus on the depiction and attendant critique of wealth, generosity, justice, and *trothe* as they function in late medieval society not only aligns with mine at several points, but also was inestimably helpful in focusing and strengthening my understanding of and arguments about this poem.

[10] James Simpson, "The Comic," p. 273.

value system.[11] Chestre builds on and adapts his sources, composing a narrative that actively contrasts the Faerie and human courts and their value systems, setting the two into explicit opposition and calling attention to Launfal's unique encounters in each conflicting space. In *Sir Launfal*, the polarization of Guinevere and Tryamour, paired with the layered circular structure their opposition generates, work together to produce a test—a choice between the opposing definitions of honor that the tale casts as immoral (Guinevere's) and moral (Tryamour's), respectively. Moreover, in the romance's final moments, that test is then opened up to the text's audience, who are presented with the opportunity to joust with Chestre's work—*Sir Launfal* the text—in order to make a choice other and better than the one that Arthur's court has made.

2.1   The Home Court and Guinevere's Surface Honor

Arthur's court, as the home space and central focus of this romance, should be the locus of civilization and civilized values, demonstrating either the triumph of its manners over that of the external foe or the incorporation of the strengths of the "othered" court or individual into its home space, thereby empowering and/or bettering the court. However, in *Sir Launfal*, Arthur's household becomes, early in the lay, dominated by what Hazell's terms "a culture" of "self-interest,"[12] one that I would argue develops out of Guinevere's introduction to and influence over both king and court. Unlike Marie or the *Landevale*-Poet—who make Arthur's un-named queen known mid-narrative when she propositions the lay's hero—Chestre presents Guinevere by name within the first four stanzas of his romance: "So hyt befyll, yn þe tenþe зer / Marlyn was Artours counsalere, / He radde hym forto wende / To Kyng Ryon of Jrlond, ryзt, / And fette hym þer a lady bryзt, / Gwennere, hys douзtyr hende" (ll. 37-42). The introduction of Chestre's Guinevere comes just one stanza after Launfal's character and role as Arthur's steward are noted, making it clear that, in this version of the tale, Guinevere, not Launfal, is the outsider. Further, the narrator notes that, for King and Steward, there were ten years preceding Arthur's marriage wherein nothing of

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[11] In his article on "The Structure of *Sir Launfal*," Earl R. Anderson similarly argues that Chestre's text differs from its sources in "structure and theme," suggesting that "The arrangement of moral values in flat contrasts, clustered around the opposed figures of Gwenere and Triamour in their relation to the uneven fortunes of Launfal, suggests a concern for ethical problems explored systematically in the narrative" (Anderson, "The Structure of *Sir Launfal*," 116). I would expand this idea to suggest that the increased symmetry Anderson notes in Chestre's version of the lay is a reflection of the complex, dual circular structure I discuss later.

[12] Hazell argues that Chestre is a "social critic," who "questions how the individual can survive in a culture ruled by self-interest," and it is this self-interest and attachment to superficial markers of honor that I suggest characterize Guinevere's value system ("The Blinding of Gwennere," 123).

narrative consequence seems to have happened; it is thus not until the introduction of the future queen that the conflict which generates the ensuing tale occurs.[13] Guinevere's introduction in *Sir Launfal* is, in other words, a narrative event linking her presence to the unfolding tale and its impact, much as Launfal is, as we will see, made synonymous with his own story at the lay's conclusion. Additionally, Chestre's decision to increase the prominence of Arthur's queen has radical consequences for the unfolding plot; Guinevere seems to haunt the narrative, partially responsible for and lurking behind every action that occurs after her introduction.[14] The Queen's influence pervades and corrupts those social practices, such as gift-giving, that are meant to fortify the community, and her actions introduce an element of shame into the narrative and its human society, thereby encouraging adherence to her code, foregrounding attention to external displays of merit, and undermining spoken language's power to communicate an individual's nobility and renown.

From almost the moment she is incorporated into Arthur's court, Guinevere produces disharmony and conflict between king and his lords, and, in particular, between the king and his Steward, Launfal: "But Syr Launfal lykede her noȝt, / Ne oþer knyȝtes þat wer hende, / For þe lady bar los of swych word / Þat sche hadde lemmannys vnþer her lord, / So fele þer nas noon ende" (ll. 44-48). There is no indication in the poem prior to this that Arthur's lords disagree among themselves or oppose the king in anything; indeed, Launfal's position as Steward is described as an honor bestowed on him by a *grateful* king. However, soon after Guinevere's arrival at court, Arthur's favor for Launfal curdles, overwhelmed by the new, superficial honor the soon-to-be queen brings with her; Arthur's court becomes, in all substantial senses, Guinevere's court, a change paralleled by a swift alteration in Launfal's own status as he is quickly shifted from Steward to social outsider.[15]

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[13] A fact which E.M. Bradstock has similarly noted: Arthur's queen "is responsible in *Sir Launfal*, but not in *Sir Landevale*, for the initial 'villainy', an action which results in a situation of lack for Launfal and thus sets in motion the first sequence of events" ("'Honoure' in *Sir Launfal*," 10).

[14] In his response to John C. Hirsch's "Pride as Theme in 'Sir Launfal'"—which describes the different themes, concerns, and characterizations in the three iterations of *Lanval*, arguing that Chestre's text is particularly interested in noble pride as a marker of Launfal's worth—Anthony S.G. Edwards similarly notes the need to also attend to Guinevere's unique role in Chestre's poem. Edwards argues that Launfal's failings are prompted by Guinevere and that he is "not judged by any absolute standard, but relative to Guinevere" ("Unknightly Conduct," 329) and that Guinevere's character serves a "poetic function" which distinguishes Chestre's work and its focus from that of the other texts in the *Lanval* tradition ("Unknightly Conduct," 328). John C. Hirsh, "Pride as Theme in *Sir Launfal*," *Notes and Queries* 14 (1967): 288-291, and Anthony S. G. Edwards, "Unknightly Conduct in *Sir Launfal*," *Notes and Queries* 15 (1968): 328-329.

[15] As Tory Pearman, notes, Chestre's Guinevere "at times seems more powerful than her husband, whom Chestre casts as passive." Tory Vandeventer Pearman, "Refiguring Disability: Deviance, Blinding, and the Supernatural in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 3.2 (2009): 134 [131-146].

The noted transformation of the court's value system truly begins at Arthur and Guinevere's bridal celebration, an occasion at which, in order to "kyþe" "Her curtasye" (l. 69), the queen gives gifts: "Euerych knyȝt sche ȝaf broche oþer ryng, / But Syr Launfal sche yaf noþyng: / Þat greuede hym many a syde. / And, whan þe bredale was at ende, / Launfal tok hys leue to wende" (ll. 70-74). In Chestre's hands, Arthur's queen is cast as primarily responsible for Launfal's social alienation and thus for the adventure that unfolds after he decides to seek solace outside the social sphere of the court—a search that leads to his encounter with the fay. This moment at the marriage feast, moreover, epitomizes the ideals Guinevere disseminates to the rest of the court; values that, taking a cue from E.M. Bradstock, I shall refer to as "surface 'honour.'"[16] Guinevere's value system from this point onward organizes and directs most of human society, defining worth solely in terms of external trappings and display. Unlike Launfal, who "gaf gyftys largelyche, / Gold & syluer & clodes ryche, / To squyer & to knyȝt: / For hys largesse & hys bounté / Þe kinges steward made was he" (ll. 28-32), Guinevere here gives generously, but only in order to display and make a public show of her courtesy. It quickly becomes clear, in her discourteous exclusion of Launfal, that the queen is not just showing her courtesy, she is *making a show* of her courtesy, defining herself publicly and through appearances and exhibition, rather than through any sort of internal quality or actual *trothe*. The intent of her gift-giving is superficial—nothing more than image creation, display, and public perception—and her influence pervades and corrupts the Arthurian community, beginning with those social practices meant to fortify social connections.

Moreover, Guinevere in this moment damages the function and health of her new husband's court rather than bolstering or increasing its power. In the later Middle Ages, *largesse*—a form of "Non-commercial household exchange"—served as a way to build connections between aristocratic households by generating obligations through the mechanism of exchange.[17] The gift-giving at Arthur and Guinevere's wedding in *Sir Launfal* is, thus, an important (nay, vital) opportunity for the creation or strengthening of "social networks"[18]: making "manorial [or regnal] capital … into political capital."[19] However, as a result of Guinevere's influence, the wedding does not reinforce social ties, instead it alienates Arthur from his Steward and begins eroding what were

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[16] Bradstock, "'Honoure' in *Sir Launfal*," 10.
[17] Elliot Kendall, *Lordship and Literature: John Gower and the Politics of the Great Household* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), p. 20.
[18] Kendall, *Lordship and Literature*, p. 21.
[19] Kendall, *Lordship and Literature*, p. 16.

originally productive bonds of obligation and lordship. Arthurian society, under its queen's influence, thus quickly fragments. Launfal and *largesse* are devalued and eventually displaced, and the human court comes primarily to value external appearance and public display rather than any sort of moral quality; to focus on social value alone, to the exclusion of moral concerns; and to pair the determination of value based on appearance and exhibitions of status with social shame for non-compliance with the social status quo.

In particular, Guinevere's promotion of external, superficial, and visible, yet generally fallacious, signifiers of honor is tellingly affiliated with the powerful influence of shame. Arthur's queen, in other words, is focused on the visible performance of honor, and shame effectively enforces and maintains that performance. As A.C. Spearing notes: "The connection between shame and sight is" in medieval narratives, and particularly in romance, "recurrent,"[20] with shame often connected to or generated by an awareness of external judgment. Shame is thus, most frequently, a personal disapprobation produced by the knowledge that others can see you doing something shameful; in other words, shame is generated by the possibility of being seen.[21] Further, because humiliation usually requires an audience, or at least the possibility of one, the suggestion or placement of an internal audience in what is essentially a position to judge—to determine what is "shameful"—is of particularly importance in relation to Chester's romance, which, Earl Anderson argues, builds an internal or intra-narrative audience—Arthur's court—into the lay.[22] The court then, as both an internal audience and as Launfal's eventual, literal judges, in part serves to model for the external audience, the readers and hearers of Chestre's romance, one possible way of reacting to the choice posed by the contrasting values presented by Guinevere and Tryamour. The reaction of the court—their internalization of Guinevere's values, values which Chestre clearly marks as faulty—models one possible response to and judgment between the choices presented by the polarized courts. The lay's audience is then given the opportunity to evaluate and judge the

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[20] A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 11.

[21] Spearing discusses the connections between looking, sexuality, and shame, stating that, "The feeling of shame (as opposed to the inward sense of guilt) is based on what we believe others to think of us: it is our response to an awareness that we are or may be the object of an unfavourable judgment from outside. Thus, given the primacy of sight as the medium of perception, shame is the product of the sense of being seen, or rather of the possibility of being seen" (Spearing, *Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, p. 10).

[22] Anderson argues that "a larger aspect of Chestre's reconception of the Lanval story" is "his addition of an internal audience that responds to Launfal's changing fortunes. The existence of an internal audience helps contrast Launfal's public life with his secret affair with Triamour, and also calls attention to the opposition of pride and humiliation in the poem" ("The Structure of *Sir Launfal*," 123).

internal audience's decisions and its ramifications before Chestre then extends that same choice to them at the tale's end.

Shame in *Sir Launfal* is consistently intertwined with Guinevere's and the court's focus on and value of external trappings and appearances, a fact that allows the combination of the (internal) audience's reaction and shame's community-destroying effects to draw a significant distinction for the audience of Chestre's narrative between the truth of an individual's internal character and the value signaled by a person's external appearance, a critical journey modeled by Launfal's own experiences and moral development. Much like the rest of the court, Launfal originally internalizes some measure of Guinevere's value system, feeling shame about his peers' potential perception of his shabby appearance and fallen fortune. [23] Chestre makes clear that Launfal's shame is particularly linked to a concern about his outsides and what they seem to communicate to others about his worth and merit. For example, in expressing his fear of attending church on the Day of the Trinity, Launfal tells the Mayor of Carleon's daughter: "'Today to cherche y wolde haue gon, / But me fawtede hosyn & schon, / Clenly brech & schere; / And for defawte of clodynge / Ne myȝte y yn wyth þe peple þrynge— / No wonþer douȝ me smerte!'" (ll. 199-204). Having clearly and completely internalized Guinevere's value system, Launfal here allows his shame over his poor clothing and what its dilapidation will communicate to others about his lowered status to keep him from attending church. Launfal's unquestioning expression of shame and his perceived need to avoid the public gaze are here tied not to his lack of funds, but rather to the *appearance* of his lack, to the perceptible marker of the "defawte" of his clothing and what it communicates to a court operating on and accepting the "defawte[dness]" of Guinevere's definition of honor.

Launfal's shame here completes the process begun by Guinevere at the wedding feast, acting to effect the knight's literal and spatial removal from Arthurian society, a removal driven by his sorrow and humiliation at his unhappy state. Continuing his address to the Mayor's daughter, the distressed and lowly Launfal expresses a desire to seek a reprieve from his social woes by venturing outside the city: "'o þyng, damesele, y pray þe: / Sadel & brydel lene þou me / A whyle, forto ryde, / *Þat y myȝte confortede be* / *By a launde vnþer þys cyté,* / Al yn þys vnderntyde'" (ll. 205-10, emphasis mine). The fickle and superficial definition of value based on an external display

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[23] For example, Bradstock suggests that Launfal's lie about leaving court to attend his father's internment is part of his "misguided concern for surface 'honour,'" a lie intended "[p]resumably to protect his 'honoure'" ("'Honoure' in *Sir Launfal*," 10).

of worldly goods and prowess here effectively drives a wedge between Arthur and his former steward, ultimately forcing Launfal from human civilization altogether. Launfal's decision to temporarily remove himself from Arthurian society, however, is not ultimately condemned, rather its wisdom is affirmed by the fact that Launfal's departure from the city provides more solace than he expected, leading him to a direct, physical encounter with a fairy mistress and an alternative mode of being. The hero's woodland meeting with the otherworld thus comes to suggest that the values of the human court, those generating and inciting Launfal's shame, are flawed, fallacious, and deserve to be questioned and reconsidered.

Before moving on to Tryamour, however, it is important to note that Guinevere's destructive function in this narrative is tied not just to sight and shame, but also to rumor: the socially destabilizing use of language. In introducing Guinevere, Chestre emphasizes both the future queen's reputation for promiscuity—a doubly treasonous action for a queen[24]—and the fact that Guinevere's infidelity is an open secret to much of Arthur's court, Launfal included. Chestre draws attention to this knowledge—which amounts to political and personal *untrothe* on Guinevere's part—in order to make clear that this (true) rumor is the reason for Launfal's dislike of his king's future wife (see above, ll. 44-48). Both here and during Launfal's trial, the truth of this rumor is accepted, without question, by audiences both within and outside the poem,[25] and this semi-public talk doubles as objective knowledge, informing Guinevere's character so that, in essence, "the queen is defined by and through speech."[26] Additionally, the enhanced emphasis on rumor and its significance as a force in Chestre's narrative is further reinforced by his distinctive depiction of Launfal's trial.

Chestre alters the approach of the *Landevale*-Poet—who dwells on absolving the king (and Landevale) by contrasting their characters (explicitly and implicitly) with the wicked morals and deeds of the queen. Chestre instead focuses his attention not just on the wanton character of the queen, but also on the fact that the court is *saying* amongst themselves that it is the queen's reputation—determined in large part by the words spoken about her—that makes Launfal's

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[24] Guinevere is not simply betraying her husband, "her well-documented adultery … [also] jeopardizes the legitimacy of Artour's lineage." Pearman also notes that blinding was often a medieval punishment for "not only sexual criminals but also [for] those who threaten the king or his kingdom," Guinevere's blinding at *Sir Launfal*'s conclusion can thus be read as a response to Chestre's depiction of her character as "sexual and politically traitorous in nature" ("Refiguring Disability," 139).

[25] Hazell further notes that the reappearance and returned significance of Guinevere's "bad reputation" in part serve a structural purpose, "add[ing] unity to the narrative" ("The Blinding of Gwennere," 126).

[26] Horvath, "Romancing the Word," p. 171.

innocence evidence: "xij knyʒtes wer dryue to boke: / All þey seyde ham betwene / Þat knewe þe maners of þe queen / And þe queste toke, / Þe queen bar los of swych a word / Þat sche louede lemmannes wythout her lord" (ll. 786-91). In so doing, Chestre draws attention to the importance of language in clearly illustrating both Guinevere's treachery and Launfal's *trothe* to the court.[27] This fact, moreover, effectively suggests that the queen's character is constituted by rumor, while also emphasizing her dearth of both substance and honor: dual lacks that have defined her since her entrance, but which the court has become more and more ameliorated to (Launfal excepted). In addition, the connection between language and character seen in Guinevere's relationship to rumor—as both socially divisive and dishonorable speech—becomes important again at *Sir Launfal*'s close when, as we shall see, Launfal the knight and *Launfal* the narrative merge.

Talk and language, linked as they are to public (audience) perception and character, become even more prominent and influential as aspects of human society in Chestre's version of the *Lanval* narrative. For instance, Launfal's shame at his appearance, as noted above, also serves to call attention to the link between rumor and shame in the value system Guinevere brings to the human court. A pre-fairy-encounter Launfal, having internalized the human court's new values, uncovers the danger and instability of existing in a system based in purely external values. First, before sending Sirs Hugh and John back to Arthur, Launfal entreats the pair to protect his reputation from rumor: "'Tellyd noman of my pouerté / For þe loue of God almyʒt!' / Þe knyʒtes answered & seyde þo / Þat þey nolde hym wreye neuermo" (ll. 143-146), and, indeed, Launfal's concern is warranted; a knight's character is often associated with and even defined by his renown: the words related about him to the court. In such a superficial, externally oriented society, rumor carries as much if not more power and influence as its ostensibly more noble oral counterpart— renown. With tenown, the tale "developed and maintained by those who tell and hear the stories about a knight's deeds,"[28] language and honor are connected just as they are with rumor, however, while the one form of speech promotes honor, the other corrupts it through the effects of shame. Further, while renown may seem to be a faithful indicator of *trothe*, the external focus of Guinevere's court corrupts all forms of report, revealing that renown—much like external

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[27] *Trothe*, as noted above, was important both morally and socioeconomically; as Hazell notes, the "focus on the importance of trust and the fulfillment of commitments reflects concern over personal loyalty in the dynamic economic atmosphere of the time; as written contracts and money rents replaced fealty oaths and service as the socioeconomic base, lord/villain relationships shifted and faith in oathkeeping was imperiled" ("The Blinding of Gwennere," 126).

[28] James T. Stewart, "The Knight in Need," 121-22.

trappings or visible displays of honor—is not a truly reliable or consistent signifier of internal *trothe*. Because of this, concern over rumor as capable of corrupting and corroding its mirrored aspect—renown—is reasonable, and, while renown may be aptly applied to and representative of the noble deeds and honorable character of many a knight, *Sir Launfal* indicates the degree to which even renown, as an external marker of honor, can be vulnerable to corruption by the ideals of surface honor.

Of course, the connection between reputation and narrative report is not unique to Chestre's *Launfal*. However, the important linking of shame, surface honor, and rumor in this text works to draw particular attention to the ways in which talk, like Guinevere's faulty gift-giving, can, "Given the centrality of oath-making to the feudal contract, and, likewise, the threats that slander and gossip posed to the maintenance of courtly affiliation,"[29] threaten the fabric of a society. Speech in such a social system—be it renown or rumor, honorable or dishonorable—has the capacity to create and shape one's public character, and, at the same time, an individual's reputation in this society directly affects his/her personal opportunities and resources. Report has an unshakeable power, in particular, to make or break an individual, a fact to which Chestre draws attention—just as he draws attention throughout this romance to his own presence as a crafter of language.[30]

In Arthur's remade court, public perception and report have more power and value than does truth. Launfal fears talk of his poverty, and the effect that talk might have on his interpersonal connections and opportunities, far more than he fears the actual fact of his reduced circumstances. Indeed, much like the rumor of Guinevere's infidelity, the truth of the report is not at issue or of concern, the issue, rather, is with the spread or public dispersal of personal knowledge and the potentially dangerous power language can possess in a superficial and self-centered society. As Richard Horvath argues, both *Sir Launfal* and the treachery-centric romance, *Athelston*:

> dramatize the capacity of transgressive speech acts, chiefly slander and lies, to disrupt social order. As do many other romances, *Sir Launfal* and *Athelston* respond to this threat by seeking to codify and thereby control the spoken word…. The resultant circuit of transformations embodies significant anxieties about the

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[29] Horvath, "Romancing the Word," p. 165.

[30] For example, O'Brien suggests that Chestre's text "reclaims a kind of self-consciousness" with elements such as the common use of "truth-claiming formula[e]" working to "emphasiz[e] the presence of the teller" ("The 'Readerly' *Sir Launfal*," 36).

capacity of *fama* to shame individual identity and communal relations, including those between authors and audiences.[31]

Rumor and talk, even when not fallacious, can "shame individual identity and communal relations" and thereby shape interactions within a society, directing how individuals relate to and with one another. Guinevere's principles thus govern intra-communal relationships and define individual and social values in terms of appearance, report, and display; however, Chestre places these superficial principles into direct contrast with the fairy values represented by Tryamour. In particular, Tryamour also defines personal value, but she does so not only in social, but also moral terms, influencing community relationships through generosity and morality, rather than through rumor and shame.

2.2   The Rival Team and Tryamour's Internal *Trothe*

Arthur's queen is not the only powerful female to influence and direct the action in Chestre's poem; Guinevere's influence is, in fact, mirrored by Tryamour's similar sway over the plot and its progression. Arthur's queen and Launfal's fairy mistress share many characteristics—both are daughters of powerful, foreign kings (rulers of Ireland and Faerie, respectively), both act on Arthur's court, both give gifts (though for varying reasons and with varying degrees of genuineness), and both express a desire for Launfal. Further, though both Guinevere and Tryamour act on, and at times through, their male partners—making *Sir Launfal* in many ways a tale driven and ordered by marginal but influential women—their similarities draw attention to and indeed foreground their radical and polarized moral differences. While Guinevere relies on and promotes superficial ideals based on public opinion and external appearances, Tryamour instead privileges internal honor and its moral display. In the end, female desire in Chestre's work directs how the lay unfolds so that the narrative tension between Guinevere's and Tryamour's wills and value systems comes to generate a similar, structural tension between their courts and their two definitions of honor and *trothe*.

Unlike Guinevere, Tryamour privileges internal honor and its moral demonstration, representing, within the romance, a system of principles that Chestre primarily links to and

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[31] Richard Horvath, "Romancing the Word: *Fama* in the Middle English *Sir Launfal* and *Athelston*," in Fama*: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, ed. Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 166 [165-186].

expresses through the fairy's otherworldly qualities.[32] In other words, the strangeness or ostensible otherness of Tryamour's value system stems from her strangeness and otherness as a fairy—a species frequently characterized by puzzling and seemingly capricious actions and motivations. In most otherworld romances, the enigmatic and chaotic nature of the fay mystifies and intrigues the tale's readers, with the "fairies [often] generat[ing] and constitut[ing] their own arbitrary 'non-law' (the force of law that is not law) that takes its [the general rules of the human world's] place."[33] Early in *Sir Launfal*, this fairy other-law contrasts dramatically with the familiarity evoked by Guinevere's code of surface honor—a superficial value system surely as recognizable to a medieval reader as to a modern one. However, it soon becomes clear that Tryamour's appreciation of internal honor is morally superior and that the seeming difference of these fairy principles is part of the work's criticism. Indeed, I would suggest that Tara William's argument that, in *Sir Orfeo*, the "magical spectacle" "expos[es] the fairies' moral code … [as well as] that code's similarities to and departures from human ethics, particularly those associated with courtly behavior and chivalry,"[34] can also be extended to *Sir Launfal*, so that the foregrounded differences of the fay and their value system work here to call attention to the similarities and differences between otherworldly values and "human ethics." In addition, Chestre calls his readers' and hearers' attention to the intersections between fairy values and the principles of the Christian Church appearing throughout his narrative. As such, the fact that otherworldly and adoxic[35] fairies here resemble the Kingdom of Heaven more clearly than does Arthur's court, effectively suggests that the operations and values of that human society ought, perhaps, to be considered suspect.

The first fairy trait characterizing Tryamour's value system is the fay power of inner sight, an aptitude that Chestre contrasts with the blindness of Guinevere's (and the court's) focus on

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[32] In discussing Marie de France's *Lanval*, Cassidy Leventhal has argued that "Lanval's lady is a physical manifestation or embodiment of a greater reality … in a form relatable to humanity" (197-198). The notion that a fairy may be at least in part a representation of a "greater reality" or way of being, supports my suggestion that Chestre's fairy mistress is intended to represent a direct contrast with and challenge to the ideals and values associated with Guinevere and the human court; Tryamour is not just a fairy, she is a sort of opportunity for change, an offer of another, different definition of individual value that does not fixate on superficial markers of honor. Cassidy Leventhal, "Finding Avalon: The Place and Meaning of the Otherworld in Marie de France's *Lanval*," *Neophilologus* 98 (2014): 193-204.

[33] James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 76.

[34] Tara Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), p. 23.

[35] Wade argues that, in the context of and their relationship to medieval, orthodox Christianity, fairies might best be described as "adoxic" because they often sit "outside the established order of traditional customs, practices, and power relations, and therefore st[an]d in a position to be used to reflect and question those establishments, but they d[o] so without contradicting, or even directly opposing, such orthodoxies" (*Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 15).

external appearance. Fairy inner sight, as James Wade notes, commonly reflects "a corresponding concern for … inner things"; for example, in discussing the "inner sight" of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Wade argues that the Knight's power "includes his ability to see into the heart of Gawain," and thus to "test Gawain in ways that only fairies (or fairy-like figures) can": by organizing a test concerned "with Gawain's moral fiber, his *trouthe*."[36] Tryamour, I would argue, sees Launfal's internal character and values him for his "moral fiber,"[37] rather than for his external appearance or performance of honor. Indeed, the implication in Chestre's poem is that Tryamour's desire for Launfal is in fact linked to and a product of her supernatural knowledge of his internal *trothe*.

Support for the conclusion that Tryamour's desire for Launfal is provoked by the hero's true virtue can be noted in the different ways in which Chestre and Marie de France introduce and describe their heroes. While Marie lists the numerous personal and physical assets her hero possesses[38]—detailing Lanval's beauty, pedigree, and prowess—Chestre spends very little time describing his hero in any respect. Further, though both Launfal and Lanval are known for their *largesse*, in Marie's text this quality is just one of the *many* internal and external virtues that Lanval possesses. Indeed, Marie even informs her audience that Lanval is of noble heritage, thereby making his selection by and appeal to a fairy mistress more "appropriate" or "logical"—or at least not quite as enigmatic. Further, *Sir Landevale*—most likely Chestre's more direct source— abbreviates Marie's portrait, but yet still draws attention to Landevale's other qualities[39]: primarily the fact that he is a "bachiller" (l. 17), "A yong knyght of muche myght" (l. 19), and that he, like Marie's Lanval, is of foreign origin, describing himself as being "here in vncuth londe" (l. 27). Additionally, the *Landevale*-Poet's description of the titular hero's spending is focused less on Landevale's magnanimous character than on his imprudent abandon: "Sir Landevale spent *blythely*,

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[36] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 34-5.

[37] Like wheat bran for your soul.

[38] "Ceo fu Lanval; ne l'en sovint / Ne nuls des soens bien ne li tint. / Pur sa valur, pur sa largesce, / Pur sa bealté, pur sa pruesce, / L'envoient tuit li plusur; / Tels li mustrout semblant d'amur, / S'al chevalier mesavenist, / Ja une feiz ne l'en pleinsist! / Fiz a rei fu, de halt parage, / Mes luin ert de sun heritage! / De la maisniee le rei fu? / Tut sum aveir a despendu, / Kar li reis rien ne li dona / Ne Lanval ne li demanda" (ll. 19-32). All quotes from *Lanval* are taken from: Marie de France, *Le Lai de Lanval: Texte critique et édition diplomatique des quatre manuscrits français* ed. Jean Rychner, Textes Littéraires Français 77 (Paris: Librairie Minard, 1958).

[39] Elizabeth Williams also points out that, in *Lanval*, Marie, "though noting generosity as a quality Lanval possesses, does not give it quite the prominence it acquires in the translation" *Sir Landevale*, a prominence I would argue is further heightened in Chestre's adaptation. Elizabeth Williams, "*Lanval* and *Sir Landevale*: A Medieval Translator and His Methods," *Leeds Studies in English* 3 (1969): 86 [85-99].

/ And yaf yeftys *largely*; / So *wildely* his goode he sett / That he fell yn grete dette" (ll. 21-24, emphasis mine). Chestre, conversely, erases most of the singular qualities that make Marie's Lanval so appealing, as well as the youth, might, and profligacy of Sir Landevale. In Chestre's lay, Launfal's description focuses primarily on the knight's generous behavior,[40] also noting his position as Steward and Member of the Round Table: "He [Launfal] gaf gyftys largelyche, / … / Of alle þe knyȝtes of þe Table Rounde / So large þer nas noon yfounde" (ll. 28, 34-35). In other words, Chestre's portrait gives his audience little definitive in terms of imagining his hero or understanding what about Launfal might be so appealing as to prompt a fairy princess to declare: "Þer nys noman yn Cristenté / Þat y loue so moche as þe, / Kyng neyþer emperour!'" (ll. 304-306).[41]

Launfal's appeal is, as such, defined almost exclusively in relation to his generous behavior. Chestre's hero possesses a true generosity of spirit—a genuine, internal desire to share his personal resources—rather than a longing to acquire social capital. Further, the fact that Launfal's giving is so unlike Guinevere's own is illustrative of his character; a paragon of knightly *largesse*, Launfal possesses an internal *trothe* that is only further emphasized by the moral way in which he resumes his giving upon the restoration of his riches. Thus, though none of the *Lanval/Landevale/Launfal* fairy mistresses explicitly explain or account for their love of the lay's hero, Chestre's less specific portrait of Launfal, paired with his early description of the titular knight's internal quality, have the effect of foregrounding Tryamour's particular interest in the *internal* worth and qualities of her

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[40] Myra Stokes similarly notes that Chestre's text, "Following *Landevale*[,] … from the first associates signal *largesse* with the hero (28-35), where in *Lanval* this is merely one among a list of the typical chivalric values he [the hero] possesses" (70). While Stokes sees Chestre's popularization of Marie's *Lanval* as attended by a sort of moral flattening or "moral polarity" (75) and finger pointing that derives from *Launfal*'s more "popular" form—a form which Stokes contends must then differ from the psychological and social subtleties of Marie's text (60-63)—I differ slightly, suggesting that Chestre's "moral polarity" works *with* his narrative's structure in order to make a moral argument and to offer a test (a choice) to his audience. Myra Stokes, "*Lanval* to *Sir Launfal*: A Story Becomes Popular," in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 56-77.

[41] In "Launfal's 'Largesse': Word-Play in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*," Carol Nappholz similarly notes Chestre's uniquely myopic focus on Launfal's *largesse*, a choice which narrows the knight's characterization so that, in contrast with the French where "Lanval is noted for his 'valur' and his 'pruesce' together with his 'largesce,'" or with *Sir Landevale* where the hero "is 'A yong knight of muche myght' (19) even though he does spend 'blythely[,]' No mention is made [in Chestre's text] of Launfal's prowess or worth, but the word 'large' occurs three times in eight lines after the hero's introduction" (5). However, while Nappholz's article argues that this focus on *largesse* might be a comedic move on Chestre's part, one which adds a degree of innuendo and raunch to his portrait (4-7), I read this altered characterization of the lay's knight-hero as a way of signaling the importance of the inner sight which the fay possess—a type of perception and knowing which allows the otherworldly to determine value based on character rather than appearance. Carol J. Nappholz, "Launfal's 'Largesse' Word-Play in Thomas Chestre's 'Sir Launfal,'" *English Language Notes* (1988): 4-9.

loved one.[42] In this way, Chestre calls attention to the inner vision that often defines the fay as beings who frequently "possess not only the ability to see into the future but also the ability to see into the heart…. [so that] Fays can act as arbiters of justice when its human forms fail."[43] In addition, it is this recognition of internal *trothe* and its connection to *largesse* and honor that ultimately comes to characterize the value system Tryamour represents for and offers to Arthur's court.

In addition to challenging the human court's reliance on external appearance and trappings to determine individual value, Tryamour's contrast and eventual interaction with the value system represented by Guinevere also negates the power of shame—for Launfal at least—as it operates within the human court.[44] In fact, upon first meeting, Tryamour immediately acts to erase Launfal's shame before her: "She seyde, 'Syr knyȝt, gentyl & hende, / J wot þy stat, ord & ende: / Be nauȝt aschamed of me!'" (ll.313-5). To acquaint her knight with her alternative mode of being, Tryamour must, in essence, first remove the shame produced by his internalization of Guinevere's surface honor, a shame that seems to blind him to the essence of (his own true) value. Once Tryamour has removed Launfal's shame before her, she gives him gifts, effectively both modeling her alternative way of being—one of true *largesse* motivated by internal *trothe*, generosity of spirit, and honor—and, at the same time, also thereby erasing his shame before Arthurian society more broadly. Through her gift-giving and magical provision of resources, Tryamour both "reverses the harshness of Arthur's court and Kaerleon,"[45] and points up the flawed and superficial notion of honor held by human society in this romance. In essence, Tryamour's gifts to her knight do not simply restore his wealth and status, they also reveal a key failing in Guinevere's (and now the human court's) definition of honor: namely, the fact that sudden displays of wealth can quickly reverse complete social rejection and shame in the eyes of those who have internalized Guinevere's values.

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[42] Hazell similarly suggests that Tryamour's love of Launfal is based on his internal quality, the fairy "offers her love based on his [Launfal's] innate attributes rather than [his] outer accouterments" ("The Blinding of Gwennere," 134).
[43] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 197.
[44] Stephen Knight similarly remarks that Tryamour "*resolves Launfal's chivalric shame* when at the end they vanish together into the evidently Celtic timeless otherworld of Avalon." Stephen Knight, "Celticity and Christianity in Medieval Romance," In *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed.s Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney, Christianity and Culture 3 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 33, emphasis mine [26-44].
[45] Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, p. 186.

For example, upon his return to human society after his encounter with the fay, Launfal's external change of status is met with a quick "about face" on the part of Carleon's mayor—the one character, besides the queen most emblematic of the fickleness of the human value system. The mayor, on first meeting Launfal after the knight's initial departure from Arthur's court, greets him joyfully, saying, "'Syr, þou art wellcome!' / How faryþ our kyng?—tel me!'" (ll. 95-96). However, upon being informed that Launfal is out of favor with the king, the mayor's conciliatory nature slips away and he claims that he cannot shelter Launfal because seven Breton knights have taken all his rooms, offering Launfal a chamber by the orchard instead. Launfal recognizes this fickleness as a response to his lowered social status, telling Sirs Hugh and John, with "scorn inowȝ," that "'Now may ye se—swych ys seruice / Vnþer a lord of lytyll pryse!— / How he may þerof be fayn'" (ll. 116, 118-120). However, Launfal's scorn in this pre-fairy-encounter moment seems as much directed at himself as at the mayor, and, indeed, he has internalized Guinevere's value system, referring to himself as a "lord of lytyll pryse." After Tryamour's personal and social erasure of Launfal's shame, however, the mayor finds himself little redeemed: "And whan þe meyr seyȝ þat rychesse, / And Syr Launfales noblenesse, / He held himself foule yschent" (ll. 400-402). The mayor's remorse here stems not from regret over his previous discourtesy and dishonorable behavior; rather, in the face of Launfal's display of wealth, the mayor regrets only a lost connection to socioeconomic power. As before, the mayor ascribes to the presence of wealth the corresponding presence of nobility, just as wealth's lack, for him, signals an attendant lack of nobleness. Despite Launfal's unchanging internal merit, the mayor's behavior reflects the not just fickle but faulty understanding of honor—an understanding based on visual displays and performances of richness—that Guinevere has brought to Arthur's society. Despite witnessing the sequence of Launfal's possession, loss, and repossession of worldly goods—Launfal's turn on Fortune's Wheel, as it were—the mayor cannot distinguish between surface honor and internal *trothe*; he cannot, as Launfal does, choose a new value system, for he is too blind.

Perception of Launfal's external richness after his encounter with the fay serves to indicate to the lay's internal audience, the human court, the knight's true value, yet this worth and nobleness had existed in him from the outset, concealed by the Arthurian court's obsession with exterior virtues. Part of Tryamour's gift to Launfal might thus be seen as the ability to make his outside appearance match the internal merit and courtesy the fairy has already noted in him; as such, the fairy gives her knight the social accessories necessary to communicate his value in the visual and

public terms that the human court reads as true. Additionally, while Launfal's dress is (as this narrative clearly indicates) deeply changeable, and his social status highly transitory (he loses his wealth twice), his courtesy and attendant liberality are *not* short-lived, and it is this *internal* nobility that the fay seem to value and celebrate.

Additionally, Launfal's magnanimity—signaled early by his *largesse*, a generosity of spirit which originally gains him social prominence as Steward—is less critiqued in Chestre's text than it is in the other *Launfal* narratives. In *Sir Landevale*, as previously noted, the hero spends himself into debt, acting almost like a knightly iteration of the Prodigal Son. Similarly, in Marie's lay, Lanval spends all his resources and refuses to ask the king for more.[46] The financial flaws of the eponymous hero in Marie's text and in the work of the *Landevale*-Poet are, however, erased by Chestre, whose hero, as we have seen, is honorable and noble largely *because* of his *largesse*. The differences between these three texts' approaches to their hero's spending reflect the social concerns of and realities for the varied members of the medieval gentry and aristocracy, particularly for those living in the later Middle Ages. As such, the treatment of *largesse* in each version of this romance has bearing on the unique concerns of each respective poem. In discussing the social and moral tensions operating in the *Lanval* narratives, Geert van Iersel notes that, on the one hand, "a balance needed to be struck between income and expenditure if the household was to be maintained," while, on the other: "There existed in medieval societies expectations for those richer than most to display behaviours that would confirm their wealth," and yet, problematically, "the Christian tradition [also] put great moral pressure on those in the possession of wealth to share what they owned with others."[47] These conflicts between the need for balanced and sustainable spending and the calls made by "faith and society … on the nobleman's purse,"[48] can be seen in both *Landevale* and *Lanval*, with each poem, van Iersel contends, making arguments about the "consequences of spending beyond one's means" or of spending "more than one may be able to acquire."[49] *Sir Launfal*, however, seems, as van Iersel similarly indicates, to diverge somewhat

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[46] "Tut sun aveir a despendu, / Kar li reis rien ne li dona / Ne Lanval ne li demanda. / Nore est Lanval mult entrepris, / Mult est dolenz, mult est pensis!" (ll. 30-34).

[47] Geert van Iersel, "Reading Romance in Context: *Lanval*, *Sir Landeval*, and *Sir Launfal*," in *Aktuelle Tendenzen der Artusforschung*, ed. Brigitte Burrichter, *et al.,* Schriften der Internationalen Artusgesellschaft 9 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), p. 325 [311-332].

[48] van Iersel, "Reading Romance," p. 328.

[49] van Iersel, "Reading Romance," p. 331.

from its predecessors in this respect, suggesting that Chestre's presentation of *largesse* deserves further consideration.

In *Sir Launfal*, genuinely motivated sharing *is* caring, and Chestre's work, in this way, makes a social argument different from that of his source(s), emphasizing the moral and communal import and impact of benevolence rather than illustrating the dangers social and spiritual pressures can pose to a noble pocketbook.[50] Chestre "represents ideal nobility through generosity and service in a community," so that: "Even while the poem praises the qualities of a single idealized knight, *Sir Launfal* [also] seems to define its hero through his place in a network of dependent relationships."[51] For instance, Chestre's points about *largesse* and its connections to both the social good and to individual nobility are linked throughout *Sir Launfal* to the practice of gift-giving. Launfal gives magnanimously in the romance's opening, as does Tryamour when we meet her, a fay generosity that in turn enables the knight to resume his own giving, and, if possible, to give *more* liberally and nobly than before. Gift-giving and its depiction in Chestre's text thus signal the superiority of Tryamour's value system, allowing the fairy to effectively supplant Arthur (and Guinevere) as the possessor of Launfal's loyalty.

Gifts given by a person of status, such as an Anglo-Saxon ring-giver or a late-medieval patron, characterize an aspect of the relationship of lordship that is intended to generate allegiance, esteem, and even veneration in the gift's recipients—a respect that "repays" the gift with homage.[52] Tryamour, taking on the role of lord by giving Launfal riches, a steed, the fairy "knaue" Gyfre (ll. 318-327), and, perhaps most significantly, her "armes oo pensel / Wyth þre ermyns, ypeynted well" (ll. 328-329), thus lays claim to Launfal's homage and supplants Arthur as the recipient of the noble Launfal's allegiance and homage. Further, the lay makes this exchange explicit by having Tryamour offer Launfal these gifts and her love if he "wylt truly to me take, / And alle wemen for

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[50] Indeed, van Iersel states that, because "Launfal thanks his official capacity in the household to his *largesse*, it could even be argued that his spending pattern has benefited his long-term social security" ("Reading Romance," p. 331).

[51] James T. Stewart, "Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and the Knight in Need," *Arthuriana* 25.2 (2015): 112 [111-128]. Though Stewart discusses this community focus in relation to fourteenth century chivalry and nobility and their dependence on "a network of dependent relationships" (112), I view it as also relevant in connection with the depiction of Launfal's generosity, particularly with respect to his giving's moral and communal emphasis.

[52] See Elliot Kendall, *Lordship and Literature*, p. 20 on exchange and worship; Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 70 on New Year's giving and homage; Claire Vial, "Clothing the Debate: Textiles, Text-Isles, and the Economy of Gift-Giving in Four Middle English Breton Lays," *Études Anglaises* 67.1 (2014): 11-12 [3-18] on Tryamour directly challenging Arthur and Guinevere by taking on the role of giver; and Hazell's description of *largesse* as "both a political and personal act," one that builds connections through the giving and receiving of gifts in "The Blinding of Gwennere," 131.

me forsake" (ll. 316-317). The contractual nature of this scene is important to and for emphasizing Launfal's personal choice: his decision to adopt Tryamour's terms, her gifts, her livery, and her value system. In addition to requiring Launfal's loyalty in love, Tryamour asks for the knight's true allegiance, his promise of which initiates his incorporation into the Faerie court, a process then completed by his departure to the otherworld at the narrative's end. Tryamour, however, is not the only one who gives generously and out of a value system that differs from the one held by Guinevere and the human court. Launfal himself is, as noted, known for his *largesse*, and his receipt of Tryamour's gifts does more than tie him to her and her court, it also enables him to resume his own generous giving.

Further, while gift-giving and magnanimity do gain (and then re-gain) Launfal social prominence as Steward, his *largesse* is also depicted as a spiritual virtue, with charitable giving serving as an important part of Christian moral practices. For instance, in all three versions of the *Lanval* narrative, the fairy's favor(s) enable the hero to resume his liberal giving; however, in the English versions in particular,[53] Launfal's (and Landevale's) giving is also cast as decidedly Christian. In particular, *Sir Landevale* and, to an arguably greater extent, *Sir Launfal* describe the knight's return to giving in passages that echo Matthew 25:31-40, a list of the charitable deeds that come to constitute the Seven Corporal Acts of Mercy:

Sir Landevale	*Sir Launfal*
"Landavale makyth nobile festys; / Landevale clothys the pore gestys; / Landevale byith grette stedys; / Landevale yeuyth riche wedys; / Landevale rewaredith religionse, / And acquiteth the presons; / Landevale clothes gaylours; / Landevale doith each man honours. / Of his largesse eche man wote, / But how it comyth noman wote" (ll. 173-182).	"All þat Launfal hadde borwyþ before, / Gyfre, be tayle & be score, / Ȝald hyt well and fyne. / Launfal helde ryche festes, / Fyfty fedde pouere gestes, / Þat yn myschef wer; / Fyfty bouȝte stronge stedes, / Fyfty yaf ryche wedes / To knyȝtes & squyere; / Fyfty rewarded relygyons, / Fyfty delyuerede pouere prysouns, / And made ham quyt & schere; / Fyfty clodede gestours: / To many men he dede honours" (ll. 418-431).

Here, *Sir Launfal* not only replicates, but expands the list from *Sir Landevale*, calling attention to the generosity and thoughtfulness of Launfal's giving. In Chestre's text, for instance, Launfal does

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[53] David Carlson notes that the English versions of Marie's lay expand the description of Lanval/Landevale/Launfal's generosity with his fairy-provided wealth, "include[ing] a greater number of the traditional corporal works of mercy" in the short list given in the Old French (99). Carlson contends that this common characteristic of the Middle English versions of the *Lanval* story suggest that the "extant English versions derive from a common Middle English original." Carlson, "The Middle English *Lanval*," 99.

not simply provide rich feasts, he does so for those who are "yn myschef"; he does not simply "delyuer" prisoners, he makes sure that they are "quyt & schere"; and, unlike the *Landevale*-Poet, who notes the social attention attracted by Landevale's *largesse* ("Of his largesse eche man wotre"), Chestre's text moves from Launfal's deeds of honor to the first tournament episode, thereby separating Launfal's later return to the human court from the direct effects of his generous giving. This separation makes possible the perception of Launfal's *largesse* as more clearly indicative of his internal *trothe*, rather than allowing his giving to be misunderstood as an attempt to regain his social standing. Further, Launfal's knightly deeds in the tournament episodes allow both Arthur's court and the lay's readers and hearers to see martial *and* moral prowess in the eponymouse knight, thereby highlighting his difference from the other members of the Arthur's court. It is thus through a synthesis of knightly ideals that Launfal's social and chivalric reputation are returned to him[54]; however, Arthur's court responds to this restoration only because it is attached to visually detectable markers of Launfal's honor. Upon hearing of the knight's "noblesse" and tournament victories,[55] Arthur promptly invites the newly-restored Launfal to rejoin the court for the St. John's Mass feast and to resume his position as "stward of halle / Forto agye hys gestes alle, / For cowþe of largesse" (ll. 622-624). In other words, Chestre's depiction of Launfal's giving works not only to foreground the knight's compassion and his chivalric excellence—which, until now, only the fay it seems recognized—but also to showcase his new and distinct divergence from the superficial values of the human court.

Launfal's return to giving, and its connection with and to the otherworldly, are of particular importance in indicating his separation from and otherness to the Arthurian Court's ideals. Gift-giving in medieval culture, as in this narrative, is an important way to create and strengthen community, useful for symbolically producing or maintaining ties between families, showing

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[54] Extended attention to the tournament episodes added by Chestre, particularly the confrontation with Sir Valentine, is somewhat outside the focus and argument of this essay, but these episodes are important moments in the tale, ones that certainly deserve attention. I view the introduction of these moments as an effort to emphasize Launfal's all-around excellence as a knight, with his prowess and nobility, like his generosity, multiplied and made obvious to us in a way they had not been before he met Tryamour. For other writing on the tournament episodes and their importance to narrative message and structure in *Sir Launfal*, see: Earl Anderson, James T. Stewart, James Weldon, and Michael J. Wright.

[55] Note again the importance of renown and even true rumor to the operations and value system of Arthur's human court. Arthur *hears* "tydyng" (l. 613) "Of Syr Launfales noblesse" (l. 615) and *then* invites him to return to his court and to his position as Steward.

one's deference and faithfulness to a lord or lady, indicating one's charity, and so on.[56] As Felicity Heal suggests, gift-giving's depiction can help to indicate "what men value, *both economically and morally*, through an examination of what they choose to give, and how they make their offerings."[57] In this way, Guinevere's selective and superficial giving indicates both her economically-focused values and her moral lack, while, conversely, Tryamour's (and Launfal's) generosity clearly intersect instead with moral *trothe*. For example, as noted above, Chestre's hero uses "the funds from Tryamour's purse to participate in the Seven Corporal Acts of Mercy … the physical acts of kindness one can do to demonstrate Christian compassion,"[58] a choice through which Chestre emphasizes what Raluca Radulescu terms the "connections between spiritual pursuits and the material side of chivalric life."[59] Further, the emphasis on this connection calls attention to and even celebrates the ways in which Launfal's new resources focus on and build community, rather than threatening it. The lay thus draws attention both to Launfal's role in and vulnerability to the courtly community as well as to the ways in which magnanimous giving brings a society closer together. Giving accordingly becomes, in this romance, an individual good, a communal virtue, *and* a moral imperative. Thus, in *Sir Launfal*, internal generosity comes to serve as a marker of true value, one that differs significantly from the performance of *largesse* that has been seen in Guinevere. In this way, the model of gift-giving presented by Tryamour and further developed by Launfal—a model that infuses social concerns and community-building with moral consideration—comes both to align with and demonstrate the different value system that the fay represent and to indicate the knight's separation from and otherness to the Arthurian court's ideals.

Put another way, Launfal's generosity is represented in religious terms as a result of his inherent goodness, the true nobility that Tryamour perceived with her inner sight. The explicitly religious expression of Launfal's *trothe*, his carrying out the Corporal Acts, is not required by his fairy mistress with respect to her gift; rather, the relationship between fairy desire and Launfal's religious expression of his internal value here weave together in a sort of *ouroboros* of causality

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[56] As Felicity Heal states: "Gifts serve to enhance bonds between individual and families, to express loyalty and deference, to display charity, and to demonstrate power." For more on medieval and early modern gift-giving, its literary significance, and its social function, see especially: Elliot Kendall, *Lordship and Literature: John Gower and the Politics of the Great Household* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008) and Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 4.

[57] Heal, *The Power of Gifts*, p. 4, emphasis mine.

[58] Pearman, "Refiguring Disability," 144.

[59] Raluca L. Radulescu, "How Christian is Chivalry?," in *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney, Christianity and Culture 3 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 79 [69-83].

wherein Launfal's goodness incites fairy desire which produces a moral generosity that arises from the internal nobility of both actors, which again produces desire, and so forth. Such complexity, moreover, suggests that the otherworld is acting, whether intentionally or not, in harmony with a greater order that values more than public displays of transitory wealth. Further, Tryamour exhibits several fay qualities that surprisingly intersect with Christian conceptions of morality, including the inner sight and generosity already noted, as well as her concluding move to establish herself as a representative and enactor of just mercy.

Failures in *Sir Launfal* are commonly met with some degree of forgiveness, a forgiveness usually meted out by the fay. For example, Tryamour's return to save Launfal from Guinevere's false accusations—a return in which she, unlike the other fairy mistresses, uniquely provides for the hero's removal with her to the otherworld, having his gifted horse and attendant prepared and waiting: "Wyth þat com Gyfre allso prest, / Wyth Launfalys stede, out of þe forest, / And stod Launfal besyde. / Þe knyȝt to horse began to sprynge / Anoon, wythout any lettynge, / Wyth hys lemman away to ryde" (ll. 1012-1017)—is a display of loyalty to Launfal (and a merciful, undeserved loyalty at that). In other words, Tryamour's punishment of Launfal is tempered by a degree of mercy that moves beyond a strict interpretation of justice—an interpretation which would require that his violation of her taboo be met with the total and unrelenting loss of her company and gifts—to instead grant him grace and exemption for his human failings after, "having first left him [for a time] to his own devices as a punishment."[60] This sort of mercy is a common response to the violation of a taboo. The taboo must inevitably (as audiences expect) be violated in order for fairy narratives not just to exist but to continue *as narratives*; however, the continuance of the narrative is *also* contingent on the forgiveness of the taboo's violation,[61] meaning that error and forgiveness are central to many fairy narratives. In this way, Tryamour's forgiveness might be seen as unmerited and thus *gracious*, reflecting or, at least, aligning with the grander and more merciful grace of the Christian God. In relation to Launfal, the otherworldly exhibit a just mercy—one containing both logical consequences and forgiveness—that then raises questions about Tryamour's ostensibly retributive yet arguably just blinding of Guinevere; a fulfillment of the

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[60] Bliss, "Introduction," p. 1.

[61] For a discussion of taboos, or *geis*, in general and in relation to various fairy narratives, see John Revell Reinhard, *The Survival of* Geis *in Mediaeval Romance* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1933).

queen's rash declaration that "'Ȝyf he [Launfal] bryngeþ a fayrer þynge / Put out my eeyn gray!'" (ll. 809-810), and one of Chestre's most discussed additions.[62]

While Launfal is granted more mercy than justice, perhaps due to his internal quality, Tryamour seems to give Guinevere more justice than mercy, seeming to reflect back Guinevere's superficial lack and her choice to keep to her own flawed value system. Because "Justice can bring punishment as well as reward, and fairy justice can be extreme in both,"[63] Tryamour's blinding of Guinevere might be read as simply a swift and intense expression of otherworldly justice. However, as Tory Pearman discusses, by the late Middle Ages, "when a king subjected a criminal to blinding in place of death, blinding became a signifier of a leader's mercy," so that blinding became "a political punishment that demonstrated a king's authority, power, and *clemency*."[64] Tryamour displays immense power in this moment, a power the human court can neither match nor oppose; however, this more literal eye-for-an-eye moment could also be seen as a consequence of the queen's own lack of remorse and her determined adherence to a superficial and ignoble value system, as can be witnessed immediately preceding Tryamour rescue of her knight: "Anoon þe queen suppose[de] gyle, / Þat Launfal schulld, yn a whyle, / Be ymade quyt & skere / … / Anon sche seyde to Artour þe kyng, / … / 'I schuld be awreke of þat traytour / Þat doþ me changy chere— / To Launfal þou schuldest not spare" (ll. 913-915, 917, 920-922). Guinevere's blinding thus acts, at least in part, to parallel Tryamour's earlier gift to Launfal: the gift of making his external appearance match his internal quality. Guinevere and the courtly value system she represents have, throughout this lay, proven themselves to be blind to true value and lacking in love.[65] As such, Guinevere's blinding here makes clear to a surface-driven human court, as well as to *Sir Launfal*'s

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[62] See Tory Vandeventer Pearman, "Refiguring Disability"; Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Sir Launfal: Introduction," In *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1995), p. 204; Myra Stokes, "Lanval to Sir Launfal: A Story Becomes Popular," in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 56-77; Dinah Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwenner"; Earl R. Anderson, "The Structure of *Sir Launfal*"; and E.M. Bradstock, "'Honoure' in *Sir Launfal*," 14, wherein Bradstock discusses the blinding episode as a keeping of Guinevere's *trouthe* with respect to her rash vow.

[63] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 199.

[64] Pearman, "Refiguring Disability," 138, emphasis mine. In similar manner to Pearman, I read Guinevere's blinding not so much as what Hazell refers to as "a permanent, visible sign of her sins" ("Chestre as Social Critic," 141), but rather as an indication of Faerie's power, justice, and superiority. However, the degree to which this moment produces and has produced theorizing, questioning, and readerly engagement with Chestre's romance supports my contention that a fairy intervention and/or presence in a narrative can be used by an author to produce consideration and thought while resisting easy solutions, simple definitions, or reliance on any one, singular answer.

[65] Anderson suggests that "… her [Guinevere's] blindness at the end [of the romance] may remind us of Andreas Capellanus's dictum that a blind person is incapable of *fin amour*" (Anderson 118); see also A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, p. 7 for more on Capellanus and the notion of blindness as an obstacle to true love.

audience the failure of the superficial code of honor that the queen has introduced and that Arthur's court has whole-heartedly embraced.

Fairies are, unsurprisingly, often linked to trials and tests, and, as Wade notes, these tests are most often "not physical, but moral,"[66] with "fairies function[ing] as embodied devices who, through their strange and arbitrary violence, work to challenge knights on physical, psychological, and moral levels, and who, in turn, become integral to the central, ideological concerns of their texts."[67] The ultimate test in *Sir Launfal*, however, is not a test of an individual knight, but rather a trial of the human court as a whole, and of its value system in particular. The final trial scene at the narrative's close provides the court—and by extension Chestre's audience—with a final, direct confrontation of and by the two value systems that have been competing for and around them throughout the poem. The court's legal squabbling over the truth and the right course of action with regards to the likely fallacious charge (and clearly fallacious secondary charge) that Guinevere has maliciously leveled against Launfal—"A newe tale þey gonne þo, / Some of wele & some of wo, / Har lord þe kyng to queme: / Some dampnede Launfal þere, / And some made hym quyt & skere— / Har tales wer well breme" (ll. 877-882)—suggests that the tale's internal audience is unable to make the choice to determinedly oppose the values embodied by Guinevere and now Arthur. Thus, when Tryamour appears, Launfal's fairy mistress plays by the court's rules: "The fairy's very public entrance into the city is in stark contrast to her earlier requirement for secrecy on the part of Launfal about their relationship."[68] Tryamour's public entrance and spectacle work to emphasize the truth of Launfal's claims, his innocence, and, by extension, the value he, as her chosen partner, must possess, providing the court here with *visual* proof of her external beauty: "Sche dede of her mantyll on þe flet / (Þat men schuld her beholde þe bet) / … / Vp stod þe queen & ladyes stoute, / Her forto beholde all aboute, / How euene sche stod vpryȝt; / Þan wer þey wyth her also donne / As ys þe mone ayen þe sonne, / Aday whan hyt ys lyȝt" (ll. 979-980, 985-990). In this moment, the fairy mistress takes particular care to ensure that the court is able to see her appearance in full so that they might, according to their own rules, accurately attest to Launfal's innocence.

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[66] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 36.
[67] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 74.
[68] Kelly Ramke, "Re-Writing Agency: The Masculinization of Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* in Two Middle English 'Translations'," *Mediaevalia* 26.2 (2005), 235.

The fact that the court's debate is resolved by this visual, external, and public presentation, however, confirms that they have failed the fairy test—rejecting the alternative value system Tryamour and her maidens have offered and which Launfal has been performing since his return to court.[69] This failure suggests that part of the reason the fay have no desire to remain with the human court is the fact that Arthurian society has learned nothing: they still have yet to recognize the superiority of the alternative definition of honor seen in Launfal and held by the Faerie court. Guinevere's blinding acts as the culmination of this moral rivalry, finally making unshakably clear the failure of surface honor in the face of the true, internal sight possessed by the fay, thereby inverting the fairy gift trope that, in a number of other fay romances, instead alters human sight and seeing by enhancing and extending visual perception to include forth-seeing or "supernaturally enhanced sight" which "[t]he Fairy Queen gives her lovers": a "prophetic sight or speech [meant] as payment in kind for what they [her lovers] have been forced to renounce"[70] by leaving the human world, even for a time. By inverting this gift-giving trope, Tryamour concretizes the emptiness of Guinevere's values, calling attention to the queen's own worthless gift-giving and altering her so that she more literally embodies the system she has generated and furthered. The blinding of Guinevere thus, in part, points out that the court's reliance on external markers of worth is in fact no sight at all—they are all blind, unjust, and too caught up in their reputations to do the just or right thing.[71] In this moment, Chestre completely upends his own audience's identification with the tale's human court so that the court, their leader, and their corrupt value system elicit not empathy but repulsion and perhaps even the horror of recognition.

Contrasting with the human system, Tryamour represents a nexus of values—generosity, justice, and mercy—which might be seen as Christian, yet she does not act as a religious figure or incite humans to follow the Church's rules and teachings. Instead, Launfal's fairy mistress models

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[69] Discussing *Lanval*, Aisling Byrne notes that the "predicament" that the lai's eponymous hero finds himself in when brought before the human court for judgement (particularly after having violated his mistress' taboo), "can only be resolved by shifting the scale by which authority is measured in the world he inhabits. The encounter with the otherworld introduces an authority higher than that of human royalty." Chestre, arguably, riffs on and expands on this element in Marie's lai, foregrounding the fact that Faerie represents an alternative authority and using the tension between fay and human authorities to reveal the moral superiority of the otherworld and its associated values. Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 62.

[70] Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 73.

[71] Bradstock similarly suggests that Guinevere's blindness reflects her inability to see "certain basic truths" as a result of "her own vindictiveness and lust" and the fact that she "cannot comprehend true 'honoure'." Bradstock, "'Honoure' in *Sir Launfal*," 14.

an alternative way of thinking and being that fuses the moral and the social in productive ways, generating an opposition that offers Arthur's court and Chestre's audience a moral choice.[72] Tryamour's judgment not only makes discernable the contrast between the courts and definitions of honor that has structured Chestre's text, but her blinding of Guinevere also makes a clear argument about the failings of surface honor. Indeed, Pearman suggests that "Tryamour, as a member of the realm of the 'counter-court,' is able to do what Chestre's human characters are not: punish Gwenore within the precise parameters of human law while simultaneously critiquing those parameters."[73] The harshness of Tryamour's justice does not rule out an affinity between her value system and morality, but rather calls attention to the blindness to morality that the human court has already internalized.[74] As such, the trial scene, in which Guinevere and Tryamour finally meet and interact with each other—rather than engaging through their male partners—arguably represents a fairy test or trial of Arthur's court, one which the court ultimately fails.

In the end, Tryamour is a character not fully defined by or tied to the world of humanity; a fact made clear by her exit from both the narrative and the human world at the lay's close. It is, however, important to note that—as Cassidy Leventhal argues with respect to Marie de France's treatment of Avalon in *Lanval*—the otherworldly realm and our human reality are different but interconnected, so that "a closer look at *Lanval* reveals the primacy of the otherworld in Lanval's quest for meaning *within* reality. Avalon then becomes not a form of escape but a deeper and more fundamental reality."[75] The narrative exchange and interaction between these two realities—one of which remains just out of our reach, eluding our comprehension and challenging our ways of being—seems to encourage audiences to consider their own reality. Chestre arguably recognizes this comparative potential in otherworld narratives and works to foreground and heighten it by explicitly setting two powerful female outsiders, Guinevere and Tryamour, and their two contradictory value systems into opposition and then building his narrative around the struggle between their two models. By thus contrasting the values of the fay court and Arthur's human

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[72] Interestingly, Timothy D. O'Brien suggest that one meaning of Tryamour's name might be "choice love" because "Tryamour is choice; she is the object of many a man's wishes" ("The 'Readerly' *Sir Launfal*," 41). However, if this definition is developed from the French *trier*, another possible interpretation is "choice" meaning not select but "to choose, to select" (*Anglo Norman Dictionary*, "*trier*"). Viewed in this way, Tryamour's very name may indicate that she represents and encourages a *choice*, and perhaps that providing this opportunity to choose or select is the loving thing to do.

[73] Pearman, "Refiguring Disability," 142.

[74] Indeed, as Diane Purkiss notes, "the Fairy Queen's caprices were reflected in the Virgin's often harsh punishment of those who flouted her authority." Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden*, p. 66.

[75] Leventhal, "Finding Avalon," 194.

court—placing the familiar, without question or comment, alongside what is inherently other and otherworldly—Chestre disrupts what seems to be normal and natural in the human social and courtly systems, asking his audience to critically examine accepted behaviors and social practices among their human contemporaries.[76] Moreover, the comparisons of Tryamour and Guinevere that are prompted in and by Chestre's narrative generate competing, dual-circle structures within the romance, configurations that both complicate the more typical model of exit and return defining most medieval romances and that effectively encourage the text's audience to draw conclusions about whose values, power, and intervention in the (human) world of Arthur's court is more just, true, and valuable.

2.3   Narrative Structure and the Making of a New Home

While the *Lanval* narratives at first follow the out and back romance pattern in fairly typical fashion, the hero in all three versions does not merely encounter the Other(world), he also, somewhat surprisingly, "returns" to and becomes a part of that separate and, in Chestre's tale, opposing court structure. As noted, Chestre's Launfal practices generosity and nobility on a grander scale when he returns to Arthur's court, actively calling attention to the posturing generosity and surface honor of the queen and the human court. The degree of critique leveled at Arthur's court—particularly upon Launfal's return—along with the knight's ensuing, dangerous encounter with the human "justice" system, indicates that Arthur's court has been displaced as the romance site of return. In this way, Launfal's journey back to the human court becomes, at the same time, a journey outwards from the fairy court in pursuit of adventure and encounter—for, of course, humans *are* "Other" to the otherworldly. Launfal's encounter with the fay thereby generates a second narrative circle that layers onto and eventually overcomes the first, more typical, romance narrative, rendering the human court no longer a locus of safety and civilization, but instead a site of testing and adventure [see Figure 1]. Chestre thus complicates typical romance structure and displaces the usual moral focus of such tales—the knight's home court—so that the first encounter with the Other introduces

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[76] Notably, the association of fairy otherworld(s) with education is not unheard of; Corinne Saunders states that, "Though the otherworld is typically associated with the wilderness beyond the court, and with the violent and unpredictable, it is often a place of learning. Figures associated with the faery tend to be distinguished by knowledge and skill in sophisticated arts" (*Magic and the Supernatural*, p. 179). It is not wholly outside the realm of possibility, then, to suggest that the fay in and throughout a narrative might be serving an educative function or seeking to teach the humans they encounter, if only that audience—whether intra- or extra-diegetic—would pay attention.

not a direct threat, but rather an alternative home space, one that proves to be morally superior. Further, this shift offers the fairy court the opportunity to test its mettle against the human realm, inverting the more typical, reverse scenario.

As noted, polarization in most romances often serves a moral purpose, working, as Frye argues, to create a clear separation between the "regressive" and "progressive" elements of the story.[77] The moral function of such polarizations operates, structurally, to make the departure from the "home" space a journey outward to an encounter, confrontation, or adventure with an opposed or "other" power, value system, society, or way of being. In most romances, the structural
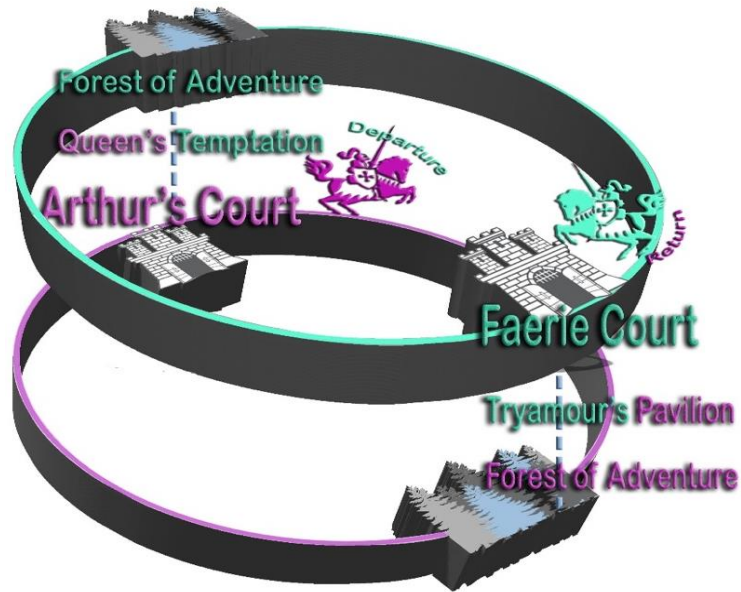
Figure 1. *Sir Launfal*'s Dual-Circle Structure

encounter with the outside functions to support or benefit the order and code of the center, so that the home court remains the focus of the narrative.[78] This is not to say that the home court or court of focus is always (or often) the morally or martially superior one, but rather that the court of return represents the realm in which the narrative is interested and invested. This is the court we, the readers and/or hearers of the narrative, are meant to be focusing on, and the encounter with the outside or "other" court, entity, value system, or way of being, is intended to, in some way, benefit or productively alter that home space. For example, in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the powerful, external, and moral force of Dame Ragnelle is ultimately (albeit temporarily) incorporated in to the Arthurian court to which Gawain returns, thereby bolstering its chivalric and moral credibility. Similarly, in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, the moral courtesy of Gawain is able to withstand the Carl's tests, both overcoming and, depending on your

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[77] Frye, *Secular Scripture*, p. 139.
[78] For example, in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the powerful, external, and moral force of Dame Ragnelle is ultimately (albeit temporarily) incorporated in to the home/Arthurian court, thereby bolstering its chivalric and moral credibility.

reading, also incorporating the power of the "Carle" into the home space of Arthur's court. As the focus of the narrative, the home court typically represents the institution in which the romance is primarily interested, while the encounter with the outside typically functions as a way to productively alter or uphold that familiar space and its values in some way.

In the *Lanval* narratives, however, the typical focus on and interest in the status of the human court shifts as a result of the hero's encounter with the fay. Amending the common pattern, the place of return for the adventuring knight can reasonably be viewed as the space and/or value system that the narrative either represents as or wishes, through appropriation, to make the romance's focus. As such, Walter Wadiak argues that romances "should be read backwards" because it is only through the insights provided by the ending of the tale that we, the audience, can understand the story's opening, with "The narrative structure of most romances consistently point[ing] us back to the beginning. The end is typically less an arrival someplace new than a confirmation of what the beginning already knows—less a resolution than a restatement of the initial problem."[79] It is, then, not the beginning, but the *end* of the romance that signals the moral focus or "home space" of the tale, thereby indicating not only the emphasis or interest of the narrative, but also the ways in which the space of departure might better itself.

Atypically, the Lanval narratives end with a withdrawal from, not a return to, the human court, a divergence suggesting that the removal of the titular hero of *Lanval*, *Sir Landevale*, and *Sir Launfal* to the otherworld is meant to level some form of critique at the human court that the hero abandons. In Chestre's text, moreover, this critique is heightened by the direct conflict generated by placing in explicit opposition the human and Faerie women, courts, and value systems that his amplifying and polarizing of Guinevere's role furthers. These competing courts produce the complex, dual circle narrative depicted above, so that, read backwards, the critique is not just foregrounded but made expansive, directing reproach at a culture that depends on and privileges surface honor over internal *trothe* and quality. By displacing the human court as the place of return, the ending of *Sir Launfal* argues that the "happiness" of the happy ending is possible only upon leaving the flawed or failing system represented by Arthur and Guinevere's court and "returning" to the otherworld. Chestre, in other words, links the value system Guinevere represents to the human court's moral failings, failings which have effected Launfal's (and

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[79] Walter Wadiak, *Savage Economy: The Returns of Middle English Romance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), p. vii.

Tryamour's) departure. In this way, Launfal's contact with Guinevere becomes the "Shameful contact with all that is other to the noble order[, which] is a constant feature of these stories,"[80] and the eventual loss of Launfal to the otherworld becomes a loss of *trothe* and virtue to and for Arthur's court. This failure, however, is neither the last nor the final word.

Through its complex structure and use of polarization, *Sir Launfal* poses the fairy test of *trothe*—the choice between the superficial and the principled—not simply to the intra-narrative audience of Arthur's court, but also to the extra-narrative audience: Chestre's readers and hearers. Though the exact or intended composition of this audience is not known, I am suggesting that Chestre actively works to involve his listeners and/or readers in his tale. In essence, the romance's imaginatively stimulating fairy material[81] and structurally complex dialectic come together in this work to urge the audience of *Sir Launfal* to actively question, consider, and even interpret the tale's narrative. Additionally, Chestre alters Marie de France's ending so that his romance remains open, with Launfal returning annually to joust with those who dare confront him: "Euery er, vpon a certayn day, / Me may here Launfales stede nay, / And hym se wyth sy3t. / Ho þat wyll þer axsy justus, / To kepe hys armes fro þe rustus / … / Þer he may fynde justes anoon / Wyth Syr Launfal þe kny3t" (ll. 1024-1028, 1031-1032). Thus, while Tryamour's decision to leave the human world and return to Faerie suggests that the superior value system she represents has failed to be "accepted" by the human world of Arthur's court, the lingering challenge left by Chestre's unique addition of Launfal's annual reappearance offers the tale's audience an opportunity to confront the text and to make their own moral choice.

By altering his romance's ending to add the hero's annual return to test the human world, Chestre allows his audience to select between value systems, an open offering of alternatives that is, in essence, what the fairy test has always been. Launfal's yearly returns serves as a recurring opportunity for the human world to test its *trothe*, because, as Corinne Saunders notes, "in the English [version] … the human world is not wholly left behind."[82] Since this is an annual challenge that appears to continue into the text's and its audience's present, the extension of the test,

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[80] Simpson, "The Comic," p. 272.
[81] For more on this imaginatively engaging and inspiring potential of fairies, see Aisling Byrne's *Otherworlds*, which argues, in part, that the appearance of an otherworldly being and/or the crossing into an otherworld signals to a text's audience that "all bets are off," "fundamentally alter[ing]" "The audience's expectations of the rules by which the narrative [and human reality] should operate," and sparking their imaginations with limitless possibilities. Byrne, *Otherworld*, pp. 22-26.
[82] Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, pp. 187-188.

opportunity, and choice to *Sir Launfal*'s audience is foregrounded, the recurring opportunity keeping Launfal's name and reputation current for Chestre's readers and hearers. Further, Launfal the knight is most present to and for Chestre's audience in Chestre's own work: the narrative *Sir Launfal*. Encountering this tale as a reader or listener accordingly serves as an imaginative opportunity for one to confront and joust with this knight as text in one's own present.

Thus, in Chestre's ending, Launfal the knight and *Launfal* the tale, already linked by the lay's opening, become synonymous, so that Chestre's hero's otherworldly "immortality" might be considered equivalent to his status as a narrative.[83] Launfal's yearly challenge is encompassed and explained by his story; his incorporation into Faerie, which enables his continued return; and by his superior nobility (with respect to the average human of Arthur's court). As Sherle Furnish suggests, the tale of *Sir Launfal* follows the hero as he becomes more than human, as he "becomes transformed, legendary, and immortal—that is, *literary*."[84] In other words, Launfal the knight is known, is "legendary," *because* of his narrativity, and, as such, *Launfal* the text's "self-conscious[ness]" not only "invite[s] its audience to reflect upon its existence as a poem,"[85] but also, in so doing, to return—either in memory or physically—to confront and reconsider the tale once more. By making clear that Launfal's story is a created narrative—by pointing up the textuality of his romance—Chestre similarly makes his knight textual, or rather, makes his text knightly. Thus, as a knight and also a text, Launfal can continue to challenge the human world so that each audience encountering him is subjected to Tryamour's fairy test once more.

Chestre's ending resists closure, extending Launfal's embodied, chivalric, and moral challenge into the audience's present, whenever that might be, so that anyone who may so wish can "… fynde justes anoon / Wyth Syr Launfal þe knyȝt" "*Euery er* …" (ll. 1031-1032, 1024). Thus, the open and almost timelessness of the fairy challenge effectively seeps past the boundaries of the narrative, growing in power and the force of relevance for and to the audience of the text by intruding on their extra-narrative world, much as Arthur's own potential return from Avalon heightens his imaginative and cultural power. The effect of Chestre's ending is to blur the boundary between time within the narrative and the time of the audience, thereby suggesting the continued

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[83] Weldon, in particular, notes the overlap between and the occasional identity of Launfal the knight and *Launfal* the text in Chestre's tale—particularly within the context of tournament episodes, times of confrontation and identity conflict which "push the identity of the character towards the identity of the narrative…" (Weldon, "Jousting for Identity," 119-120, see also 109, 113, 115).

[84] Furnish, "Thematic Structure," 117, emphasis mine.

[85] O'Brien, "The 'Readerly' *Sir Launfal*," 38-9.

relevance of the moral conflict and extending the fairy test into the realm of the present. By adding one final degree of circularity in the form of Launfal's yearly return—a cyclicality which stretches the narrative beyond its textual limits—Chestre adds an element of hope to his tale, indicating that, though the test of *trothe* may have bested the might of the Arthurian court, human failure is neither final nor indomitable. In the end, the union of knight and text in these final moments suggests that reading or hearing this romance is a way to joust with Launfal, metaphorically speaking, thereby casting his romance not just as a constructed narrative and a piece of art, but also suggesting that engaging with, facing, and considering this text is a moral exercise amounting to testing one's own *trothe*.

CHAPTER 3.   THE LAUGHING COURT: TRANSGRESSION, COSMIC REDEMPTION, AND FAIRY MOVERS IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Scholarly interpretations and understandings of what Derek Brewer terms "the profound ambiguity of"[1] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*) vary widely, producing an abundance of thoughtful, and occasionally contradictory, readings. Some are critical of Gawain, others of Arthur; some see the poem as ultimately tragic, others as unwaveringly comic; some see Morgan and/or the Green Knight as threats, while others see them as jovial tricksters. On the whole, *SGGK* seems designed to both perplex and intrigue,[2] placing the poem's audience in a situation analogous to Gawain's own: possessing good intentions but scant information. Along with Gawain, the readers and/or hearers of *SGGK* are taken on an ostensibly wild and chaotic ride through moral quandaries and failed tests, yet those failures are, in the end, mercifully redeemed and the seeming chaos of human, sublunary experience is shown to be part of an ordered and encompassing cosmic system. In this way, the poem emphasizes the limitations and vulnerabilities of sublunary or terrestrial beings, showing the impossibility of Gawain's perfectionism, the inevitability of his failure, and the contrast between his lack of knowledge and the more complete and expansive understandings of the fairy characters who act on and around him. To some degree, these fairies exist outside of the human world, but their influence still intersects with and disrupts human institutions, complicating both the Arthurian court's code of chivalry—which is initially defined by the Pentangle—and the structure of the poem itself. In addition, the structural elements of the poem intersect with its expression of and engagement with ethical and moral concerns, the two supporting and mutually influencing one another. Thus, while the poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript all share a common interest in moral and ethical questions,[3] Tara Williams suggests that the Arthurian subject matter of *SGGK* adds an ethical component to this work because Arthurian narratives as a whole

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[1] Derek Brewer, "Introduction," in *A Companion to the* Gawain-*Poet*, ed.s Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge : D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 9 [1-21].

[2] Lynn Staley Johnson, for example asserts that the works of the *Gawain*-Poet "still interest and frequently puzzle a twentieth-century reader." Lynn Staley Johnson, "Introduction," in *The Voice of the* Gawain-*Poet* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984): p. ix [ix-xix].

[3] Indeed, Tara Williams has shown that these poems "share an operating assumption that poetry is [itself] capable of doing moral work." Tara Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), p. 70.

tend to deal with a set of related principles and ethical issues.[4] I would suggest that, in *SGGK*, these ethical, Arthurian elements combine with otherworldly influences, Christian theology, and principles of medieval science to undergird and inform the moral lessons of the romance, illuminating the poem's related interests in cyclicality and redemption.

In the horizontal plot of *SGGK*, the fairies stride, uninvited, into the lives and operation of Arthur's court, challenging and eventually subverting the court's conception of chivalry—or, more specifically, their definition of "chivalric perfection" as represented by the Pentangle—and doing so primarily through the testing and judgment of Gawain: paragon of courtesy. Gawain's ultimate failure of the fairies' intertwined tests is, however, not so much a failure of nobility, but rather a fundamental, human failing: a fear for and love of one's own life that is wholly unsurprising in any fallen and imperfect human. As Nicholas Watson notes: "Gawain and his colleagues can never in practice achieve the perfection to which they must aspire, but must expect to live their lives in a cycle of venial sin, repentance and penance…. Indeed, his [Gawain's] real error … may be his failure to recognize this fact."[5] I would argue, then, that the cyclical nature of the poem's narrative[6]—a pattern appearing, as I will show, on a variety of scales from the natural to the cosmic—foregrounds the recurrant pattern of an ideal passing into decay, a "decaying" which, in turn, then "rise[s] again, transformed."[7] Further, though the chivalrous Gawain may not at first recognize (or wish to recognize) the impossibility of the Pentangular perfection to which he aspires, the fay intrusion and violent destruction of that ideal is, I would argue, what ultimately allows for the substitution of the necessary cyclical processes that Watson describes. That shift, hinging on the redemptive powers of repentance and mercy, replaces the ideal of faultlessness with the process

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[4] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 71-72. For more on Arthurian ethics see also Jane Gilbert, "Arthurian Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed.s Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 154-170.

[5] Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," in *A Companion to the* Gawain-*Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 293 [293-313].

[6] Lynn Staley Johnson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *The Voice of the* Gawain-*Poet* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 37-96.

[7] Walter Wadiak, "Gawain's 'Nirt' and the Sign of Chivalry," in *Savage Economy: The Returns of Middle English Romance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), p. 88 [88-118]. This pattern, moreover, suggests that even the Fall of Troy and the coming destruction of Camelot can be seen as a low-point in what is, nonetheless, a linked pattern of descents followed by recuperations. Just as Troy's fall led to Brutus' discovery and "founding" of England, so Camelot's fall can in turn lead to another "happy" establishment, such as the court of Richard II (if we are to presume that there is significance in Richard II's "strong connections" with the region of Chestre, and that, as Jill Mann argues, "In the context of the Ricardian court, a number of puzzling features of the *Gawain*-poet's works becom[e] more comprehensible."). Jill Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics and Courtly Ethics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009): 238-239 [231-265].

of perfect*ing*. In thus substituting perfection—a status that one holds and which one can permanently lose—with finishing or becoming—a process in which one engages—*SGGK* suggests that moral living allows for both falls and reclamations. Further, this cycle is presented as an element of the processes of becoming more finished or perfected, so that the processes of becoming also suggest the importance of cyclicality within both the terrestrial world and in the poem itself. In the end, it is this ordered pattern that the initially-disruptive intervention of the fay comes to foreground and reinforce.

As we will see, Gawain's "fall" from excellence is a happy one, a chivalric *felix culpa* of sorts. In revealing how impossible it is for a limited and flawed human to maintain truly faultless courtesy, Gawain's failure opens up room for the forgiveness and the redemption of even knightly failings. By the peom's close, a new and different process moves to the foreground, detectable in Gawain's exchange with the Green Knight at the poem's close—a scene notable for its reflection of confessional and penitential language.[8] The emphasis shifts, in these final moments, away from the anticipation of perfection in noble knights: an unrealistic expectation whose devastating effects are best witnessed in Gawain's original reaction to his failure of a test he did not realize he was taking. In particular, the Pentangle, the ideal of faultlessness as status, is replaced with the green girdle, a symbol of process and becoming perfected. Failure, repentance, penance, and absolution are recurring, even cyclical experiences for humans (as Watson suggests), a repetition largely resulting from the fact that, as fallen beings, humans—whether or not they are paragons of chivalric virtue—cannot keep from sinning and are thus in regular need of forgiveness and redemption.[9] In addition, *SGGK* indicates that penitence (the emotion, rather than the sacrament)

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[8] A brief list of scholars who discuss this phenomenon includes Karma Lochrie, "Tongues Untied: Confession and Its Secrets," in *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 12-55, esp. pp.42-55; David Aers, "Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain*-Poet," in *A Companion to the* Gawain-*Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1997): pp. 95-98 [91-101]; J.A. Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Routledge, 1965); Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1987): pp. 122-124; Gerald Morgan, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight *and the Idea of Righteousness* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1991): pp. 152-161; A.C. Spearing, *The* Gawain-*Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970): pp. 219-229; and Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," pp. 293-294.

[9] Moreover, when considering the actual sacrament of confession, which, as Karma Lochrie notes, is constructed as a "ritualized power relationship conducted through secrecy between the one who confesses and the one who keeps the secrets," additional elements of cyclicality are introduced both through the imperative for annual confession required of medieval Christians and also, as Lochrie shows, by the ways in which "lodging … the secrets of the individual in the frailty of the flesh insures that the process of self-examination and individuation must go on indefinitely." Lochrie, "Tongues Untied," p. 21, 53.

foregrounds process—it is grounded in *re*pentence—emphasizing the possibility of finishing the soul over time and acknowledging that spotlessness and perfection are unachievable for any human being without the provision of generous grace by a loving and Divine Being.

However, the focus on becoming as a process, as seen in *SGGK*, conflicts with Neoplatonic theological arguments that suggest that humans must transcend their world and their fallen bodies in order to know God. As such, I would argue that *SGGK* better aligns with and supports medieval theological approaches that see God's plan as visible and immanent in the natural and sublunary world, beliefs that align more with Thomist and Aristotelian models of the moral universe.[10] In the Middle Ages, such immanent conceptions of the universe and its operations generally conceived of the cosmos as a series of concentric spheres of hierarchy and influence radiating out from the terrestrial, but contained by an unmoving, empyrean heaven governed by a Prime Mover, who is typically identified as the Christian God. In these models, the cyclical motion of the cosmos originates with and ends in the Divine, but each celestial sphere is occupied by an angel or intelligence, a mover who can affect and move the terrestrial sphere and all those who dwell in that mutable, sublunary realm. As I will show, this configuration of the cosmos is reflected in and by the overarching structure of *SGGK*. It is unexpected, yet significant, then that the otherworldly beings are the ones who inaugurate the testing that both reveals the naiveté of Gawain's original definition of and expectations for noble and chivalric behavior and who also foreground the necessity of penance in the cycle of failing and redemption. As otherworldly, more knowledgeable, and more "perfect" (or rather, less mutable and terrestrial) beings who routinely act on and alter human societies and cultural norms, the fairies in *SGGK* act, in a sense, like intermediaries or cosmic intelligences, further enhancing the mini-cosmic structure that I will argue defines this poem. In other words, the various and often enigmatic influences impinging on this tale and its hero (and audience)—each one a little more removed from human experiences and understanding than the next—serve to order the poem just as much as they work disrupt it—shaping *SGGK* into a sort of cosmos writ small.

In what follows, I will show that *SGGK* is a poem operating on multiple, interlinked levels, each reinforcing and encompassing the one "below" it. I will focus on the terrestrial, plot-driven

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[10] See, for example, the writings of not only Aristotle himself, but also of Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and Roger Bacon, among others. Aristotelianism also influenced encyclopedic writings like Bartholomeus Anglicus' *De proprietatibus rerum.*

level and the cosmic, structural level in turn. The terrestrial plot of the poem, in which Gawain's moral journey occurs, is inextricably linked to the work's cosmic structure through a shared emphasis on process and becoming. In particular, the fairies—whose various influences form a narrative and structural analogue to the organization of the cosmos—enable the expression of the work's tropological aspects through their intrusion and disruptiveness, intrusions that make possible Gawain's test and the moral reclamation of his failing. Finally, both the terrestrial and the cosmic levels of *SGGK* function, independently and in tandem, to emphasize becoming and process as the lesson of and common thread woven throughout the poem.

3.1   The Terrestrial Plot: In Which Gawain is Made Great Again

On the terrestrial or human scale, the destruction of the Pentangle and its replacement with the necessary, beneficent, and cyclical processes of contrition, confession, penance, and redemption is represented in the semi-typological relationship between Gawain's trespass and St. Peter's Biblical betrayal of Christ. In essence, much of Gawain's journey can be viewed as a necessary shift in moral understanding from the desire to embody unachievable flawlessness to a more grace-based perception of human living as a process of becoming (more) perfected—a process that ultimately depends on Divine grace. Thus, Gawain's failing, in a sense, replicates Adam's fall, making way for the exercise of mercy that is needed to redeem the fallen, human world. On the terrestrial level of the plot, then, the human connection to the Divine is made most clear through the foregrounded importance of failure, repentence, and redemption as a cyclical process, a moral lesson that is "taught" through Gawain's likeness to Peter—a connection only made visible through the interference of *SGGK*'s fairy characters.

Though Peter is mentioned by the Hautdesert Porter, rather than by Gawain—a moment that alludes to Peter's role as Keeper of the Keys and Gates of Heaven[11]—there are two other times at Hautdesert when the audience's attention is drawn toward a cock's call, a sound particularly associated with Peter's thrice denial of Christ before the rooster's crowing.[12] In the first passage, which opens the boar-hunting adventure, the cock's crowing is notably described to have occurred three times—"Bi þat þe coke hade crowen and cakled bot þryse, / Þe lorde watz lopen of his bedde,

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[11] Robert J. Blanch, "The Game of Invoking Saints in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The American Benedictine Review (ABR)* 31.2 (1980): 240-241 [237-262]; Ronald Tamplin, "The Saints in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Speculum* 44.3 (1969): 403-405 [403-420].

[12] Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75; Luke 22:54-62; Mark 14:66-72; John 18:15-27

þe leudez vchone" (ll. 1412-1413).[13] The second passage—which occurs right before Gawain arms and departs for the Green Chapel—takes matters further, linking the cock's crows to Gawain himself, emphasizing both the knight's place as listener and the emotional turmoil this sound attends: "Þe snawe snitered ful snart, þat snayped þe wylde; / Þe werbelande wynde wapped fro þe hyȝe / And drof vche dale ful of dryftes ful grete. / Þe leude lystened ful wel, þat leȝ in his bedde— / Þaȝ he lowkez his liddez ful lyttel he slepes; / *Bi vch kok þat crue he knwe wel þe steuen*" (ll. 2003-2008, emphasis mine). Here the repeated use of the pronouns "he" and "his" link the cock's crowing to Gawain and his testing, and also ask the poem's audience to hear, to a degree, through the knight-hero's ears—to imagine ourselves in his position. The connection between Gawain and the rooster here is, as suggested, particularly intriguing given the varied associations the bird held for medieval people, in particular, its connection to St. Peter and repentance.

As Beryl Rowland and Jill Mann show, in medieval iconography, the cock was associated with several different ideals and individuals—from the knight[14] to the courtly lover,[15] from Christian beliefs in the "resurrection or … eternal life"[16] to the power of discernment and the ability to herald sinfulness.[17] Perhaps most commonly, however, the rooster often signified the

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[13] All quotes from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from: The *Gawain*-Poet, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 5th ed (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2014 [2007]).

[14] Jill Mann discusses the "physical appearance" and "characteristic animal behavior" of the rooster as one that, through "direct observation," suggests "similarity between the cock and the knight," with one Latin poem, for example, "compar[ing] the cock's comb with a royal crown, and not[ing] that his feet have spurs, 'like a knight ('ut miles')." Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 252-253.

[15] Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1978), p. 25. Further, Rowland explains that some noted the rooster's lasciviousness, while, others, like Isidore of Seville, argued that his name came from the word *castratio* (26-27).

[16] Rowland, *Birds with Humans Souls*, p. 21.

[17] For example, Hugh of Fouilloy's twelfth-century aviary and Christian allegorical text, *The Book of Birds* (variably titled *De columba deargentata*, *De tribus columbis*, *De avibus*, *De natura avium*, and *Aviarium*) (Clark 1-2), claims that the rooster has a Divinely inspired power of discernment: "Quasi enim horas noctis discernere est peccatorum merita diiudicare" [For dividing the hours of the night is just like judging the merits of sinners] (Hugh of Fouilloy 180-181). Hugh's *Aviarium*—a popular text that was widely owned and circulated in Europe (England included) (Clark 25)—also dwells on the religious and allegorical properties and lessons of the cock, emphasizing his function as a warning about or herald for sinfulness and noting his connection to the role of the "sanctorum praedicatorum" [holy preachers], who cleanse and prepare themselves before warning others about their sinfulness: "Prius cogitationum alis semetipsos feriunt, quia quicquid in se inutiliter torpet sollicita investigatione deprehendunt, districta animadversione corrigunt. Prius sua punire fletibus curant, et tunc quae aliorum sunt punienda denuntiant" [First, they strike themselves with the wings of meditation, because whatever is uselessly sluggish in themselves they perceive by careful reflection <and> correct by sever reproach. First, with weeping, they strive to punish their own <sins>, and then declare which <sins> of others should be punished] (Hugh of Fouilloy 184-185). The association of the rooster with watchfulness and "spiritual vigilance," as well as its iconographic identification with "the priest or preacher, particularly with priestly warnings" about sin, seems particularly significant given Gawain's position as audience to and for the rooster's crowing the night before he departs for the Green Chapel. Further, his weeping and vigorous

trespass and eventual redemption of St. Peter. For instnace, the rooster often appears in the background of art depicting either Peter's denial of Christ or his expression of his extreme grief and penance at his actions.[18] Moreover, in the Middle Ages the rooster's association with Peter's denial—a denial motivated by Peter's own concern for his life—was not, fundamentally, or at least not in ultimate consequence, a negative one. As Rowland writes: "the cock of St. Peter…. Rather than representing treachery … was the symbol of the call to repentance. As the bestiaries remarked: 'At the crowing of this bird hope returns to all men … faith comes back to the fallen. Jesus looks back upon the waverers and sets the wanderers straight'."[19] Considered in relation to this larger tradition, the two rooster crows noted by the *Gawain*-poet seem particularly significant. Because, as scholars like Robert Blanch have shown, the few saints referenced in the poem indicate the qualities and ways in which Gawain will be tested—particularly with respect to the "major themes in *Sir Gawain*, especially [those of] 'sin,' penance and redemption"[20]—Peter can be viewed here as a particularly apt parallel to Gawain, a connection foreshadowing not just his trespass but also, and perhaps more importantly, the redemption of his human failing.

Much like Peter, Gawain's failing is not malicious or depraved; rather it is a symptom of his humanity, a fear for and love of his own life. Indeed, the Green Knight himself characterizes Gawain's failing as only a "lyttel" one, emphasizing the almost understandable or natural sense of his error: "'Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wonted; / Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowing nauþer, / Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf—þe lasse I yow blame'" (ll. 2366-2368). This small lack did not require skill to effect or test; it was not a "wylyde werke" but, implicitly, a part of the human condition, a fear common to human "kynde," so that the Knight's blaming of Gawain is far less severe than it would have been otherwise. Indeed, the Green Knight—an expert pedagogue—begins his critique by first praising his less-knowledgeable companion, noting all of Gawain's successes and declaring that the knight is "'On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede. / As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more, / So is Gawayn, in god faith, bi oþer gay knyȝtez'" (ll.

repentance of his trespass of his *trawþe* upon hearing about the true nature of his test from the Green Knight might be seen to align with the penitent preparation that the "sanct[um] praedicat[um]" take before seeking to lead a larger group—like Arthur's court—to the truth. Willene B. Clark, "The Author and the Text," in *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloy's* Aviarium, ed. and trans. Willene B. Clark (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992): pp. 1-26; Hugh of Fouilloy, "Chapter 41: The Cock," in *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloy's* Aviarium, ed. and trans. Willene B. Clark, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 80 (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992): pp. 181-187.

[18] Blanch, "The Game of Invoking Saints," 242.

[19] Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls*, pp. 22-3.

[20] Blanch, "The Game of Invoking Saints," 237.

2363-2365). The comparative nature of this praise is noteworthy; Gawain is a superior human, but he is still a human, a "freke" who goes on foot and who is, as Gawain himself more explicitly states, affected by human fears and faults.

In foregrounding Gawain's inescapable humanity, the Green Knight's application of the language of contrition and penance in his response to the knight's lament becomes significant, serving as an offering (or reminder) of an alternative: the mercy that can recover the fallen but penitent (whether he be knight or apostle): "Thenn loȝe þat oþer leude and luflyly sayde: / 'I halde hit hardily hole, þe harme þat I hade. / Þou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses, / And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe point of myn egge, / I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt and pured as clene / As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz first borne'" (ll. 2389-2394). This is, of course, not a typical or church-sanctioned practice of the sacraments, but the use of confessional and penitential imagery is important here. In part, this language defines the unequal power dynamic between Gawain and the Green Knight, a dynamic based on a "model … for unmediated exposition of one's sins without falsification, boasting, self-derision, or storytelling, which ultimately disposes one," in this case, Gawain, "to [be] obedien[t]"[21] to the other, in this case, the Green Knight. By drawing on this dynamic, the Green Knight's interpretation of Gawain's fault is given an additional degree of authority, so that it is not the Knight's marvelous appearance alone that elevates and gives authority to his interpretation, raising it over Gawain's own.

Thus, while Gawain sees himself as fallen and despicable, the Green Knight emphasizes the Arthurian knight's wholeness rather than his (lost) perfection—focusing on process, the actions which "polysed" and "pured" the knight so that he is (again) "clene"—instead of dwelling on a status Gawain can have and then lose. The processes of polishing and purifying return Gawain to his state at birth, but they do so in a way that does not deny his experiences and identity as a knight. The penance is at the Green Knight's "egge,"[22] and, by performing his chivalric duty in appearing

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[21] Lochrie also makes the compelling case that confessional discourse is employed far earlier in the poem, in the exchanges between Lady Bertilak and Gawain in Gawain's bedroom. In these moments, Lochrie contends that *SGGK* "brilliant[ly] analogiz[es] … the discourses of penance and desire," thereby indicating the "parallels between the three confessional scenes and the three seduction scenes, between the language of love-talk and the language of confession, and between the dynamics of Lady and male lover and confessor and penitent." While this is outside the scope of my current discussion, these important threads and their relation to and suggestion of socially recognized power dynamics indicates another way in which the otherworld in *SGGK* can often be more knowledgeable and possess a greater understanding than do the humans, who remain limited to and by the sublunary sphere. Lochrie, "Tongues Untied," p. 38, 45.

[22] While it is somewhat outside the scope of this particular discussion, I think it worthwhile to note that one of the medieval metaphors for nature discussed by Kellie Roberston in *Nature Speaks* is that of the "Ax of Nature." The Ax,

at the Green Chapel and braving the Knight's stroke(s), Gawain manages to reclaim his cleanness. Indeed, Jill Mann contends that, in this moment: "Gawain's hidden fault becomes susceptible to healing precisely as it comes to the surface in the form of the nick that makes it visibly manifest," operating in conjunction with Gawain's "confession[, which] has also restored his moral wholeness, his integrity, in the etymological sense of that word, making him 'clene' in the sense of 'complete.'"[23] On the one hand, such visibility makes the wound to Gawain's chivalric faithfulness and knightly identity both perceptible and prominent. On the other hand, however, that wound is then able to be made whole by a process that intertwines chivalric and Christian language, experiences, and practices—healing Gawain's *trawþe* through the wounding of his body—a "nirt in þe nek" (l. 2498) that restores and becomes a personal, penitential reminder to Gawain. In like manner, the girdle's public adoption allows it to serve as a similar, communal signal and celebration of the healing of human failing that has been made possible, even to noble knights, through the application of grace and mercy.[24]

In this way, Gawain's failings do not define or destroy him, rather, he is like Peter, a man who was fearful for his life and momentarily disloyal to Christ, but who was also one of Jesus' noblest disciples—the rock on which Christ built his church.[25] Additionally, the Green Knight's

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[23] Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics," 257-258.

[24] Similarly, Mann suggests that "Arthur's courtiers agree with the Green Knight in emphasizing Gawain's major success rather than his minor failure. For them, to have done as well as Gawain did would be no failure but an unimaginably high level of success." Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics," 258-259.

[25] Peter's association with the papacy and its founding predates the Middle Ages, first taking hold during the "reign" of Pope Leo I (440-461). As Kevin Uhalde writes, Leo did not merely "claim … Petrine authority," he also specifically engaged, in sermons, with Peter's denial of Christ. Uhalde argues that Leo juxtaposed Peter and Judas, suggesting that "Leo in no way apologized for Peter but instead suggested that the apostle possessed a unique and powerful experience of justice *because* of his lapse," thus, while "Judas's example demonstrated how a misunderstanding of Christian justice led to ruin, because there could be no effective forgiveness…. Peter's failure and repentance … emphasize the advantage of fallibility for those whose humility would allow them to find forgiveness" (672, emphasis mine). Indeed, Peter's example, as Leo preached, foregrounds the necessity of penance, suggesting that proper employment of this gracious gift would allow humans to move past their fallen state by "trigger[ing] a response from divine mercy," for, "If not even Peter could survive human existence without the remedy of penance, then neither could they" (Uhalde 688). Peter, moreover, remains a figure of interest in the Middle Ages, appearing in numerous sermons, multiple bestiaries (as Rowland notes above), and even literary works like Langland's extended dream vision, *Piers Plowman*. The *Cursor Mundi*, for example, expands on the moment in Matthew when Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, and several other disciples, stating that, in this moment Peter is made "chief" of the others: "Petur þat he porest fond / Ouer alle he made him moost weldond / Biforen alle his oþere feres / Moost priuilage he ȝaf to peres" (ll. 13312-13315). Further, despite his later failing, Peter is not condemned by the author of the *Cursor Mundi* or by Christ, who tells the apostle

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as Robertson shows, generally speaks to the "causal relation between the natural phenomena we perceive around us and the plan intended by God." In immanent works that employ this metaphor, nature is "a tool guided by God," so that "God is the principle moving cause, [and] the ax the instrumental cause." As such, considering the Green Knight as a sort of "ax of nature" in *SGGK* may prove to be a fruitful direction for further scholarship. Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 64 and 67.

comparison of Gawain to a pearl is particularly evocative, bringing to mind the parable of the "Pearl of Great Price," which describes God's love for and desire to redeem human souls, and, which is, of course, also one of the key parables informing another of the Cotton Nero A.x poems: *Pearl*. Peter is thus emblematic of the cleansing and renewing powers of contrition and penance, processes which provide grace to terrestrial, fallen beings through the power of Divine mercy. If the rooster crowing and Gawain's anguished and penitent "reaction to his human frailty" evoke and are "remarkably similar to Peter's shameful recognition of his denial of Christ,"[26] then the *Gawain*-poet might also be asking his/her/their readers and hearers to harken back to the St. Peter invoked by the Porter's oath—the redeemed Peter: Keeper of the Keys and Gates of Heaven. Thus, though Gawain's humanity is, to his great chagrin, the origin of his imperfection, his connection to the very human, very flawed, and very redeemed Saint Peter offers a sort of hope—one grounded in process and polishing and an emphasis on becoming that, as we shall see, is reinforced in and by the organization and structure of the poem as a whole.

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of his coming denial in an impressively loving way. In this passage, Jesus begins not with death, but with redemption, stating that, "… bi my deeþ on þe rode: / shal monnes synne be bet / I shal rise þe þridde day: / to lif wiþouten let / And whenne we shul in galile: / efte to gider be met / Alle þe cares þat ȝe haue now: / clene shul ȝe forȝet" (ll. 15549-15556). It is only after Peter's stubborn go into Galilee as he has been asked, stating that the two will suffer together, that Jesus reveals Peter's coming denial, stating: "Þou shal se hem ȝitt to nyȝt: / do me greet deray / For þei wolde on me wreke: / al her owne affray / þou shal ar þe coke crowe: / forsake me þries I say / And say þat þou me neuer seȝe: / hit beþ noon oþere way / But þou shal couer & coumforte hem: / þat þou seest in delay / And þe & hem of ȝoure woo: / I make quyt som day" (ll. 15567-15578). What is particularly interesting in this passage, in addition to the compassionate tone with which it is related, is the sense that Peter's denial is a reaction to the violence or "attack" (affrai, *MED*) that will be directed at his Lord. The implication that Peter's failing is a result, like Gawain's, of his fear for his own life, is further emphasized by the description of the disciple's later approach to Caiaphas' house and his hesitation to ask after his Master because: "For sore he dredde as aftir fel: / þat he shulde be slayn" (ll. 15907-15908). Further, Jesus' foretelling of Peter's denial here is also notable for its implication that Peter's failure must happen, there can be "noon oþere way." It seems here as though this is simply the way things have to be; there is no condemnation or censure in this passage, rather, Jesus asks Peter to comfort himself and others in their sorrow over his death and states that they will soon be "quyt" in what can only be expected to be, based on the opening description of humankind's redemption as a result of Christ's death, a joyous and grace-filled "quyting."
[Aside: Judas' and Peter's betrayals are juxtaposed in the *Cursor* much as they were in Pope Leo's sermons. For example, in an apocryphal episode immediately prior to Jesus' trial, Judas tells his mother that Jesus' rising from the dead is just as likely as the sudden "vpris[ing]" of her "cok" that was "scalded ȝuster-niȝt"; upon his utterance of this boast, however, the rooster suddenly leaps into the air, crowing, and it is this "craw" that Peter hears following his denial (ll. 15985-15998, Fairfax MS).] *Cursor Mundi (The cursur o the world): A Northumbrian Poem of the XIV*[th] *Century in Four Versions*, Part III, ed. Rev. Richard Morris, Early English Text Society Original Series 62 (London: Pub. for the Early English text society by K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & co., 1876). Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are, for ease of reading, from the Trinity Manuscript. Kevin Uhalde, "Pope Leo I on Power and Failure," *The Catholic Historical Review* 95.4 (2009): 672, 688 [671-688].
[26] Blanch, "The Game of Invoking Saints," 248.

3.2 The Violence of the Otherworld: In Which the Pentangle is Broken

Unexpectedly, perhaps, the argument *SGGK* makes about the merciful and joyous necessity of penance is a result of the testing worked on Gawain and the human court through the intervention of the poem's otherworldly beings, fairies who act on and influence Arthur's knight and his court. This fairy interference not only introduces the poem's primary conflict, it also destabilizes the operations of the terrestrial world, with the complex, chivalric perfection of the Pentangle serving as the primary target of the fay-wrought destruction. The Pentangle can be viewed as an ideal: a symbol, "depaynt[ed] of pure golde hwez" (l. 620), "In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbez; / For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez / And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer / And ayquere hit is endelez … / … / Forþy hit acordez to þis knyȝt and to his cler armez, / For ay faithful in fyue and sere fyue syþez, / Gawan watz for gode knawen and, as golde pured, / Voyded of vche vylany…" (ll. 626-629, 631-634). In essence, the Pentangle represents a fixed perfection, voided of villainy and composed of pure and purified gold, an endless good that does not admit of mistake or trespass. In this way, the Pentangle is not in any sense bad or wrong, but it *is* outside the reach of all except Christ and his mother, Mary,[27] because it does not allow for the redemption of even a single trespass. The devastation of the Pentangle is thus, I would contend, a necessary destruction, a wound or rupture that opens a space or "nirt" into which pity—followed by grace and redemption—can enter, replacing pure gold with a polished pearl.

The Pentangle's representation of enumerated and intertwined bodily, social, and moral perfections has been much discussed, with James Simpson offering the compelling suggestion— which I adopt—that the Pentangle is an inflexible and, I would further argue, unattainable, ethical code, so that: "By the apparently rigid terms of the pentangle, which Gawain wears as the court's

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[27] Indeed, the medieval question or "thought-experiment" wherein "medieval thinkers explored" the problems of or relationship between Mary's Immaculate Conception and the "family of doctrines regarding Adam's fall and its [universal, human] consequences" (Adams 134) make her presence on the inside of Gawain's Pentangle-bearing shield interesting and illustrative. Mary's image here might be read both as representing the shield's own unachievable perfection and as heralding the Pentangle's merciful replacement with repentence and reclamation as Jesus's mother is both "patroness of chivalry and friend to penitent sinners" (Johnson 77). Further, this "much contested dogma" was of interest and heated debate in the fourteenth century, with scholars like Ann Astell arguing that the debate appears in the poetry of Chaucer—a contemporary of the *Gawain*-Poet. (My thanks to my advisor, Michael Johnston, for pointing out this connection.)
Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: A Thought-Experiement in Medieval Philosophical Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 103.2 (2010): 134 [133-159]; Ann W. Astell, "Chaucer's 'St. Anne Trinity': Devotion, Dynasty, Dogma, and Debate," *Studies in Philology* 94.4 (1997): 398 [395-416]; Lynn Staley Johnson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," p. 77.

representative, he has [by the poem's end] failed."[28] In the terms represented by the interlinked and static perfections crystalized in the completed whole of the Pentangle—which is the sum of all perfections or goods—then, any human being living in a mutable, post-lapsarian world cannot hope to do anything *but* fail.[29] However, though the world is complex and hard to read, even for one as attentive to his code of ethics as is Gawain, it is also a merciful or redeemed realm, meaning that the unachievable ideal of the Pentangle cries out for some sort of alternative—an opportunity for grace and restoration. Simpson similarly suggests that the Pentangle in fact includes its own productive undoing, promoting mercy or an individual, "penitential ethics" as "an alternative to aristocratic shame."[30] Through Gawain's encounter with the fay, then, I would argue that we, the poem's readers and hearers, learn with the Arthurian knight the necessity of grace, discovering that,

> In retrospect, even the pentangle's uncompromising ethical system contains its opposite, since the last aspect described is 'pité, that passes alle pointez' (l. 654).… Only pity, which takes individual circumstances and motivations into account, can admit of gradations of punishment, unlike shame.… in this poem a penitential ethics, quite distinct from both the prudential and the chivalric ethics described above, serves the ends of chivalric self-regulation.[31]

Indeed, it is the possibility of being redeemed, along with this merciful pity to and for those who trespass against the unyielding perfections of the Pentangle that are what I am arguing Gawain's failure admits or introduces into the chivalric code that the Pentangle had initially represented. The moral lesson of the poem is thus well captured by the dual meanings for "pité," the key term and culmination of the Pentangle passage. "Pité," in Middle English, has the primary meaning of "pity" or "mercy, clemency, leniency," but it can also refer to "piety" or "Godliness, reverent and devout

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[28] James Simpson, "The Comic," in *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, The Oxford English Literary History Vol. 2 1350-1547 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 279-280 [255-321].

[29] Similarly, Nicholas Watson suggests that "The green belt which Arthur's company will now wear offers an ironic comment, certainly, on the extent to which the pentangle's 'endeles knot' (*G* 630) is translatable into reality." Likewise, Jill Mann notes that the "interlocking quality of the five virtues" of the Pentangle indicates that "the virtues are, as it were, loyal to one another, linked in mutual bonds of relation," and that, as such "The loss of one is the loss of all." The result of this, Mann continues, is that "For Gawain, … any breach of his knightly integrity destroys the perfect enclosure represented by the pentangle," so that one trespass, in essence, undermines Gawain's whole *trothe*. Further, Tara Williams contends that *SGGK* examines the "reasonable limits to virtue and how we might respond to those whose virtue has faltered," thereby "interrogat[ing] chivalry" and its ethical concerns. Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," p. 293; Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics," 248 and 257; and Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 80.

[30] Simpson, "The Comic," p. 281.

[31] Simpson, "The Comic," p. 281, emphasis mine

obedience to God, righteousness,"[32] which is certainly how several scholars have read it in this particular instance.[33] Rather than choosing between these two potential readings, however, it might be more helpful to think of the use of "pity" in the Pentangle's description as an intentional reliance on the word's polysemous-ness, one that indicates the link between human piety, the emotions of contrition and repentance, and the celebration of Divinely-granted clemency that, ideally, inspires such piety. Any mercy administered in this poem, whether or not it comes immediately from God, is fundamentally gracious and compassionate, effectively modeling the operation of the lovingly-ordered universe.

The fairies thus introduce a sort of productive pity into the narrative. For instance, the mercy displayed by the Green Knight in the poem's final Beheading Game not only fulfills the literal rules of the game in a way that saves Gawain from a death sentence, it also produces the opportunity, in the confession scene discussed above, for human limitations to be met, not with exacting reprisal, but with "the processes of penance, spiritual realignment, and salvation."[34] As such, I would argue that a comic boisterousness undergirds *SGGK*, reinforcing the joyful potential of Gawain's failing. In his reaction to Gawain's distress over his own, human weakness, the laughter of the Green Knight and the description of his speech as a courteously or "luflyly" spoken (l. 2389) both recall Gawain's own reputation for courtesy—a reputation that has now been remade and even enriched—and foreshadow the coming reaction of Arthur's court to Gawain's tale. Indeed, laughter and game ring throughout this poem, adding an air of levity to the action that reflects the tale's eventually felicitous reorientation of human failings toward salvation and

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[32] *MED*, "pitē (n.)."

[33] While Simpson, as noted above, adopts "pity" as the appropriate reading of this aspect of the Pentangle, critics such as Conor McCarthy and Gerald Morgan instead argue for "piety" as the appropriate definition, with Morgan suggesting that "pité" must be read "piety" because "because of the status of piety as the highest of the moral virtues (see *ST* 2a 2ae 81. 6), and, second, because the virtue of piety is continuously relevant to the action of the poem, whereas considerations of pity are entirely absent from it." Similarly, McCarthy argues for the "piety" interpretation, noting that such a reading "draws our attention to Gawain's repeated religious observances, but also to his controversial confession before the final journey to the Green Chapel." As discussed above, I see piety and pity as intertwined in this text, with piety the appropriate human response to the gift of pity from a more powerful being—with the primary or ultimate source of that grace always the Divine.
Gerald Morgan, "The Perfection of the Pentangle and of Sir Gawain in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" In *Essays on Ricardian Literature In Honour of J.A. Burrow*, ed. A.J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): p.256, fn 9 [252-275]; Conor McCarthy, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Sign of *Trawþe*," *Neophilologus* 85 (2001): 299 [297-308].

[34] Sarah Stanbury argues that this is a common interest in the works of the *Gawain*-poet, contending that, "In each of the texts, human action is poised—and found wanting—against judgment, a juxtaposition that comments, in some of the poems directly, on the processes of penance, spiritual realignment, and salvation." Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the* Gawain-*Poet: Description and the Act of Perception*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 2.

redemption. At the same time, this celebratory and exuberant tone does not negate the risk or the harm also present in the work, but it does make the hunting game and Gawain's failure in it part of a larger festivity or jest.[35] In the end, Gawain's is both a human sin and, in a larger sense, the sin of being a (post-lapsarian) human; his presentation to the court reveals this, showing his sorrow at his failings, which are the failings of all, as well as his genuine contrition, an emotion which is, of course, a needful prelude to his being truly shriven through the application of grace and Divine mercy.

In effect, Gawain's failing proves his humanity; yet, in the same moment, this proof activates the *pité* of the Pentangle, making way for the mercifully-provided processes of perfecting signified by the penitential baldric that Gawain and his fellows bear, a symbol which, Dennis Moore poignantly argues, represents the "imperfect soul," with the wholeness made by the joined or "knotted ends of the *lace*, in obvious contrast to the endless knot of the pentangle."[36] Gawain takes the knowledge of his imperfection back to the court, both in the form of the girdle—an outward marker of his experience—and in the wound to his neck—a literal embodiment of the lesson learned. When he returns, Arthur's knight shares his story with his King and his fellows, interpreting its lesson for them. Gawain explains the connection between the girdle and the "nirt," beginning with his personal imperfection and using a number of first-person pronouns:

> "'Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek. / Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue / Of couardise and couetyse, þat I haf caȝt þare; / Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne. / And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last / For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit, / For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.' / Þe kyng comfortez þe knyȝt, and alle þe court als / Laȝen loude þerat and luflyly acorden / Þat lords and ledes þat longed to þe Table, / Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue, / A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryȝt grene, / And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were" (ll. 2506-2518).

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[35] The *MED* entry for "game (n.)," which appears in various forms throughout *SGGK* (a by-no-means-exhaustive sampling of which include mentions of "game" or "gomen" at ll. 365, 989, 1314, 1319, 1376, 1532, 1536, and 1635), notes that the term refers primarily to "Joy, happiness; pleasure, delight; gaiety, mirth," but that it can also indicate a "festivity, revelry"; "Any of the sports of hunting, fishing, hawking, or fowling"; "amorous play, love-making"; "an athletic contest; also, a game of chess … a tournament or jousting"; "a joke, jest"; and even the "game animals … killed or caught" during a hunting expedition. The important combination of hunting, good natured challenge, gaming, sexual "play," and general frivolity all appear in and are key to Gawain's character, his experiences, and his testing in this poem. The overwhelming sense of this word, however, is one of lightness and good times, suggesting that the challenges or "gomen" that the knight faces—while without a doubt dangerous trials with high stakes—might be encapsulated by a larger air of comedy and felicity. MED, "game, n."

[36] Moore, "Making Sense of an Ending," 228. Here Moore is discussing and expanding a similar point about the knot in the girdle made by A. Kent Hieatt, "*Sir Gawain*: Pentangle, *Luf-Lace*, Numerical Structure," In *Silent Poetry: Essays in Numerological Analysis*, ed. Alistair Fowler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 120 [116-140].

Gawain here emphasizes his failings, expressing regret and explaining his need to wear the "bende," a necessity that seems like a penitential practice; however, his speech quickly thereafter turns outward. Gawain needs to wear the band as a reminder of human failing and the joyous necessity of Divine pity and grace, but he is not alone. In moving from the particular—his individual experience—to the larger subject of "mon," Arthur's knight here imparts the key lesson that people can hide their fallen-ness behind ostensible perfections like public reputation or the sign of the Pentangle, but they cannot "vnhap" the first "harme" of the Fall, and thus need reminders, like the girdle, of the human need for mercy and the primacy that *pité* should hold. This move from the individual "I" to the communal "mon" is likewise important in drawing attention to the fact that all humans share this experience. The baldric, in essence, forges a community out of Gawain's unique experience, and, while scholars like Manish Sharma have argued that this change "at least partially efface[s]" Gawain's "individuality," so that, "for the denizens of Camelot the girdle serves to reintegrate Gawain into a collectivity,"[37] I would instead suggest that the point here is that this community was in existence from the beginning, deriving from our common share of the post-lapsarian human condition. In other words, the community that comes to the fore here is that kinship and kind that was originally "tachched" to all humanity by the Fall—as is noted by Gawain in his shift to "mon" in his speech—a unity now made visible and visual to all through the baldric. Further, this final moment recalls Peter's sermon at the first Pentecost and the community it created, again linking Gawain to the Saint and his call for followers to "Repent and be baptized."[38] In this way, the otherworldly intruders in *SGGK* show the human community what they did not wish to see: that they share a fallen status that cannot be denied or erased through adherence to symbolic ideals. Instead this human "spot" can be polished away only through the mercifully-provided processes of remorse and penance, processes based on grace and a cyclicality that reflects similar cycles in the plan and order of the cosmos.

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[37] Manish Sharma, "Hiding the Harm: Revisionism and Marvel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 44.2 (2008): 182 [168-193].

[38] Acts 2:38 (NIV), or "paenitentiam inquit agite et baptizetur" (The Latin Vulgate), from *Bible Study Tools*, Website, http://www.biblestudytools.com/parallel-bible/passage/?q=acts+2:38&t=vul&t2=niv, Accessed September 10, 2017.

3.3   A Cosmic Becoming: In Which Plot Meets Structure

The poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript exhibit complex and elegant narrative structures, and *SGGK* is no exception. Indeed, as Jill Mann argues, there is a "sense of the poem itself as a carefully crafted *objet de luxe*." Further, while Mann's analysis focuses on the ways in which the poem's description of "courtly dress and armor" make clear "the poet's concept of the relation between outward appearance and inner qualities," I would suggest that that correspondence can be further expanded to show that the outward structure of the poem not only reinforces but also contributes to the communication of the plot's message or "inner quality." [39] As such, this section will both show the ways in which the structure of *SGGK*

Figure 2. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s Terrestrial Structure

represents the poem as a three-dimensional sort of mini-cosmos and how that structure further aligns with and invokes an immanent view of the universe and its Divine plan.

On one hand, the terrestrial plot and moral sketched above is arranged by the *Gawain*-poet in a series of parallel or nested frames that encompass and describe the horizontal action of the poem. As scholars like Helen Cooper note, *SGGK* possesses a "meticulous mirror-symmetry," [40] wherein each key moment and episode is reflected by a later, similar moment, with the earlier such moments bracketing those that follow them until the center of the poem is reached and the work begins to move outward again, closing the frames in an even, reflective sequence [See Figure 2]. [41] The structure Cooper outlines, however, best describes only the terrestrial plain and horizontal, human action of *SGGK*, beginning with Troy and moving from the Green Knight's Beheading Game to Gawain's First Arming Scene and then to Bertilak's Exchange of Winnings Contests, an inward progression that is then echoed in the poem's return journey outwards, through the Second

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[39] Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics," 243.

[40] Helen Cooper, "The Supernatural," in *A Companion to the* Gawain-*Poet*, ed.s Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 289 [277-291].

[41] My thanks to Dorsey Armstrong for drawing a version of this helpful visual during a meeting of our *Arthurian Literature* class, and also to my visual rhetoric consultants—Brittany Claytor and Aidan Holtan—for their help clarifying the image/design.

Arming Scene, the Conclusion of the Beheading Contest, and finally back to Troy. This is both a horizontal journey and a two-dimensional circle, bending back upon itself in suggestion of the cyclical patterns of "forward"-moving human history.

On the other hand, however, I would argue that the intervention of the fairies—intersecting most emphatically with the sublunary sphere through the Green Knight—does not simply test and affect the moral shape of the human world, it does so in a way that complicates the poem's horizontal, nested-frame structure, adding a third, vertical dimension to the work. By destabilizing the human concept of chivalric perfection through the interference of actors who act on yet are at various removes from the understanding and control of the human world, *SGGK* comes, on a smaller scale, to reflect the structure of immanent models of the medieval cosmos (which I will discuss in more detail below). In other words, the
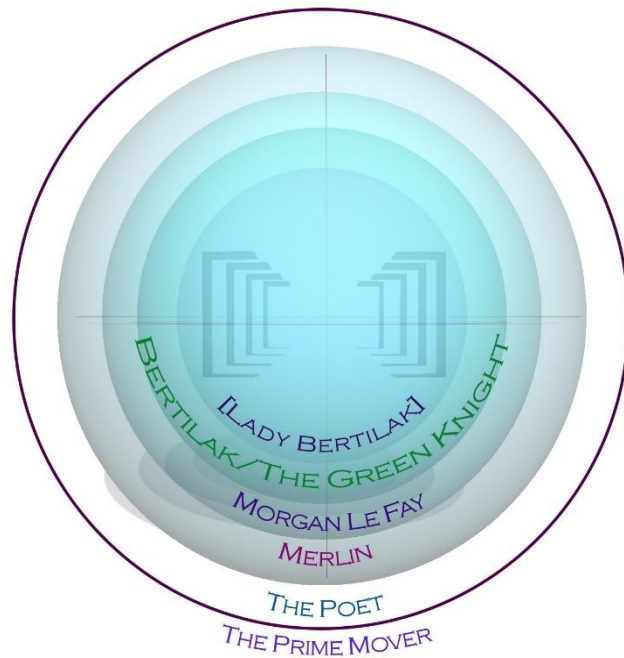
Figure 3. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* Cosmic Structure

hierarchy of influences in *SGGK*—from Lady Bertilak to Bertilak to Morgan le Fay and possibly even to Merlin—acts on the terrestrial plane, altering their mutable, human society and ways of life in a manner that is, on a smaller scale, analogous to the concentric structure of the medieval cosmos. In this way, the poem becomes a narrative version of a larger cosmic order, a poetic microcosm whose organization in part reflects the moral arrangement of the universe, linking the structure of the work to its ethical lesson. Further, the poem's cosmic organization does not overwhelm the mirror-structure Cooper describes; rather the human content is encircled by the spheres of otherworldly action, influence, and motivation, which are generated at ever-increasing removes from the human plot, so that each sphere contains and is contained by what came before or will come after, much as the cosmic sphere(s) enclose and contain each other and the sublunary realm [See Figure 3].

As I will discuss in greater detail, the fairy actors in *SGGK* stand at one or more removes from the terrestrial realm and Gawain's experiences, but their actions drastically influence and even upend the lives and culture of the human world. Each of these fay influences possesses, as a result of their fairy-nature, greater knowledge and perfectibility (their forms change, but they are less mutable—aging slowly, if at all) than that of the tale's humans. Further, the depiction of each otherworldly being—from the Green Knight to Morgan to Merlin—is characterized at least in part in terms that evoke making, artistry, and craft, features that then link these movers to the overseeing, creative power of the Poet, just as the cosmic motion described at greater length below connects the motion of the universe's spheres and influences to the First Motion, which is derived from the unmoved, Prime Mover. As I will show, the fairies' presence and influence in *SGGK* generates, for the poem, a structure analogous—though not identical—to medieval models of the cosmos. Furthermore, the emphasis on becoming and finishing suggested by this cosmological structure reinforces the argument for the fortunate necessity of grace made evident through Gawain's failure and redemption in *SGGK*'s plot. Before digging too far into *SGGK*'s specific, fay-derived make-up, however, it is important to sketch out the medieval cosmology I will be referring to, in addition to showing how the theological and moral lessons of these conceptions of the cosmic and the Divine infuse and structure the poem as a whole.

The overall, macrocosmic structure of the late medieval cosmos can be conceived of as a series of concentric orbs or spheres that were assigned to the planets and the "sphere of fixed stars," all of which is then enclosed by "an all-encompassing, immobile empyrean sphere" or heaven, wherein dwells the Divine (and typically also the angels and the blessed).[42] In this model, though God is both the cause and the end of the cosmos and cosmic motion, the things furthest from His perfect immobility find themselves subject to the mutability of terrestrial nature, whereas the incorruptible beings—like the angels—who exist closer to the empyrean heaven, are less variable, changing only with respect to place, for, as Thomas Aquinas writes, "the nearer a creature approaches God, Who is immovable, the more it also is immovable" (I.65.1).[43] This hierarchy is important in that it becomes a sort of ladder of causes as well as one of perfections. Though God

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[42] Edward Grant, "The Medieval Cosmos: Its Structure and Operation," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 28.2 (1997): 157-158 [147-167].

[43] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, First Complete American Edition, Vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947). All citations from the *Summa Theologica* will be cited parenthetically: (Pt.Q.Art).

is the origin of all motion—the ultimate governor of the cosmos and the "end" toward which it tends—He is not the only "mover" in this cosmological model. Other movers include the celestial orbs, which each occupy a separate heavenly sphere and move in circular paths, changing place but not form (unlike humans, whose bodies, for example, decompose, changing form after death). The circular progression of these celestial orbs in turn raises the question of how such bodies move through space: is it through natural, internal, or external influence? Per Edward Grant, most natural philosophers and theologians in the late Middle Ages subscribed to the view that God had chosen to assign the movement of these orbs to an intermediary or "secondary cause," either internal ("some form, or soul, or natural innate force … allow[ing] them to be self-moving") or external (a "distinct and separate entity, say an intelligence or angel").[44] Moreover, the external influence theory tended, per Grant, to predominate in the late Middle Ages, with "Celestial intelligences" considered to be a class of Angel far more powerful than humans but still limited by and inferior to God.[45]

In most cosmological models, at the center of these nested spheres of cosmic influence rests the sphere of terrestrial and corruptible bodies—those beings occupying the sphere below the moon (the sublunary sphere) who are considered to be the most mutable, and who are subject to a plethora of changes, from changes of place to changes of form (such as decomposition). These terrestrial "bodies" occupy the lower end of the chain, ladder, or hierarchy of causes,[46] with heavenly or celestial bodies, like the planets, potentially acting on or influencing the lives of sublunary beings, humans included. As Grant notes: "During the Middle Ages, many assumed that celestial bodies governed all activities of sublunary bodies," affecting terrestrial life through motion, light, and influence, and, "Since the celestial region was assumed to be more noble and perfect than the terrestrial region, natural philosophers were virtually unanimous in their conviction that celestial influences were unidirectional, flowing down from the celestial to the terrestrial regions."[47] In other words, these models of the universe allow for the possibility that there are movers outside of the terrestrial sphere, ones less corruptible than the stuff of earth, and ones whose movements, though distinct from and not motivated by consideration of the needs or

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[44] Edward Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs: The Medieval Cosmos, 1200-1687* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 523-524.

[45] Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, pp. 527-528. See also Grant, "The Medieval Cosmos," 159-161.

[46] Indeed, this metaphor of a chain or ladder is one often used by both immanent and transcendent writers—academic and vernacular—to describe the operations of the universe. Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, pp. 55-60.

[47] Grant, "The Medieval Cosmos," 162-163.

desires of the human world, can have an effect on the natural world and the lives of humans beings (while, at the same time, being ultimately governed by the motionless, Prime Mover). It is this model of concentric spheres of influence that I would suggest is reflected, on a smaller scale, in the overall structure of *SGGK*.

That the independent and concentric spheres of will, desire, knowledge, and influence created by otherworldly actors in *SGGK* might call to mind the structure and organization of the cosmos, particularly those models influenced by medieval, theological approaches to the work of Aristotle, is supported by the fact that those representations of the cosmos had, to varying degrees and in a spectrum of ways, permeated both academic *and* popular culture by the late Middle Ages. As Kellie Robertson has argued, medieval natural philosophy—of which cosmology is a key aspect—was, much like poetry, an attempt to understand the world in which medieval people lived.[48] Further, late medieval natural philosophy, Robertson notes, was not restricted to the discourse of the medieval university; rather, "many medieval poets were conversant with, even fluent in, these debates,"[49] and, at this time, poetic engagement with natural philosophy and the human experience grappled with questions similar to those engaged by "academic debates," so that, "For a certain segment of late medieval writers, how one understood the systemization of the world determined how one could write poetry about it."[50] Though the *Gawain*-poet is not one of the poets Robertson discusses in her work, I would argue that an interest in the connections between Christian theology and medieval science underpins and informs *SGGK*, so that its harmonious, reciprocal structure becomes, as we shall see, a concentric set of spheres—a miniature version of the cosmos influenced not by angels but by productively-disruptive fairies.

Rather than embroil myself and this chapter in the epistemological and ontological throw down between Augustine and the Neoplatonists (in one corner) and Aristotle and the Thomists (in the other), I will adopt Robertson's terminological distinction between "transcendent," "immanent," and "syncretic" views of the natural world and the universe.[51] These terms, as Robertson

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[48] A "set of interpretive practices that sought to divide up the material world." Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, p. 1.

[49] Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, p. 7.

[50] Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, p. 31.

[51] Robertson defines the "transcendent" perspective as one "associated with Neoplatonic and Augustinian writers who saw nature as inscrutable and to varying degrees detached from the human world"; the "immanent" as "associated with Aristotelian and Thomist writers who believed that the regular teleological processes observable in nature could not only reveal aspects of the divine plan but also teach us something about ourselves"; and the "syncretic" which describes the spectrum of view and approaches between these two poles, a variety of attempts to "graft the new[, Aristotelian] learning onto an older[, theological/Neoplatonic] cosmographical armature." Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, pp. 3, 44-45.

compellingly argues, are better able to capture the late medieval array of approaches to and understandings of the universe because they show the connections between each respective philosophical approach and the writings of key scholars and philosophers without defining any philosophy solely upon authorial affiliation. That distinction is important because an attempt to definitively assign a specific cosmological or philosophical perspective to the as-yet anonymous *Gawain*-poet's experience and thinking is impossible to do with absolute certainty (in addition to being outside the needs and scope of this argument). The *Gawain*-poet, as might be expected of a late medieval poet, writes from a syncretic, rather than from either a strictly transcendent or strictly immanent perspective; however, I would contend that, while drawing on both viewpoints, *SGGK* tends more toward the immanent perspective: a model, prominent among late medieval poets or academics, in which a world in motion is a world becoming and in which the Divine plan can be read in the order of nature.

That the Divine order or plan is perceptible or immanent in the natural world implies that terrestrial changes are not wholly chaotic or destructive, but rather that there is a governing cause and presence that benevolently infuses and directs these changes. A key element of immanent conceptions of the cosmos is that primary motion comes from the Divine—the first cause and unmoved mover—with cosmological models placing God at the "top" of the complex schema, a hierarchy of order, movement, and mutability[52] represented by the concentric spheres mentioned previously. The empyrean heaven or *primum mobile*—which is itself stationary and unmoving orb "that enclosed the world of movable orbs"[53]—was generally considered to have an instrumental or contributory effect on the rest of the cosmos, serving as the origin or cause of the ideal, "uniform, circular motion"[54] of the celestial spheres.[55] Thomas Aquinas, whose work aligns principally with the immanent school, writes in his *Summa Theologica* that the "order of Divine Providence disposes that lower things be subject to the actions of higher … as the inferior angels are enlightened by the superior, so men, who are inferior to the angels, are enlightened by them"

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[52] Much like the Book of Nature metaphor discussed above, for Aristotelians, this hierarchy or Ladder of Nature (often also described as The Great Chain of Being) emphasizes process rather than transcendence, becoming rather than being: "… medieval commentary on the Aristotelian *scala* emphasizes becoming over being, since each 'step' contains that which comes before" (Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, p. 59).

[53] Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001): p. 254. Grant also notes here that the empyrean heaven was a creation of faith not natural philosophy, a "theological construction derived from faith, not by rational argument or empirical appeals) (254).

[54] Grant, "The Medieval Cosmos," 158.

[55] Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, pp. 378-382.

(I.111.1).[56] Moreover, Aquinas elsewhere contends that the primary or most universal "underlying principle in things" can be viewed also as the ultimate cause of all things, high and low, and "Therefore no secondary cause can produce anything, unless there is presupposed in the thing produced something that is caused by a higher cause…. Hence it remains that nothing can create except *God alone, Who is the first cause*" (I.65.3, emphasis mine). In essence, then, God is perfect, complete, and unmoving, existing in the empyrean heaven, outside of the heavenly spheres occupied by the planetary orbs, but still serving as the originator and cause of the harmonious, cyclical motion of those spheres. He is the cause and the end of all things, and, because God governs all, Aquinas (often, in a truly syncretic fashion, citing both Boethius and Aristotle) further contends that the natural order of all things moves toward and ends in goodness: "we observe that in nature things happen always or nearly always for the best; which would not be the case unless some sort of providence directed nature towards good as an end; which is to govern" (I.103.1). The celestial spheres thus move in circular form, following the "natural" order provided by the Prime Mover (God), and this is the "perpetual and uniform motion" responsible, as Grant notes, for changes like the passage from day to night and back or the change of the seasons.[57] Moreover, this cosmic order—which, as Aquinas suggests, is immanent and perceptible in nature—also has a telos, a direction toward what Boethius would term "the Good" which is God.[58] In the context of

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[56] I turn to Aquinas here not because I would argue that the *Gawain*-Poet ascribes to Aquinas' philosophy specifically, but rather because Aquinas and his master, Albertus Magnus, are the heavyweight champions, so to speak, of the immanent approach, and, thus, their writings are a good indication of the basic ideas engaged with and heard by later medieval academics and poets who were influenced by immanent natural philosophy.

[57] Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, p. 521 [518-521].

[58] It should be noted that for Boethius—whose *Consolation of Philosophy* yet also draws, in its Fifth Book, on Aristotelian philosophy (Relihan xix)—this tendency toward the Good is not just teleological but also somewhat cyclical, with the soul descending from and returning to its originator:

> "You who control all the world everlastingly by your own reason,
> …
> … resting unmoved, you put all things in motion
> …
> You center Soul: It unites threefold Nature, sets all things in motion;
> You divide Soul and apportion it into harmonious members;
> Soul, once divided, collected its motion in two equal orbits,
> Moving so as to return to itself, and completely encircling
> Mind at the core, so the universe wheels in its image and likeness
> …
> You plant these souls in the heavens, in earth; by your generous statutes
> You make them turn back toward you and return—a regression of fire." (III.m9)

While the focus here remains primarily transcendent, there is still a sense of order with a goal or point of return that would influence later theological thinking. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001); Joel C. Relihan, "Introduction," In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001): x-xxvii.

SGGK, then, the moral lesson triumphing the redemption of failures met with repentence works with and is further illuminated by the Divine order in and mini-cosmic structure of the poem. In this way, the tale's organization reveals that the chaos and disruption produced by the fay are, at the same time, governed by an even more powerful, benevolent and directing force. Further, the cyclical nature of contrition and redemption discussed above reflects the ordered motion of the cosmos—a pattern derived from and returning to the First Cause or Prime Mover—and that cyclicality is again reinforced by other such examples of ordered motion that appear in and throughout *SGGK*.

As noted, the *Gawain*-poet makes great use of cyclicality, building many such patterns into the poem's narrative.[59] First, *SGGK* indicates a sort of moral recurrance wherein a fall (sin) is, upon repentance, redeemable, with the implicit understanding that that reclamation may yet be followed by another sin, and so forth. In addition, human history is represented as a pattern based on the turnings of the Wheel of Fortune and the rise of one power from the "fall" of another, a pattern shown most clearly in the mentions of the fall of Troy and the founding of Britain. Moreover, this recurring pattern of human history—which is further buttressed by the way in which the nested frame structure circles back on itself—arguably adds a fourth, temporal dimension to the structure of the poem. Finally, the cyclical elements in *SGGK* are also represented in the depictions of the natural world and its changes. Those moments where the *Gawain*-poet slows down to trace the rhythms of the natural world—including the movement of the year from one season to another—are important indicators of the celestial and moral order that in fact governs the terrestrial, moral, and narrative worlds of this poem. Thus, including "long passages of natural description," represents, for immanent composers like the *Gawain*-poet, not a narrative digression, but rather, as Robertson contends, a key textual moment that ought to be attended to, and through which Divine truths and meaning can be communicated.[60]

Indeed, I would suggest that one such extended passage of "natural description" purposely precedes Gawain's departure for the Green Chapel. In this episode, the Poet describes the quick

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[59] Indeed, Nick Davis suggests that the length of the poem creates a "large-scale recapitulative structure" in which one "cycle" (suggested by the completion of a hundred lines of verse) is concluded and another just begun, structurally invoking the "cyclical patterns of recurrence in the human experience" and "precipitating the beginning of" a new such cycle. Nick Davis, "Narrative Form and Insight," in *A Companion to the* Gawain-*Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson , Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 339 [329-349].

[60] "Just as form is inherent within matter, for Aristotelian writers, meaning is immanent in the visible surfaces of things that disclose the key to their own operations." Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, p. 83.

"ȝernes" of the "ȝere" (l. 498) from Yule to Yule as "vche sesoun serlepes [in turn] sued after oþer" (l. 501), with joyous Christmas passing to "crabbed" Lent which "fraystez flesch" (ll. 502-503), and the verdant beauty, floral and faunal abundance, and warmth of Spring and Summer giving way to hardness and harshness in Fall and Winter. Suddenly taking the perspective of a single plant, the audience finds that: "After þe sesoun of somer wyth þe soft wyndez, / … / … þen hyȝes Heruestand hardenes hym sone, / Warnez hym for þe winter to wax ful rype; / … / And al grayes þe gres þat grene watz ere; / Þenne al rypez and rotez þat ros vpon fyrst, / And þus ȝirnez þe ȝere in ȝisterdayez mony / And winter wyndez aȝayn, *as þe worlde askez*" (ll. 516, 521-522, 527-530, emphasis mine). As this portion of the longer passage shows, *SGGK*'s natural interlude makes clear the mutability of the world, but it does so in a way that, at the same time, also emphasizes the cyclical, ordered passage of the year from one season to the other. Yes, the "soft wyndez" of summer are replaced by the "hardenes" of fall, yet, even as the year "grayes" and becomes harsher, the language of the passage also recalls earlier seasons of plenty and suggests a sort of parallel order to these cycles. For example, fall, the time when the fruits of spring and summer "rypez" and are "Heruestand," seems to parallel the spring, as both seasons contend with and implicitly overpower the seasons that came before them. Just as spring is heralded by the fact that "þe weder of þe worlde wyth winter hit þrepez," until the "Colde clengez adoun, cloudez vplyften" (ll.504-505), fall likewise fights with the brightness of summer, making the way for winter as its "Wroþe wynde of þe welkyn wrastelez with the sunne" (l. 525). Further, though, as Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron note: "The changing of the seasons was traditionally imagined as a battle between Summer and Winter which manifested itself particularly in the equinoctial storms,"[61] here the description of these contests draws attention to the reciprocal roles and functions of Spring and Fall as equal yet opposing natural forces in the movement and structure of the annual cycle.

Additionally, in shifting this passage's perspective to that of a plant affected by and aware of the changes in the terrestrial world—a plant warned by the Harvest season to ripen its fruit against the coming winter—the *Gawain*-poet asks the audience to attend to and consider the natural world and to view, on a very small scale, the order expressed by this pattern of decay and renewal. The organized, parallel structure of the passing seasons is here emphasized by the description of winter as the time where "al grayes þe gres þat grene watz ere," thereby suggesting the ordered, inverse relationship between the verdure of summer and the graying of winter, with

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[61] *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, note to line 504.

spring and fall serving as seasons of becoming that connect and enable the year to "wyndez aȝayn" from one Yule to the next. Finally, the point that this is not simply an orderly but also a *governed* process is driven home by the final reminder that "winter wyndez aȝayn, *as þe worlde askez*" (l. 530, emphasis mine). Here "askez" can mean "To ask" or "To inquire," but, as the *Middle English Dictionary* notes, can also mean "To make a demand," "To have an intention," or "Of things: to require as appropriate or necessary; … tend toward or seek (a goal)."[62] The meaning of "askez" suggested for this line by Andrew and Waldron[63] supports my reading of the verb as conveying something along the lines of "demands," "requires," or "intends." *SGGK*'s natural interlude thus culminates in the statement that what has been depicted as a well-arranged cycle of reciprocally inclined seasons is not simply ruled but governed, operating in a means that is "required as appropriate or necessary" by an overseeing or ordering force, a First Cause, reflecting the cosmological model sketched above.

The poetic-cosmic structure of *SGGK* thus points to and foregrounds the moral lesson of the poem, revealing that, just as the cosmos is enclosed and governed by a Prime Mover who is the eternal cause and end of cosmic and terrestrial motion and who is the unity of all goodness, so too is Gawain's testing, failure, and merciful redemption encompassed by and a reflection of the goodness and merciful grace of the Christian God. In other words, the chaotic, puzzling, and at times inexplicable actions of the fairy movers as they act on and influence the human court and Gawain, as the court's representative, are encircled by God's powerful and merciful plan. Understanding the macrocosmic structure and order roughly sketched here[64] is important to an individual's understanding of the universe as a whole, just as, for immanent academics and poets, attending to the order perceptible in nature could provide one with a fuller, though never complete, understanding of Divine truths, because God and his plan were considered to be *immanent* within the terrestrial world.

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[62] MED, "asken, v."

[63] "aske (v.) … demand, require, … *G* 530)." Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, "Glossary," in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript:* Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 5th ed (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2014 [2007]).

[64] Though I do not mean to suggest that this is the only or an exhaustive model of the late medieval cosmos, only to present a common conception/typical model of the universe that would have been available to the *Gawain*-Poet and which I shall argue can be seen reflected in/by his poem.

3.4   Interlude – But Are There Fairies There?

This chapter has been treating the otherworld-associations attached to Hautdesert, the Green Knight, the Green Chapel, and Morgan le Fay as obvious, yet the fairy-nature of these actors and places is rarely if ever explicitly declared in *SGGK*. There are, however, numerous indications— from the borderland location of Hautdesert[65] to the water barrier and cave at the Green Chapel— that these locations and characters belong to an otherworld, to Faerie.[66] Speculation by Arthur's court about the Green Knight's nature and origins plants this seed early, suggesting that he might be a "fantoum" or of "fayryʒe" (l. 240); in other words, the human court suspects that the intruding knight is either a specter, dream, or illusion[67] or a resident of the land of Faerie. This moment effectively links imaginative mental productions like dreams and illusions to the residents of the otherworld and suggests that the Green Knight might belong to the same family of beings. Moreover, the court's musings about the Green Knight's appearance and origin are supplemented by the Narrator's own bemused theorizing that "Half-etayn in erde I hope þat he were, / Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene" (ll. 140-141). Much like the court's speculation, this moment emphasizes that the Knight is clearly different from but yet not wholly other to humanity; he is human-like—"mon most I algate mynn hym to bene"—*and* supernatural, but he is not, strictly speaking, a monster.[68] The difference of the otherworldly from those of Arthur's court is further

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[65] Michael Twomey points out that "Poets as widely separated in time as Marie de France, William Dunbar, and John Keats knew that fairies could be found almost anywhere at the liminal, marginal spaces of the world…." Michael W. Twomey, "Morgan le Fay at Hautdesert," in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed.s Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas, TX: Scriptorium Press, 2001): p. 107 [103-119].

[66] In addition to Twomey's work, Andrew and Waldron have noted the use of a fairy formula at line 460—"To quat kyth he becom knwe non þere, / Neuer more þen þay wyste from queþen he watz wonnen" (ll. 460-461)—that emphasizes the Knight's aura of other*world*liness—the sense that he hails from a different realm that is distinct from the human world—a feeling or implication that is repeated throughout the remainder of the poem. Others who have written about fairy motifs in *SGGK* include J.R. Hulbert, "*Syr Gawayne and the Grene Knyght*," *Modern Philology* 13 (1915): 458 [433-462] and Martin Puhvel, "Art and the Supernatural in *SGGK*," *Arthurian Literature* 5 (1985): 1-69.

[67] *MED*, "fantoum."

[68] When the Green Knight first appears in the hall, he is referred to as an "aghlich mayster" (l. 136). "Aghlich" here is a complex and polyvalent term that seems to be a Middle English version of the Old English "aglæca"/"æg-læca," used in *Beowulf* to refer not just to Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, but also to Beowulf himself. Further, another Middle English form of this OE word, "ēglēche," connotes bravery and fearlessness—though not necessarily goodness (*MED*, from the OE **"æ-glǣcea** warrior, hero, monster"). I would rather not get into a *Beowulf* fight here, but the polysemousness of this term in that poem alone suggests that it commonly refers to a variety of supernatural non-humans (or, what Shaun Hughes would call "nonhuman human beings") who can be, but are not always, monstrous. Further, I would argue that the *Gawain*-Poet is familiar with the flexibility of this word and chooses it accordingly in order to heighten the Green Knight's perplexing moral and cosmic affiliation, so that, as readers and hearers, our interpretation of this otherworldly figure remains, with Arthur's court, suspended—our attention and interpretive desires peaked.

reinforced when, immediately prior to Gawain's departure on his quest, Arthur's court laments that Gawain's destiny is to be beheaded by an *elvish* man: "Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde" (l.681).

In addition, the Green Knight's own confusing origins are supplemented by several indications that, on his journey to Hautdesert, Gawain crosses into an *other* world. First, the travel passage locates him in "contrayez straunge" (l. 713); second, the castle at Hautdesert shimmers and in many ways invokes otherworldly tropes (from extreme beauty to constant luminescence);[69] and, third, the castle is home to Morgan le Fay. However, the otherworldliness of Hautdesert and the Green Chapel is perhaps best emphasized by Gawain's own perception of his location. Arthur's knight remarks three times in three different ways that his homeland and its rules seem very different from those of Hautdesert, the place and code that currently defines his experiences: first, Gawain considers himself summoned to seek a place not in the human world: "For I am sumned myselfe to sech to a place / I *not in worlde* whederwarde to wende hit to fynde" (ll. 1052-1053, emphasis mine); second, Arthur's knight defines the moral code of the castle and Lady Bertilak as different from those of his home, saying: "… good is your speche; / Bot þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende" (ll.1498-1499); and, finally, Gawain makes clear that he believes that the place he seeks—the Green Chapel—and the place he occupies—Hautdesert—are land(s) different from those of Arthur: "And I am here an erande in erdez vncouþe" (l.1808). These strange and unknown otherlands, however, do not simply act as a foreign space of adventure distinct from and other to the realm and rules of the human court in *SGGK*; instead, Faerie's vast power and surpassing knowledge (when compared with the understanding of the tale's humans) is important to the functions that these beings serve in both morally testing the court and in driving and structuring the narrative.

3.5   Fairy Movers: In Which the Plot (and Structure) Thicken

As we have seen, the fairies in *SGGK* act, on the terrestrial level of the plot, to disrupt the ideal of the Pentangle in a way that opens room for the ideal's replacement with a necessary and more gracious process of becoming, just as, in their otherworldly and slightly removed roles as influences, the fay also help to generate for the poem a concentric, spherical structure analogous

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[69] See, for example: Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1, 60, and 90-91.

to immanent models of the cosmos. In this way, the otherworldly in *SGGK* effectively bridges the terrestrial and the cosmic, the plot and its structure, supporting and even furthering the poem's communication of its moral point. Returning to Figure 3, it becomes clear that, though the Divine is the most distant and powerful cosmic and moral force acting on and affecting the lives and experiences of Gawain and his fellows, there are also other, *super*-natural actors influencing and even disrupting the lives and culture of the human court in this poem. These otherworldly figures— each one more knowledgeable and more distant from the changeable experience of the terrestrial realm than the next—structure and shape the work's narrative action, generating layers of influence at one or more removes from the terrestrial, human realm. The Green Knight, Morgan le Fay, Merlin, and the poet are all influential figures, but the further removed each influence is from the action of the poem the more powerful and inscrutable an actor she/he/they prove(s) to be. These layers of influence, moreover, give the poem it's cosmologic structure, a structure that encompasses not only the surprising yet comprehensible games of the Green Knight/Bertilak, but also the more perplexing and remote plans of Morgan le Fay, and, finally, the most distant and indistinct influences of Merlin and the *Gawain*-poet themself. As we move away from Gawain's human perception and experience—an experience defined by his status as distinctly human and limited—the audience's clarity regarding each additional influence's motives and purpose (like Gawain's own understanding) decreases. Conversely, however, the further the explanation moves from Gawain, the more the supernatural actors seem to know about the processes and secrets of the cosmos. Thus, at each remove there exists an actor who sees or knows a little more than does the one below him- or herself, and who acts on or moves those other actors and their spheres through making and craft in one form or another. The movers' connection to the powers of craft, moreover, links them to the creative power of the *Gawain*-poet as the work's "prime mover," just as cosmic influences and movers are connected to and derive their motion from the immovable Prime Mover who governs them. In this way, the structure of the poem and the influence of the fay characters together reinforce the idea that God's order, role, and plan are reflected in His creation.

Of the otherworldly influences on Gawain's life and morals, the most prominent and visible is the Green Knight himself. Gawain spends the majority of the narrative at the center of a maelstrom of mutability wrought, ostensibly, by the Green Knight/Bertilak, and, though we later learn that the Green Knight is not the only powerful being influencing Arthur's court Gawain's

experiences, the Knight's role is enormously significant to the action that unfolds. The Green Knight is primarily responsible first for introducing the narrative's conflict in the form of the Beheading Game and then, as Lord Bertilak, for orchestrating the Exchange of Winnings Game. These two challenges, unbeknownst to Gawain, link his success in the Beheading Game to his later performance in the personal testing of his individual honor at Hautdesert. The Green Knight (and/or Bertilak) is thus the most prominent, knowledgeable, mobile, and visible actor and influence within the poem's narrative. Indeed, he proudly takes credit for arranging his wife's "hunting," so to speak, of Gawain, claiming: "'And þe wowing of my wyf. I wroȝt hit myseluen" (l. 2361). The word "wroȝt" here—further emphasized by the line's alliteration—conveys the Green Knight/Bertilak's importance and power as the key maker of the Exchange of Winnings Game and its attendant wooing "test." However, the use of "wroȝt" also invokes several other lexical senses and connotations, in particular the connection between "working" and artistic creation (including poetry), as well as the cosmic sense of an influence "affect[ing] earthly events."[70] These additional senses of "wroȝt" reinforce Watson's claim that the *Gawain*-poet commonly sees "poetic craft," "courtliness," and "the intricate harmony of heaven" as intertwined, with the fairy Knight's statement implicitly connecting his work to the creative and influencing work of the poet and, ultimately, to that of the Prime Mover. As such, the depictions of the otherworldly influences in *SGGK* are not only linked to each other by a shared connection to artistic making, that connection also links the fairy movers to the Divine who is, in the end, both the source of creation and the origin of its order.

Further, the Green Knight's use of "wroȝt" here is not the first time that Bertilak and/or his otherworld realm have themselves been described with words that suggest poetic construction. For example, when Hautdesert first appears to Gawain, the castle is described as having "coruon coprounes, craftily sleȝe" (l. 797)—carved finials that are intricate and made "Skillfully, ingeniously, artistically,"[71] with craft. Much like the use of "wroȝt" in the Green Knight's explanation of the elaborate game he fashioned to test Gawain, the use of "craftily" in describing the Knight's castle suggests that his home was constructed with skill, while also calling to mind

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[70] *MED*, "werken" (senses 2, 9-11). Relevant meanings of "werken" include "work toward a specific purpose; "to have or exert an influence … *astrol*. reign in a sphere, affect earthly events"; to "practice an art; work magic"; to produce artistic workings like weaving, constructing a building, or painting; and "to exercise creative power, be a creator."

[71] *MED*, "craftīlī"

the artistry of *poetic* making or *craft*. "Craft," another polyvalent term, likewise connotes not only "strength" and "skill," but also "An art," "The theory of an art … [or] a branch of learning," and even magical skill or sorcery.[72] The connection between power and influence (including cosmic influence in the case of "wroʒt") and artistic and even magical creation thus reveals key aspects of Bertilak's character and role in *SGGK* as a powerful will and influence, but also, I would argue, as an artist—a skilled and otherworldly creator. The connections between artistic craftsmanship and magical power are neither hard to imagine nor unique to this poem. Aisling Byrne, for example, has made a compelling case for otherworldly spaces as representative of fiction and its capabilities—these worlds are inherently magical places where all bets are off and the expected no longer applies; in essence, the imaginative potentiality of the journey into or encounter with the otherworld means that an "audience's horizon of expectations shifts for a second time, and that of the narrative's human protagonist for the first time, enabling these discrete spaces within narrative texts to mimic the processes of fiction itself."[73] Viewed this way, the Green Knight/Bertilak might be read as the "author" of the exchange of winnings game: he does not simply put a plot in motion, rather, his plan is a complex work of art, wrought, or perhaps co-wrought, by an intentional creator, and his actions within this context come to both structure and direct the "text" of the game or test. In this way, the Green Knight's influence reinforces the sense that this poem and the cosmos are deliberately composed and ordered works; however, Bertilak is not the only author or influence on the human world of this poem. In particular, several other influences emerge in the "big reveal" at the poem's end.

Bertilak of course works on Lady Bertilak, who in turn works on Gawain, and, to some extent, on the poem's audience who, with Gawain, encounter one surprising twist and revelation after another, quickly learning that there is a broader, and fairly perplexing, context for the poem's action, a scheme crafted by Gawain's aunt: Morgan le Fay. The actions and desires of Morgan seem, as might be expected, illogical and capricious, but they also bracket the Green Knight's own test—first inciting the Knight's intrusion into and challenge of Arthur's court and then (re)appearing in the Knight's "big reveal" after his own test has been resolved. The revelation of Morgan's role in Gawain's tale and trial becomes a puzzling interruption of the narrative's resolution, one that effectively continues what might otherwise have been a somewhat more simple

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[72] *MED*, "craft" (n.(1)) (senses 1-3, 5)
[73] Byrne, *Otherworlds*, pp. 22-25.

tale, in line with the action of *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*,[74] and complicating any sense of who is "in charge" or of what the ultimate goals of Gawain's test might be. Morgan's sudden appearance raises questions regarding authority but also seems to suggest degrees or layers of intention and intervention that neither Gawain nor the reader had previously been able to detect, effectively complicating the narrative by making it more like the limited experience and understanding of the universe that defines everyday human existence.[75]

Whereas Bertilak/the Green Knight is, as seen above, central to and a clear influence on the action unfolding within *SGGK*, Morgan exists at a slight remove from the action, the audience, and the narrative. Unlike Bertilak and the Green Knight, who are seen, heard, named, and interacted with throughout *SGGK*, Morgan appears in the poem—she is seen and named—but the work's audience never hears her speak or sees her take any notable action. While her influence is an ostensibly powerful and important one, she never communicates about it or for herself in any way, leaving the Green Knight to explain: "Morgne þe goddes / Þerfore hit is hir name; / … / Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle / For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were / Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table; / Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue, / For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe" (ll. 2452-2453, 2456-2460). Bertilak here ascribes his marvelous appearance as the Green Knight to Morgan "þe goddess," and, whether you believe the Green Knight is Bertilak's true form or not, this speech clearly assigns to Morgan not just the working or construction of a plan—implemented through an intermediary—to test the "renoun" of the Rounde Table, but also ascribes to her the power to shape or craft the Knight's wondrous, green form. His "wyse" is her artistic, formed, we are told, to achieve what Morgan desires, and, moreover, her intentions are cast as distinct from Bertilak's own, catching Gawain in a miasma of motivations.

In addition, the Green Knight explicitly describes Morgan's power or "myȝt" as rooted in her possession of exceptional knowledge and craft: "'Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous

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[74] Which is not to say that *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* is simple, just that it is less complex than *SGGK* because it has fewer supernatural actors influencing the human world and the poem's action, and, moreover, because the motivations of the otherworldly beings in the former romance are more fully explained than they are in the latter work.

[75] Dennis Moore, notes that "Morgan's unforeseen emergence as prime mover of the story suffuses the romance with an ambiguity and indefiniteness," one that often allows key questions multiple possible yet conflicting answers. For example, Moore discusses the Exchange of Winnings Game and its relationship to the Beheading Game, arguing that Bertilak could be solely responsible for the former, as his speech suggests, but that, at the same time, uncertainty in the text also allow for the "possibility that Morgan had him send his wife to Gawain," and that it is not "safe" to assume one way or the other. Moore, "Making Sense of an Ending," 226.

lenges, / And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned— / Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony ho hatz taken, / For ho hatz dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme / With þat conable klerk; þat knows alle your knyȝtez / At hame" (ll. 2446-2451). Morgan then holds learning and skills that are exceptional and rare, knowledge derived from her studies and relationship with Merlin. In other words, the further the explanation moves from Gawain, the more the actors seem to know of the operations and "maystrés" of the world and the less we, the audience, seem to understand or comprehend about their motivations, desires, or means. Morgan's power, intentions, and understanding continue to exceed and frustrate those of both the human hero and the work's audience so that we share in Gawain's "limited vision" and "shocked recognition of his own imperfection," even coming to realize our identity with him and his experience so that, as Dennis Moore notes, "the surprising introduction of Morgan" ultimately "has the further effect of reminding us how completely we share that imperfection."[76] Moreover, Morgan's introduction and involvement perplexes readers and critics to this day, encouraging in audiences a sort of mental reflection on or re-reading of *SGGK* in the moment of this reveal.[77] Despite her silence in and distance from the narrative action, then, Morgan holds an immense and yet somewhat inaccessible power throughout *SGGK*, a power stemming largely from her magical nature and her unnerving remoteness—factors that work together to obscure her motivations and desires.

Morgan, however, is not the only magical individual to hover at the periphery of Gawain's story. Merlin, likewise, appears somewhat vaguely within the Green Knight's surprising revelation, his influence one degree removed even from Morgan's own. In the Green Knight's explanation of causes, Merlin is clearly defined by the possession of skill and learning—he is mentor to and origin of Morgan's skill and knowledge—yet he exists only in name, mentioned but never seen within the poem at any point. He appears only in allusion, and it unclear whether he does or does not have another plan for what unfolds, or if he is in any way currently acting on or through Morgan (as she is through Bertilak). Merlin, thus, haunts the narrative, inaccessible to an even greater degree than Morgan and understandable only through intertextual reading and evidence.

Finally, at one further remove even from Merlin, the repeated reminders of artistry and poetic working throughout these passages subtly indicate the work of the *Gawain*-poet themselves, the

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[76] Dennis Moore, "Making Sense of an Ending: Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Mediaevalia* 10 (1984): 224-225 [213-233].
[77] In his article, "Making Sense of an Ending," Moore similarly argues for and discusses the reflective encouragement effected by Morgan's surprise introduction.

work's prime mover, who holds the most knowledge and an almost God-like ability to magically bend and shape the experiences of both Gawain and the poem's audience. By layering these supernatural influences and creative workers, *SGGK*, much like the natural world, becomes a text in which the Divine plan and/or order can be seen as immanent, and, by drawing attention to the artistic power of the otherworldly actors as makers and workers, the *Gawain*-poet links fiction to the communication of Divine truths. Indeed, Nicholas Watson similarly suggests that, in their works, the *Gawain*-poet emphasizes a "triangular link … between poetic craft, the intricate harmony of heaven and the self-conscious complexities of courtliness,"[78] arguing, much as I do, that the Poet appears to conceive of poetic or artistic structure as a sort of microcosm. Further, Watson extends his argument to suggest that the Poet's definition of court structure within her/his/their works similarly reflects the "harmony of heaven," so that: "as Hildegard of Bingen viewed both the convent she governed and the synaesthetic visionary works she wrote there as microcosms of heaven … so the *Gawain*-poet seems to have perceived both his own intricate verbal creations and the self-consciously rarefied court culture within which they position themselves as earthly images of heavenly reality."[79] As such, I would contend that the links between artistic creation within *SGGK* and the poet's own working of that same poem can together be seen in the ways in which the otherworldly actors are characterized—the common emphasis on craft in each portrait pointing, finally, back to the originator and cause of the cosmos itself—the Divine.

3.6   Conclusions

In many ways, the action of *SGGK* thus stems from the layered influences of the otherworldly beings on the almost stationary figure of Gawain—though we do see Arthur's knight traveling, these moments of activity are rushed through in a way that his experiences resting in bed or participating in feasts are not. Gawain, despite his best efforts to always be the embodiment of chivalric perfection, finds himself acted on, tricked, tested, pushed and pulled in numerous directions by various fairy characters, all of whom are more mobile and more knowledgable than he. Much like Arthur's court, stunned and silenced by the Green Knight's appearance, Gawain finds himself virtually powerless to contend with those forces and desires whose understanding

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[78] Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," p. 311.
[79] Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," p. 297.

and attendant power so vastly outweigh his own. However, we—the audience—and Gawain—the hero—only fully understand and learn this lesson at the poem's conclusion. The otherworldly beings of *SGGK* do not simply add flash and "narrative excitement" to the poem; rather, they serve a larger, moral purpose through which "The natural, the known, is itself defamiliarised and made strange, so that it can be seen as if for the first time."[80] In this way, the fairies act much like the fiction striving to contain them[81]: they arrest Gawain, and the tale's audience with him, disrupting the human ideal of chivalry and posing a number of questions that they refuse to fully resolve. By thwarting expectations, undermining social mores, and writing new, unexpected rules, these fairies act as creative forces, encouraging the audience (and Gawain) to contemplate more deeply their effects: seeking to understand not just their influence and purposes, but also ourselves.

In the end, the fairies of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* serve as a disruptive and "disintegrative" force,[82] but the "disruptive power of the marvel"[83] is, at the same time, benevolent and joyous, a disruption that makes Gawain's (and humankind's) failure to uphold the interlocked ideals of the Pentangle into a redeemable flaw, shifting the focus of morality in *SGGK* away from flawlessness and towards becoming. Further, the poem's emphasis on cyclicality and its mini-cosmic structure work together to emphasize the importance of finishing or perfecting at the levels of the human, the natural, and the cosmic. The laughing court and the brotherhood of the baldric, then, reflect the ultimate, Divine comedy: the redemption (polishing, purifying, and perfecting) of humanity from universal harm through the creative power of Divinely-bestowed grace, a necessity and possibility which is, in *SGGK*, made clear only through the interference of the fay.

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[80] Cooper, "The Supernatural," p. 279.
[81] As Byrne has so compellingly argued.
[82] Sharma, "Hiding the Harm," 179.
[83] Sharma, "Hiding the Harm," 188.

CHAPTER 4.   WOUNDED BODIES AND WOUNDED TEXTS: FAIRY INTERVENTIONS AND NARRATIVE INJURY IN *SIR ORFEO* AND CHAUCER'S *MERCHANT'S TALE*

Fairy narratives often focus on and engage, explicitly or implicitly, with the human body. Some fairies, for example, delight in collecting or transforming human forms—changelings being perhaps the most obvious and noteworthy example—while others, like the Morgan Le Fay, who is mistress of Avalon, act as magical healers of wounded mortals.[1] Fay interest in and engagement with human bodies matters because, in medieval culture and thought, the concept and "construction" of the body serves, as Thomas Prendergast has also noted (in a very different context), as a flexible and salient metaphor widely used to represent a multiplicity of concepts, everything from basic human corporeality to the organization of a sociopolitical group, and many others besides. The body, in other words, was a valuable way for medieval thinkers to literally and metaphorically engage with a wide range of ideas: the body was good to think with. As such, as Prendergast notes, "the construction of not just 'the body' but of a multitude of bodies (the king's, women's, Christ's, the mystical body of the Church) is crucial for any understanding of the Middle Ages."[2] This "multitude of [metaphorical] bodies," moreover, includes the notion of a text as a body, one with a physicality as well as a readability and form. Further, both corporeal and narrative bodies are (re)productive: the former through the production of children and the latter through those textual and imaginative legacies engendered both through intertextuality—such as the citation of other romance heroes in the description of a romance's own protagonist—and/or through the inspiration of ideas and other creative productions in their readers and hearers.

In what follows, I will refer to several distinct but related types of form or body that the fay can interact with and disrupt. The first of these is the "physical" or "corporeal body" of the tale's mortal characters. These are the individual, human forms that we, as modern readers, most

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[1] Corinne Saunders, for example, notes the shared interest in human bodies that seems to characterize the fay in numerous medieval romances. In her work on "Violent Magic," Saunders suggests that, in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, "the hag's role neatly aligns with the role of fairy in other romances, where magical practices tend to include a kind of amoral game-playing with humans, which most of all involves the pursuit of bodies"; indeed, Saunders also sees this desire for and "pursuit" of the human form in *Sir Orfeo*, wherein "The King of Faery seems to want to *possess*, but not in sexual terms, bodies." Corinne Saunders, "Violent Magic in Middle English Romance," in *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature: A Casebook*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 2004): pp. 231, 237 [225-240].

[2] Thomas A. Prendergast, "Introduction," in *Chaucer's Dead Body: From Corpse to Corpus* (New York: Routledge, 2004): p. 3 [1-16].

often expect or imagine when confronted with the term "body." The next is "metaphorical bodies," by which I mean those representative, metonymic, and/or social forms appearing in each work (for my purposes, most extensively in *Sir Orfeo*), many of which are listed in Prendergast's "multitude of bodies." A metaphorical body often symbolizes and can allow discussion of a sociocultural concept, group, entity, or corporate unity, anything from the body of a kingdom or of the Church to the unified "one flesh" of the marital body. Lastly, I shall refer to the actual form of each text as a "narrative" and/or "textual body."[3] Attention to the ways in which the fay destabilize a narrative's form is, in both *Sir Orfeo* and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, related to and makes meaning through a similar disruption of human physical and/or social forms within both tales. In what follows, I will argue that, in both *Sir Orfeo* and *The Merchant's Tale*, the treatment of corporeal and metaphorical human forms is reflected in and by the treatment of the form of the narrative itself as a textual body. In particular, fairy alteration of human forms in both works, whether through wounding, as in *Sir Orfeo*, or through healing, as in *The Merchant's Tale*,

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[3] Though the sense of a body as a readable text is by no means unique to medieval thought, the Middle Ages had a distinctive understanding of the connection between the medium of skin and the particular, material exemplar of the text that would be encountered by the reader or hearer, a relationship that is somewhat alien to modern audiences. Parchment, the substance onto which early works as well as many late medieval texts, were copied, is undeniably the product of a physical, fleshly body. In addition to the texture and color of each leaf, the evidence of the hair follicles of the animal from which the sheet was made remains on the "hair side" of each page, even after scraping, further reinforcing the skin-ness of the book. In other words, despite being "stripped on one side of flesh and on the other of the hair," "parchment is [unavoidably] a refined form of animal skin," giving medieval texts and codices a unique materiality and a formal, bodily kinship with and connection to their readers; the book is a material thing formed of skin just as a human body is. As a result of this connection, a material book might conceivably be seen not just as the product of a body, it may also be understood as a new or re-formed body, one that is meant to communicate, instruct, and/or amuse. Indeed, Carolyn Dinshaw bases her discussion in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* on the fact that: "Literary production takes place on bodies," going on to suggest that "literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying—allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating—with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal—the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning—with the feminine." Furthermore, Katie Walter supports the supposition that medieval narratives can be "read" as bodies with a material form, suggesting that the medieval belief in the "correspondence of body and soul, or of matter and form," reflects similar views regarding texts and their interpretation, with the concepts of "matter and form, also structur[ing] medieval literary theory" so that "the figurations and disfigurations of skin are bound up with the sense-making powers of discourse." These notions, along with the sense that a text is or can be a body, further suggests the potential readability of the human form as a text, a corporeal readability likewise indicated in the common medieval desire to discern a person's internal character or situation (and, in particular, their soul) through the observation of their external appearance, visage, and/or hue. (For example, Katie L. Walter writes that "the soul is widely understood in the Middle Ages to be the entelechy of the body. It is this medieval belief that grounds skin's readability. As that which paradoxically hides what lies beneath and displays it …, the text of skin is a tool used both by medical practitioners in diagnosing sickness and by priests in identifying moral disposition and sin.") Sarah Kay, "Skin, Suture, and Caesura," in *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2017): p. 3 [1-21]; Katie L. Walter, "Introduction," in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. Katie L. Walter, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 4 [1-10]; and Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 5, 9.

illuminates the ways in which each text critiques the necessity and desirability of human "perfection," suggesting instead the productivity and necessity of openness, inclusion, and difference.

Fairy actions in both *Sir Orfeo* and *The Merchant's Tale* affect not only physical and metaphorical forms, they also do so in a manner that is reflected in and related to the presence and treatment of the work itself as a narrative body. The textual, the human, and the otherworld are intertwined in *Sir Orfeo* and *The Merchant's Tale*, with both narratives examining perfection in relation to the physical human form, the body of the text, and the metaphorical bodies of human sociocultural forms like the kingdom and/or the family tree. The idea of the body as a material form and an organizing intellectual concept importantly links these disparate elements, revealing the ways in which narrative and social bodies can define and affect physical forms, and vice versa. Furthermore, I use the term "perfection" in what follows solely to describe a quality of completed or finished action, a wholeness that is in no way a signifier for personal or social value. As such, when referring to a figure as "perfect," I am not suggesting that that form is superior in worth to alternative forms that are open, wounded, or "imperfect," but rather that perfect forms are ones that are finished; they are those that are done being and becoming.

Additionally, fairy influence over connected, corporeal and narrative bodies in both tales is largely, or most significantly, focused on a primary, female character—Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo* and May in *The Merchant's Tale*—as well as on her connection to biological and textual fecundity. As Catherine Cox shows, in Middle English poetry, gender and textuality are often connected, particularly via the notion of reproduction. Cox states: "a Middle English pun may be determined in connection with two forms of 'make,'" referring on the one hand to poetic making and on the other to a romantic or sexual "mate," so that

> The latter sense, while etymologically distinct from and unrelated to the former, underscores the connectedness of textual and sexual en/gendering; it is representative of sexual engendering, pro/creation and re/production. The generation of texts, like the generation of progeny, entails making/mating in order to produce something new, something more than its origins. When I speak of *making* and *en/gendering*, I am therefore using terms that for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are subtly fraught with sexual connotations figuratively connected to the act of textual production.[4]

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[4] Catherine S. Cox, *Gender and Language in Chaucer* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 4.

I would argue that both *Sir Orfeo* and *The Merchant's Tale* engage these connections between gender, textual production, and fertility, placing women and their interactions with the otherworld at the crux of each narrative's ability to function as a meaningful and artistic narrative. In *Orfeo*, Heurodis' feminine and queenly body is central to the health and future of the romance's metaphoric and narrative forms, and the treatment of her corporeal body is paralleled in and by the similar treatment of those metaphoric and narrative forms. The traumatic, fairy-wrought rending of Heurodis' body here has the effect of opening the artificial perfections of the kingdom's metaphorical body and the lay's stalled narrative to change and the incorporation of new and different forms, replacing sterile artifice with revolutionizing and generative artistry. Conversely, in *The Merchant's Tale* the fairies intrude not at the narrative's opening, but instead at its close, effecting the resolution of the work through the magical healing of both the tale's textual body and January's corporeal body. However, the overly perfect, magical healing of January's blindness and the ensuing resolution of the narrative's conflict through May's fairy-gifted rhetorical skill ultimately draws attention to the open questions left in and by *The Merchant's Tale*'s conclusion. In so doing, I would suggest that Chaucer is laughing at the notion that a human can wield perfect control over any terrestrial form, pointing instead to the productiveness of indeterminacy, uncertainty, and openness. The larger result of fay intervention in both *Sir Orfeo* and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, whether it comes at the work's opening or at its close, is the forming of each story into an open and meaningful artistic creation, one that critiques world views that idealize completeness as "perfection." Ultimately, what most makes both tales into works of art is, arguably, that they are neither perfectly nor impossibly closed wholes; rather, both narratives are willing to be and to promote bodies—textual, human, and/or metaphorical—that are open, imperfect, and, as such, generative.

4.1   Artificial Perfection and Imperfect Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*

Sir Orfeo is fascinated with the power of art and story, as can perhaps best be seen in the opening of the tale, which tells of "Layes þat ben in harping" including the "auentours" of Sir Orfeo, as well as in the lay's closing, which reminds the tale's readers and hearers that "Harpours in Bretaine after þan / Herd hou þis meruaile bigan, / & made her-of a lay of gode likeing, / & nempned it after

þe king. / … / Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note" (ll. 597-600, 602).[5] Both of these moments draw attention to the romance's own status as an intentionally-crafted piece of narrative art. Further, as is often noted,[6] the poem overtly links Orfeo the king to the *Orfeo*-poet, foregrounding and often returning to the king's skill as a harper: "Orfeo mest of ani þing / Loued þe gle of harping; / Siker was eueri gode harpour / Of him to haue miche honour. / … / He lerned so, þer no-þing was / A better harpour in no plas" (ll. 25-28, 31-32). Finally, the claim that the harpers made the lay of *Sir Orfeo* upon hearing a "meruaile"—the one now being related—suggests a further connection between not only the lay, its harper king, and art, but also between narrative art and marvel,

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[5] *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A.J. Bliss, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). All further citations will be done parenthetically in the main text, all quotes are taken from the Auchinleck manuscript unless otherwise noted. I have chosen to draw my evidence primarily from the Auchinleck version of this lay in part because it is the version with the most detailed description of and engagement with Faerie; indeed, Murray J. Evans has suggested that the other two versions—in the fifteenth-century BL MS Harley 3810 and Bodl. Lib. MS Ashmole 61, respectively—are more religious in focus. Evans thus suggests that in the Harley "*Sir Orfeo* [is] stripped of most of its faery atmospherics and human drama and … its sparer narrative may invite an allegorical gloss," whereas "Ashmole's largely edifying narrative manuscript context … suggests a more explicitly religious/exemplary reading of *SO* [*Sir Orfeo*] than in Auchinleck." In addition, as Seth Lerer has noted, the Auchinleck version "contains a clearly expressed version of the story … because of its consistent imagery, its unique and pointed vocabulary, and what I [Lerer] take to be its thematic coherence." As such, I see the Auchinleck version as particularly valuable to and for an analysis of the lay's engagement with Faerie as well as its consistent use and consideration of artistic and narrative features. Murray J. Evans, "Romances in Composite Manuscript Contexts II: *Sir Degare*, *Sir Orfeo*, and the Middle English Lay," in *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 98-100 [83-102]; Seth Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum* 60.1 (1985): 94 [92-109].

[6] For instance, Ellen Caldwell notes that: "Framing the story of this recovery [by Orfeo] of political and martial sovereignty are explicit references to the composing of lais by minstrels…. Rescuing Heurodis, then, allows Orfeo to reclaim the subject matter of minstrelsy and political sovereignty, both figured in his source of inspiration, his wife." In addition, Shearle Furnish notes that Breton lays are typically structured and unified by recurring images and motifs, noting that "in *Sir Orfeo* … distinct episodes are marked by recurrent mention of the harp" as well as by the repeated "appearances of the fairies" and the "subsequent crises in which the hero speaks." Lerer likewise contends that the Auchinleck version of the lay is characterized by a "thematic coherence" that is in part a result of the "Auchinleck narrator's continual attempt to associate [their] art with Orfeo's," and Roy Michael Liuzza writes that: "The reader is unavoidably forced to make parallels between the actions of the poet Orfeo and those of the *Orfeo* poet." Taking the matter a step further, Oren Falk suggests that other "critics rightly link Orfeo's triumph with that of the extratextual poet," but argues that they, nonetheless, overlook the "possibility that this tour de force may serve a political function within the text." Lastly, speaking more generally, Aisling Byrne has argued that it is "a very natural thing" to "Connec[t] the magical arts, with their world-constructing powers, with art itself." Ellen M. Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in *Sir Orfeo*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 43.3 (2007): 304, 306 [291-310]; Shearle Furnish, "Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays," *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought, and Religion* 62 (2007): 89-90 [83-118]; Oren Falk, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30.2 (2000): 258-259 [247-274]; Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry," 94; Roy Michael Liuzza, "*Sir Orfeo*: Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21.2 (1991): 279 [269-284]; Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 26; and see also: David Lyle Jeffrey, "The Exiled King: Sir Orfeo's Harp and the Second Death of Eurydice," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature and Ideas* 9 (1975): 59 [45-60].

particularly the marvels of and represented by the otherworld.[7] In making these connections, the lay, early on, focuses attention on craft and artistry, and, in particular, on the artistry that the lay, its marvel, and its performance represent. Further, in order to fully explore the nature and power of art, the narrative of *Sir Orfeo* also draws contrasts between works of artifice and those of artistry.

"Artifice," on the one hand, denotes attempts to paint over or control the imperfections and failings of terrestrial living in order to achieve ostensible (and superficial) aesthetic perfection. Such artifice is at its height at the beginning of the lay, where idealized images of the king, queen, and kingdom foreground the conventional perfections typical of romance openings. For instance, Orfeo is not only "stalworþ," "Large[,] & curteys" (ll. 41-42), he is also descended from Greco-Roman nobility: "His fader was comen of King Pluto, / & his moder of King Juno" (ll. 43-44),[8] royals who used to be, the poet notes, thought of as gods (l. 45-46). Similarly, Orfeo's queen is described as "Þe fairest leuedi, for þe nones, / Þat miȝt go on bodi & bones, / Ful of loue & of godenisse; / Ac no man may telle hir fairnise" (ll. 53-56), a description that emphasizes her perfection in bodily terms, elevating her flesh (and bones) and their aesthetic perfections above those of all other human women. In addition, Heurodis, Orfeo's queen, is not simply exceptional in body, her external flawlessness is a mirror of her internal goodness and her loving nature. Such idealized descriptions are not unexpected to and for romance,[9] but, as conventions, they foreground a perfection that must be disrupted in some way in order for a story to take place. Indeed, the use of *dubitatio* in Heurodis' description—emphasizing the fact that no one could "telle hir fairnise"—makes the fact that language fails in the face of such perfection not just noticeable, but *inescapable*. The lay's opening, as it is here, is too complete, too ideal for rhetorical or narrative continuation.

Seeming to recognize this, *Sir Orfeo* opening swiftly moves to describe Orfeo's and Heurodis' orchard, a natural yet artificial and constructed space. In particular, the orchard's noted beauty reflects the ideal perfection of Orfeo's kingdom, linking the two through similar natural

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[7] Similarly, Tara Williams argues that *Sir Orfeo*'s opening suggests that lays, as a genre, are "unit[ed]" by the fact that "they deal with 'ferli [marvelous] þing' (4). In fact, the narrator suggests, such a 'þing' is the prerequisite and inspiration for a lay." Tara Williams, *Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), pp. 17-18.

[8] This genaeology is somewhat perplexing given that Juno is Jupiter's *queen*; however, the Harley 3810 manuscript adjusts Orfeo's lineage, stating that Orfeo's "fadre was come of Syr Pilato, / & his modur cam of Yno" (ll. 29-30). The question of whether the seeming mis-gendering of Juno in the Auchinleck version of this lay is intentional or accidental is outside the scope of this study, but it would certainly be worthy of further consideration.

[9] Indeed, Lerer argues that "Orfeo's lineage, combined with Heurodis's grace and beauty, tells the reader that this is an idealized court patterned along the lines of romance convention." Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry," 94.

descriptions: the kingdom is "ful of flours, / & blosme breme on eu*er*i bouȝ" (ll. 60-61), just as Heurodis and her maidens go to the orchard "To se þe floures sprede & spring" (l. 67). Similarly, the warmth of May, "When miri & hot is þe day" (l. 58), is subtly suggested again by the heat of "vndrentide" (l. 65), which likely helps lull Heurodis to sleep. Further, the orchard's beauty recalls the comparable beauty of Heurodis, both because such garden spaces are often, in medieval narrative, linked to female bodies and sexuality,[10] and because Heurodis is most narratively prominent and visible first, in this orchard and then in its otherworld double. Though Heurodis is, as we shall see, *not* artificial, her connection to the orchard gives the sense that she is, early in the lay, enclosed or contained in some way, just as a confined orchard is, unavoidably, a space that is aesthetically engineered and spatially restricted. For instance, "the royal orchards of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were walled enclosures, designed as much to keep regulated plantings in as to keep the wilderness out."[11] This controlled and aesthetically constructed space is meant to represent human control over the land and the wilds, and, as such, fairy intrusion into this space and their affliction therein of the queen's body—which has been linked to the restricted orchard realm—represents a trespass and rending of artifice and perfection.

Indeed, I would suggest that artifice as an entity and a concept is exactly what fairy chaos in *Sir Orfeo* disrupts, thereby both critiquing human investment in perfection and asserting the generative power of true, organic, and evolving artistry as an alternative. In contrast with artifice, *Sir Orfeo* poses "art" as the more meaningful, powerful, and effective process, largely because, unlike artifice, art acknowledges trauma, wounding, and difference, finding beauty in the incorporation and appreciation of the real, rather than viewing artistic making as a means for promoting pretense. As such, art is not the assertion of complete control so much as the acceptance

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[10] For instance, Curtis Jirsa notes that: "Numerous medieval romances depict erotic, otherworldly adventures in orchards or beneath fruit trees," and, as is discussed later in this chapter, *The Romance of the Rose* provided a great deal of eroticized garden material from which medieval culture could draw. Further, Priscilla Martin notes the cultural prominence of two Old Testament gardens: the Garden of Eden and the "exuberantly erotic" garden in the *Song of Songs*. In the *Song of Songs*, a Biblical text attributed to King Solomon, "The lovers express their devotion and desire in torrents of imagery drawn from the natural world, wild and cultivated…. They celebrate each other in a garden, like the royal lovers of Eastern painting. The woman is identified with the garden, full of fruit, plants and trees, fragrant and fertile." Adding to the garden's cultural resonances, Alcuin Blamires argues that the space also reflects January's "compliance with Epicuren ideas of 'felicitee', suggesting that the garden may be seen to invoke that [Epicurean] sect very directly…. January's garden is … more than a place for recreation and sexual delectation, it *is* the body of thought that, in the popularized view of Epicureanism, prioritizes such things." Curtis R.H. Jirsa, "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre: Arboreal Folklore in *Sir Orfeo*," *English Studies* 89.2 (2008): 142 [141-151]; Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1990), pp. 107-108; and Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 94.

[11] Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry," 94-95.

of indeterminacy and of the generative potential of difference and openness that is introduced by fairy disorder. In *Sir Orfeo*, art—which is best associated with Faerie and with Orfeo's harping—eventually supersedes the human kingdom's obsession with and commitment to artifice. In particular, the fay intrusion into the orchard—their opening of perfection by bodily wounding—permits the acceptance and incorporation of different corporeal and metaphorical bodies, including Heurodis' noble yet heir-less one, and the continuation of the kingdom through the adoption of the Steward. In what follows, I contend that *Sir Orfeo*'s triumph is in making art out of so-called difference, rather than in attempting to control that difference out of existence—the later, thankfully, representing an action that is both impossible and undesirable.[12]

Finally, as I have noted in other chapters, an interest in the relationship between chaos and order characterizes fairy romances, with chaos often acting as a surprisingly productive (if somewhat terrifying) force. In the case of *Sir Orfeo*, I would argue that this notion is most clearly explored in relation to the physical and textual bodies of and within the romance itself. While artifice represents an attempt to control and perfect terrestrial forms, artistry can be seen as an acceptance and even embracing of the productive power of chaos. In effect, Orfeo's ostensibly controlled and ordered kingdom, existing at least on the surface as a perfectly crafted whole, is actively disrupted by the "disorder" introduced by the moment of fairy intrusion. However, this intrusion also works to effectively reveal the "faults" in the seeming wholes of Orfeo's kingdom and patrimony, forms that had previously been presented to the lay's audience as belonging to an earthly paradise.[13] In particular, the fairy court's intervention in the narrative and the kingdom emphasizes the connections existing between corporeal and textual bodies, beginning with

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[12] For a similar, earlier argument, see Seth Lerer, whose argument sees similar tensions operating in *Sir Orfeo*, but, while I argue that the intrusion of Faerie works to compromise artifice, opening it up to the creative and open forces of art, Lerer links artifice to the "consciously crafted" kingdom of Faerie. Further, while Lerer contends that the poem ends happily, with rhetoric and artistry taking control and "restoring order to a potentially fragmented world," I am instead suggesting that the ending makes art out of the inclusion of fragmentation, difference, and indeterminacy, an act that celebrates genesis and creative production rather than order and control. Lerer, "Artifice and Artistry," 102, 109.

[13] The connection between Faerie and the earthly paradise/Eden is not a new or unexpected one. The distinctions between the otherworld and the earthly paradise are frequently, even notoriously, vague in many medieval texts and the descriptions of both worlds often dwell on similar features—such as brightness and abundance in both fruit and greenery. See Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friar*, pp. 185-187 and Byrne, *Otherworlds*, pp. 30, 80, and 91. Further, as Green notes, the poem itself makes explicit references to "Paradise," both in describing Orfeo's harping and in detailing the Fairy King's palace. Green suggests that these comparisons—in particular, the one comparing the earthly paradise with the Fairy King's palace, are subversive, most significantly because "*Sir Orfeo* … makes no obvious accommodations with the dominant ideology, and … shows itself remarkably unembarrassed in its espousal of a fairyland ethos." Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 168-169.

Heurodis' self-mutilation and abduction, a moment that, as we will see, joins her wounded corporeal form to the analogously wounded, metaphorical body of the kingdom, opening and "ending" the perfection of both forms in what will prove to be a productive way.

4.2   Cuts Like a Knife: Narrative Wounds and Textual Bodies

In many ways, *Sir Orfeo* foregrounds both the textuality of the human form[14] and its transience and vulnerability to change, linking the readability of physical bodies to their mutability. In particular, the prominent, physical changes borne by human corporeal forms throughout the lay are paralleled either by similar transformations in the shape the narrative or by alterations that indicate the readability of physical forms—a readability that further connects corporeal and narrative bodies. For instance, though all versions of the lay call attention to the vulnerability of physical and material forms by noting the mangled bodies decorating the Fairy King's courtyard, the Auchinleck version deliberately extends the passage, dwelling on the various traumas which can be inflicted on material and human forms. The grisly passage describes the fragmented, mutilated, pained, and "taken" bodies adorning the Faerie courtyard thus:

> Þan he gan behold about al / & seiȝe liggeand wiþ-in þe wal / Of folk þat were þider y-brouȝt, / & þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt. / Sum stode wiþ-outen hade, / & sum non armes nade, / & sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde, / & sum lay wode, y-bounde, / & sum armed on hors sete, / & 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 awedded, / & wonder fele þer lay bisides: / Riȝt as þai slepe her vnder-tides / Eche was þus in þis warld y-nome, / Wiþ fairi þider y-come. / Þer he seiȝe his owhen wiif, / Dame Heurodis, his lef liif, / Slepe vnder an ympe-tre: / Bi her cloþes he knewe þat it was he. / & when he hadde behold þis meruails alle / He went in-to þe kings halle. (ll. 387-410)

The horror of this passage leaps out first and most emphatically, fixing the lay's readers and hearers intently on this moment, with the lay's progression slowing to dwell on the description of the gallery's fairly gruesome décor. On the one hand, this moment effectively arrests Orfeo's own narrative, lingering for some time over the Fairy King's unique adornments. On the other hand, each "adornment" is unavoidably, also a human being with her/their/his own story. Indeed, the passage in many ways characterizes these bodies in relation to their diverse past experiences. Orfeo,

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[14] Tara Williams similarly contends that, "in particular, the poem [*Sir Orfeo*] underscores the ways in which bodies can signify to those who behold them." Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 15.

and the lay's audience with him, detects not only persons who have been wounded and had limbs truncated, but also those who have been drowned, strangled, and burned, as well as others who have gone mad, and women lying in child-bed.

Certainly, the implication is that these individuals are near death or that they would be dead if they had not been taken from the human world[15]—it is somewhat hard to live without a head, for instance, the Green Knight, of course, excepted—but their various experiences and the multiple reasons for their myriad near-deaths or mutilations complicates our understanding of why they were taken by Faerie. For example, some of the bodies "slepe her vnder-tides," repeating Heurodis' own experiences, by which we can assume for them somewhat similar experiences and stories; however, those who are "armed on hors sete" undoubtedly did not have identical encounters to nor did they arrive in Faerie for the same reasons as those who "þer lay on child-bedde." These collected and fragmented forms tell a plethora of stories—tales of drownings, combat, deadly births, and much more. As such, the wonder that this passage inspires arrests the forward action of Orfeo's (and Heurodis') own narrative, but it does so while extending the readers and hearers' minds backwards and outwards, encouraging us to consider how each body was wounded, and why, and to attempt to understand the reason the fairies might take human bodies to begin with. Mostly dead, wounded, and taken bodies do in fact tell tales, whether or not they use words to do so. Further, the state of each of these bodies communicates a great deal about the individuals' relationship to their fellows, their social value, and the vulnerability and mutability of the human form in general. Additionally, Tara Williams suggests that the "spectacle" of the gallery is "both aesthetic and narrative," arguing that the "catalog of different types of suffering" offered by the description of the courtyard "echoes the [work's] opening lines' survey of the different types of lays."[16] These elements reinforce those connections between narrative and physical bodies that are being considered throughout *Sir Orfeo*, just as the inclusion of Heurodis' body in the courtyard, particularly given her physical form's centrality to and association with the lay's narrative (more

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[15] That they are *not* dead is, however, important, and the lay makes clear that the bodies decorating the Fairy King's court are not deceased, rather they are, as Richard Firth Green rather delightfully puts it, "merely taking a siesta" (167). Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 163-170. For more on this, see also Dorena Allen, "Orpheus and Orfeo: The Dead and the 'Taken,'" *Medium Aevum* 33.2 (1964): 104 [102-111]; Jirsa, "Arboreal Folklore," 147-149; Tara Williams, "Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality in *Sir Orfeo*," *Philological Quarterly* 91.4 (2012): 541-553 [537-568]; and Elliot Kendall, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny in *Sir Orfeo*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35 (2013): 307-309 [289-327].

[16] Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 17.

on this in a moment), similarly supports the sense that each human in this space represents a story waiting to be told.[17]

In addition, though this passage is fascinating and imaginatively inspiring, it is also, inescapably, a list. The record of body "types" here is not mere description, it is a catalogue, a compilation, a collection of specific examples such as frequently appear in medieval writings broadly speaking. Though the content is exceptional, the form is not, and the untold narratives that each body represents align the courtyard with other medieval, textual assemblages, including florilegia and miscellanies: works that make selections and fragments of other texts into new recorded forms.[18] In particular, the passage joins the physical and the textual, implying that the courtyard can and perhaps *ought* to be read, like these medieval genres, as an artistic, thoughtful, and meaningfully assembled accumulation of parts taken from other textual bodies.[19] Indeed, the wounds inflicted on the bodies in the gallery makes them, to a degree, fragmentary, thereby reinforcing the sense that their presence in the courtyard unites them in physical space much as a miscellany unites its fragments in textual space. The corporeal and the textual come together here—each human form suggesting to the spectator or audience a portion of a larger tale—and the courtyard becomes a compilation of those "witnesses."[20] This, however, is only one of the instances in which the physical and textual are linked in this lay by their mutability as well as by their ability to communicate and tell stories.

Throughout *Sir Orfeo*, shifts in the treatment of human forms are reflected by a parallel alteration in the form of the narrative itself, a move customarily characterized by an attendant move from artifice and "perfection" to the appreciation, instead, of indeterminacy, openness, and art. For instance, the lay, placing early portrayals of the metaphorical body of the kingdom

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[17] Caldwell similarly suggests that the bodies in the Faerie courtyard can be thought of as stories, writing: "That strange, troubled catalogue of the undead is a catalogue of stories, trapped in the library of the fairy king, but not 'alive,' not in circulation—because they have not been given the voice and expression they might have, were they released to the world of poets and minstrels." Caldwell, "Heroism of Heurodis," 306.

[18] Kendall, for example, refers to this scene as a sort of miscellany. Kendall, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny in *Sir Orfeo*," 308.

[19] In a somewhat related argument, Roy Michael Liuzza has indicated that Heurodis might be thought of as a written text, a semi-dead and frozen work, while Orfeo might be instead thought of as a living and evolving oral narrative. Thus viewing the bodies of the courtyard as "frozen" textual bodies, suggests the potential for viewing the courtyard as a whole as an example of a florilegium composed by the fairies themselves. Liuzza, "Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance," 278-280.

[20] In related manner, Williams suggests that the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* should, based on the gallery's functioning as "not simply [an] assembled but [also as an] actively created … museum of human suffering," be read as "artists as well as curators." Williams, *Middle English Marvels*, p. 22.

alongside the description of the corporeal bodies of its king and queen, begins idyllically as a wholly enclosed and perfected body with little overt indication of conflicts existing in the court, the royal family, or the forms of the monarchs themselves (a point to which I will return). The opening of the lay lauds this seeming flawlessness, stating: "Orfeo was a kinge, / In Jnglond an heiȝe lording, / A stalworþ man & hardi bo; / Large & curteys he was al-so" (ll. 39-42). The excellence of Orfeo, and, by extension, his kingdom, as a hardy, courteous, and ostensibly paradisiacal whole is here foregrounded, so that the opening of the lay concentrates on the ideal— the realm, the royals, and the romance which are, seemingly, perfected. Even if there are, at this time, slight flaws in the operation of Orfeo's court and/or marriage, they are neither unique nor dramatic enough to constitute the matter of a romance; all such foibles are painted over and, as much as possible, rhetorically obscured, so that perfection here occludes and even impairs the tale and its ability to exist as a narrative. The façade is, however, as impossible as any worldly perfection to maintain, and the faults peek through at times. Oren Falk, for instance, suggests that small details throughout the early narrative—such as Heurodis' barrenness, the "hint that the [queen's] maidens are (willfully?) negligent of Heurodis's safety at the notoriously dangerous moment of 'vndrentide,'" the public spectacle made of Heurodis' distress, and the fact that Orfeo's lords and barons do not advise him—indicate that Orfeo's kingdom is not as perfect as it might seem at first glance.[21] It is, in essence, a locus of artifice. However, such minor dramas in the court's social and interpersonal life, while important and likely to affect the health of the political body, will only become the narrative matter of a romance with either the intervention of a supernatural force (as it is in this lay), the caprices of Fate, the menacing of a rival kingdom, or some combination thereof.

The primary problem with the seemingly fault-less replication of romance perfection as it appears in the early depiction of Orfeo's person, realm, and lay, is that it is, in a word, boring. As Aisling Byrne, in a discussion of "unfettered wish-fulfilment," similarly asserts, the otherworld is effective in checking artifice's impulse toward unlimited potential, largely by "highlight[ing] the

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[21] Falk, "The Son of Orfeo," 248-249, 250, 253. While I am not convinced of the potential duplicity or machinating "loyalty" of the Steward as discussed by Falk, I am in agreement that the ostensible perfection of Orfeo's kingdom pre-fay intrusion is illusory. I would suggest that it is in fact an attempt to paint over or control away the imperfections of human living that makes art less attractive or aesthetic—that, in fact, renders art artifice—while an acceptance and incorporation of change and openness, which might be mistakenly cast as imperfection, leads to the production of art that is more effective, powerful, and meaningful because of its acknowledgment of trauma and wounding.

fact that completely fulfilled desire imposes a limit on narrative."[22] Speaking more generally of the uses and functions that the otherworldly serve in narratives, I would suggest that the fay can work to interrupt or complicate such moments of narrative perfection—instances of artifice with limited narrative promise—thereby opening the tale up to and for productive development. While moments of upset or intrusion are common in romance openings, *Sir Orfeo* distills this pattern and foregrounds it and its narrative functions, offering a commentary on romance more generally.

As A.J. Bliss notes, it is not until "Queen Heurodis [goes] out into her orchard, [sits] down under an *ympe-tre*, and [falls] asleep" that the lay truly begins, and, as such, "this apparently simple act [on Heurodis' part] is the true commencement of the story, for all the rest of the action springs from it."[23] Tellingly, this "true beginning" is also the moment of fairy intrusion, an incursion that splits open the façade and introduces conflict: an ingredient necessary to the composition of any story. Further, I would argue that the connection forged here between the introduction (via fairy) of necessary and narrative-producing conflict and the resultant infliction of bodily and material violence is not accidental. In this key moment, the poet clearly emphasizes Heurodis' embodiment, describing her distress in ways that foreground the corporeal and material violence she wreaks on her own form. In most narratives, the moment that introduces the conflict that shapes and motivates the ensuing tale is the one that also fascinates and often disturbs its audience, often via the twined tools of wonder and horror. In *Sir Orfeo* the moment of intrusion can arguably be viewed as a point of wounding—an argument to which I will return shortly—with the narrative body paralleling Heurodis' own riven form: their dual perfections opened by contact with fairy alterity. This moment foregrounds material mutilation, intertwining Heurodis' emotional reaction to her encounter with the fay with a moment of lurid, physical violence: "… as sone as sche gan awake, / Sche crid, & loþli 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" (ll. 77-82). The *Orfeo*-poet strikingly foregrounds the material and corporeal violence being done here, noting that Heurodis "froted" her body and "crached" at her face until it bled, just as she "to-rett" her beautiful robe.[24] Heurodis' emotional distress and its material effects are palpable, unnerving, and

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[22] Byrne also likens "narrative stasis" and its "potential curtailing of the narrative action" to the "stunting of the personal growth so fundamental to romance." Byrne, *Otherworlds*, pp. 46-47.

[23] A.J. Bliss, "Introduction," in *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A.J. Bliss, p. xxxv [ix-lx].

[24] Later in the lay, Orfeo is able to recognize Heurodis, among the other bodies in the Fairy King's gallery, "Bi her cloþes" (l. 408). There are several possible conclusions to be reached from this fact; for instance, since Heurodis was seized by Faerie the day after her first encounter with them—an encounter prompting her to tear both her body and

unforgettable; her grace and prior loveliness fade from readers and hearers' minds, leaving instead the vivid image of internal pain externally written on the queen's self-mutilated body.[25] Further, post-fairy encounter, Orfeo himself laments the extremity of Heurodis' bodily change. Observing his wife, he says "wiþ grete pité, / 'O lef liif, what is te, / Þat euer ȝete hast ben so stille, / & now gredest wonder schiller? / Þi bodi, þat was so white y-core, / Wiþ þine nailes is al to-tore. / Allas! þi rode, þat was so red, / Is al wan, as þou were ded; / & al-so þine fingres smale / Beþ al blodi & al pale" (ll. 101-110). The lament here fixates on Heurodis' physical form, alternating between descriptions of her body "before" and its status "after," and encouraging the audience of the tale to focus on the force of change wrought in her form, actively reading it just as the king is doing. In this moment, as in the otherworld courtyard catalogue, Heurodis' corporeal body is readable *as* a text, just as her body, like those in the gallery similarly suggests the physicality and materiality of a narrative or textual form. Further, the connections drawn here between the physical and the textual emphasize the changes a body can experience, pointing, in particular, to the distinct contrast existing between the seeming wholeness of Heurodis' physical body before her encounter with Faerie and the corporeal change wrought upon her thereafter.

The temporal contrast between before and after and its emphasis here on the caprice of change is soon reinforced by Heurodis' own words: "'Allas, mi lord Sir Orfeo! / Seþþen we first to-gider were / Ones wroþ neuer we nere, / Bot euer ich haue y-loued þe / As mi liif, & so þou me; / Ac now we mot delen ato / — Do þi best, for y mot go'" (ll. 120-126). Heurodis' speech writes her narrative, emphasizing the completeness and unity of her former life with Orfeo, noting that, not only were they then "to-gider" in perfect union, without any anger between them,[26] but also

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her robes—she may have altered her dress in some way before the next day's appointment with the Fairy King. Another possibility is that Orfeo is more easily able to detect Heurodis because her clothes are damaged in a particular and memorable way—their exchange after her first encounter with Faerie is certainly vividly striking. Further, when Heurodis later sees Orfeo in the forest she, as I will discuss more later, recognizes him despite his having gone through dramatic physical and material changes, whereas, in this moment in the King's gallery, Orfeo recognizes Heurodis by her most external layer—her clothes. I would suggest, then, that the true significance of this moment is in contrasting Orfeo's abilities as a reader with Heurodis' own, arguably superior skill.

[25] Ellen Caldwell suggests that Heurodis' self-mutilation is not only memorable, but also a manifestation of her depth of character and her loyalty to her husband. Heurodis' scratching of her own visage, Caldwell, argues, "connects her to a tradition of holy and chaste women in the early Middle Ages who disfigured themselves in order to appear unappealing to would-be attackers. Heurodis' self-mutilation, similarly, is an attempt to preserve her chastity to her spouse Orfeo." Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis," 291-292.

[26] Heurodis' statement that she and Orfeo "Ones wroþ neuer we nere," certainly emphasizes the closeness of their bond and heightens the sense of tragedy that attends it loss, but it also serves to reinforce the aura/air of unreal or idealized perfection that characterizes their marriage and kingdom prior to the fairy intrusion. The conventional expression of an ideal here grates, albeit slightly, with any reader or hearer who has attempted to live with another

that her need to go now, to be taken by Faerie, is equivalent to a rending or splitting of their married body, meaning that now they "mot delen ato."

After his queen is taken, Orfeo also transforms, taking to the woods and becoming what is commonly described as a "wild man."[27] Driven by his grief and "gret malais" (l. 240), the king leaves behind not only his former body, but also his people, his kingdom, and his possessions. The poet takes time to clearly describe the king's physical change, noting that: "His here of his berd, blac & rowe, / To his girdle-stede was growe" (ll. 265-266), while also indicating that this alteration also applies to Orfeo's political body and to his material, kingly possessions: "He þat hadde y-werd þe fowe & griis, / & on bed þe purpuer biis / — Now on hard heþe he liþ, / Wiþ leues & gresse he him wriþ. / He þat hadde had castels & tours, / Riuer, forest friþ wiþ flours / — Now, þei it comenci to snewe & frees, / Þis king most make his bed in mese" (ll. 240-248). As with the change-centric descriptions used for Heurodis, the contrast here functions to suggest not only the bodily hardships Orfeo undergoes in the woods—experiences that radically differ from the luxury of his prior life—but also the violence done to his other, royal and political body. The king has, in other words, lost not only his wife, he has, in one dramatic moment, also been deprived of his bodily comfort, material possessions, emotional satisfaction, and physical kingdom.

In particular, the phrase "He þat hadde had castels & tours, / Riuer, forest friþ wiþ flours" (ll.245-246) emphasizes what Orfeo has lost and to whom he has lost it, with the power of Faerie and its king taking center stage. In particular, this phrase is identical to the one Heurodis uses to describe the lands she observed on her first visit to Faerie,[28] lands that the Fairy King possesses, present tense. In the Auchinleck version,[29] Heurodis explains that "… as son as he [the Fairy King]

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human—an experience of intimacy that is nearly impossible to maintain, no matter how great the love, without any occasion for frustration.

[27] For scholars who have discussed Orfeo's exile in relation to the "wild man" trope, penance, class, and so on see: Penelope B.R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Kendall on this time as a sort of sociopolitical death, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny," 319-320; as a self-imposed penance in part contrasted with Yvain's unrecognizableness in his wild-man phase, Claire Vial, "Clothing the Debate: Textiles, Text-Isles and the Economy of Gift-giving in Four Middle English Breton Lays," *Études Anglaises* 67.1 (2014): 14-16 [3-18]; and as class-crossing, Jacob Lewis, "Visible Nobility and Aristocratic Power in *Sir Orfeo*," *CEA Critic* 75.1 (2013): 20 [16-21]. For similar episodes see Lancelot's reaction to his loss of Guinevere and Tristan's response to his loss of Isolde in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (see also: Laura Clark, "There and Back Again: A Malorian Wild Man's Tale," *Arthuriana* 27.2 (2017): 56-72 for a Bakhtinian reading of Malory's use of the wild man trope.)

[28] On the near identity of the language used to describe Orfeo's kingdom and the kingdom of Faerie see also Liuzza, "Poetics of Performance," 279 and Andrea G. Pisani Babich, "The Power of the Kingdom and the Ties that Bind in *Sir Orfeo*," *Neophilologus* 82 (1998): 479-480 [477-486].

[29] Unlike the Auchinleck, Harley 3810 does not use identical language to describe the kingdom of Faerie and Orfeo's lost or left kingdom, but Ashmole 61 does.

to me cam, / Wold ich nold ich, he me nam, / & made me wiþ *him* ride / Opon a palfray bi his side; / & brouȝt me to his palays, / Wele atird in ich ways, / & schewed me *castels & tours, / Riuers, forestes, friþ wiþ flours*" (ll. 153-160). Reiterating this phrase in describing Orfeo's alteration thus reinforces both the sociopolitical wound done to Orfeo's kingly body (noting what the Fairy King still has, despite the fact that his intervention has indirectly deprived Orfeo of his own kingdom in both the present and the future tenses) and to imply that Faerie—described first and in glowing terms—outstrips what seemed to be the exceptionally idyllic human kingdom of Orfeo and Heurodis.[30] Both in this instance and in Orfeo's and Heurodis' reactions to their lives and her body post-fay-encounter, the shift from the "before"—a time of ostensible wholeness and perfection—to the present, a fragmented state of change and rending, conveys the sense that fairy intrusion and disorder has the effect of compromising or undoing completeness. Ellen M. Caldwell is therefore right to note that "The abduction of Heurodis creates not only a rift in the marriage and the kingdom, but a rape of Orfeo's authority and identity."[31] Through their interaction with the human world, the fay thus split apart, tear, and open the bodies of the queen and the royal marriage.

As a result of this narrative wounding, the text's wholeness and "perfection" might be thought of as productively compromised, opened by the intrusion and conflictual violence it experiences. In *Sir Orfeo*, the appearance of the fay is thus linked to bodily violence on multiple levels so that the moment of their intrusion might be read as a sort of narrative wound. Certainly, a less perfect opening to the lay could have preceded this wounding, but I would suggest that the paradisical nature of *Orfeo*'s beginning serves to emphasize its original, narrative completeness, drawing on romance's tendency toward polarization in order to foreground the aforementioned binaries of artifice and artistry and order and disorder. By drawing this more dramatic contrast between the pre- and post-encounter status of kingdom, form, and narrative, the lay is then able to situate the point of encounter as a rupture, a point of wounding. As such, the move from finished ideal to open, horrifying, and yet wondrous form encourages attention to the potential (or lack thereof) in both the lay's opening and its conclusion, thereby suggesting the significant difference between artifice and the open power of art. Ultimately, the wounding in *Sir Orfeo* is generative, opening the space needed to reclaim an "imperfect" version of Heurodis and to re-form the

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[30] See also James F. Knapp and Peggy A. Knapp, "Perception and Possible Worlds in *Sir Orfeo*," in *Medieval Romance: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 57 [51-72].

[31] Caldwell, "The Heuroism of Heurodis," 297.

metaphorical body of the kingdom so as to allow for its continued existence as something other than an organization based on dynastic succession.

4.3 It's the Terror of Knowing What the World is About: The Queen's Body and the Pressure of Hereditary Succession

Fairies have, at times, been used to explore and comment on anxieties regarding paternity and the flaws inherent in those systems that depend upon patrilineal descent for their continued existence and operation—systems that include dynastic monarchies. In most fairy lore, and in the majority of otherworld narratives, such concerns are raised by and related to the issue of changelings: beings who represent a "threat to the patriarchy," and who, like "fairy hybrids," "might raise difficult questions of paternity and legitimacy."[32] Though, unlike such tales, *Sir Orfeo* does not directly engage with the issues of "changed" children, Heurodis' abduction and her unique physical and sociocultural role as not only a wife but also a queen raises similar questions regarding dynastic succession and its flaws.

In a patrilineal monarchy, though the queen may not be viewed as the head of the kingdom's metaphysical body, her physical form is still cast as vital to the future of the monarchy, particularly with respect to her role in the production and protection of an heir: a son, related by consanguinity, who will maintain and continue the royal line. However, patrilineal descent is a system that relies on human corporeal perfection, working only when the physical bodies of the king and queen are lastingly and ideally functioning. Specifically, the uninterrupted continuation of the kingdom as a united entity is tied to the likewise uninterrupted operation of dynastic succession: a model for the passage of the Crown from one generation to the next which is cast as dependent both on the queen's physical fertility and on her constancy to her husband.[33] This model

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[32] In addition, Lisa Walters notes that changelings "disrupt patterns of succession and heredit[ar]y right," further suggesting a connection between Faerie and social concerns regarding institutions based on dynastic succession and patrilineal disecent. Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 113; and Lisa Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations: Authorship and Folklore in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Renaissance and Reformation* 39.1 (2016): 124 [115-146]. For a detailed study of the phenomenon, see Jean-Michel Doulet, *Quand les démons enlevaient les enfants. Les changelings: étude d'une figure mythique,* Traditions et Croyances (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002).

[33] Karen Cherewatuk has noted the conjunction of private and public concerns that characterize a queen's body, focusing in large part on the issues surrounding King Arthur's choice of wife in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*— considerations that include the ways in which "dynastic tragedy" can "reside in the queen's body, in the twinned problems of barrenness and adultery." While Cherewatuk is writing about a fifteenth-century text (and while Heurodis is in no way a reflection of the adulterous Guinevere), these observations have bearing on the way queenly bodies signify in romance, including how Heurodis' body's centrality, despite its extensive absence, throughout *Sir Orfeo*.

of "hereditary succession"[34] was crafted both to centralize power and to ease its transfer from one ruler to the next in order to ensure the unity of the kingdom as an unceasing, metaphorical body and to prevent a dangerous *interregnum*. These sustaining functions are, moreover, achieved through the King's metaphorical body, a form which, unlike the king's physical body, is meant to continue indefinitely as an entity, thereby preserving the unity of the kingdom as a corporate body and ensuring the transfer of Rulership and the Crown from one king to another, without event, *ad infinitum*.[35] However, it is not difficult to quickly distinguish the flaws in this model—most obviously, the problem of a king who does not have an heir through whom to continue the undying monarchy, upon whose existence and authority the maintenance and continuation of the kingdom's corporate body depends. This is a system that defines value narrowly and rigidly, rejecting bodies that do not adhere to the "ideal" model of fertile queen, virile king, and "healthy" son and heir. Such a restrictive system is cruel both to those who compose it and to those rely on its operation, just as it is doomed, in a transitory world, to inevitable failure through introduction of "imperfection"; a failure that *Sir Orfeo* reveals to be ultimately desirable.

As is made clear by medieval medical texts following the teachings of Galen and Avicenna, the blame or, at the very least, the responsibility for the failure or success of the patrilineal dynastic system is, in many ways, placed in the physical body of the queen. Galenic texts ascribe to the "two seed theory" and, unlike the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas, often locate the "problem" of infertility in the female body, suggesting, for example, that, "If a couple failed to conceive, it was likely that the coldness of her body thickened secretions and stopped her womb."[36] Scientific and cultural discourses such as these make the absence of an heir to the throne of Traciens not just a lack in or impairment to the corporate body of the realm but also, implicitly, lay the blame for that

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Karen Cherewatuk, "The King and Queen's Marriage: Dowry, Infertility, and Adultery," in *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory's* Morte Darthur, Arthurian Studies 67 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006): p. 24 [24-55].

[34] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 336.

[35] The conception of the kingdom as a metaphorical body developed over time so that, by the later Middle Ages, a realm or state might be thought of as a "legally immortal" "personified collective … and corporate bod[y]," one that "projected into past and future" as a "corporate *universitas*" whose identity was "preserved … despite changes" to its limbs, even and, indeed, *particularly* with respect to a change in head or monarch of the *universitas*. Thus, despite the fact that the ruler of this corporate body had his or her own physical form, a form that could change and die, s/he also served during his/her rule as the lasting head of the state's communal form, thereby exhibiting what Ernst H. Kantorowicz, in his foundational study, refers to as "the king's two bodies." According to this model, individual kings might change places, but the kingdom and its King continue on, unaffected by such individual, corporeal change, an enduringness largely achieved through the related institutions of patrimony and dynastic kingship. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, pp. 311-312.

[36] Cherewatuk, "The King and Queen's Marriage," p. 38.

lack on the somehow deficient body of the otherwise ideal queen: Heurodis. It seems at least possible, then, that the vulnerability in the metaphorical body of Orfeo's kingdom pre-dates the fairy abduction of its queen and is in many ways related to how her presence and the functioning of her physical body are understood. It is, moreover, worth noting that there is no indication in any version of the *Orfeo* romance that Heurodis was suddenly rendered infertile by her encounter with the fay, though the effects of her experience have been read that way.[37] It is, in fact, just as likely that the couple was as unable to conceive prior to the fairy abduction as they are after it.[38] Thus, while fay intrusion wounds the narrative and prompts Heurodis's and Orfeo's physical changes, I would suggest that, with respect to the metaphoric body of Orfeo and Heurodis' kingdom, fairy disruption serves instead to illuminate a flaw in the system of patrilineal succession, foregrounding both the vulnerability such a reliance on perfection leaves in the kingdom as well as the ways in which this model devalues women's bodies and virtues, reducing their value to their fertility.

The fairies' physical removal of the queen's body from Traciens effectively concentrates attention on Heurodis' corporeal form and on her importance to the kingdom's present and future

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[37] See, for example, Falk, "The Son of Orfeo," 260.

[38] As a result, attention to the courtyard scene indicates that the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* are compilers and collectors, but they are not assailants. Certainly, the fay have the power to cause most, if not all, of the injuries detailed in the passage, but numerous indicators suggest that the majority of the harms done is of human origin. For example, given their supernatural abilities and clear power over the human form, there is no reason a fairy would need to bind someone who "lay wode" any more than they would typically desire to "astrangle" someone while eating. It is difficult to imagine fairies manually throttling a distracted diner when they could simply be-spell him or her, just as it is unlikely that a human, even one suffering from mental illness, would pose such a risk that these supernatural beings—who were in no way stymied by the amassing of Orfeo's forces when they returned to claim Heurodis—would need to bind him or her with anything other than magic. In addition, the armed and truncated figures suggest political conflicts, whereas we have seen from Heurodis' abduction that fairies are more than capable of taking what they want from among ranks of armed warriors without need for physical interaction or conflict. In other words, though many of the physical traumas Orfeo witnesses here could be due to accidents (for example, the drownings or the women "lost" in childbirth), the majority of the harms he perceives seem to be of human origin. Indeed, rather than spending a great deal of time fighting, strangling, or hog-tying human beings, fairies instead have a habit of simply taking them. Corinne Saunders, for one, has suggested that this passage in *Sir Orfeo* shows that: "The King of Faery seems to want to possess …bodies," in particular, *human* bodies, and fairy lore supports that suggestion. For instance, Richard Firth Green reminds us that "Fairies often abduct mortals," and with adults, unlike with changelings, generally "no living fairy substitutes are left behind in the mortal world as replacements." Further, literary examples such as Arthur's "taking" to Avalon indicate that the otherworld can even serve as a place for magical healing. Indeed, Dorena Allen points out that those humans who are taken to Faerie pass "with or without a semblance of dying, … unchanged, in earthly flesh and blood, from one world to another," contending that, in *Sir Orfeo*, "Heurodis and her companions remain exactly as they were at the moment when they were abducted, stretched in sleep, or frozen in grotesque attitudes of apparent death." In other words, though fairies are certainly powerful enough to do great harm to human bodies, and though the harms done to the bodies in this courtyard could be a result of their encounters with Faerie, the injuries visible upon the forms in the courtyard suggest instead that the wounds are of a human origin. Moreover, the fay tendency to take individuals who are close to death reinforces the sense that the fairies in *Sir Orfeo* are not threats, they simply have a very odd hobby. Saunders, "Violent Magic," p. 237; Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 111; Allen, "The Dead and the 'Taken,'" 104.

existence. Further, the female bodies in the fairy courtyard who, near death, "þer lay on child-bedde" (l. 399), along with the lay's replacement of hereditary succession with a more flexible system for the passage of power (as we shall see), serves to remind readers and hearers that inheritance based on physical perfection or lasting "wholeness" is impossible and always vulnerable to changes in fertility and the dangers of childbirth and childrearing. The instability of living in a changeable world—an instability to which the fay often call attention[39]—makes it nearly impossible to rely on any system founded, in essence, on the continued, perfect functioning of human bodies and relationships. As such, the lack of an heir exists as an imperfection or vulnerability in the metaphorical body of all kingdoms that rely on hereditary succession, and *Sir Orfeo* works to both reveal this drawback and then to suggest an alternative system. The vulnerabilities stemming from reliance on dynastic succession have lurked beneath and marred the ostensible perfection and happiness of Orfeo's domain long before Faerie intruded upon and tore open their unity. As such, the narrative of *Sir Orfeo* might be seen as, in part, organized around the substitution of an idealized monarchy imagined as a dynastic body without flaw—an unrealistic system that does not admit room for the amelioration of change or difference—for what is instead a more flexible, longer-lasting system that acknowledges the need for alternative means of passing power in order to maintain the unity of the whole. Indeed, Elliot Kendall describes *Sir Orfeo* as an "anti-patrimonial" romance, with its conclusion effectively "decenter[ing] the family and then exclud[ing] lineage from the royal succession" in the appointment of the Steward, thereby addressing what Kendall refers to as the "deep troubles with the family as a political structure" in medieval society.[40] It is, moreover, worth noting that this productive substitution results from the physical and metaphoric wounding wrought by fay interference. By abducting the queen, the

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[39] Other scholars have read fairies in this romance as representative of and/or metaphors for specific, unpredictable or destabilizing human experiences or afflictions such as death or madness. Many of these arguments are compelling and unquestionably valid readings of the fay influence in this text; however, I would suggest that here fairies be considered as, first and foremost, forces that resemble the chaos and caprice of a transitory world experienced in numerous ways by humans across their lives, rather than standing in for one particular change or affliction. Further, because fairies routinely resist reduction to a single metaphorical meaning in any given narrative, existing instead as characters and beings in their own right, it is important to acknowledge how they, as do other beings and forces, operate in ways that are both distinct from and yet overlap with and influence the lives of others in often unpredictable ways. Viewing the fairies in this way suggests that each distinct scholarly reading can be viewed as speaking to a way that an audience member may have or will encounter and understand the narrative, while allowing the impact of the romance itself to be both expansive and deeply personal to myriad, different humans. By approaching the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* as unpredictable and individually-motivated creatures, we are as readers able to acknowledge the interconnected and diverse ways that human living is effected by natural, sociopolitical, cultural, and interpersonal caprice.

[40] Kendall, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny in *Sir Orfeo*," 289.

otherworld tears open the metaphorical body of Orfeo's kingdom, revealing the fact that that body was already made vulnerable by its determined adherence to ideals and unachievable perfections, including that of hereditary descent, to the degree that, heirless, the kingdom had finished becoming and—thus perfected—could not continue on.

Fairy disruption and Orfeo's overwhelming grief thus have the ultimate effect of forcing the king to consider how best to address the lack in his kingdom's form, and the narrative deliberately shows him taking time to appoint his Steward to govern in his absence when he takes to the woods, an action specifically intended to ensure the monarchy's continued existence and proper functioning: "'Lordinges,' he said, 'Bifor ʒou here / Ich ordain min heiʒe steward / To wite mi kingdom afterward; / In mi stede ben he schal / To kepe mi londes ouer-al, / … / In-to wildernes ichil te, / … / & when ʒe vnder-stond þat y be spent, / Make ʒou þan a parlement, / & chese ʒou a newe king" (ll. 204-208, 212, 215-217). Orfeo's thoughtful and deliberate assignment here of both a means of succession and a plan for the maintenance and continuation of his kingdom should not be dismissed overlooked. The poet spends many lines describing the plan, detail which suggests that this is a salient moment deserving of audience attention. In particular, the Steward's appointment effectively avoids the possibility of a dangerous *interregnum* and foreshadows the lay's conclusion, which officially establishes the Steward as Orfeo's heir, offering a more workable and open means of defining heredity and the passage of the throne from one generation to the next. In other words, the trajectory of *Sir Orfeo* in part represents what Kendall considers to be a much-needed shift from a political household organized along family lines—"based on [both] blood and marriage ties"—to a system instead based on "*familia* (the household including servants and followers)."[41] The conclusion of *Sir Orfeo* might thus be read as the production of a new social body, one that is made to function through the grafting of the Steward onto Orfeo and Heurodis' family line. As a result, the absence of an heir and the violence attending the fairy's intrusion are both proven to be neither as irrecoverably violent nor as tragic as they may at first seem.

4.4   Talkin' (and Readin') Body: Fairy Influence over the Textual Body of *Sir Orfeo*

As noted earlier, the influence that fairies have over human corporeal and metaphorical forms within both *Sir Orfeo* and in *The Merchant's Tale* is, in turn, reflected in and by the narrative forms

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[41] Kendall, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny," 290.

of both works. In *Sir Orfeo*, fairy intrusion wounds not only the corporeal bodies of Heurodis and, eventually, of Orfeo, nor merely the metaphorical body of the monarchy, but also the corresponding narrative form, so that the early moment of fairy-effected tearing serves to open up the lay's textual body in productive ways. In particular, the rupture effected by the intrusion of Faerie enables the re-forming of Orfeo's kingdom, including allowing Heurodis to be seen as the laudable queen she is, regardless of her fertility, while also making the continuation of the dynasty possible by substituting *familia* for a system based solely on familial descent. Further, the narrative wound produced through the fairies' disruption proves to be a surprisingly vital and generative laceration; by introducing the lay's conflict, this injury is what makes the text into a narrative or fiction: a story worth telling and recording, one that signifies and entertains.

The rift opened by the sudden arrival of the Fairy King makes the ensuing action and artistry of *Orfeo*'s lay possible, allowing for a productive change to the tale through the generation of both an actual, relatable narrative where none before existed and a beneficial alteration to the operation and existence of Traciens, its royal family, and its dynastic system.[42] As a result, the wounding of the lay's narrative body takes the boring and a-narrative artifice of the tale's opening and makes from it a generative and compelling piece of art that lauds the potential of openness and imperfection. In this way, the moment of fairy intrusion both rewrites the description of Orfeo and Heruodis' kingdom—producing from its idyllic yet vapid beginnings a signifying piece of fiction—and also allows for the recovery of Heurodis herself, a journey that reclaims both her beautiful but seemingly infertile body and the sociopolitical body of the kingdom. Heurodis' recovery is significant, partly because the lay's ultimate source, the story of Orpheus, denies this reclamation, leaving the actually-dead Eurydice irredeemably inaccessible to and for her living husband. In the medieval *Sir Orfeo*, however, the substitution of a fairy otherworld for the Greco-Roman underworld allows Heurodis to be returned to Traciens and her husband, partly because she was only mostly dead, and partly because fairy narratives, upon occasion, allow select humans to successfully traverse the boundary between this world and the otherworld, suggesting a sort of precedent via trope. Conversely, were Heurodis to have actually died, she would, based on both

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[42] Ellen Caldwell also uses "rift" to describe the effects of this moment, supporting my suggestion that various audiences could conceivably read this moment as one of violent opening or, what I am terming, a narrative wound. See Caldwell, "The Heroism of Heurodis," 302.

the Orpheus story and the logic of human experience, be beyond retrieving.[43] In addition, untimely death represents a danger not only for this fictional queen, but for all women who bear children. Pregnancy and delivery are perilous for both a mother and for her child,[44] and are capable of leading to the death of one or both parties or to the potential experience of post-partum depression by the mother—a suffering which could be mistaken by some audiences as madness.[45] The substitution of the Steward, however, curtails this jeopardy, making clear that the absence of a biological heir is not as tragic a situation as it might at first seem to be. In essence, the paradisical opening of *Sir Orfeo* lacks meaning and a future—having trapped Orfeo, Heurodis, and their kingdom in a stagnant sort of "perfection" without destination, dynastic or otherwise—and it is this ideal stasis that the fairies interrupt, allowing previously unheeded "flaws," so-called, including the lack of an heir, to be first acknowledged and then accepted and creatively re-formed. In this way, Orfeo's and Heruodis' persons, marriage, and kingdom are reworked into something that, though not perfect, can be redeemed as hopeful and meaningful through the incorporation and celebration of those purported "failings."

The moments of prominent corporeality in the lay thus help to distinguish as art those works that communicate a developed and dynamic meaning, encouraging interpretation in spite of, or perhaps, because of, their imperfections: their differences and the ways in which they are open and becoming, rather than finished and perfected. Two examples of this power and its joining of

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[43] Unlike a return from death, a return from Faerie *is* possible, though still rare. Green discusses the "motif of a recovery from fairyland," reminding readers that, in addition to romance figures like Sir Launfal and Thomas of Erceldoune (and perhaps, one day, King Arthur), accounts like Walter Map's King Herla and Gerald of Wales' Eliodor reinforce the sense that "the possibility of a return to this world [from Faerie] can never be completely ruled out." Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 161.

[44] Kendall notes this as well, describing childbirth as a "demand on royal wives" that "might be answered at sever personal cost, especially given medieval medical practices." and argues that fairy intervention in *Sir Orfeo* "bears witness to realities that could not always be ignored." Kendall here reinforces my contention that fairy interference is calling attention to a flawed and failing system that lacks clear, generative potential and that can negatively affect the bodies of the queen and the kingdom. Kendall, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny," 314.

[45] *The Book of Margery Kempe* makes this point particularly poignantly, relating Margery's post-partum sufferings in painful detail:

> what for labowr sche had in chyldyng and for sekenesse goyng beforn, sche dyspered of hyr lyfe, wenyng sche mygth not levyn…. And anoon, for dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde and hys scharp reprevyng on that other syde, *this creatur went owt of hir mende* and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys … lych as the spyrytys temptyd hir to sey and do so sche seyd and dede…. and into wytnesse therof sche bot hir owen hand so vyolently that it was seen al hir lyfe aftyr. And *also sche roof hir skyn on hir body ayen hir hert wyth hir nayles spetowsly, for sche had noon other instrumentys*, and wers sche wold a don saf sche was bowndyn and kept wyth strength bothe day and nygth that sche mygth not have hir wylle. (ll. 178-80, 197-200, 213-214,215- 221, emphasis mine)

The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Bary Windeatt, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004).

the physical and the textual should suffice. The first is the exchange between Heurodis and Orfeo when they encounter each other by chance in the forest ten years after the Queen's abduction. Approaching a party of falconers,[46] a much-changed Orfeo beholds a lady and "& seþ bi al þing þat it is / His owhen quen, Dam Heurodis. / Ȝern he beheld hir, & sche him eke, / Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke, / For messais þat sche on him seiȝe, / Þat had ben so riche & so heiȝe. / Þe teres fel out of her eiȝe" (ll. 321-327). Orfeo's ability to identify his unaltered[47] wife in this moment is far less surprising than her immediate recognition of him despite his deeply altered physical state. Heurodis' emotional reaction to seeing her long-estranged husband is tied to her detection of the change that has been wrought in his body and to his status,[48] but she is able to recognize him despite this change. Further, she responds to Orfeo's change both visibly and emotionally and expresses her sentiments corporeally, the "teres" that start from her eyes acting as a legible, physical sign of her sorrow. While, at later moments, other humans are unable to see the soul of their king in Orfeo's wild body,[49] Heurodis here has no difficulty identifying and pitying her husband, not because he is pathetic, but because he is and has been suffering. Heurodis sees clearly that, despite his anguish and physical alteration, Orfeo is not, in substance, "less than" he was before. Further, as can be seen from his harping, which is only briefly mentioned prior to his self-imposed alienation, the king's changed and somewhat broken form can and does make world-changing art, so that, when later arriving at the Faerie court, he "tempreþ his harp as he wele can,

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[46] It is not uncommon for fairies to display high status hunting birds and/or dogs—see, for example, the appearance of Lanval's fairy mistress when she arrives at Arthur's court to acquit her knight of the queen's false charges. In many ways, these birds are markers of wealth and rank that suggest the nobility of the fairies who carry them and that are, at the same time, also readable as status symbols by the human world. Additionally, these birds remind us that fairies are not insubstantial spirits, but rather that they are physical beings capable of interacting with and wreaking harm on the human world. Much like the Fairy King in the lay's early moments, these fay hunting birds are able to do material damage in our primary world and this physical impact should not be ignored or dismissed. Indeed, this potential of Faerie to affect the human world within *Sir Orfeo* can arguably be read as somewhat analogous to the potential a fairy narrative possesses to interact with and speak to its own sociocultural context.

[47] When taken by Faerie, humans tend to cease aging or to experience the passage of time in a manner that is far slower than that experienced by people living in the human world. Further, Liuzza notes that in *Orfeo* in particular, the "brilliant otherworld is also imbued with an air of timelessness" so that, "while Heurodis is in Fairy, Orfeo ages and changes but she does not." Liuzza, "Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance," 279.

[48] I differ slightly from Tara Williams' reading of this moment, in which she argues that Heurodis' "tears insinuate to Orfeo that her situation causes her to suffer." Instead, I would suggest that Heurodis' tears best reflect her feelings of pity for Orfeo based on the alteration to his physical and kingly bodies. Indeed, the poet explains that Heurodis' reaction is a result of the distress or "messais" she feels upon seeing her husband, suggesting that she is weeping because of a new stimuli (here, his changed appearance), rather than because of an ongoing unease she has been suffering since being taken. Williams, "Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality," 555.

[49] The poem notes that, after reclaiming Heurodis from Faerie, Orfeo returns to Winchester "Þat was his owhen cité; / *Ac no man knewe þat it was he*" (ll. 479-480, emphasis mine), and Orfeo's testing of his Steward (ll. 510-574) is only possible because the Steward doesn't recognize his physically altered King.

/ & blisseful notes he þer gan, / Þat al þat in þe palays were / Com to him forto here, / & liggeþ adoun to his fete, / Hen þenkeþ his melody so swete. / Þe king harkneþ & sitt ful stille; / To here his gle he haþ gode wille. / … / Þe riche quen al-so hadde he" (ll. 437-444, 446). Orfeo's virtuoso performance before the fairy court—his artistic mastery displayed in a realm that is clearly invested in aesthetics [50]—so dazzles and impresses the Faerie King that he, in a rare inversion, rashly offers Orfeo a boon: a promise that then enables the human king to reclaim his wife. In this way, physical bodies that are imperfect, open to change, an even wounded show themselves to be capable of and linked to compelling art, whether it be the performed music of Orfeo's or the *Orfeo*-poet's harping or the more material textuality represented by Heurodis and the other bodies in the otherworld courtyard. Art itself, it seems, is created from an openness to and incorporation of difference. In this way, fay intrusion allows for the productive alteration of Traciens' monarchy just as it also reveals the ways in which mutable and even broken forms can create meaning, beauty, and hope for a better world.

4.5   Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*: a Story about Control

We'll leave *Sir Orfeo* there for now and turn to Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, a work that is, as has often been noted, a patchwork of medieval genres, sitting uncomfortably and incompletely within any one textual type and routinely raising generic expectations only to frustrate, deny, or invert them.[51] An amalgam of advice literature, debate poetry, fabliaux tricks, and romance tropes—

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[50] Liuzza suggests that, in *Sir Orfeo*, Faerie is a textual land, with "The king of Fairy" serving as "the king of textuality," a ruler whose "castle, a glittering visual artifice, appeals to the eye like a *manuscript illumination*; he presides over a court of images suspended in the act of becoming, like painted figures or words on a page." Liuzza, "Poetics of Performance," 282, emphasis mine.

[51] *The Merchant's Tale*, as many scholars have noted, draws on specific texts, models, and tropes from a variety of genres, containing elements from fabliaux, romance, encomium, and formal debate, among others. This generic instability has been noted by scholars such as Marie Borroff, "Silent Retribution in Chaucer: The *Merchant's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, and the *Pardoner's Tale*," in *Traditions and Renewals: Chaucer, the* Gawain-*Poet, and Beyond* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 53 [50-70], who identifies the *Tale* as "perhaps the most notable of Chaucer's generic hybrids"; Mike Rodman Jones, "January's Genesis: Biblical Exegesis and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Leeds Studies in English* 39 (2008): 72 [53-87], who writes that the *Tale* "contorts itself into a virtuoso panoply of genres"; Glenn Burger, "Present Panic in *The Merchant's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 66 [49-72], who argues that the *Tale* "inscri[bes] … the impossibility of securing the very stable, unitary satiric perspective it appears to desire"; Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), p. 104, who describes the *Tale* as a "mixture of genres," in which "January believes he is inhabiting a romance which is finally rudely exposed as a fabliau"; and Lee Patterson, "Chaucerian Commerce: Bourgeois Ideology and Poetic Exchange in the *Merchant's* and *Shipman's Tales*," in *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 333-334 [322-366], who describes the tale as "remarkably unstable, even volatile," a work whose "challenge" stems both from "its syncretism, its dizzying conjunction of widely disparate literary materials" and "its refusal to provide a coherent perspective on this *bricolage*."

including the late-to-the-party introduction of fairy nobles—this work resists definition or narrative "control," in part accentuating the instability common to and routinely introduced by the fay. In particular, the *Tale* often escapes its teller, revealing the fact that a strict reliance on genre can be a reductive and even imprudent form of reading—one that limits the potential of a text, rendering the narrative impotent. As such, January's and the narrator's superficial approaches to romance in this *Tale* might be seen as what Holly Crocker terms a "perversion of genre," one stemming, at least in part, from the "reduc[tion of] the romance, which often effaces or suspends heteronormative marital ties in favor of a brand of 'competitive masculinity,' to the domesticating social function it increasingly played in the late fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries." January's misguided attempt at authoring a romance is, in other words, an oversimplification that amounts to a readerly blindness to the potentials of romance that instead merely strives to construct and reinforce a convenient genre fiction. Furthermore, the use of genre in *The Merchant's Tale* has explicitly gendered implications, connecting textual and corporeal bodies in another important way.[52] As Susan Crane has shown, gender and genre are not simply similar "systems of distinction that are susceptible to hierarchization," they are also both cultural concepts that mutually influence one another, with "genre[s like romance] imagin[ing] gender" and gender relations in definable ways.[53] As a result, the uses to which genre is (successfully or unsuccessfully) put in *The Merchant's Tale* has bearing on what the *Tale* is doing with and saying about gendered bodies. Finally, though the otherworldly will be less overtly discussed in the opening sections of this analysis, the foundations laid here will come together in the concluding considerations of Faerie's role in and relationship to the *Tale* and its ultimate finale.

Scholars have debated Chaucer's distaste (or not) for romance for many years.[54] While the use to which romance elements are put by January, Damyan, and, implicitly, by *The Merchant's*

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[52] This is not to suggest that culturally determined gender roles and stereotypes are a reflection of distinctly variable biological sex, but rather that gender often is naturalized by being played out on the body and in the ways that gendered bodies are permitted to relate to each other and to society.

[53] Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's* Canterbury Tales (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 3-4.

[54] Joanne Charbonneau reminds us that the Host's opinion of *Sir Thopas* cannot be taken as an exact reflection of Chaucer's own opinions, writing: "many modern scholars have questioned the traditional view that Chaucer rejected the native English romance tradition, especially in light of his own appropriation of the diction, formulaic conventions, and even compositional methods of the romances in serious contexts within his own work, especially in the *Troilus*." Joanne A. Charbonneau, "Sir Thopas," in *Sources and Analogues of* The Canterbury Tales, Vol. II, ed.s Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, Chaucer Studies 35 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), p. 651 [649-714]. For a prominent example of the "traditional view" that Charbonneau suggests is now being questioned, see, for example, Thomas

Tale's narrator would seem to suggest Chaucer's outright distaste for the genre, what I would instead suggest, is that Chaucer does not so much disdain romance writ large, as he is poking fun at examples of the genre that are simplistic, overly wrought, and insubstantial. Just as *Sir Thopas* is nearly all romance trappings—detailing Thopas' dress and gear excessively and repeatedly—with almost no actual romance narrative, *The Merchant's Tale* uses romance to mock those works that—either through overdependence on conventions, textual or social, or through a reliance on excessively magical interventions—willfully or foolishly overlook the impossibility of controlling or perfecting any narrative. Motifs and tropes "work" for narratives because they engage with and play on audience expectations; however, when overused, they instead restrict a narrative's ability to make meaning or function as art, reducing the potential for play and invention to mere replication. Narrative technologies like motifs and tropes rely, in particular, on the interplay between authorial invention and audience interpretation, and it is in this exchange that the story comes to exist. As Helen Cooper notes, "Conventions … make literature work" because "they initiate active participation from the audience in the creation of meaning."[55] In essence, romance tropes can function because "[t]he very familiarity of the pattern of the motif, the meme … sets up expectations that the author can fulfil or frustrate,"[56] and, moreover, their use is predicated on an understanding of engagement and exchange between a work's composer and its audience, a relationship that effectively divides control over the narrative and what it will become between both parties. Conversely, complete authorial fulfillment of audience expectations generates narratives that are formulaic, simplistic, and, often, unsatisfying. As such, artistic narrative both stems from authorial invention or creation while resists complete authorial control, opening itself to alteration, adaptation, and even misunderstanding the minute an audience is involved.[57]

Tyrwhitt's claim that Chaucer is mocking English metrical romances as paltry translations in *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: G. Routledge, 1843), p. lxvi.

[55] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 15.

[56] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 15.

[57] Moreover, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans have shown that listening audiences of medieval vernacular texts would have, most likely, been "sophisticated and active listeners," "Whether or not they could read," so that "The audiences that made up the broad and immensely socially varied 'audiate' culture that lay behind many such Middle English texts could not have been passive consumers. Whether or not they could read, they had to be sophisticated and active listeners." *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed.s Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 114.

Throughout *The Merchant's Tale*, masculine characters, including January, Damyan, Pluto, and, at times, even the *Tale*'s teller, constantly reach for an elusive perfection that evades them until it is finally, and fallaciously, achieved in the moment of otherworldly intrusion near the *Tale*'s close. In particular, the *Tale*'s narrator, January, and Damyan all attempt to control their physical "matter"[58] and narrative expression through a reliance on numerous narrative "types" and commonplaces, including the use of genre conventions and of gender stereotypes such as the shrewish wife and her opposite, the passive, young beauty.[59] These efforts—which, when they are expressed in the narrative, are frequently embodied—represent attempts on the parts of the *Tale*'s masculine characters[60] to structure and manage their personal narratives, the dynamics of their interpersonal relationships, and their legacies. Unlike May, who is narratively labile and who sees the freedom in generic mingling and openness, the *Tale*'s narrator and its masculine characters strive to fully control their lives and/or legacies through the strict application of textual conventions, efforts that ironically hamper and disempower them.

In *The Merchant's Tale*, narrative and corporeal forms are somewhat differently linked than they are in *Sir Orfeo*. In this *Tale*, Chaucer draws on the relationships between socially-prescribed gender roles and narrative and genre conventions, using textual commonplaces and social scripts to highlight cultural and physical attempts to control terrestrial forms as well as those attempts' attendant failures. For instance, as Holly Crocker has compellingly shown, May's ostensible passivity is a fiction, an assertion of agency that undermines not only expected gender roles—including the fantasy of female passivity—but also the very notion that gender categories can be defined clearly and consistently, if at all.[61] By thus revealing the flexibility of gender and

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[58] Arguably inverting or toying with the narrator's approach in *Troilus and Criseyde* which Dinshaw suggests "position[s] … an explicitly masculine narrator who manipulates the feminine text," *The Merchant's Tale* instead, I would argue, figures May as both text and an author, an uncontrollable feminine force who manipulates her masculine narrators and resists their attempts to control of her meaning and productivity. Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, p. 26.

[59] See Holly Crocker's discussion of the contrast between the stereotyped femininity promoted by January (that of women as passive and devoid of agency) and the opposed type promoted by the narrator/Merchant (that of woman as shrew), as well as Elaine Tuttle Hansen's description of the feminine position in *The Legend of Good Women* as "a divided one—vulnerable, submissive, subservient and self-sacrificing on one hand, crafty and duplicitous on the other." Holly A. Crocker, "Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in the *Merchant's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 38.2 (2003): 184-185, 191-192 [178-198], and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 3.

[60] For the narrator is certainly a creation of Chaucer, a voice that may or may not belong to the Merchant. For scholarship wrestling with this question, see: Robert R. Edwards, "Narration and Doctrine in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Speculum* 66 (1991): 342-367 and C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Caroline Press, 1986), among others.

[61] In her work on *The Merchant's Tale*, Crocker shows the performative nature of May's passivity, arguing that acting passive is, in fact, an action and an assertion of agency that undercuts the definition of masculinity as active and

its physical and narrative expression, May's actions and inactions also make clear that those ostensibly embodied gender roles are no more than constructions, inventions that seek to link and determine the actions of the corporeal body within society. I am not arguing here that Chaucer is writing a medieval version of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, but rather that *The Merchant's Tale* uses physical forms—here the gendered body and its assumed correspondence to prescribed social and behavioral roles—to think about the instability of terrestrial forms, and, in particular, of narrative forms. By showing that, despite expectations to the contrary, May's influence and expression cannot be defined by her physical form and thus controlled by the social expectations attendant thereto, the *Tale* reveals the instability in all terrestrial forms, particularly those built on the assumption of embodied stability or perfectability. As such, it is not only the "failure of gender" that *The Merchant's Tale* "catalogs,"[62] but also, I would argue, the failure of human attempts to control, fix, or perfect any terrestrial form, physical, metaphoric, or narrative. May serves, within the *Tale*, to draw attention to the instability and fluidity of terrestrial roles and types, from those of gender to those of genre, pointing instead to the (literal) productivity of and potential in such lability. Conversely, January, Pluto, and even Damyan reveal themselves to be constantly desirous of and grasping at control, a dominion that, however, continually slips from their grasp. Chaucer and the *Tale* itself thus playfully undermine efforts by the narrative's characters and its supposed narrator to dominate and fix the unfixable, substituting instead the fruitfulness of fluidity and indeterminacy as represented by the female and the fay.

In this and other ways, *The Merchant's Tale* repeatedly shows itself to be a work driven by dual impetuses: the first, an anxiousness for control and perfected completion at the narrative, familial, and corporeal levels, and the second, a constant coming-apart-ness that is, in the end, located most clearly in feminity and Faerie. Further, this second impetus eventually and emphatically overcomes the first, in part because complete control is impossible for any earthly creator to maintain, but also because, as Chaucer shows, narrative potential lies not in perfection but in openness and indeterminacy. As such, *The Merchant's Tale* might be seen as an exercise in

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passive femininity as, therefore, masculinity's opposite: "When she shows that the difference between passivity and agency is only a matter of display, May takes away the ability for men to differentiate themselves from one another, or from women…. When May shows that femininity involves a process of 'passing,' she also demonstrates that masculinities based on displays of agency are performances of masquerade." Crocker, "Performative Passivity," 179.

[62] Crocker, "Performative Passivity, 180.

various attempts at authorial control, ones that repeatedly (and spectacularly) fail, while Chaucer laughs from the sidelines.

January, for example, first uses the debate form to achieve his aims, performing the proper pursuit of advice from and reasoned discussion with his friends Justinus and Placebo, all while having already made up his mind to marry and to select a young bride.[63] January's self-perceived success in this first endeavor then leads him to attempt a similar application of textual conventions, this time those of romance, to his subsequent marriage. While I hope that I have shown that romances can effectively promote critical thinking about and audience analysis of sociocultural modes and commonplaces, in *The Merchant's Tale*, romance is reduced, simplified, and primarily associated with social status, narrative control, perfected happy endings, and a reliance on gendered constructions of bodies and behavior. For instance, Crocker has compellingly shown that January imagines his marriage and his bride in terms of romance-originated gender conventions, oversimplifications that center, in particular, on January's expectation that he will inhabit the powerful, active role ascribed to the masculine heroes of those works. January's "expectations for his bride and his marriage" thus stem "from his overestimation of his worth, an attitude which derives from a romance notion of independent masculine agency," a misperception that leads him to believe he can wield total control over his familial life and that, simultaneously, makes the Lombard knight foolish, rendering him "vulnerable in his desire to make himself the man he wants to be through a submissive spouse."[64] Moreover, in the early stages of the *Tale*, May seems to reinforce January's genre-derived gender assumptions, appearing to exist solely as a creation of the knight's imagining: a perfect image that he has summoned into being.[65] At her wedding she

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[63] For instance, Mike Rodman Jones argues that in *The Merchant's Tale* counsel is, in essence, sound and fury, signifying nothing: "whilst this vocabulary of advice abounds in the *Merchant's Tale*, the actuality of counsel is repeatedly prevented. It is not just that Placebo and Justinus, the actual counsellors of the text, fail to produce anything like 'counsel' … it is that the text emphasizes over and over again the public, performative, even ostentatious spectacle of January using the political facade of counsel while ruthlessly suppressing it." Similarly, Priscilla Martin contends that "January affects to consider marriage carefully but from the beginning of the poem he is resolved on it," and Alcuin Blamires likewise notes that *The Merchant's Tale* "travest[ies]" the "imperatives of prudential counsel," with January "announc[ing to his advisors] at once his foregone conclusion—'th'effect of his entente' (IV.1398)—that he will marry and that he would like to hear no argument against it." Jones, "Biblical Exegesis," 69; Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, pp. 102-103; and Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, p. 67.

[64] Crocker, "Performative Passivity," 183.

[65] The much-discussed mirror passage reinforces the sense that January imagines May into being. For instance, in a much cited passage, Elaine Tuttle Hansen suggests that, "At the narrative level, there is literally no May before January marries her … she enters the story quite explicitly as the product of the old man's warped imagination." Likewise, Christian Sheridan argues that May appears in the *Tale* as "a text written out of the material of January's imagination, and the tale stresses this textual origin by introducing her not as a complete character, but as a series of idealized

sits, "stille as stoon" (IV.1818),[66] a static work of art surely intended, in her statuesque repose, to recall Galatea from the Pygmalion story. In contrast, January's active performance and self-fashioning, in contrast, suggests that he is positioning himself as an author and May as his textual creation,[67] a suggestion reinforced by his earlier description of a young wife as moldable: "But certeynly, a yong thing may men gye, / Right as men may warm wex with hands plye" (IV.1429-1430). Here again vaguely recalling Pygmalion by taking on the role of sculptor, January also refers to wax—a surface that can receive the impressions of words—in an effort to assume the role of masculine agent and to assign to his wife the status of a submissive, feminine object awaiting his creative intervention.

Not only does January attempt to position himself as an author and hero and May as his submissive and idealized devotee, but he also draws on romance tropes to do so. Moreover, he does so lamely, his texts lacking creative invention and a full understanding of the genre or of narrative. For instance, Elaine Tuttle Hansen contends that January's "imagination is … derivative and stereotypical, produced as much by antifeminist discourse, as May herself is."[68] Further, Peter Brown expands on the critical assertion that January imagines May into being by arguing that May is not just "a product of January's sexual desires," but that he writes her (if you will) as his own fairy mistress, noting that May "materializes as a wish fulfillment figure—exactly the role that the fairy mistress is wont to play."[69] In so doing, I would suggest that January is attempting to craft an idealized romance for himself alone: claiming the status of noble hero and recipient of a seemingly perfect love and an ideal ending. Ignoring the power and unique sovereignty wielded in romance by fairy mistresses—including the later-appearing Proserpina—January's compositional attempts here and in the later construction of his garden suggest efforts on his part to assemble a personal otherworld, a domain of unique perfection that is under his control and that will grant him

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features imagined by January." Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, p. 250, and Christian Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace: Commodification and Textuality in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 102.1 (2005): 33 [27-44].

[66] All quotes from "The Merchant's Tale" are from: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

[67] Sheridan makes a similar point, observing that January "parses his prospective wife in much the same way a reader might an unfamiliar text." Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 33. For more on this see also: R. Jacob McDonie, "'Ye gete namoore of me': Narrative, Textual, and Linguistic Desires in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 24.4 (2012): 325 [313-341].

[68] Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, p. 251.

[69] Brown also points his readers to the description of May at the wedding, suggesting that the line: "Hire to biholde it semed fayerye" (l.1743) works to foreground her "role as an agent of the other world," and the enchanter of January. Peter Brown, "Chaucer and Shakespeare: The *Merchant's Tale* Connection," *The Chaucer Review* 48.2 (2013), 236 [222-237].

superhuman powers such as those afforded to the other human knights of romance who receive wealth, prophecy, and/or otherworld citizenship from their own fairy mistresses. As such, May's youth and physical perfection are related by January in what amounts to a textual effort to police her identity and behavior, painting her as a type, a character who is subject to the creative authority of her male "author"/creator.

As the *Tale* unfolds, January repeatedly shows himself to be a flawed and simplistic reader, a fault that his physical attempts to manifest complete masculine control over May's alleged passivity makes clear. Women in romance are rarely if ever wholly passive or devoid of agency, as Crocker has shown with respect to Chaucer's own characterization of Criseyde,[70] and fairy mistresses are as threatening as they are beneficent: wielding a capricious power that exceeds that of any human lord. However, in casting May as a fairy mistress type. January not only reveals his misunderstanding of romance, he also, arguably, empowers May and prefigures her later assertion of her own will, power, and sovereignty. Conversely, January does not or, more likely, *will* not see these aspects of romance femininity, as his behavior toward May during and after their wedding makes clear. In these moments, the Lombard knight is not only active, his activity is fixated on his demonstration of his masculinity, in particular, of his masculine power through his domination of the feminine. Yet, in this fixation, January's "affections" are revealed to be malevolent and, at times, physically violent—characteristics for which most romance heroes (even Malory's Gawain) receive some form of censure. For example, in describing January's "attentions" to May, as well as of May's receptions thereof, Chaucer notes that: "in his herte" January "gan hire to manace / That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne / Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne" (IV.1752-1754). May, as we have seen, is conversely described to be "stille as stoon" (IV.1818): not just inactive but nearly inanimate. Words like "manace" and "streyne" may make sense within this sexualized context, but, read beyond the literal, they also introduce a sense of predation that renders May not just passive, but seemingly helpless, an aesthetic possession to be seized forcefully,[71] just

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[70] Crocker, "Performative Passivity," 186. Similarly, Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* performs passivity while exerting exceptional control over the romance's action, as do many of the iterations of Guinevere, Isolde, Lunete, and numerous other influential romance women.

[71] Interestingly, Martin's description of *The Romance of the Rose* lines up with my description of January's actions here quite well: "He [the lover], like his patron the God of Love, is as predatory as courtly. His project is to get into the garden and, as is spelled out in Jean de Meun's long continuation of the poem, into the rose. He is hero, she is object. The harmonious imagery of dancing and singing gives way to figures of conflict and capture—plucking the rose, besieging the castle—as if the couple were enemies." The similarities here reinforce the sense that Chaucer is characterizing January as someone who is attempting to frame his life in terms of courtly and/or romance conventions

as Paris seized Helen. In addition, the well-noted ick-factor of the following consummation scene reinforces this impression. The description of the consummation focuses on January's body, highlighting both how unappealing he is—a truth that he is (aptly) quite blind to[72]—as well as the subtle harm his body can and likely does inflict on May's. His beard, for example, is "thikke brustles … unsoft" (IV.1824) with which he "kisseth hire [May] ful ofte" (IV.1823), unquestionably irritating and perhaps even scratching her skin.[73] The contrast in textures between January's body and May's is further reinforced and reiterated when January's not-so-sexy stubble is likened to "the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere" (IV.1825) that he then "rubbeth … aboute hir tendre face" (IV.1827). Whereas May is cast here as tender and ostensibly vulnerable,[74] January is instead composed of bristles, thorns, and shark skin, his affections represented as violent, threatening assaults on her body.

In attempting to perform or embody gendered romance conventions through his physical interactions, January is here both endeavoring to write himself into a romance that will allow him to claim the perfected masculinity he desires and, as a masculine agent, to assert the perfect control over his life and family to which he feels such masculinity entitles him. However, in so doing, the Lombard Knight also reveals that he misunderstands romance and, unlike May—who, as we will

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in order to maintain the "masculine" position of power and control that he so desires. Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, p. 110.

[72] January's able body is plainly no more understanding, moral, or perceptive than his blinded one, as is made clear in his unguided selection of a wife, an important decision about which he considers only his own desires: "[he] … chees hire of his owene auctoritee; / For love is blynd alday, and may nat see" (IV.1597-1598). In addition, because of his selfishness, January is constantly and unconcernedly blind to May as an individual, disregarding everything from her thoughts to her personal desires; indeed, Martin suggests that part of what Proserpina gives May is the means to make sure that "what she thinks in her heart will always be opaque to her husband." Further, along with acting blindly at critical moments in his life, the *Tale* also outlines two distinct forms of visual impairment, suggesting that internal, moral blindness is more vexed than physical, perceptual blindness: "O Januarie, what myghte it thee availle, / Thogh thou myghtest se as fer as shippes saille? / For as good is blynd deceived be / As to be deceived whan a man may se. / … / Passe over is an ese, I sey namoore" (IV.2107-2110, 2115). Deception is here both a kind of blindness and a kind of choice, suggesting that there is both a desirable and a detestable vulnerability to the impairment. January's willingness, then, to be deceived by May at the end of the *Tale* recalls this passage and reinforces the sense that the Lombard Knight remains just as blind as he was before being healed—just as blind as he always has been. Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, p. 49. For more on this see Tory Vandeventer Pearman, "'O Sweete Venym Queynte!': Pregnancy and the Disabled Female Body in the 'Merchant's Tale,'" in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua R. Eyler (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), p. 31 [25-37]; Edward Wheatley, "Blinding, Blindness, and Sexual Transgression," in *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 129-154; Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, pp. 64-65; and James M. Palmer, "Your Malady is No 'Sodyn Hap': Ophthalmology, Benvenutus Grassus, and January's Blindness," *The Chaucer Review* 41.2 (2006): 203, note 2 [197-205].

[73] Two words: Beard. Oil.

[74] It is important to note that May is not always passive or vulnerable; indeed, she quite literally thrusts her note to him under Damyan's pillow in a scene Chaucer arguably intends to be read as innuendo, and she personally arranges their affair, taking the active role in most of their relationship.

see, capably adapts, shapes, and reinterprets forms and genres, proving herself to be a skilled composer—January shows himself to only be capable of clumsily (and ultimately unsuccessfully) compiling a failed romance with and onto his own physical and familial body. Further, expanding Crocker's argument that total feminine passivity actually undermines masculinity's ability to assert itself as active and in control,[75] I would suggest that active masculinity on its own—even without the performed faux-passivity Crocker describes—can undermine the concept of chivalric masculinity that January draws from romance and attempts to replicate in and for his own life. In particular, by showing that, without embodied and active female consent, masculine activity is in fact simply ignoble aggression, January's "attentions" to May make clear that the noble role that January attempts to craft for himself cannot, in fact, be written without the willing contribution of the female: an element which is outside the control of even those authors as overbearing January. January can dominate May's physical form and, as he does later, attempt to control her actions and force her into the wifely role he imagines for her, but he cannot truly contain her elusive agency, and, by attempting to write his romance through the interactions of their gendered bodies, he instead undoes the foundations upon which his own romance and chivalric masculinity are built. Further, like January, Damyan also (mis)uses romance tropes and, in so doing, emphasizes the impossibility of controlling a terrestrial form, however, Damyan's authorial attempts go even further, also calling attention to the audience's role in creating a text.

Like January, Damyan employs romance motifs in an attempt to compose his own, ideal narrative, in this case misunderstanding May as the passive reader of his intertwined physical and textual forms. May is just as objectified in Damyan's romance as she was in January's, albeit in a different way. She is treated by her husband's squire not as an aesthetic object of his own creation, but instead as the literal object of Damyan's desire. In this way, Damyan does not use his body to perform masculinity through domination, instead he succumbs to a fairly conventional bout of romance-style love sickness. Sight of May predictably effects Damyan's physical body, acting as an affliction: "He was so ravysshed on his lady May / That for the verray peyne he was ny wood.

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[75] For instance, Crocker describes the wedding night, arguing that "Despite January's depravity, it is not his behavior towards May on their wedding night that separates him from the ranks of lovers such as Troilus. Rather, it is May's lack of response to his 'pleyyng' (IV 1854), her continued passivity in the face of his attempts to perform sexually, that suggests both his disregard for her and her indifference to him." In other words, May's passivity here makes the consummation scene creepier, all while highlighting the fact that patriarchal culture cannot truthfully or effectively subdivide gender into male/active and female/passive. Moments such as these, Crocker compellingly argues, reveal that "grades of masculine empowerment depend on the different ways feminine agency passes itself off as passivity in public displays" Crocker, "Performative Passivity," 186, 182.

/ Almoost he swelte and swowned ther he stood, / So soore hath Venus hurt hym with hire brond" (IV.1774-1777). This initial description of May's (and Venus') effect on Damyan is fairly standard, particularly for the genre of romance, and, though it may seem to render Damyan powerless or inert, in adopting this trope, Damyan proclaims a sort of status that gives him social power. Love sickness was not experienced by or available to all of medieval society, rather it was an "upper-class" disease, and "the sufferer was typically thought to be a noble man."[76] From the introduction of Constantine the African's *Viaticum* well through to the later-Middle Ages, medical discourses regarding lovesickness, which were also influential in the construction of courtly romance,[77] suggested that lovesickness was a disease only available to those of privilege. For example, in his glosses on the *Viaticum*, Gerard of Berry contends that the "conditions of wealth and leisure, typical of the nobility, predispose an individual to lovesickness," meaning that the affliction "became another mark of precedence, like wealth and leisure themselves."[78] As such, Damyan's experience of lovesickness can be read as an assertion of "precedence" and nobility through the gendered performance of a romance trope. In other words, Damyan's bodily affliction performs the narrative role and status he wishes to occupy, parlaying his physical state into the presentation of an elevated textual and social "type."

Damyan accepts and almost seems to relish this image of himself as romance hero—his physical suffering ostensibly ennobling him and exalting his desire—as can be seen in the lengthier description of his physical affliction that soon follows:

> This sike Damyan in Venus fyr / So brenneth that he dyeth for desyr, / For which he putte his lyf in aventure. / No lenger myghte he in this wise endure, / But prively a penner gan he borwe, / And in a letter wroot he al his sorwe, / In manere of a compleynt or a lay, / Unto his faire, fresshe lady May; / And in a purs of sylk heng on his sherte / He hath it put, and leyde it at his herte. (IV.1875-1884)

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[76] Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The* Viaticum *and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. xi.

[77] Wack shows that the medical discourses regarding lovesickness held such cultural power that they influenced literary productions, writing: "the description of love as illness lent a powerful and ongoing presumption of reality to the evolving love conventions of the literature emanating from courts and urban centers of medieval Europe…. The cultural authority of medicine may have in part enabled the poetic fantasies of the troubadours to become the social realities of the late Middle Ages and early modernity." In addition, Susan Crane details a literary shift in the "gendering of love," arguing that "One of the major expansions masculinity achieves in romance transforms feminine suffering and submission of love into a formative masculine experience." Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages*, p. 50, and Crane, *Gender and Romance*, p. 25.

[78] Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages*, p. 61.

Here, the fire of Damyan's desire threatens his life and his body and causes him to seek relief in textual composition. In other words, his physical body and its affliction are expressly linked to a document, a textual body, that is then further associated with the medieval genres of "complaint" and/or "lay." While Damyan's choice to compose a complaint is not terribly surprising, the connection of Damyan's letter to the Breton lay genre is less expected, calling up associations with, for instance, love and often marriage; the family; British "cultural heritage"; the frequent influence of the supernatural, especially of Faerie; and an emphasis on art and storytelling, in particular, of "music and minstrelsy."[79] Nonetheless, the plot of *The Merchant's Tale*, when viewed from Damyan's perspective, could certainly recall the basic premise of several of Marie de France's lays—including *Chevrefoil*, *Laüstic*, *Guigemar*, and *Yonec*—tales in which a young woman who is unhappily married to a domineering older man receives the more appealing attentions of a younger man. Indeed, in both *Guigemar* and *Yonec,* the husband "literally imprison[s]" his wife and she can only be "released into the arms of [her] younger [lover] by magic,"[80] a plot arc *The Merchant's Tale* could certainly be seen to be playing with. While I do not wish to argue that Chaucer is re-interpreting one or more of Marie's lays in his construction of *The Merchant's Tale*, I would suggest that, by citing the lay as one of the genres Damyan is using as a model for his letter to May, January's Squire can be seen to be using both physical forms (in particular, his romance-worthy bout of love sickness) and textual ones to uplift the status of his desire. In essence, Damyan is writing January, May, and himself into the key roles of a *mal-mariée* lay, reserving for himself the Tristram-like role of the long-suffering young lover.[81]

Despite January's and Damyan's best efforts, however, it is not until May's (and later Proserpina's) uncontrollable interference takes charge of these simplistic romances that the narrative of the *Merchant's Tale* as a whole actually manages to go somewhere, to bear narrative

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[79] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, "Introduction," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), pp. 3-7 [1-14].

[80] I found Tony Davenport's summation of *Guigemar* and *Yonec* (quoted above) useful in considering what Damyan might be drawing on in attempting to construct and assign a textual role to himself and his physical body; however, Davenport does not in this section of his work discuss Chaucer, and I do not wish to argue that Chaucer was drawing on these particular texts so much as on the cultural sense of what a lay might or could contain. Tony Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 132.

[81] Though I differ from Marcia Dalbey's reading of *The Merchant's Tale* in many of the particulars, we here agree that Chaucer "undercuts any pretense of courtly idealization in May's love affair," pretense that I would suggest is of Damyan's own invention. Marcia A. Dalbey, "The Devil in the Garden: Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's 'Merchant's [sic] Tale,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 75.3 (1974): 413 [408-415].

fruit, as it were. Almost to emphasize the closed and fruitless nature of his own composition, Damyan ultimately places his letter in a silken purse that lies against his heart, an action that may reinforce the work's connection to his corporeal form, but that also makes his text ineffective as a complaint, a letter, or a lay. Damyan's letter is not seeking an audience or attempting to inspire a reaction, and, because of this missing "ingredient," his text is rendered, for a time, an infertile narrative body. Whether or not Damyan consciously acknowledges that this is the case, by keeping his text fully under his own control, he inhibits its functioning as a textual body. In essence, and as the *Tale* later makes clear, a text cannot act or be effective as a narrative until the composer's desire for complete control over that work and what it communicates is relinquished and the work is made available to an audience for interpretation and response.[82] Interpretation is a dynamic and productive process that makes meaning through exchange, and, in particular, through the interplay between author, text, and audience.[83] This openness may disavow authorial control, but, as May and Proserpina's use of language make clear, the alternatives can birth new forms, ideals, and potential.

4.6   May's Designs on The Merchant's Tale

The Merchant's Tale is not really a romance, and it is certainly not a reductive or simplistic one. Unlike Damyan or January, May is aware both of the creative and interpretive power of a text's audience and of the generative power of generic hybridity, adapting the romance material left by these masculine compilers into her own triumphant fabliaux.[84] Though it is less noticeable to a

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[82] Sheridan likewise stresses the influence an audience holds in the construction of a text and its meaning, stating: "A text unread, like a commodity that doesn't circulate, has no value. Thus, Damian's gesture of placing the complaint in a silk purse by his heart devalues his text as a means of communication. Like all authors, he must have an audience and be able to influence it." Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 35.

[83] Catherine Cox makes a similar point, contending that, "Just as a text eludes an author's or narrator's control over its integrity once in circulation, so too it resists an author's attempted control over its inevitably diverse perceptions by the 'diverse folk' that constitute its audience; 'diverse folk' will indeed read and interpret individually and hence idiosyncratically, and they will do so independent of an author's wishes." Cox, *Gender and Language*, p. 2.

[84] The determined and lengthier engagement with the genres of romance and fabliaux in *The Merchant's Tale* deserves a little more consideration and discussion. While fabliaux often foreground the connections that exist between corporeality and language, romances are less likely to engage as explicitly and graphically with the full range of human embodiment or with its connection to language and narrative. While I would resist the temptation to describe fabliaux as concerned with "reality" and romance as, by contrast, "unrealistic," Tony Davenport's claim that, unlike romance, "*fabliaux*, are relatively … plot-dominated; their actions are presented so that events are specifically motivated and occur within a logical sense of space and time," emphasizes the different interests each narrative has *with* reality. While both genres are arguably interested in and engaged with reality, they often focus on slightly difference portions of reality or on a similar aspect of their reality, but on a different scale. Most significantly for *The Merchant's Tale*, however, fabliaux and romance often differ in terms of generic perception and social weight, with the former (often

modern reader, May consistently proves herself to be not only a textual body to be read and interpreted, but also a physical being who is more than capable of authoring her own texts, particularly by drawing on and refashioning what has been provided to her by previous writings, thinkers, and authorities. In many ways, May reflects the medieval linguistic/gender stereotype Cox discusses, wherein "Woman is representative textually not only of the carnal—the feminine flesh from which further meaning might be conceived, predicated as this medieval model is on a heterosexual orthodoxy—but also of the potential multiplicity of meaning that gives rise to the polysemy necessary for language to transcend literal constraints."[85] May re-writes generic tropes and social commonplaces, imagining them anew in order to author a text and a family that better suits her desires for herself and her narrative. For example, Cathy Hume compellingly argues that May's ability to organize and consummate her affair with Damyan derives from her ability to make use of the roles typically granted to medieval wives, both those that January has permitted her to access,[86] and several other "freedom[s] customarily allowed to wives of her social class," that she determinedly repossesses "in order to get what she wants."[87] In this way, May manipulates the base matter provided to her as a wife in order to re-imagine that same spousal role; she adapts conventions to create a new form or position for herself that resists the controlling or defining intentions that generated those roles in the first place. Notably, May accomplishes her will and her fabliaux-esque trick by affirming January's and Damyan's romance-fueled fantasies,[88] using the

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incorrectly) assumed to be unsophisticated. As a whole, however, *The Canterbury Tales* regularly plays both with social expectations and perceptions of various genres and with the notion that distinctions between modes can ever be maintained. For example, the first tale told, Knight's high, chivalric romance, is immediately and easily re-told by the Miller as a bawdy fabliaux, the transition pointing up the fallacious distinctions drawn between genres and "classes," and so on. As the pilgrims continue on, the genres of the tales told become more complex and enmeshed, just as the tellers to whom the tales are ascribed varies widely and often flouts expectations. *The Merchant's Tale* is only one example of an instance in *The Canterbury Tales* in which modes, styles, expectations, and genres intermingle, and, in showing how easily a romance can give way to a fabliaux, Chaucer is in part showing how much more fluid and mobile late medieval society is than it may wish to believe. Davenport, *Medieval Narrative*, p. 16.

[85] Cox, *Gender and Language*, p. 12.

[86] Namely, those of "giving him an heir, caring for his health, and looking after the welfare of the household servants." Cathy Hume, "Love in Confinement in the *Merchant's Tale*," in *Chaucer and the Cultures of Love and Marriage*, *Bristol Studies* in Medieval Cultures 3 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), p. 93 [90-106].

[87] Hume, "Love in Confinement," p. 90.

[88] Crocker, for instance, notes that the *Tale* resists reducing May to the stereotype of the shrewish woman, with the conclusion instead showing "January accept[ing] a romanticized version of feminine agency that separates May from the model of shrewish feminine aggression against which Justinus warns and Pluto grapples," ignoring the trick in order to maintain the romance, as it were. As such, Crocker suggests that May "exceeds both the model of feminine passivity he [January] desires and the model of [shrewish] feminine agency the speaker wants to expose," thereby resisting their controlling desire to define and thereby to fix her femininity. Crocker argues that May "exploits the fiction of feminine passivity so that it allows her to exercise agency as she wishes," meaning that January "depends upon May for his conception of feminine identity, and as long she leaves his fantasy of self-empowerment undisturbed,

basic substance of medieval marriage and wife-hood in a new way, or perhaps in a way that always existed but that is rarely registered. Much like Chaucer himself, May pretends to be merely a translator, all the while working subtly as an author, using the material given to her by her text and her society to write a fabliaux within and out of a romance; the fabliaux she creates, moreover, does not overcome or undo the romance, rather it opens it up, showing the potential and narrative fecundity of resisting the desire for total narrative completion.[89]

As *The Merchant's Tale* progresses, May begins to take over the "masculine" authorial role,[90] using it far more effectively than January or Damyan ever did. First, she composes her own letter, literally thrusting it into Damyan's bed as he lies convalescing—demanding that her text be given his attention:

> This gentil May, fulfilled of pitee, / Right of hire hand a lettre made she, / In which she graunteth hym hire verray grace. / Ther lakketh noght oonly but day and place / Wher that she myghte unto his lust suffise, / For it shal be right as he wole devyse. / And whan she saugh hir tyme, upon a day / To visite this Damyan gooth May, / And sotilly this lettre doun she threste / Under his pilwe; rede it if hym leste. / She taketh hym by the hand and harde hym twiste / So secrely that no wight of it wiste, / And bad hym been al hool, and forth she wente. (IV.1995-2007)

Here, May's letter is not simply a text, however, it is also made an extension of her body, having been explicitly written "of hire hand." In addition, though the letter claims to be acquiescing to

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no matter how empty his agency appears, she can exercise control over herself and her husband." Building on Crocker's work, I would suggest that May affirms the romance January has written for himself—what Crocker refers to as the knight's "fictional reality"—in order to escape that same, simplistic romance. In addition, Martin similarly suggests that January's "attempt to create a stability of perfection in an earthly garden and his attempt to possess his wife entirely within it is a vain bid to control meaning," further noting that "May does generate fresh meaning in January's closed system," so that "The pluralism of the Tale invites the audience to construct better meanings." Crocker, "Performative Passivity," 193, and Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, p. 121.

[89] Fabliaux, as Michelle Kohler shows, often make their humor out of the rules and logic of their contemporary culture, frequently "plac[ing] the audience and its systems of thought on the absurd side of the binary, so that the object of the joke is not only the character who unwittingly favors logical form over obvious truths, but also the logical forms themselves—and thus the external world that reverences their capacity to lead to truth." Michelle Kohler, "Vision, Logic, and the Comic Production of Reality in the *Merchant's Tale* and Two French Fabliaux," *The Chaucer Review* 39.2 (2004): 147 [137-150].

[90] As Mike Rodman Jones notes, patristic writings often link physical and linguistic authority while reinforcing gender hierarchies. For instance, Augustine contends that "The physical origins of the female body in Genesis come to imbue Adam with linguistic power over Eve," a link, Jones suggests, that was extended beyond the Biblical tradition, so that "the connections between masculine physical and linguistic primacy that are made by Augustinian exegesis [were] never far removed from later thought, and reappear[ed] regularly in elaborated ways." In addition, the antifeminist nature of many of these philosophical and narrative works returns us to the question of "Who painted the lion?" referenced in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. As Priscilla Martin shows, the Wife's point is that "Men have written the books,... they have been educated, their views have been heard. No wonder women have had a bad press. If the other sex had been authors and reported their experiences of men, the 'mark of Adam' ([*CT,* III] 696) would never be able to make amends for their wickedness." Jones, "January's Genesis," 62, and Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, p. 5.

and fulfilling Damyan's "lust," the organization of their encounters are, from this point on, steered by May. Finally, while Damyan places his letter in a pouch near his heart, May immediately seeks an audience for her text, thrusting her letter under Damyan's pillow in an action that prefigures or at least suggests a similarity to the pear-tree "thronging" (IV.2352-2353) that will constitute the corporeal realization of their affair, further reinforcing her appeal for attention and textual interpretation further by twisting the Squire's hand. Arguably, this moment differentiates May's and Damyan's coming sexual encounter from May's wedding night. Whereas, in the earlier encounter, January acts as sole scripter and director of the consummation while May's aggressive stoniness seems to cast her as a non-participant, this second letter exchange not only presages the orchard affair, it also shows May to be an active author of that encounter, thereby divesting authorship and authority from claims and enactment of masculinity.

In addition—and not to belabor the point or to stray too far into Freudianism—after thus thrusting her letter under Damyan's pillow, May bids the squire to "been al hool" (IV.2007). In so doing, May is most obviously beginning the process of returning Damyan to health by indicating that she will, physically, fulfill his desires. Her letter, thrust into his bed, gives birth to their forthcoming sexual encounter and, as a result, makes the squire well again (a healing function that the actual tryst ends up, somewhat unexpectedly, effecting for January as well). However, by urging Damyan, the receiver of her words, to be all *hole* as she thrusts the semi-phallic letter into his bed, May is also purposefully inverting gender roles and unlinking both genre and textual composition from biological sex by performing the textual thrusting herself while, at the same time, assigning to Damyan the status of receiving "hole."[91] Damyan is little better than January in his generic and gendered treatment of May; however, while the orchard encounter may seem to be

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[91] As the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED) makes clear, when used as an adjective, "hole" refers to and reflects the more obvious or surface-level meaning of May's command: the suggestion that Damyan be healthy or "get well." "Hole" in its adjectival form is primarily used to describe a "person, animal, the body, [or] part of the body" that is "healthy, cured, healed, free from disease or defect." (Similarly, the adverbial form of "hole" gives a clear sense of a unit or entity that is complete, whole, and/or "all together".) However, if "hole" is read instead as a noun, May's statement to Damyan can be understood in an altogether different light. As a noun, "hole" can refer to the obvious "perforation, bore, [or] hole," but it can also, as the MED's secondary definition emphasizes, refer to a bodily opening: "An external bodily orifice; an eye socket, a nostril, the anus, the orifice of the female pudendum, etc." The polyvalence of this seemingly simple word reveals not only May's undermining of attempts to control and script her behavior (particularly in relation to her gender) but also the slipperiness of language itself—allowing it to be more easily related to magic and femininity as *The Merchant's Tale* unfolds. *The Middle English Dictionary* (MED), "hole (adj.)," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED21006; "hole (adv.)," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED21007; and "hole (n.)," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED21003, Accessed December 5, 2018.

about Damyan fulfilling his lusts, this earlier moment of letter exchange suggests something different. First, that the pear tree tryst isn't about Damyan at all—it is an encounter authored and enabled, ultimately, by May—and, second, that May's authorial influence is rooted in her appropriation and adaptation of gender and genre conventions to and for her own ends.

In like manner, May next seizes control of the narrative tropes used by *The Merchant's Tale* itself, unlinking gender dynamics from the sexualized metaphor of the walled garden.[92] The garden in the *Merchant's Tale* represents another attempt by both January and, more subtly, by the *Tale*'s narrator to draw on and exploit a "type"—in this case the depiction of a walled garden or orchard as a spatial euphemism for female sexuality and genitalia—in order to exercise narrative and corporeal control over May, efforts that May ultimately rewrites to her own ends. Truly, the garden becomes ground zero for female and fairy textual revision and re-composition, serving as the place where the fruitfulness and generativity of openness and lability of forms becomes most clear.

The *Tale*'s narrator is not subtle in drawing the connections between January's garden, female sexuality, and the romance genre, explicitly citing the most famous example of this trope, *The Romance of the Rose*, when describing January's construction of the garden: "He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon; / So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon. / For, out of doute, I verraily suppose / That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose / Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse" (IV.2029-2033). The passage here extols the beauty of the garden, expecting the audience, through the citation of the *Romance of the Rose*, to connect it to May's body, which has also earlier been lauded with similarly characteristic and overblown rhetoric. In addition, the passage repeatedly emphasizes January's construction of the garden in an effort to exercise sexual and physical control over May's corporeal form.[93] First, the narrator notes that the garden is "walled al with stoon," a

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[92] I agree with Sheridan that the garden, viewed as a text, is authored by January; however, I would differ slightly in arguing that May does not simply read and "reinterpret" the garden, she in fact reframes the raw material given to her, making a fabliaux of her own design out of the Fisher Price My-First-Romance building blocks that January has left lying around. In sum, she does not just reinterpret, she re-writes. Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 38.

[93] Indeed, January's lust for control even leads him to attempt to take hold of the story of Eden in an attempt to construct for himself an *earthly* rather than a heavenly paradise wherein he can achieve pleasure. Mike Rodman Jones has compellingly argued that *The Merchant's Tale* is not invoking Genesis alone, but rather exegesis of Genesis, suggesting that the "ostentatious awareness of long clerical tradition of exegesis on Genesis and marriage which acts to highlight the ruthless, megalomaniacal drive towards masculine sexual prerogative—the centrality of 'disport' in January's 'paradys terrestre'—that characterizes January's palimpsest of Genesis." Jones notes how Augustine's writings, for example, emphasize Eve's "physical and verbal derivation" from Adam, who is the first, the origin, whereas Eve was taken from his body and her name, "woman," taken from his: "man." Jones, "January's Genesis," 60-62.

phrase that both conveys enclosure and recalls May's earlier stoniness, as well as its connection to January's construction of her as an aesthetic object over which he hopes to have total control. The *Tale*'s speaker then goes on to extol the garden's (and May's) material beauty, conjecturing that Priapus himself would be astounded: "Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise, / Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle / The beautee of the gardyn and the welle / That stood under a laurer alwey grene / … / … of the smale wyket / He [January] baar alwey of silver a clyket, / With which, whan that hym leste, he it unshette." (IV.2034-2037, 2045-2047). That Priapus—a fertility god known both for his role as protector of gardens and for his prominent phallus—should be cited here is no accident. This passage is meant to make clear that the garden is not only intended to represent May's sexuality, but also to signal January's efforts to control her corporeal body,[94] her fertility, and the connection between her physicality and his legacy: his "family tree."

The allusion to Priapus, in tandem with the material enclosure of the garden, emphasizes the contained and guarded nature of the orchard, just as the description of the garden's small gate, which can be opened only by a key kept on January's person and used only at his "leste," marks the space as not only a locus of sexual activity, but also one that is regulated and meant to be accessible to January alone. Not only is an orchard an artificial natural space, one that is deliberately and carefully constructed by human gardeners,[95] but this orchard is also one accessible solely by and at *January's* desire. Further, Priscilla Martin shows that, in constructing this enclosed garden, January is displaying his knightly class status and striving to (again) write himself into a romance: "The garden is a travesty of the knightly honour to which January pretends.… Too old to win honour in arms, he tries to compensate for his lack of knightly prowess and glamour by fabricating an atmosphere of romance."[96] These elements of the orchard's construction make it all

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[94] Marie Borroff, for instance, notes that: "The gate and the pleasure garden, then, are natural symbols of May's external and internal sexual anatomy, respectively. January, as householder and husband, has access to both." In addition, Tory Pearman argues that, by consummating their affair in a pear tree, the connections between the garden and May's body are foregrounded and tied explicitly to May's fertility: "the pear tree itself both suggests the potential fruitfulness of the female body and serves as the site where May's scorpion-like 'tayl' further deceives January; though the tree produces fruit, the fruit may not be legitimate, effectively terminating his familial line…. the Merchant's allusions to Fortune's venomous, scorpion-like tail locates May's vagina as poisonous and deadly, fruit-bearing and destructive." Borroff, "Silent Retribution," pp. 56-57, and Pearman, "'O Sweete Venym Queynte,'" p. 34.

[95] Orchards, as Kendall notes, "ha[ve] patrilineal significance. As secluded spaces, they protected the lord's wife from social contact (with males of the household or outsiders) that might compromise the legitimate status of her offspring." Kendall, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny," 312.

[96] Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, pp. 116-117.

the more significant that May makes this space the location for the consummation of her affair with Damyan, thereby supplanting January's desires and genre with her own.

Indeed, the *Tale* itself slips free from the associations to which the orchard trope attempts to tie it, so that May's body is not the only one effectively linked to the physical and metaphorical form of the garden. For example, soon after Priapus is cited in the passage above, the *Tale*'s narrator takes a moment to name one single tree growing within the orchard's walls: the laurel. This detail links January's body and his masculinity to the garden just as has been done for May's feminine form, naming here the same tree that January had earlier in the *Tale* used to describe himself and his virility: "I woot myseleven best what I may do. / Though I be hoor, I fare as dooth a tree / That blosmeth er that fruyt ywoxen bee; / And blosmy tree nys neither drye ne deed. / I feele me nowhere hoor but on myn heed; / Myn herte and alle my lymes been as grene / As laurer thurgh the yeer is for to sene" (IV.1460-1466). In this comparison with the laurel, January stresses the youth and, in particular, the yield of his body, arguing that he is young "where it counts" and therefore capable of bearing "seed." The laurel, then, recalls January's confidence in his ability to produce an heir and thus to avoid his earlier-stated fear of leaving his "heritage" in "straunge hand[s]" (IV.1439-1440).[97] In this way, the *Tale* encourages its audience to connect the physical body of January, and his corporeal legacy—his family and "heritage"—to his control, or lack thereof, of the paradisiacal orchard. Further, January's assertion that he is, in essence, evergreen, contrasts sharply with his own bodily change: the blindness which his corporeal self-image could not effectively counteract or control. Despite the long and (mockingly?) Boethian passage that, in the *Tale*, accompanies January's "unexpected" blinding, bemoaning the faithless workings of Fortune, many scholars have shown how very expected January's blindness would have been to medieval audiences (particularly ones familiar with medical treatises on the subject).[98] January's depiction early in the *Tale* would likely have easily called to mind for Chaucer's readers and hearers well-known medical traditions that linked "blindness and [many forms of] sexual

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[97] Earlier in the *Tale*, January argues that he needs to marry in order to prevent his patrimony from being inherited or acquired by someone outside his consanguineous family: "Yet were me levere houndes had me eten / Than that myn heritage sholde falle / In straunge hand, and this I telle yow alle" (IV.1438-1440).

[98] In addition to Wheatley, see Palmer, "Your Malady is No 'Sodyn Hap,'" 197-205; Carole A. Everest, "Sight and Sexual Performance in the *Merchant's Tale*," in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in* The Canterbury Tales *and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter G. Beidler, Chaucer Studies 25 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 91-103; Pearman, "' O Sweete Venym Queynte,'" pp. 31-32; and Peter Brown, "An Optical Theme in *The Merchant's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, *Proceedings*, *1984: Reconstructing Chaucer*, ed. Paul Strohm and Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville, TN: The New Chaucer Society, 1985), pp. 231-243.

transgression."[99] Further, even were this not the case, January cannot stop the aging of his body, no matter his claims of vitality, a fact that points to the expected losses in sight that regularly attend aging. January's blindness, as such, indicates both his failures to exercise control over his lusts— to his own body's detriment—and, at the same time, to his naiveté in believing in the possibility of ever possessing or maintaining complete control over even one's own body. Moreover, this point is reinforced by the fact that January's blindness and his construction of the garden, a place built to maintain his control, work together to enable his tricking by May. It is through January's "refusal to leave May," that he instead "gives her control over [his] movements,"[100] and it is through January's own faults, in particular, his mania for control, that May is able to take command not only of his domain—his enclosed and, he believes, restricted garden(s)[101]—but also, quite possibly, of his family line, thereby ironically effecting the realization of January's earlier fear that marriage to an older and possibly barren woman could dislocate his patrimony. It thus noteworthy that May authors her garden tryst with Damyan by appropriating January's key—a symbolic phallus intended to allow the Lombard Knight alone access to the enclosed garden which has been associated with May's genitalia—and making a copy of it in order to give Damyan access to her body and *her* productive power. In substituting Damyan's key for January's own, May both supersedes January as master of the metaphorical garden that is her corporeal body and sexuality, and, because January's own body and his family tree have also been, linked to that same orchard, May is in this moment likewise seizing control of the Lombard knight's heritage, writing a new familial and narrative body with her own, corporeal body and on her own, uncontrollable terms.[102]

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[99] Wheatley, "Blinding, Blindness, and Sexual Transgression," p. 129.

[100] Wheatley, "Blinding, Blindness, and Sexual Transgression," p. 148.

[101] Borroff similarly argues for the inversion of power and control in the garden scene, suggesting that it amounts to an ultimately "silent retribution" in which, "January, who controls the course of events, including the vents of May's life, at the outset and is controlled by them in turn." Borroff, "Silent Retribution," p. 59.

[102] As Crocker and Sheridan argue, albeit in slightly different ways, May resists easy categorization: she will not be reduced to a single type or set of expectations, and, in many ways, that is the true foundation of her alarmingness. For instance, Crocker argues that May's refusal to fit either the shrewish or the passive woman models makes her resistant to masculine control; thus, "Since January can see feminine agency only as it promotes his fantasy of empowerment, he has no ability to resist the 'excess' agency that May exercises over her marriage. And, even if the speaker is able to reveal May's subversive agency for his broader audience to see, her ability to recover herself uncovers the narrator's lack of control over his feminine creation." Sheridan, instead, links May's indefinability to her textuality, suggesting that she has a "double existence: at once a blank on which the male characters, including the narrator, can attempt to write their desires and an already-written text with its own contradictions that *resist interpretation*. Furthermore, as both text and commodity, May is creative in her own right and is thus difficult to control." Crocker, "Performative Passivity," 194, and Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 42.

4.7   Audience, Interpretation, and Textual Fluidity in *The Merchant's Tale*

In medieval thought, texts can stand in for and/or become part of their composer's or audiences' physical bodies in several ways. For instance, the processes of memory formation and of reading are routinely described by both classical and medieval natural philosophers using metaphors, prominent among those, the association of memory creation with the impression of something into soft wax.[103] This way of conceptualizing memory emphasizes the physical impact that external stimuli, including the reading or hearing of a text, makes on its receivers' (its audiences') bodies, imprinting itself and thereby leaving a memory image. The productive interaction between an audience and a text is, in essence then, a physical one that functions because a text can and does have a corporeal impact. This in turn suggests that a narrative has some materiality *as narrative*— even if that materiality comes from the sensory reception of the text. The wax metaphor's ability to connect narrative and physical bodies is, moreover, subtly invoked by *The Merchant's Tale*. Wax, as we have seen, appears twice in the *Tale*, first in January's description of a young wife as delightful because she is pliant, so that "men [can] gye, / Right as men may warm wex with hands plye" (IV.1429-1430), and again when May uses it to counterfeit the key to January's enclosed garden, "In warm wex … emprent[ing] the clyket" (IV.2117). These two moments contrast May and January as prospective composers. Whereas January views his compositional role as one that affords him control, allowing him to—Pygmalion-like—shape perfection easily and for his own pleasure, May recognizes that the power of her composition is not in molding but in imprinting, a process that admits the role of the audience in receiving, interpreting, and creating a text. May's authorial activities literally open enclosures—both in the form of the garden and in the body of the

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[103] As Mary Carruthers discusses, the "seal in wax" metaphor was used by Classical and medieval thinkers to describe the operations of cognition, memory, and recall. Aristotle, for instance, theorizes that "Memory-images," which are somatic and "produced in the emotional (sensitive) part of the soul," are made part of long-term memory when they are "impress[ed on] the material of the receiving organ," leaving a lasting copy of the image as the impression of a seal does in wax. Thomas Aquinas likewise suggests that the image leaves a physical impact on the individual's body (if a memory is formed), noting that "the wax does form a physical likeness of the original seal." Another important element of the metaphor is its emphasis on the link between seeing and reading: "it is a model based upon how the eye sees in reading…. In recollection, one *looks* at the contents of memory, rather than hearing or speaking them." Indeed, the metaphor does not only suggest that a memory leaves a physical imprint on an individual (thereby enabling the memory to later be recalled), it also connects memory to writing and inscription, suggesting that a memory could not only be impressed on the brain, but that it could, likewise, be written there: "the 'seal in wax' is basically a model of inscription or incising, as writing is incised upon a clay or wax or stone surface. Moreover, the forms incised symbolize information and thus are representations that serve a cognitive purpose, as do the representations of words, whether by phoneme or syllable or unit of sense, used in writing systems." Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 60, 70, 24-25.

text itself—to possibilities, including the possibility of resolution. Further, May's use of wax to imprint and adapt January's key, his emblem of control, suggests that a text, when passed on to the receptive mental wax of an audience, can no longer be regulated. Cox likewise notes that Chaucer's work routinely explores the impossibility of regulating one's textual creations, arguing that both scribal copying and textual interpretation amount to "manifestations of appropriation; the scribe who disfigures the manuscript in effect transforms it into his own, just as hermeneutically[-]minded readers, in subjecting the text to analysis and interpretation, transform the original author's text into personal readings."[104] In like manner, May appropriates January's key through copying and the (re)interpretation of the spatial-textual garden he has created, reinforcing the sense that, even when a creation is identical to its original in form—as Damyan's newly copied key is to January's original—the use of that copy is outside the influence of the original composer.

Christian Sheridan also emphasizes the importance of audience in and to the creation and meaning of *The Merchant's Tale*, writing that, not only is "the *Merchant's Tale* affect[ing] its audience by manipulating their responses to its characters,"[105] but that it also "endorses a very fluid view of textuality, suggesting that texts … are formed in the interactions among reader, author, and language."[106] Indeed, I would even take this a step further, suggesting that this recognition of fluidity is extended to all terrestrial forms in the *Tale*—beginning with that of the human body—and that the recognition here of the power that the audience holds in the "making" and understanding of a text also indicates the impossibility of an author or compiler effectively controlling a composition. Sheridan's work even toys with the relationship between textual and physical bodies as it is engaged by *The Merchant's Tale*, remarking that "the tale forces us to expand our definition of a text to include any object, event, or even *character* that requires interpretation,"[107] and noting several times that May "embodies" a text and the concept of dynamic textuality[108] as dependent on and constructed via exchange. The primary takeaway here is that a narrative, once opened to an audience, becomes labile and unpredictable but it also becomes

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[104] Cox, *Gender and Language*, p. 2.
[105] Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 27.
[106] Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 29.
[107] Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 29, emphasis mine.
[108] For example, Sheridan suggests that "At various points in the tale, she [May] is a text, an author, and an audience," thereby "embod[ying] all aspects of textuality." Sheridan, "May in the Marketplace," 30, see also 40-42.

generative, and that should sound a great deal like the effects of otherworld chaos described in other chapters.

Unusually, the fairies do not intrude on the human world in *The Merchant's Tale* until its conclusion, and, when they do appear, we don't get the extensive descriptions of their physical appearances that we might expect after considering other fairy romances. In most otherworld tales, the fairy queen in particular is indisputably embodied, defined by her sexual allure and exceptional beauty: an inhuman perfection which must be paused over and described in copious and lingering detail. Indeed, even when the fairy queen's blazon is conventional or lacking in specifics—making audience's imagination of the queen's physical body more difficult—there still remains in these stories an emphasis on her physical appearance and its aesthetics. She is an emphatically material entity.

Except that in *The Merchant's Tale* she is not; Chaucer's fairy queen, Proserpina, is very briefly described, and those accounts pay little if any attention to her corporeal form. The first depiction of Proserpina merely notes that she likes to "disport" with her "fayere" about the well in January's garden: "Ful ofte tyme he Pluto and his queene, / Proserpina, and al hire fayerye, / Disporten hem and maken melodye / Aboute that welle, and daunced, as men tolde" (IV.2038-2041). The little we learn about Proserpina here focuses on her actions, her hobbies (if you will), and her status as a queen of Faerie. Further, the passage distances its audience from Proserpina's physical and active body by noting that we only know about these activities because they have been related as such: what we know of the fairy queen is solely derived from what reports of her "men tolde." Further, while we can presume that this Proserpina is beautiful, we are only able to do so because we know the story of Pluto's rape of Proserpina—a story that details her beauty— and because we know that other romance fairy queens are beautiful.

Further, the second depiction of Proserpina only reinforces the intertextual and narrative nature of Chaucer's fairy queen, whose description here is nearly identically to the tale of Pluto and Proserpina as it appears in Claudian (and Ovid) with some slight, fay adjustments: "Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye, / And many a lady in his compaignye, / Folwynge his wyf, the queene Proserpyna, / Which that he ravysshed out of [Ethna] / Whil that she gadered floures in the mede — / In Claudyan ye may the stories rede, / How in his grisely carte he hire fette —" (IV.2227-2233). In essence, our understanding of Proserpina in *The Merchant's Tale* is based primarily on recourse to other stories. Further, though the presence of fairies suggests that this garden episode

is and should be read as a romance, this intertextuality is not the type that is characteristic of romance. Whereas romances tend to invoke other romances—commonly either naming other knights and/or heroes in order to cast that romance's hero or court as superior, as Chaucer does in *Sir Thopas* (VII.897-902), or detailing other romances the tale's author has previously composed or related—the other text and author referenced here are, instead, Classical. Though the inclusion of elements, characters, and even stories from the Classical tradition are not antithetical to the composition of popular and chivalric romances (as *Sir Orfeo* itself shows), the admixture of traditions and generic associations invoked by these Classical fairies recalls the generic complications that continue to characterize *The Merchant's Tale*.

Further, by referring the *Tale*'s audience to another *auctorité*—noting that "In Claudyan ye may the stories rede"—this passage reinforces the sense of narrative report introduced in Proserpina's first description, in which "men tolde" information characterizing the fairy couple. Unlike most fairy queens, Proserpina is arguably incorporeal, substantiated primarily by plot and knowable only through intertextuality—through recourse to narrative. Much as Guinevere in Chestre's *Launfal* is constituted by rumor, Proserpina is here composed of and by story. As might then be expected, her power is rooted not in her physical beauty but instead in her linguistic abilities, so that her later involvement in *Tale*, and, in particular, her demonstration of fairy magic, is characterized by demonstrations of rhetorical skill. Indeed, I would suggest that the combined lack of physical description and focus on the rhetorical aplomb and narrative nature of Proserpina makes this fairy queen more text than body: she is knowable and effective almost solely through her words and her command of their slipperiness and productivity. Ultimately, the collaboration of Proserpina and May complicates gender and genre, undermining forms of social, physical, and textual control by opening them up to interpretation and difference while showing the ridiculousness of the alternative, of willfully and blindly holding on to fictions of dominance and control.

Upon first noting May's intention to deceive her husband, Pluto and Proserpina have a heated exchange about the treacherous nature of women, one that might be whimsically described as a marital squabble. Pluto, unsurprisingly, paints the soon-to-be-cuckolded January as the victim of a wicked wife, lamenting: "'ther may no wight seye nay; / Th'experience so preveth every day / The tresons whiche that women doon to man. / Ten hondred thousand [tales] tellen I kan / Notable of youre untrouthe and brotilnesse / … / Ne se ye nat this honorable knyght, / By cause, allas, that

he is blynd and old, / His owene man shal make hym cokewold'" (IV.2237-2241, 2254-2256). In so doing, however, Pluto's argument that women are treasonous and false unwittingly foregrounds men's true vulnerability as it attempts to claim the privileged status of innocent and long-suffering victim. As a result, this speech complicates the opposed and rigidly defined genders that romance often posits and that January, Pluto's human double,[109] has attempted to draw on and reinforce in his earlier treatment of May. In traditional, patriarchal discourse, masculinity is typically cast as the norm, the average body,[110] rendering the female body, through contrast, fundamentally disabled.[111] However, by lamenting January's ill treatment, Pluto's speech here unintentionally reveals the veiled fact that masculinity is, like femininity, vulnerable and penetrable—pointing to January's exposure to the masculine "wound" of cuckoldry.[112]

In addition, Pluto's ostensible investment in gender roles, despite his accidental destabilizing of them, suggests that his vow to magically heal January's sight might be seen as an attempt to restore the gendered and generic order, to circumvent the fabliaux trick that May is plotting and to return January to a position of physical and social power and "wholeness." In many ways, this makes Pluto's intervention an instance of what Susan Crane describes as the masculine character of romance magic. Masculine magic, Crane suggests, is "associated with masculine concerns and characters," "strives to confer on the individual subject an autonomy and

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[109] Pluto is, of course, also an aged husband who abducted *his* young wife and kept her against hers and her mother's will.

[110] For more on this see: Pearman, "'O Sweete Venym Queynte,'" pp. 27-28; Crane, *Gender and* Romance, p. 21; and Cox, *Gender and Language*, pp. 8-9; among others.

[111] Pearman, "'O Sweete Venym Queynte,'" pp. 27-28, 34.

[112] This is not to suggest, however, that January should or can be pitied for his blindness or his ensuing cuckoldry. Any concern or sympathy the audience may feel for January in this moment, is, however, swiftly undercut both by recalling the source of the utterance, Pluto, and by January's own previous depiction in the *Tale*. January, as we have seen, is a terribly unsympathetic character, with everything from his moral and introspective blindness to his lusts and bodily excess making his position here feel less than tragic. Additionally, January's early identification with Lombardy makes it likely that Chaucer's audience would also have been disinclined to read January as sympathetic. As Wheatley notes: "For fourteenth-century English readers this title [of Lombard knight] would have linked him closely with a group whose metaphorical blindness was the subject of an earlier chapter: Jews. During the fourteenth century the Lombards were the largest group of Christians to engage in the practice of usury" and, as such, "the well-traveled Geoffrey Chaucer certainly knew that he would not predispose his readers in January's favor by calling him a Lombard and pointing out that he has garnered 'greet prosperite.'" Wheatley, "Blinding, Blindness, and Sexual Transgression," p. 145. Similarly, Tory Pearman has also discussed "The Lombard connection to disability—particularly blindness," likewise noting that this association "stems from the association of Jews with blindness and the subsequent linkage of Lombards to Jews," and suggesting that "Chaucer draws deliberate attention to January's Lombard roots by clearly demonstrating January's age and wealth, two qualities that his probable source text, an account of the fruit-tree deception in the a late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century Italian *novellino* tales, omits." Tory Vandeventer Pearman, "Refiguring Disability: Deviance, Blinding, and the Supernatural in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability* 3.2 (2009): 136, footnote 4 [131-146].

completeness," and tends, in romance, "to seek a self-sufficiency and control beyond the usual contingencies of social and intimate relations."[113] In this way, Pluto's promise that "'Now wol I graunten, of my magestee, / Unto this olde, blynde, worthy knyght / That he shal have ayen his eyen syght, / Whan that his wyf wold doon hym vileynye. / Thanne shale he knowen al hire harlotrye, / Both in repreve of hire and othere mo'" (IV.2258-2263), strives to restore gendered power dynamics, opposing the "worthy" male knight with the "vileynye" and "harlotrye" of his wife. In like manner, the restoration of January's physical sight is meant to allow the Lombard knight to see that his authority has been circumvented so that he can reclaim his control and influence. However, Pluto overlooks the fact that January's true blindness is internal, linked both to his failures as a reader and to his mistaken belief that terrestrial forms can be controlled and perfected.

Moreover, Pluto is also a bad reader,[114] a quality which directly contrasts with his wife's extensive understanding and rhetorical savvy. For instance, after matching her husband's pledge to heal January by promising to bestow a counter-gift on May—a vow to which I will return in a moment—Proserpina shows off her personal mastery of language and argument, contradicting Pluto's condemnation of women as faithless and wicked. Addressing her husband's assertion of Solomon as an *auctorité* on women's falseness and inconstancy, Proserpina proclaims: "'Though that he[, Solomon,] seyde he foond no good womman, / *I prey yow take the sentence of the man*; / He mente thus, that in sovereyn bontee / Nis noon but God, but neither he ne she'" (IV.2287-2290, emphasis mine). The fairy queen's response here models a superior use of ethos, and she then turns Pluto's own *auctorité* against him, undermining Solomon's credibility by noting that he "'was a lecchour and an ydolastre, / And in his elde he verray God forsook; / And if God ne hadde, as seith

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[113] Crane, *Gender and Romance*, pp. 133-134.
[114] While there is not space to get into this in any great detail in the chapter proper, it is also worth mentioning that Pluto's restoration of January's sight does not, as January and the fairy king might desire, similarly "restore" the gendered hierarchy of power and control. Instead Pluto's vow unintentionally reinforces May's power over herself, her narrative, and her legacy—which includes her family and her story's future by placing her in the active role. Significantly, the vow is worded in such a way that it actually gives May an exceptional degree of control over January's future and his body: he will be healed *only* when (and, implicitly, *if*) she does her husband "vileynye." By thus tying the condition of the cure to May's actions, Pluto effectively fuses January's return to physical wholeness to May's volition and agency: her pursuit of her personal desires. Pluto's stipulation inverts the earlier narrative of gendered opposition of activity and control to passivity and submission, placing May in the active and organizing role and arresting the romances of January and Damyan. May is the one doing January villainy, not Damyan, and, as the active subject of the line, she takes command of the plot of the narrative, introducing fabliaux-elements into the romance and revealing a productive fluidity in and to genre-ed narratives and gendered bodies. In addition, Pluto does not have the final word; instead his wife, Proserpina, masters him first rhetorically and then at supernatural giving, her intervention further heightening May's narrative and familial sovereignty.

the book, / Yspared him for his fadres sake, he sholde / Have lost his regne rather than he wolde'"
(IV.2298-2302). By thus collapsing Solomon's authority into his own censure, Proserpina sharply
contrasts Solomon's fickleness with his aforementioned claims about female untruth and
faultiness. [115] As such, this moment demonstrates Proserpina's rhetorical power while also
decoupling gender from narrative and cultural "types" and "commonplaces." If both women *and*
Solomon can be faithless, then the binary opposition upon which gender and gendered hierarchies
are built—including those of the romance-derived gender relations which Pluto's gift is intended
to restore—swiftly fall apart, giving way to a more open and indeterminate spectrum of qualities.
In addition, Proserpina's retort here also serves to instruct her husband on proper reading and
interpretation practices,[116] encouraging him—and, by extension, the *Tale*'s readers and hearers—
to look beyond surface meanings and to attend instead to the *sentence* of his own example. Her
instruction points also to the interpretative power of a text's audience, suggesting that narrative
meaning is impossible for even an author to control, subject as it is to a range of reading practices
and abilities that are, in turn, representative of a number of different interpreters and interpretive
skills.

Moreover, Proserpina's composition as and by narrative makes her intervention here of
additional importance; on the one hand, she reveals the multilayered and cultural power of textual
bodies, but, on the other, she also points to the slippery and uncontrollable nature of language and
texts, indicating both the ways in which a sign or authority can be applied in numerous ways to a
variety of efforts or meanings and to how the *sentence* of a statement may differ from its literal or
surface substance. As such, language cannot be fixed or controlled any more than Pluto can
dominate his powerful wife. Further, by folding Solomon's censure of gender back onto his own
character, Proserpina's speech links corporeal, gendered bodies to rhetorical practice, suggesting
that—like textual bodies—physical forms may be more labile than January or Pluto wish to admit,
so that the ability of corporeal forms to signify is shown to be impossible to fix, with their meanings
revealed instead to be fluid and open to interpretation. In addition, Proserpina's mastery of rhetoric
and narrative does not remain hers alone; rather, in the final moments of the *Tale*, Proserpina's

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[115] In addition, if the *Tale*'s audience is reading beyond the surface, as just instructed, the portrait of Solomon as a
blasphemous letch who, in his old age, abandoned Godly living, nearly dooming his soul, should sound more than a
little familiar, and perhaps even somewhat typological, thereby encouraging *The Merchant's Tale*'s audience to
consider the ways in which Old Testament narratives might further illuminate the meaning of Chaucer's own work.
[116] Blindness most devastatingly at the level of poor and/or faulty interpretive abilities, seems to plague both January
and Pluto, emphasizing the moral deficiency that similarly defines the two.

"feminine magic" extends her rhetorical skill to May and all other women. Rather than simply inverting control and power dynamics, however, May's final, fairy-fueled triumph joins embodied activity and linguistic ability in order to both re-write gender fictions and to craft an open narrative that is unquestionably more fruitful *because* of its imperfections and lability.

Upon hearing Pluto's vow to heal January so that the knight can catch his wife and Damyan *in flagrante*, Proserpina swiftly replies that, *if* such healing occurs, she will:

> "yeven hire [May] suffisant answere, / And alle women after, for hir sake, / That, though they be in any gilt ytake, / With face boold they shulle hemself excuse, / And bere hem doun that wolden hem accuse. / For lak of answere noon of hem shal dyen. / Al hadde man seyn a thing with bothe his yen, / Yit shul we women visage it hardily, / And wepe, and swere, and chide subtilly, / So that ye men shul been as lewed as gees." (IV.2266-2275)

Thus, whereas Pluto uses his magic to (re)assert masculine control and autonomy—exemplifying the masculine magic that Crane describes—Proserpina's intervention instead reflects that feminine magic which "has an element of ambivalence that expresses femininity's compounded attraction and danger in romance,"[117] magic which is notably uncanny and polyvalent.[118] It is important, if hardly surprising, that Proserpina's polyvalent, feminine magic is, moreover, tied to her talent with language. Like femininity, language and its crafty manipulation are both dangerous and attractive, here becoming not only a means of bodily protection but also a means for dissemblance—two powers that are purposely intertwined in the *Tale*. Here Proserpina casts verbal evasion as an often life-preserving necessity, and, by giving her gift not only to May but also to all women who come after her, the fairy queen seems to allude to Genesis 3:16, wherein pain in childbirth becomes the inheritance of all women on Eve's account.[119] In drawing this connection, the *Tale* implies that, like language, women are both dangerous and productive. Proserpina's gift thus further links corporeal and textual bodies as well as their literal and figurative legacies: the "fruit" that they will "bear."

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[117] Crane, *Gender and Romance*, p. 150.
[118] Crane, *Gender and Romance*, p. 152. Crane in fact claims that feminine magic is "bivalen[t]"; however, I am using "polyvalent" because I would suggest that the instability and "occult" nature that she describes speaks to a sort of multiplicity of meanings that results from the common difficulty in, and even impossibility of, identifying not only the means but also the meaning and motivation of these magics. The examples, such as Morgan le Fay's ambiguous intervention in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that Crane provides likewise suggest that the meanings of feminine magics are impossible to fix and to ever fully understand, not because they are devoid, but because they are *full* of possible meanings.
[119] "To the woman He [God] said, / 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; / with painful labor you will give birth to children. / Your desire will be for your husband, / and he will rule over you'" (Genesis 3:16).

While Pluto's gift fails to restore the gendered and genre-ed control he and January have desired—a control that has shown itself, throughout the *Tale*, to be not only nonexistent but unachievable—May's completion of the fabliaux trick is rooted in her ability to use her personal physicality and narrative proficiency to (re)create, for January, the sense that his romance and his control remain. May, in effect, undermines the fictions of corporeal and textual control by foregrounding the fact that they *are* fictions. By writing for January the romance he desires—joining her potential pregnancy with her rhetorical savvy—May underscores the impossibility of that desired perfection and crafts for herself a new narrative.[120] Convincing her husband that his newly healed eyes currently have "'no parfit sighte'" (IV.2383), she maintains her place in January's household while also recreating that domain: substituting Damyan's paternity for January's own—if she is indeed pregnant—in the blossoming of January's otherwise fruitless family tree. May, in effect, uses the patriarchal desire for control to open up opportunities in which she can instead exercise her own powers of creation. Her explanation to January thus underscores the sterile impossibility of perfection, repeating instead negative forms of "parfit." These moments—wherein May claims that January misapprehended her actions in the tree because he has "'no parfit sighte'" (IV.2383) and states that "'Upon a thyng, [he] ne seen it parfitly'" (IV.2399)—mock January's attempts at achieving perfection, while May's simultaneous grafting[121] of Damyan, less formally than Orfeo's Steward, onto January's sprout-less shaft, supplies instead the potential productivity of openness and lability. By encouraging his audience to recognize how language can both reveal and obscure *sentence*, how important but variable interpretation can be, and how even a whole body—such as January's healed, masculine form—can fail to "work," (in this case, to see accurately) Chaucer thus primes his readers and hearers to consider the ending of *The Merchant's Tale* in relation to this revealed instability and the unlikelihood of perfection and wholeness in the terrestrial world.

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[120] Crocker similarly notes that: "Because May can present herself as active and obedient (she claims to be working to cure her husband), she makes January accept her agency and the [*Tale*'s] speaker accept that such agency can be read as feminine submission," and, "since January always believed in a fictional reality," May's actions here simply "recast that identity so that it allows her to do as she pleases." Crocker, "Performative Passivity," 193.

[121] Alcuin Blamires notes that: "The vocabulary of tree trunk or stem (*stok*), of branching, and fruition, had been entrenched in cultural perception of genealogy" for some time, making the garden setting and use of such terminology duly meaningful in this moment. Moreover, Kendall notes that grafted trees, such as the ympe-tree in *Sir Orfeo*, are common in medieval orchards, often as fruit trees that, through human intervention, have "combined different species in the new, hybrid plant," and, as such, they "were sometimes used as metaphors of genealogy." See Kendall, "Family, *Familia*, and the Uncanny," 312; Alcuin Blamires, "May in January's Tree: Genealogical Configuration in the *Merchant's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 45.1 (2010): 111 [106-227]; and see also: Jirsa, "Arboreal Folklore," 142.

4.8   Textual Healing: Chaucer's Fay Conclusion

The fairy intrusion into *The Merchant's Tale* is not, as it was in *Sir Orfeo*, a moment of conflict-production and narrative wounding; rather, Chaucer's fay, as noted, do not intrude on, interfere with, or even truly appear in *The Merchant's Tale* until its conclusion, where they act only to intervene in and quickly resolve human conflict into what seems to be a neat and almost perfect knot. It is thus the *Tale*'s resolution, rather than its initiation, that is fairy-wrought, and the fay seem, on the surface, to be little more than a ridiculous and somewhat clumsy device for wrapping up the unwieldy problems of the human characters. In particular, the conclusion of the *Tale* at first appears to finally achieve the perfect completeness that January, Damyan, and the *Tale*'s teller have been reaching for, wrapping the story and its various conflicts up neatly: January believes he possesses a loving young wife who will soon give him an heir, and May can safely and easily continue her affair with Damyan—should she choose to do so—without compromising her power and status as January's wife. However, almost as soon as this perfection is achieved, it becomes clear that it is a fallacy, with numerous, unresolvable loose ends in fact trailing from the final knot. The *Tale* is, in truth, left open to and for the audience, inviting its unique, mental completion by each of its readers and/or hearers. In so doing, this fairy-achieved ending not only mocks narratives that rely on overly magical *deus ex machina* to perfect the narrative matter, it also emphasizes the ridiculousness of those characters who are misled by the ending into believing that they have managed to bend terrestrial forms—the family, a narrative, and/or their own or others' corporeal bodies—fully to their personal wills.

The important prominence of terrestrial instability and the impossibility of complete wholeness and unblemished perfection in *The Merchant's Tale*, though present throughout the work, here takes on particular significance as the question of the "wholeness" or completion of the narrative's body comes to the fore at its conclusion. At first glance, fairy intervention in the garden plot seems, through the healing of January and the saving of May, to utterly resolve the conflict of the tale: everyone appears to be at peace and to have what they most desire—even if they have had to resort to self-delusion to achieve it. Moreover, Pluto and Proserpina are instrumental in this completion, allowing January to regain his sight without producing any new or potentially violent conflict, such as that which might have been expected to result from January's sudden perception of his wife in a tree, her "'smok … leyn upon his [Damyan's] brest'" (IV.2395). In so doing, the

fairies forestall the extension of the already bloated narrative,[122] resolving this next spate of conflict before it can arise. In a fashion that should appear quite uncharacteristic of the otherworld—particularly given their actions in *Sir Orfeo* and the other romances discussed in this study—Pluto and Proserpina here serve as what Richard Firth Green, in his discussion of the work, aptly labels the "*dii ex machina*"[123] of *The Merchant's Tale*. The fairy couple's supernatural intervention wraps up the action swiftly and magically, but also, I would suggest, somewhat unsatisfactorily. In many ways, the unexpected appearance and intervention of Pluto and Proserpina in January's garden seems random and unnecessary, an addition that feels haphazard largely because of the generic instability that has characterized the *Tale* up to this point.[124] For instance, the presence of fairies typically suggests elements of romance,[125] while these fairies' appellations associate them with Classical narrative, adding yet another degree of generic complication.[126] In addition, the garden scene has clearly shifted the *Tale* away from romance and

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[122] R. Jacob McDonie similarly suggests that the *Tale* is packed full of "narrative detours" that "delay the ending, prolonging the desire for narrative resolution insofar as they are metonyms…. metonymies are a method of narrative self-preservation, a narrative technique that dilates the plot, creating distractions and digressions, in order to resist meaning, keeping the narrative and its textual energy alive." However, McDonie notes, *The Merchant's Tale* is too overloaded with such metonymies, delaying resolution and satisfaction. McDonie, "'Ye gete namoore of me,'" 323, 325.

[123] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 198.

[124] *The Merchant's Tale* sits uncomfortably and incompletely in any one specific genre, having elements of fabliaux, romance, encomium, and formal debate, among others. This generic instability has also been noted by scholars such as Borroff, "Silent Retribution," p. 53 [50-70], who identifies the *Tale* as "perhaps the most notable of Chaucer's generic hybrids"; Jones, "January's Genesis," 72, who writes that the *Tale* "contorts itself into a virtuoso panoply of genres"; Burger, "Present Panic," 66, who argues that the *Tale* "inscri[bes] … the impossibility of securing the very stable, unitary satiric perspective it appears to desire"; and Patterson, "Chaucerian Commerce," pp. 333-334, who describes the tale as "remarkably unstable, even volatile," a work whose "challenge" stems both from "its syncretism, its dizzying conjunction of widely disparate literary materials" and "its refusal to provide a coherent perspective on this *bricolage*."

[125] This is not to suggest that fairies only appear in romance—they of course also appear in numerous chronicle accounts as well as in folklore and otherworld journey poems, indeed Neil Cartlidge even discusses what he terms the "fairies in the fountain" motif in Breton lays but also in the fabliaux *Le Chevalier*. Here I merely wish to indicate that the presence of fairies tends to invoke an air or a sense of connection to the realm of romance. In addition, N.S. Thompson notes that Chaucer's sources for the "pear tree story" ascribe the supernatural forces in the garden to either God and St. Peter (as in the *Il novellino* version) or to Jupiter and Venus; as such, the inclusion of Proserpina and Pluto, as well as their association with Faerie, are both Chaucer's sole invention. Neil Cartlidge, "The Fairies in the Fountain: Promiscuous Liaisons," in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, edited by Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic, and Judith Weiss, Studies in Medieval Romance (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 15-27, and N.S. Thompson, "The Merchant's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues of* The Canterbury Tales, Vol. II, pp. 484-485 [479-534].

[126] Arguably, making Pluto and Proserpina fairies makes them vernacular entities, in part because fairies are most likely to occur in romance, which is, most commonly, a vernacular form and which receives its name, *romanz*, from the vernacular (Old French). Further, in late-Middle English texts, the vernacular had otherworldly qualities of lability and unpredictability, so that, while "Latin offered a relatively stable language…, [while,] In contrast, English was both unstable and highly localized," in large part due to dialect differences. As a result of this, "the vernacular came to *stand for* fluidity and instability, as against the stability of Latin." Wogan-Browne, Watson, Taylor, and Evans, *The Idea of the Vernacular*, p. 11.

firmly toward fabliaux, and, as a result, the sudden, fairy resolution of the conflict feels more ambiguous than satisfying.

Further, this involved generic interplay has had the effect of lengthening the narrative, largely because, until this moment, the narrative elements within the *Tale* have primarily been competing with each other, rather than coming together to make a clear and engaging tale. As such, the *Tale*'s long-delayed culmination begins to feel like January's unsatisfactory "pleying," so that the long-put-off resolution "damn[s] up" the combined narrative and "sexual desire … only to … curtail[that desire by relating] a digressive narrative that obstructs narrative and sexual resolution, finally eliciting disappointment."[127] In fact, the magical, fairy elements of the *Tale* further this disappointment by linking it to wholeness and perfection. Through fay interference, the *Tale* comes crashing to a rapid and somewhat too-convenient conclusion, reproducing the sort of surface-level perfection that has been tied to overly simplistic romance and to January and Damyan's attempts at control: a perfect resolution that seems to belie the points the story has been making about the impossibility of worldly perfection. Here every character, to a degree and far too conveniently, has managed to "win"; however, the *Tale* has—in its early moments—primed its readers and hearers to question such perfect wholeness in corporeal, metaphoric, and narrative bodies, and, as we look closer at this moment of resolution, we can detect numerous unresolved questions and possibilities trailing from the final, (im)perfect knot.

Notably, the fay healing of both January and the narrative conflict that defined the *Tale* only partially disguises these irresolvable loose ends; for example, scholars continue to debate whether or not May is pregnant at the *Tale*'s conclusion—struggling with the problems of when and by whom she was impregnated, if at all, as well as with whether or not the affair continues, what the outcome of January's demise will be, and what the implications of those different possibilities and readings are and might suggest.[128] In this way, the fairy healing actually

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[127] R. Jacob McDonie makes a similar suggestion, likening narrative construction to sexual desire and satisfaction. McDonie, "'Ye gete namoore of me,'" 325.

[128] Select readings of this issue include Alcuin Blamires, "May in January's Tree," 116, which argues for the pear tree moment as a place/time of transition where genealogy shifts "from patrilineal to matrilineal" with May taking control of January's family tree; Borroff, "Silent Retribution," pp. 50-70, wherein Borroff argues that May is in fact pregnant and that Damyan is the father, a fact that achieves a "richly deserved retribution" upon January, ensuring that "The fate that [he] thought to avert by marrying a young wife in old age … is visited upon him" (p. 51); Milton Miller, "The Heir in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 29 (1950): 437-440, which also puts Damyan forward as the father of January's heirs; Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill, "Love in Hell: The Role of Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (1990): 389-407, which likewise argues for Damyan's paternity; Margaret Hallissy, "Widow-To-Be: May in Chaucer's 'The Merchant's Tale,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 26.3 (1989):

destabilizes the very things it seems to control and "put back together": the narrative, January and May's marriage and family, and January's sense of control and stability. The openness and uncertainty that now defines these structures and institutions is, moreover, a more familiar, more terrestrial experience of the vagaries of human living, and it is a truth and familiarity that points again to the impossibility of January or any other human being able to achieve complete control over their household, story, or even their own body. The fairy healing of January thus restores bodily wholeness and generic control only to then poke fun at them. As a result, the questions and imperfections that remain, obscured but omnipresent, indicate the undesirability of perfect wholeness, mocking overly magical and perfected endings—including the endings of many a romance—while advocating instead for the real, artistic, and productive potential of narratives that are open and that embrace the indeterminacy and imperfection of human living. The ultimate effect of introducing questions here that are neither resolved nor fully resolvable, is that Chaucer invites the audience into the *Tale*, acknowledging that they are already a part of the composition process: their interpretations exceeding authorial control and affecting how the story is understood. As such, the open ending of *The Merchant's Tale* points to the potential and productive power of audience interpretation and the impossibility of forestalling those external, narrative-shaping efforts, no matter how hard an author may try to control their own work.

Both *Sir Orfeo* and *The Merchant's Tale* reinforce the point that no human form, institution, or narrative can ever be a fully finished or perfected whole, and that no mortal author or creator can have or maintain complete control, pointing instead to the real and productive desirability of mystery and openness. Ultimately, both works query the elevation of wholeness and of perfect understanding in human bodies, societies, and narratives, offering instead alternative forms that are opened to engagement either through productive wounding or through the questioning of closure as a desirable or achievable possibility. The intrusive actions of otherworldly beings in both tales thus affect humans at the narrative, familial, and corporeal levels, changing the functions of all three. As such, though the body of a text may be altered and often opened by fairy interventions—interruptions which spawn multiple and often definitively unanswerable

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295-304, which contends that May's pregnancy is ambiguous but her tryst with Damyan was foolish risk to take, one that could jeopardize her future security as a wealthy and independent widow; and both Pearman, "'O Sweete Venym Queynte'" and Samantha Katz Seal, "Pregnant Desire: Eyes and Appetites in the *Merchant's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 48.3 (2014): 284-306, who argue May's pregnancy is productively irresolvable.

questions—these ruptures arguably do not so much compromise, as, in many ways, enhance the functionality and message of these narratives.

CHAPTER 5.   TAKING LIBERTIES, PLAYING REALITIES, AND IMAGINING OTHERWORLDS IN SHAKESPEARE'S *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*MND*) demonstrates the theatre's ability to both represent and comment upon its contemporary contexts. The play does not simply draw on reality and body it forth on stage,[1] however, it also explores the ways in which an artwork may speak back to its milieu. Because the medium of the playwright is physical,[2] auditory, visual, *and* spatial, a play can be viewed as a work of art constituted through the combined contributions of bodies, spaces, movements, and words, both written and uttered. Further, because theatrical products are partially dependent on the perceptions and imaginations of their spectators, a play is produced not only by the playwright and players, but also in collaboration with the minds of the work's spectators.[3] As such, a play, in truth, only exists in those moments of interaction between the playwright's poetry, the actor's physical performance, and the spectator's imagination. In *MND*, for instance, the fairies only "work" as fairies when there is added, imaginative participation from the play's audience, meaning that, even with the addition of modern, high-tech effects, audiences must mentally buy into the suggestion that Oberon stands behind Titania, her fairies, and Bottom "unseen" (see stage directions IV.i),[4] or that the actors, child or no, playing Titania's fay servants

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[1] Anne Barton, in her introduction to the play in the *Riverside Shakespeare* makes a similar point, arguing that "the play has created its own reality, a reality touching our own at every point." Anne Barton, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* Introduction," in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, ed.s G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), p. 255 [251-255].

[2] Helen Cooper describes several key features, the first of which is that plays are physical—the action is acted out and the play "mediated … through the body in performance," whereas drama tends to rely first and foremost on rhetoric. Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, The Arden Critical Companions (London: Bloomsbury, 2010, reprint 2013), p. 48.

[3] The "three main steps of stage adaptation," as Anna Stegh Camati writes, are "conception, presentation, and reception," with the "role of the audience" in reception consisting of "creating meaning." Further, As Cooper writes, "The practice of embodiment on stage went hand in hand with the exercise of imagination in the spectators. Violence and divinity alike place extreme demands on the audience, to make believe such things are happening even while they know that they are not." Indeed, Theseus makes a similar point when suggesting that, even with bad actors, "imagination [can] amend them" (V.i.212). Similarly, Montrose describes the "process of performance" as that "in which both the players *and their audience* participated actively in the making of meaning." Anna Stegh Camati, "Intermedial Issues Inscribed in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Todas as Letras - Revista de Língua e Literatura* 19.1 (2017): 104, 110 [103-112]; Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 72-73; and Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, p. 105, emphasis mine.

[4] All quotes from and references to the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are taken from William Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, ed.s G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

could be elves small enough to "hang a [dewdrop] pearl in every cowslip's ear" (II.i.15) or to "Creep into acorn-cups, and hide them there" (II.i.31).[5] In thus imaginatively engaging the audience, *MND* reaches out and makes accomplices of the play's spectators, encouraging them to become collaborators in the production of the works' fantastic realm.[6] Notably, this effect is not so much unique to *MND* as it is heightened in and by this play through the efforts of the fairies and the negotiation of its otherworlds.

Though there are, as I will later show, several complex and often overlapping conceptual and spatial locations generated by and navigated throughout the production of *MND*, I will here take a moment to briefly sketch the two primary locations produced by and negotiated within the play: that of Athens, on the one hand, and that of the forest otherworld, on the other. Early in *MND*, Athens is positioned as a locus of order, a rational space governed by laws and one that appears, at first, to be spatially and conceptually distinct from the sylvan realm in which the majority of the play's action unfolds.[7] That Athenian order is, moreover, made clear through its placment in explicit contrast to the seeming disorder of the forest, fairy enchantments, and their ensnaring influence. For instance, when Egeus seeks Theseus' assistance in bending Hermia to his will, he cites the laws of Athens: the "ancient privilege" which ensures that "As she is mine, I may dispose of her" (I.i.41-42). Egeus, moreover, claims that it is his paternal right to oppose the effects of love,

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[5] Adam Rzepka similarly notes in *MND* an experimental quality that "graft[s] imagined landscapes onto the physical space of the theater," and "engag[ing] in … imaginative embellishment" in moments such as that which "attempts to establish its lush green world upon the relative bareness of the stage." See also Rzepka's discussion of the miniature fairies' presentation and its suggestion of how far theatre can work with and press imagination. Adam Rzepka, "'How easy is a bush supposed a bear?': Differentiating Imaginative Production in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 66.3 (2015): 318 and 324 [308-328].

[6] Ronald Miller similarly argues that the Faerie elements in *MND* inspire and engage audience imaginations, arguing that the fairies "pose open-ended questions about illusion and reality, existence and art to those willing to press beyond the older interpretation of the play as a charming theatrical fantasy or a comic medley or a burlesque." Ronald F. Miller, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: The Fairies, Bottom, and the Mystery of Things," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26.3 (1975): 254 [254-268].

[7] I am, of course, far from the only person to note this. For instance, Andrew Barnaby suggests that "the play [*MND*] thematically contrasts imagination and reason, an opposition it situates in the various tensions between the framing plot and setting (the city of Athens, the city of philosophy itself) and the fantastical nighttime world of the fairies, the story of love and love's essential irrationality as recounted in the play's main plot, and the ingeniously creative parody plot of the mechanicals' rehearsal and performance of 'Pyramus and Thisby.'" In addition, Lisa Walters contends that "the forest" of *MND* "is distinct from the civilization and tyrannical laws of Theseus…. In contrast, dreams, lovers, magic, and theatre (as manifested in the form of the 'rude mechanicals') all exist in the forest outside of social institutions and norms." Lisa Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations: Authorship and Folklore in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Renaissance and Reformation* 39.1 (2016): 125 [115-146]; Andrew Barnaby, "'The Botome of Goddes Secretes': 1 Corinthians and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Renaissance Drama* 43.1 (2015): 4 [1-26]; and see also R.W. Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Critical Essays, ed. Dorothea Kehler (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 93 [85-106].

which he likens to magic, alleging that Lysander has ensorcelled Hermia and thus circumvented his legal rights as a father:

> This man hath bewitch'd the bosom of my child. / Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes, / And interchang'd love-tokens with my child; / Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung / With faining voice verses of faining love, / And stol'n the impression of her fantasy / With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gawds, conceits, / Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats—messengers / Of strong prevailment in unhardened youth. / With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart, / Turn'd her obedience (which is due to me). (I.i.27-37)

Egeus' fairly dramatic claims here use language that suggests that Lysander has taken over Hermia's senses or made her senseless with magic: "bewitch[ing] her bosom" and "st[ealing] the impression of her fantasy." Further, allegations such as the making and giving of "bracelets of [Lysander's] hair," allude to the performance of love magic,[8] thereby raising early in the play the specter of sensory delusion and its association with magic. Not only is this charge clearly levelled at both emotion (love) and enchantment, but it is also linked more subtly to the fairies whom we will soon meet, alluding not only to the moon that will light the forest otherworld and be linked to its fay occupants, but also, indirectly, through the use of terms like "bewitch'd" and "cunning," to those human practitioners of magic, including witches and cunningfolk, who were, at this time, often believed to receive their powers from the fairies.[9] Moreover, these charges call attention to the connections existing between and the suspicion raised by not only emotion, enchantment, and the fairies, but also between and with the theatre, which, as will be discussed, occupied a vexed

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[8] As Michael Bailey notes, "Across almost all cultures and throughout history people have employed rites or concocted potions that they think will inspire love or just inflame passion in someone else, or conversely that might sow discord between lovers or enmity between friends." Further, Mary Floyd-Wilson has also pointed out the similarities between Egeus' charges against Lysander in this passage and common practices of love magic: "If we accept Egeus's version of events, magical influences began well before the lovers entered the woods…. The exchange of gifts—rings, gauds, and handkerchiefs—was often identified as a means of enchantment." Michael D. Bailey, *Magic: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 38; and Mary Floyd-Wilson, "Potions, Passion, and Fairy Knowledge in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare in our Time: A Shakespeare Association of America Collection*, ed.s Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett, Bloosmbury Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), p. 186 [184-188].

[9] In addition to Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, scholars of Elizabethan fairies, going back at least as far as Minor White Latham, have often noted the connections drawn between witches or cunningfolk and the fay. Though recent scholarship has added nuance, complication, and new information to many of Latham's conclusions, his study, along with the work of K.M. Briggs, provides a foundation for and introduction to the study of Shakespeare's fairies (most especially Robin Goodfellow/Puck) and, in particular, to the understanding and interpretation of these beings as it has evolved over time. Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1930), p. 29. For other work on the early modern connections between fairies and witches and/or cunningfolk see: Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 133-140; Floyd-Wilson, "Potions, Passion, and Fairy Knowledge," p. 187; and Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London: Hambledon Press, 2003), p. 70.

situation in Elizabethan England and in relation to contemporary iconoclastic discourses and allegations regarding images' "faining." Indeed, as *MND* progresses, these connections become more prominent and are further developed, so that the actions of the fay within the play relate to the metatheatrical commentary being made by the work as a whole. At the play's beginning, the law of Athens—its claims to order, rationality, and realism and the ostensible disorder of the forest are opposed, with the rigid Athenian law—driving love, magic, and theatre out of the city into the sylvan otherworld. That ludic, forest realm, moreover, initially seems to be a distinct space: it is there that the mechanicals go to rehearse, "for if [they] meet in the city, [they] shall be / dogg'd with company, and [their] devices known" (I.ii.103-104); it is through there that the lovers run in an effort to escape impending tragedy; and it is also there where fairy intervention first begins to blur spatial and conceptual boundaries within the play.

In contrast to Athens, the forest—which serves as the locus for the majority of the action in *MND*—along with the fairies who inhabit it, acts generatively, revealing how deeply both the beings and the otherworld realm are inflused with the transformative and creative power of imagination. The otherworld space of the forest can be viewed as emblematic of inspiration and creativity's chaotic and uncontrollable nature: its potential to run amok.[10] Further, the distinctions between Athens, as the locus of reality and civilization, and the forest, as an otherworld of fiction and imagination, are early established by Hermia and Lysander's flight from the city. In planning their escape, Lysander locates his and Hermia's deliverance in his Aunt's house specifically because it is "remote seven leagues" from the city and, at that distance, "the sharp Athenian law / Cannot pursue us," urging Hermia to meet him the next night "in the wood, a league without the town" (I.i.159, 162-163, 165), so that they may journey to this safe and distant place. In thus emphasizing distance from the city as a defining element in their plan and reinforcing the status of the forest as "without the town," Lysander here creates a clear sense of difference and boundary between Athens and the wood outside it, underlining the associations of the city with reason and order and the forest with not only love, comedy, and creation but also with disorder and change.

As such, it is perhaps unsurprisingly that when the play moves into the forest in Act II, the spectators are here introduced to a host of fairies. Like the forest realm they largely occupy, these

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[10] A chaotic quality to which anyone who cannot write from an outline can attest.

otherworldly beings are capricious forces of imagination, transformation,[11] and inspiration, and as such, the divisions between concepts and spaces produced by the action in Act I are soon confused and enmeshed through the effects of the fairies and the otherworld. In this way, the interference of the fay in *MND* influences not only the narrative's outcome, but also the shape of its reality and its engagement with the potentially "real" power of creativity and imagination. Moreover, the connections between the fay and creativity are furthered by the forest's affiliation with playing, with the wood functioning as the first place where we truly see the Athenian mechanicals at work on their interlude. Though *MND* makes these associations between players and fairies more overt in its final Act (a point to which I shall return), this early connection between the mechanicals, the forest, and the fay encourages the audience to consider the literal similarities and shared connotations between the three. As Lisa Walters suggests, the "references throughout the play, which link playacting and fairies, invite comparison and produce thereby a self-referential commentary upon his [Shakespeare's] own art and self."[12] As such, *MND* is arguably invested in considering both what it means to be a play and what it means to be "real," using place and imagination to do so.

Further, by linking fairies to art, imagination, and creative production, *MND* is able to indicate the ways in which creativity can, like the otherworld and otherworldly, destabilize the divisions between perceived dualities—such as tragedy and comedy, reality and imagination, ludic or play space and real and/or spectator space—divisions which are represented in the play both conceptually and spatially. The realms of Athens and the forest, in particular, come, as the action of *MND* unfolds, to be associated with reason, quotidian reality, order, and tragedy, on the one hand, and imagination, playing, transformation, and comedy, on the other. In so doing, the fairies and forest otherworld of *MND* help to indicate that these conceptual dualities cannot be kept separate or distinct, and that, perhaps, their entanglement is more real, generative, and desirable than is their division. Indeed, as Hugh Grady contends, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's fullest explorations of aesthetic ideas. It is thus a meta-aesthetic drama, as well as

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[11] Fairies are "agents of transformation since they could transform healthy babies into sickly changelings and transfer wealth to the poor, and were most likely to appear during times of transition such as birth, adolescence, loss of virginity, marriage, death, and burial. Shakespeare emphasizes their transformational nature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream….* [For instance,] Puck associates acting and the theatre with his ability to transform." Notably, the forms of fairy-worked transformation that Walters draws attention to here suggest not only individual and physical change, but also social transformation. Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 119.

[12] Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 117.

a development of the comic genre to new levels of complexity and self-reflection."[13] As I will discuss, by exploring the permeability of the associated conceptual and spatial boundaries within and surrounding the play and its staging, *MND* suggests that imagination's products—poetry and playing first among them—are necessarily enmeshed with day-to-day existence, being both drawn from and, once shared, serving as a key part of that reality: acting on and shaping the spectators' lived-experiences. Further, because space and physical movement are such important components of a theatrical production, the forest's existence as a sort of otherworld, as well as its conceptual significance and its interference with the human realm in and throughout the work, contributes to and illuminates the meaning of the play as a whole and its ability to explore and comment on the relationship between a work of art and its context.

This chapter focuses on both the experimental and meta-theatric elements of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and their connections to the fairies and their forest otherworld, suggesting that, while *MND*'s interest in art and imagination has been discussed by scholars both dismissive and celebrative of the play, further attention to the interwoven relationships between the stage, the otherworld, and quotidian reality reveals the ways in which Shakespeare's work theorizes the stage, exploring the productive relationship between imaginative productions and reality and arguing for a beneficial enmeshment of the two. *MND* is not and should not be read simply as a lark or "airy nothing," despite its own occasional protestations to the contrary. Imagination, its denizens, and its sylvan realm do not, in this work, present an alternate or separate space of frivolity or carnival; rather, it and all its creative progeny are instead twisted up in and with both play *and* everyday reality. Further, it is this complex fabric that makes theatre reflective of and inescapably imbricated with human experience.[14] If the fairies and the otherworld realm are disrupting anything, it is the

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[13] I am building here on the work of Grady and other scholars who have written about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an apology for the theatre and/or for poetry and as a work of theatre that is in part thinking about what theatre is and can do. See, for example, Adam Rzepka, who writes that: "There is a strong critical consensus that Theseus's dismissal of the events in the woods, together with his responses to the woeful staging of 'Pyramus and Thisbe,' ultimately serves as a foil for what is actually *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s larger apology for theater. From this view, the defense of theater is inseparable from a defense of audience imagination." Similarly, R.W. Dent writes that *MND* "offer[s] a defense for its own existence," and "simultaneously offers us Shakespeare's closest approximation to a 'Defense of Dramatic Poesy' in general." Hugh Grady, "Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics: The Case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.3 (2008): 278 [274-301]; Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 310; Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," p. 101.

[14] Though I differ with Lisa Walters on some of the particular points made in her piece on *MND*, in general we reach similar conclusions (albeit with different evidence) about the play and the general effect made by its decision to intertwine Faerie, theatre, and imagination. For instance, Walters suggests that the play makes "continuous comparison[s] between fairies, authorship, and acting," and that "The imagination is the thread that links stories of fairies, madness, love and poetry." In addition, her article reminds its readers that imagination and fairies were neither

very sense of viable divisions between concepts, spaces, and persons, offering, instead, a space where social and conceptual dualities are productively and provocatively intertwined. Shakespeare's work might be read, then, as a reflection on the relationship between an artwork and its social context as well as an argument regarding the productive potential of art and the imagination. In this, I am not striving to suggest that Shakespeare is taking a stance on the Reformation or Reformation-derived discourse, pro or con,[15] but rather that, in a culture wrestling with the status of imaginative works and their place in society, *MND* is carving out a place for creativity and playing, suggesting that both are a vital part of the fabric of reality and that their presence in the tapestry of everyday life is part of a necessary and productive exchange that makes up both the realms of "imagination" and those of "reality."

Finally, this chapter comes closest to claiming fairies as symbolic of or a metaphor for something—in this case, imagination and its products—however, this is, I would suggest, in large part a result of the increased aestheticization, noted by Richard Firth Green, of the otherworldly in and by English literature post-Chaucer.[16] Shakespeare's fairies are artistic creations engaged with the consideration of art and its effects, and while the fairies and the forest of *MND* are not solely emblematic of creativity and its products, their disruptive festivity and their relationship to the order of the natural world and to the needs and lives of the humans—nobles and mechanical players alike—breaks down the sense of a clear barrier existing between the wild, fictive, and

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of them neutral topics, arguing instead that the fairies in *MND* "are not stripped of the complex political, social, and sexual agency that fairies represented in the popular imagination," and that "the play alludes to darker themes within folk tales" and connected to and with fairy lore. Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 116-118.

[15] For another argument against viewing *MND* as an either a pro- or an anti-Reformation work, see Alison Shell, "Delusion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in which Shell argues, in part, that "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is more plausibly read as an ironic comment on the comic consequences of thinking one has changed one's mind oneself, when in fact it has been changed *for* one: an attitude that displays Shakespeare's prevailing skepticism and [that] could be applied to a wide variety of cases, religious and secular." Alison Shell, "Delusion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, eds. David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 88 [81-95].

[16] Richard Firth Green argues that the "comparative mildness of the [early modern] English witch hunt was," in large part, due to "an attitude of amused skepticism on the part of the ruling elite toward such popular superstitions as fairy belief and, further, that this attitude owes much to the cultural prestige of *The Canterbury Tales*," going on to state that: "If any medieval English author aestheticizes (to borrow Le Goff's term) fairyland, it is Chaucer." The result of Chaucer's aestheticization of Faerie, combined with his popularity in the sixteenth-century, moreover, influences Shakespeare and Spenser's use of and engagement with the fay. As Green argues: "As a late sixteenth-century promoter of the Elizabethan fairy myth Shakespeare was certainly less prominent than Spenser, but the image of fairyland presented by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (as well as the ending of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Mercutio's Queen Mab speech in *Romeo and Juliet*) is no less aestheticized." Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 197-198, 201.

transformative realm of playing and imagination and the quotidian reality of the spectators, the actors, and Shakespeare himself. Imagination is, as Lisa Walters contends, the "thread that links" actors, fairies, love, and poetry[17] to reason and lived reality, stitching the cloth from which *MND* is cut into a unique and meaningful whole. MND thus uses the narratively and socially disruptive potential of fairies to complicate artificial binaries—including the opposition between the play and lived-reality—and to reveal the interwoven presence of this thread, indicating thereby the ways in which a creative work can both depict and shape human experience, just as that real context can, in return, act on and fuel artistic creation.

5.1   Setting the Stage: Early Modern Playing and Fairies in their Social Contexts

While early modern England was a deeply "theatrical" society characterized by practices, such as "royal processions, executions, exorcisms, charivaris, [and] chivalric jousts," through which the state's power could be displayed and shored up, the public theatre was not itself viewed as a mere "extension of monarchical power."[18] Playing companies had to negotiate numerous social influences, powers, and rhetorics, including both the royal censor and the commercial marketplace.[19] In addition, though "the Queen's Privy Council and the court nourished the professional theatre—if only to the limited extent that it could be construed as serving their interests—"[20]anti-theatrical discourses and texts were also prevalent, broaching concerns about everything from the "affective power of theatrical performance"[21] to the function of theatre's "visual representation[s]" in relation to contemporary, iconoclastic polemics.[22] Perhaps most

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[17] Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 116-117.

[18] Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 4.

[19] Howard notes that, because the stage's "spectacles were commodities," spectators held a degree of power over playing that they lacked over the spectacles of the monarchy; their money "talked," "exercis[ing] a certain degree of control," as it were. Howard, *Social Struggle*, pp. 4-5.

[20] Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 28

[21] Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, p. 45.

[22] See, for example, Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theatre in Early-Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). I do not wish to get into a detailed history of the theatre's place in early modern English society (largely because, not only is that discussion outside the scope of my argument in this chapter, but also because doing so would require the composition of another dissertation in its own right); however, I would like to note that, though anti-theatrical texts may cite concerns about social mobility and class mingling, for instance, many of these concerns are not the "new" or "Renaissance" anxieties they are often claimed to be. One need only look at medieval sumptuary laws or *The Canterbury Tales* and its descendants to recognize that social mobility was not an early modern invention and that efforts were taken centuries prior to Shakespeare to differentiate the "classes" and keep them distinct. Moreover, and somewhat oversimplifying, Lollardy and Wycliffism well-preceded the

illustrative of the powerful yet ambiguous status held by the early modern theatre, however, was its placement in relation to the city of London. If the city proper is thought of as the primary text on a manuscript page, then the playhouses existed as marginalia[23]; they remained part of the page, but lay outside the text, occupying a site of difference, of variability, of useful guides and devices, and also, at times, of visual hybridity creative abandon. As Steven Mullaney argues: "The outskirts of the premodern city were places of a complex and contradictory sort of freedom, ambivalent zones of transition between one realm of authority and another,"[24] and, as such, the playhouses' liminality afforded them "a critical distance … that provided the stage with a culturally and ideologically removed vantage point from which it could reflect upon its own age." [25] Consequently, not only could early modern playing represent reality on the stage,[26] it could also comment upon it.

Though scholarship has, understandably, primarily discussed Shakespeare and *MND* in relation to *early modern* English theatrical and social contexts, it is important to note that Shakespeare and *MND* are also, in fact, inheritors of medieval practices and beliefs. First, many of Shakespeare's plays deal with medieval subject matter: from the characters and moments from British history appearing in works like *Richard II* or *King Lear* to the inclusion of Gower, an actual, medieval author, in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. In fact, *MND* itself has been shown to draw not only on Ovid but also on the work of Chaucer.[27] Further, scholars believe that, as a boy, Shakespeare

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Reformation, suggesting that arguments that rest on a sudden, early modern shift away from an unquestioning medieval obsession with Catholicism likewise require additional nuance.

[23] Here I am drawing on and expanding Steven Mullaney's assertion that "the Liberties also served as margins in a textual sense: as a place reserved for heterogeneous and overdetermined cultural phenomena and for divergent points of view—for commentary upon and even contradiction of the main body of their text, in this instance the body politic itself." However, I would note that marginalia is not solely limited to commentary, helpful manicules, and the like, but can also consist of some truly audacious and imaginatively inspiring drawings. Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. ix.

[24] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p. 21.

[25] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p. 30.

[26] By reality I mean the lived-realities of the spectators, the players, and Shakespeare himself, their quotidian contexts, or what Tolkien refers to as the "primary world," (which he sets in contrast to a work of fictional subcreation's "secondary world" or reality). See J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), pp. 31-99.

[27] Though scholars agree on *The Knight's Tale* as a source for *MND*, there is also some speculation that *The Merchant's Tale* might have also inspired the Faerie characters and their functions in Shakespeare's play. For example, Richard Firth Green notes that, "While the most obvious intertext of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is *The Knight's Tale*, Tyrwhitt long ago suggested that Shakespeare modeled Oberon and Titania on Pluto and Proserpina in *The Merchant's Tale*, and recent criticism has expanded this insight." In addition, Peter Brown, who likewise affirms *The Knight's Tale* as a source for *MND*, also addresses the possibility of a connection between Shakespeare's play and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. While showing all the ways in which *The Merchant's Tale* can be discounted as a direct source for *MND*, Brown also notes that "there is an affinity between the two works; and the basis for that affinity is

would have seen performances of medieval cycle dramas in the nearby town of Coventry, [28] performances that would likely have influenced his understandings of not only Christian history, but also of the approaches and technologies available to and for the construction and execution a play. Indeed, the medieval elements of playing that appear in Shakespeare's works often occur in those moments wherein his plays differ from humanist values regarding the composition of "proper" dramas.

Much like the cycle dramas and medieval mystery plays, Shakespeare's plays can be thought of as examples of what Helen Cooper terms "total theatre": theatrical productions which are characterized by a sort of boundlessness—a breadth of possibilities with respect to place, subject, and characters which are grounded in the "conviction that the proper subject of the theatre is the whole cosmos, and that anything can be staged." [29] Unlike humanist drama, what Shakespeare and, to varying degrees, many of his early modern English contemporaries "wrote and acted were *plays*." [30] Plays, as Cooper writes, were commonly dismissed by the humanists

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the representation of faery," instead suggesting that the two works be seen as responding to the same tradition: "what we may have in these two works are different orders of festivity, implying different (if related) social functions for the two works." Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 201; Thomas Tyrwhitt, "An Introductory Discourse to the *Canterbury Tales*," in *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer*, edited by Thomas Tyrwhitt, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1798), 1:97-98 [67-114]; and Peter Brown, "Chaucer and Shakespeare: The *Merchant's Tale* Connection," *The Chaucer Review* 48.2 (2013): 230 and 233 [222-237].

[28] For instance, Louis Montrose suggest that, "During his childhood in Stratford, the younger Shakespeare would have had the opportunity and the occasion to experience the renowned Corpus Christi play that was performed annually in nearby Coventry, until its suppression after 1579." Likewise, Helen Cooper has noted that, while scholars "often speak as if it were a comparable fact that Shakespeare attended the Stratford grammar school (itself a medieval foundation)," a conclusion that Cooper also deems "highly likely," it is "similarly likely [and significant] that he [Shakespeare] saw the Coventry Mystery Plays, which were being performed just a few miles from his home town until he was in his mid-teens." Further, in their introduction to *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, Curtis Perry and John Watkins argue that Shakespeare's "debt to the old drama runs even deeper," claiming that "Shakespeare found in [that "old" drama] not only a model for individual characters but also a structural inspiration for some of his greatest scenes." In addition, Curtis and Perry reiterate the need for scholarship to "consider new factual evidence suggesting that the boundaries between medieval and modern experience were less than Shakespeareans once supposed," noting that "the Reformation did not lead to an abrupt mysteries' end," "that Protestantism was not inherently opposed to theatrical representation," and that, as Montrose and Cooper also state, "The cycle plays were not fully suppressed until the 1560s and 1570s, late enough for the young Shakespeare to have seen ones performed at Coventry." Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, p. 181; Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval* World (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 7-8; and Curtis Perry and John Watkins, "Introduction," in *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, ed.s Curtis Perry and John Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4 [1-18]. For additional scholarship on the relationships between Shakespeare and the Middle Ages see also the essays in *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, ed.s Curtis Perry and John Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and those in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, ed.s Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[29] Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 42.

[30] Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 46. In what follows I will sometimes use the words "play" and "performance," as well as "actor" and "performer," interchangeably, largely in my discussions of play space and because the senses are similar enough for modern readers that they will therefore make my argument easier to follow. However, it is important to note that "playing" is how Shakespeare would have referred to theatre for most of his

because they did not possess "the dignity endowed by the Classical generic terms."[31] Such objections primarily take exception to the lack of modal stability, or, more to the point, the lack of enforced opposition between social and conceptual binaries in more medieval forms of performance. Yet, though sixteenth-century English plays—as the descendants of medieval mysteries and moralities—might not be what Classical or neo-Classical dramatists would term "right comedies or right tragedies,"[32] their modal flexibility arguably granted them an affinity with quotidian reality on a grander, human scale.[33] As a result, approaching Shakespeare as an early modern author while, at the same time, attending to and uncovering the historical foundations upon which he is building and with which he is playing lends additional clarity and complexity to our understanding of the Bard's works and their relationship to their contemporary moment.

Shakespeare, moreover, contributed not only to the development of English theatre, but also to the development of the English fairy tradition.[34] While medieval fairies are amoral and "adoxic,"[35] early modern fairies are somewhat more plagued by that growing trend toward demonization most recently described by Richard Firth Green, who notes that, "from the fifteenth

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career, with the shift in vocabulary that "give[s] us our more modern way of speaking" not occurring until "around 1600." Prior to this shift, the term "performing" would have been seen as the opposite of playing, a term which refers more to doing an action for show (playing or acting), rather than to doing it in actuality as "performing" instead connotes. Tom Bishop, "The art of playing," in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, edited by Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 160 [159-176].

[31] Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, pp. 46-47.

[32] Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, pp. 46-47.

[33] For example, the medieval *Everyman* play certainly does not fit many (if any) of the Aristotelian unities, but this lack of Classical dramatic "rightness" is a direct result of the play's subject—*every* human—and its consideration of playing as creating a miniature cosmos, a reflection of the world on a more expansive level. Medieval plays were often capacious in scope, striving to represent the human experience, moral allegory, and the like to spectators, and seeing the "whole cosmos" as the "proper subject of the theatre." Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 42, see also pp.43-45 and pp. 107-138.

[34] For instance, Diane Purkiss argues that "Shakespeare's invention is so powerfully seductive that no one afterwards can quite escape its influence," noting that Robin Goodfellow's Puck-ish iteration takes on a life of its own so that, though Puck (Robin, really) may be "famous before Shakespeare writes about him[,] … he is not—or not quite—Shakespeare's Puck," and it is Shakespeare's version of Robin that influences later incarnations and that we know still today. Further, though there are examples of small, otherworldy beings in the medieval period—from the child-sized Oberon in *Huon of Bordeaux* to the tiny elves from whose shot hapless Anglo-Saxons needed protection to the small fay who, as K.M. Briggs notes, appear in the accounts of "Giraldus Cambrensis, Ralph of Coggeshall[,] and Gervase of Tilbury"—scholars like Mary Ellen Lamb suggest that the wee fay in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "populariz[e] a tradition that literally takes away the fleshliness of their bodies, rendering them the ethereal figures of later centuries." Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 158; Mary Ellen Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.3 (2000): 308 [277-312]; K.M. Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge, 1959), p. 6.

[35] James Wade's term for the neither orthodox nor unorthodox quality of medieval fairies. James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 15.

century onward, as education began to close the cultural gap between clerical and secular authorities, the control of vernacular [fairy] belief became more and more exacting, culminating in the terrible witch hunts of the early modern period."[36] By the time the "literary construct of the fairy kingdom was fully formed"—in what Ronald Hutton identifies as the fifteenth century—English fairies had come to be somewhat more closely associated with witchcraft, cunningfolk, and, at times, even with Satan. In particular, fairies were often thought to gift humans with magical abilities and/or to associate with the devil and his witches.[37] For instance, in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*,[38] Reginald Scot claims that, after witches have made their bargains with the devil—accepting promises of "long life and prosperitie" and being taught "to make ointments of the bowels and members of children, whereby they ride in the aire, and accomplish all their desires"—they do homage to the devil in ceremonies that include the witches "delicatlie bankett[ing] with the divell and the ladie of the fairies," who is also said to be "the ladie *Sibylla*, *Minerva*, or *Diana*."[39] Nonetheless, Hutton does make clear that those who went so far as to "[class] fairies as demons pure and simple were rare enough almost to count as radical."[40] In addition, and even at

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[36] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 8-9. It is, however, important to note that the severity of this demonization varied regionally, with Scottish fairies often exciting more anxiety and religious alarm than their English fellows. As such, Ronald Hutton notes, there was a "greater appearance of fairies in Scottish witch trials" than there were in those trails held in England. Briggs suggests that, for the English, the combination of "ornament[al]" fairies and those from folk tales meant that the "fairy vogue … rested upon a kind of pleasurable half-belief," so that "The fairy poetry of Shakespeare, Drayton and Herrick was obviously meant to be taken lightly, but there was more reality behind it than there would be about such poetry written in the present day." Further, Green argues that English audiences' lesser concern regarding fairies and witches stems from the important role that Chaucer played in making fairies more aesthetic and literary, and thus less real and threatening, stating that: "one of the reasons for the comparative mildness of the English witch hunt was an attitude of amused skepticism on the part of the ruling elite toward such popular superstitions as fairy belief, and, further, … this attitude owes much to the cultural prestige of *The Canterbury Tales*." Ronald Hutton, "The Making of the Early Modern British Fairy Tradition," *The Historical Journal* 57.4 (2014): 1155 [1135-1156]; Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 197; and Briggs, *Anatomy of Puck*, p. 6.

[37] For instance, Diane Purkiss notes that "Occult gifts are a characteristic result of contact with the fairies, and [that] this belief persisted firmly in early modern England, where there are numerous cases of cunning men and women claiming that they gained knowledge of the future or of current events from contact with the fairies; others claimed to have gained healing powers." Diane Purkiss, "Old Wives' Tales Retold: the mutations of the Fairy Queen," in *'This Double Voice': Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, ed.s Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000), p. 108 [103-122].

[38] This text is generally understood to be Shakespeare's primary source for supernatural belief and material. Purkiss argues that, "Reginald Scot" is "Shakespeare's chief and often his only source for English folklore." Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden*, p. 158.

[39] *The Discoverie of Witchcraft by Reginald Scot: With an Introduction by the Rev. Montague Summers* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972 [1930]), Book III, Chapters 1 and 2.

[40] Hutton, "Early Modern British Fairy Tradition," 1144, 1150. Further, Hutton suggests that, not only do "reflections suggest that those who classed fairies as demons pure and simple were rare enough almost to count as radical," but that "Those hostile to affection for them, or even belief in them, tended more often to declare them to be non-existent, and the products of a deluded imagination." This observation, it might be noted, well describes Theseus' response to the fairy antics described to Hippolyta and himself in the final Act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

times in contrast to religion's maligning of early modern fairies, the fay were also often perceived to belong, nostalgically, to the past[41] or to folklore, the domestic realm, and/or to the middling and lower "classes."[42] For instance, Fairies could, and certainly did, often have aristocratic alignments—the most superlative of which was, of course, the Queen of Faerie's association with the "cult of Elizabeth"[43]—but there were also more "homely" fairy traditions that treated with domestic and often mischievous household fairies like Robin Goodfellow.[44]

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[41] Though I would note that this is not merely an early modern invention—the use of fairies to construct a sort of romantic and narrative medievalism very certainly predates the early modern period and appears in several medieval texts such as, for instance, Laȝamon's *Brut* or Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*—Hutton does note that "writers treated a belief in fairies—or indeed their existence—as one feature of an older, simpler, and happier world, a variation on the theme of Merry England." Hutton, "Early Modern British Fairy Tradition," 1152; and Purkiss makes a similar point in *At the Bottom of the Garden*, p. 164.

[42] For instance, Wendy Wall shows that, "In the English cultural imagination," fairies often had an

> attachment to domestic work [that] made them multifaceted emblems of vernacular culture. For elite audiences they signified the exotic or vulgar hominess of serving women; for the middle part of the population they enabled a critique of elite neglect for life's basics; and for general audiences they simply marked the threat or comfort of a "familiarity" inscribed in the rural roots of Londoners, native traditions, or the mythological space of childhood itself…. Fairy belief was not the province of one specific social group but served as a discursive field that could be activated in diverse ways to produce alliances and stratifications.

Wendy Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52.1 (2001): 80-81 [67-106]; see also: Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 277-312.

[43] During Elizabeth's reign, the Queen of England came to be regularly associated with the Queen of the Fairies. For instance, the idea, as Green notes, "features prominently in an entertainment with which [Sir Henry Lee] welcomed Elizabeth to Woodstock … in 1575," and "There can be no question of Queen Elizabeth's not wholeheartedly encouraging the cult." Indeed, as Purkiss notes in her chapter on "Old Wives' Tales Retold," the connection was featured again in "Thomas Churchyard's entertainments for Elizabeth in Suffolk and Norfolk in 1578" and "At Elvetham in 1591" where the fairy queen "appeared … and presented Elizabeth with a garland of flowers." In addition to these theatrical events, the association between Elizabeth and the Queen of Faerie also appeared in literature. For instance, though the connection does not, as is sometimes thought, originate with Spenser, the *Faerie Queen*, as Purkiss notes in her book, "both flatters the queen and agonizes about her continuing single status." Further, the meaning of this association of Elizabeth with the Fairy Queen has been discussed in relation to *MND* and Titania's character, with scholars like Purkiss questioning whether or not Shakespeare is expressing an anxiety about powerful female rulers (and attempting to re-capture that alarming force through Oberon's masculine triumph). However, this scholarly conversation is outside the realm of my particular argument here, and, as such, I will not dig into it further at this time. Purkiss, "Old Wives' Tales Retold," p. 114; Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 199; Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden*, p. 179. For more on Elizabeth's possible connection to and with Titania, see: Purkiss, "Old Wives' Tales Retold," pp. 103, 116-117; Louis Montrose, "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture," *Representations* 2 (1983): 61-94; and Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, especially chapter 10, "The Imperial Votaress," pp. 151-178.

[44] See, for instance, Wendy Wall, Mary Ellen Lamb, and K.M. Briggs on Robin Goodfellow. Briggs notes that Goodfellow can be classed among the "hobgoblin" type of British fairy: they "are rough, hairy spirits, which do domestic chores, work about farms, guard treasure, keep an eye on the servants, and generally act as guardian spirits of the home. Useful as they are, they are easily offended and often mischievous. They are not exclusively domestic, but are often associated with streams, pools and rocks…. On the whole they were regarded as honest and friendly spirits, though the weight of church authority was against them." Moreover, Wall's fascinating article, "Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle," goes into great detail about Robin Goodfellow's folkloric origins and the traditions of English household "bugs," arguing "that Puck's sacred sweeping links good housewifery with dramatic closure and political authority and, for the brief moment that it does so, allows a glimpse of an Englishness founded on principles that the play has not generally endorsed—the vernacular broadly defined." Lamb

In addition, as Faerie traditions and lore developed and evolved in the fifteenth-century, a social use of the revolutionary and productive potential of the fay came to the fore in several of the instances of insurgence and fractiousness occurring toward the middle and end of the century—occasions which would have been recent enough to still be known by early modern audiences.[45] During this time, several bands of rebels claimed either the identity of or an affiliation with Faerie and its rulers. For example, in January of 1450, preceding the explosive Midsummer rebellion that Jack Cade would lead in May, a "small yet volatile rebellion," led by Thomas Cheyne, occurred in Kent.[46] Seeming to refer to Cheyne, *Bale's Chronicle* states that "Item the moneth of Janyver oon calling hym self Queen of the feyre yede into Kent and Essex and did noon oppression nor hurt to any persone."[47] In addition, Kew, National Archives, KB 27/755, m.75 (Rex, m. 4), which is provided in Alexander Kaufman's study of *The Historical Literature of the Jack Cade Rebellion*, lists the "diverse names" that Cheyne was said to have had, sobriquets that include: "Thomas Cheyne first, King of the Fairies second, Queen of the Fairies third, Jenessay fourth, Haveybynne fifth, Robyn Hode sixth and a certain Robert canon of the house of St Stephen in Rome seventh."[48] Like Cheyne, the aliases used in and by Jack Cade and his fellows during the 1450 revolt include "such names as 'King of the Fairies,' 'Queen of the Fairies,' and 'Robin Hood.'"[49] These mid-fifteenth-century examples suggest that, at this time, linking Faerie to acts of social rebellion, revolt, and outlawry—both in relation to these historical rebellions and in the repeated references

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also details Goodfellow's traditional characteristics and associations and argues in part that *MND*'s "representation of the fairies, as well as its transformation of the hairy Robin Goodfellow of ballad tradition to a courtly Puck, take on more than aesthetic or literary meanings," becoming both "profoundly social and ultimately political." Briggs, *Anatomy of Puck*, p. 15; Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep," 67; and Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 280-281, and 295-302 (on the ballad version of Robin Goodfellow).

[45] In addition to the fairies, weavers were also often connected in early-modern cultural products to these and other contemporary uprisings and rebellions. The occupation of "lower class clothier," Walters notes, was "associated with political radicalism and subversion," "gain[ing] a notorious reputation for political rebellion." Shakespeare himself was aware of this trope, representing Jack Cade in *2 Henry VI*, one of his early plays, as not only a rebel leader but also as a "shearman." Further, not only were weavers and clotheirs associated with rebellion, but Midsummer was the time in which "almost all of the [food] riots took place" in 1595, and artisans, especially weavers, were associated with these and other social protests during this time. As such, these connotations further link the mechanicals, particularly the weaver Bottom, to both the fairies and the "real world" context of *MND* during its composition and early performance in 1595 or 1596. Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 140-141.

[46] Alexander L. Kaufman, *The Historical Literature of the Jack Cade Rebellion* (Farnham, UK: AShgate Publishing, 2009), p. 178.

[47] *Six Town Chronicles of England Edited from Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library the Library of St. John's College Oxford, the Library of Trinity College Dublin, and the Library of the Marquis of Bath at Longleat*, "Bale's Chronicle," ed. Ralph Flenley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), p. 127.

[48] Kew, National Archives, KB 27/755, m.75 (Rex, m. 4), qtd. In Kaufman, *Jack Cade Rebellion*, p. 179.

[49] Kaufman, *Jack Cade Rebellion*, pp. 25-26.

to Robin Hood—not only serves to protect the identities of the rebels and their captains, but also to reveal a late-medieval recognition of fairies' potential (and tendency) to destabilize, upset, and disrupt human organizations and institutions. Further, the connections between Faerie and rebellion continued even after the Jack Cade Rebellion was put down. For instance, as discussed in the Introduction, an indictment made in 1451—indictment no. 33 in the King's Bench Referring to Kent, K.P. 9, file 46—accuses a group of about one hundred persons, composed primarily of yeomen, husbandmen, and laborers, of raiding the "park of Humphrey, Duke of Buckingham, called 'Redeleff' [Redleaf] at Penhurts."[50] The raiders, who are charged with having "chased, killed and took away from the said park 10 bucks, 12 sores and 60 does," are reported to have been behaving "in riotous manner and arrayed for war, viz. with 'jakkes', 'saledes', 'brygandes''brestplates', hauberks, cuirasses, lances, bows and arrows, and covered with long beards and painted on their faces with black charcoal, calling themselves servants of the queen of the fairies, intending that their names should not be known, (*ac induti cum longeis barbis et pitti in faciebus suis cum carbonibus nigris nuncupantes se esse servientes Regine de Faire ea intencione ut ipsi a nomine cognoscerent*)." Further, some decades later, William Paston added an alert regarding the actions of northern rebels to a letter, from early May of 1489, directed to his brother, Sir John Paston III. In this alert, William urges that it be "knowyn to all the Northe partys of England to euery lorde, knight, esquyer, gentylman, and yeman, that they schalbe redy in ther defensable aray, … vpon peyne of losyng of ther goodys and bodyes," (ll. 40-42, 43),[51] concluding by ascribing the rebel's actions, somewhat jokingly, to the brother of Robin Goodfellow: "And thys is in the name of Mayster Hobbe Hyrste, / Robyn God-felaws brodyr he is, as I trow" (ll. 49-50). In Shakespeare's time, these earlier associations of Faerie with uprising and rebellion would likely contrast with the growing and more contemporary connection of the Otherworld and its Queen to the cult of Queen Elizabeth I, a contrast suggesting a sort of meaningful complexity and polyvalence that the fay could (and I would argue, do) bring to the action of *MND*.

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[50] All quotes Indictment 33 are taken from K.B. 9, file 47, indictment 33, "Some Ancient Indictments in the King's Bench referring to Kent, 1450-1452," ed. R. Virgoe, in *Documents Illustrative of Medieval Kentish Society*, printed for the Kent Archaeological Society, vol. 43, gen. ed. F.R.H. Du Boulay (Ashford: Headley Brothers, Ltd., 1964), pp. 254-255.

[51] All quotes from this letter are taken from: William Paston, "413. To John Paston III, 1489, between 6 and 10 May," in *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, Part I, ed. Norman Davis, Early English Text Society, Supplemental Series 20 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 658-659.

In *MND* itself, while the human nobles appear to belong to the "civilized" and "rational" space of Athens, the fairies, especially the noble fairies,[52] seem to belong instead to the forest otherworld which exists outside the rule and order of the city, while, at the same time, also mirroring the human world and its structure. For instance, Titania's wee servant, one of the first fairies we meet, describes its roamings in relation to natural spaces, claiming to journey: "Over hill, over dale, / Thorough bush, thorough brier, / Over park, over pale, / Thorough flood, thorough fire, / I do wander ever where, / Swifter than the moon's sphere" (II.i.2-7). Further, Puck notes that Oberon and the "Knight[s] of his train … trace the forests wild" (II.i.25)[53] and Titania and Oberon were said, prior to their fight, to "meet in grove or green / By fountain clear or spangled starlight sheen" (II.i.28-29): all of which constitute natural locations outside the "ancient privilege[s]" (I.i.41) and laws of Theseus' Athens. At the same time, however, the seeds are also planted, as the play moves from Athens to the wood, for the fairies' later trespass of the unofficial yet established boundaries between the forest otherworld and the order of Theseus' realm; for one, Puck's disdaining description by Titania's fairy servant emphasizes his status as a homely spirit who "frights the maidens of the villager, / Skim[s] milk, and sometimes labor[s] in the quern, / And bootless make the breathless huswif churn, / … / [and thus,] … do[es] their work, and they shall have good luck" (II.i.35-37, 41). Rather than dancing in the glades or riding through the forest, Puck is depicted here as a domestic sprite whose primary interactions are with the quotidian interests of human beings. Though, in *MND*, Puck is principally encountered in the woods working as Oberon's right hand, these broader, homespun associations cling to him and add complexity to his portrait and the spatial and conceptual boundaries between fairies and humans in the play.

Titania laments that her fight with Oberon, in particular their failure to meet "on hill, in dale, forest, or mead, / By paved fountain or by rushy brook, / Or in the beached margent of the sea, / To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind" (II.i.83-86), has led to the disruption of the natural world and its order. Expressing grief, the fairy queen describes a world in disarray, where:

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[52] These are the fairies more familiar to readers of medieval romance, they are human-like in appearance and stature and their society mirrors and often comments on aristocratic human society, often surpassing it in beauty, riches, quality, or a combination thereof. These are the "heroic fairies" Briggs describes, the "aristocrats among fairy people" who "pass their time in aristocratic pursuits, hunting, hawking, riding in procession on white horses hung with silver bells, and feasting in their palaces, which are either beneath the hollow hills or under or across water." Briggs, *Anatomy of Puck*, p. 13.

[53] The suggestion here that Oberon spends much of his time riding with his Knights through the forests alludes, moreover, to the Wild Hunt or wild horde, also often known as the *familia Herlequini* or *la mesnie Hellequin*, who appear in medieval works as disparate as Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium* and, as Richard Firth Green argues, the anonymous romance of *Sir Orfeo*. For more on the *Hellequin* see Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, pp. 172-178.

> Contagious fogs … falling in the land, / Hath every pelting river made so proud / That they have overborne their continents. / The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain, / The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn / Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard / … / Therefore the moon (the governess of floods), / Pale in her anger, washes all the air, / That rheumatic diseases do abound. (II.i.90-95, 103-105)

The disharmony wrought by the conflict between the fairy royals unmistakably encompasses both the natural landscape and the human world, showing the almost ecologic interdependence of the two realms. Here, disharmony in the natural world acts on the lives and livelihoods of the humans dwelling in both the country and the city, negatively affecting not simply those who grow the grain, but also those who need that grain for food, those who are afflicted with rheumatic diseases, and so forth. As a result, though *MND* works to distinguish the realms of Athens and the forest from one another, it also begins, early on, to blur the boundaries between and to interweave those same spaces. Moreover, it is the influence and associations of the fay, as well as their relationship to and with the humans, that truly makes this enmeshment come about.

The actions and organization of the fay throughout *MND* thus reflect the otherworld's noted ability to transcend modal and social limitations as well as its resistance to definitive categorization. Fairy influence over the human world within the play draws attention to the instability of both conceptual and physical binaries, acting in part to redirect the impending Athenian tragedy towards more comic auspices and, through the fairies' final benedictions "To the best bride-bed …, /Which by us shall blessed be; / And the issue, there create, / Ever shall be fortunate" (V.i.403-406), to also encourage (re)productive futures to and for Athens and its nobles. The influences of otherworldly creatures and spaces within this play thus productively encourage the integration of conceptual binaries—such as tragedy versus comedy and imagination versus reality—and of the spatial realms onto which those concepts have been mapped. Further, as I will discuss shortly, by turning, through their interaction, the tragedy brewing in the human sphere of Athens into a lively comedy with the literally generative potential of heirs thereby made possible, the fairies and their imaginative realm effectively or (re)productively reorient human reality.

One final note: in making its point that fictive creations might have real and imaginatively generative effects on the intellects of their audiences and the shape of their real, human, and quotidian contexts, *MND* also touches on the social value ascribed to both imagination and reality in Shakespeare's contemporary culture. In Elizabethan society, much as in contemporary, Western society, reality and things considered to be "actual" and/or "rational" were often treated as though

they held greater value and mattered to a greater extent than did the "fictive" and fantastic products of the imagination. James Simpson argues that the "threat" that the imagination often poses has, regardless of the time period, a great deal to do with its existence as a sort of "dividing line around which many other cultural distinctions can be made."[54] In Simpson's model, the imagination can serve as a border space, a conduit, or a barrier between historical periods, such as medieval and early modern,[55] and between "the popular and the learned," which Simpson further relates to the distinction "between image and word."[56] This final conceptual negotiation is, I would suggest, of particular relevance to *MND* and its project; Simpson argues that "Literate and learned culture always distrus[ts] popular culture's dependence on images, a dependence that is often read as idolatrous, precisely because the imagination threatens to put reason in thrall to the material."[57] Theatre, of course, transgresses this boundary between image and word, blending the two and working them into a multimodal art form. In this way, the very form of *MND* begins the work of interweaving imagination and reality, an enmeshment that the fairies within the play continue and expand, both for the opposition of imagination and reality and for the other dualities contained by and presented within the work.

Lastly, the imaginative space of the forest otherworld within *MND*, connected as it is to the cultural space occupied by the theatre in early modern England, encounters competing discourses both within the play world—in the form of Theseus' dismissal of imagination and its products— and in contemporary, Elizabethan society. In particular, tense discussions regarding iconoclasm, paired with a Reformation-stirred mistrust of the visual, influenced the development of the theatre as well as its status in Shakespeare's cultural moment.[58] As Michael O'Connell shows, anxieties

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[54] James Simpson, "The Rules of Medieval Imagination," in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 10 [4-24].

[55] Simpson, "Medieval Imagination," p. 11.

[56] Simpson, "Medieval Imagination," p. 10.

[57] Simpson, "Medieval Imagination," p. 10.

[58] In particular, anti-theatrical discourse was a part of a larger conversation rooted in suspicion regarding visual perception. Michael O'Connell shows that "Opposition to the stage … persisted through the first four decades of the seventeenth century," long after the novelty of theatre as a business and an aspect of early modern life had worn off. O'Connell ties this opposition to "a larger cultural movement," a "sense of iconoclasm [that] was not limited either to strictly religious contexts or to the use of literal painting and sculpture, but [that] was comprehended as well in the imagistic powers of language and the potential of poetry to emulate pictorial experience." In particular, the suspicion of and anxiety regarding visual perception seems to be rooted in sight's status as "an ambivalent process that both informs and deceives the mind." Rzepka also notes the emergence during this time of what he terms an "aesthetic debate … over the special status of theatrical images," locating theatre in a "new and troubling place" with respect to thinking regarding art, particularly the arts of painting and poetry. See O'Connell, "Jonson and Shakespeare," pp. 116-118; Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 321-322; and Marguerite A. Tassi, *The Scandal of Images:*

regarding any art form that relied on or promoted image(s) came to affect early modern playing. For Shakespeare, O'Connell argues, the "self-reflexive moments in his plays" generally show him to be "insist[ing] in a positive way on the identity of theater as a visual art,"[59] as well as an auditory and rhetorical one.[60] Indeed, while contemporary scholarship often conceives of *MND* as a defense of theatre and/or poetry, I would take things a step further and contend that the play in fact shows that imagination and all of its products are vital and inseparable parts of their cultural and quotidian contexts. Just as the primary world inspires art, imaginative products are able to reveal what reality is, what it can be, and even to inspire alterations in the spectators' thinking and their relationships to their own, lived experiences. The spatial relegation of the playhouse in Elizabethan society amounted to the treatment of the action of its interior as less worthy because it belonged to the realm of "aery nothings." By invoking the seeming contrast between that marginalized interior and the rational space exterior to and surrounding it, *MND* is thus able to break down the now-visible boundaries between imaginative space and "reality," allowing both places to productively and happily influence one another. In essence, Shakespeare can be seen to be making a case for the necessity and generativity of art as a part of, rather than as an escape from, reality.

5.2   Staging a Tragical Mirth: Modal Blurring and Bodying Forth Reality

As noted, medieval English plays and their Elizabethan descendants were, on the whole, more willing to allow a flexibility of modes, including the crisscrossing of those elements associated with or ascribed to either tragedy or comedy, elements which the humanists, conversely, preferred be kept separate. This is not to say that medieval plays or their descendants had no sense of genre or of the differences between the tragic and comic modes—certainly, if this were the case, then the mechanicals' production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *MND* would lack most if not all of its

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Iconoclasm, Eroticism, and Painting in Early Modern English Drama (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2005); among others.

[59] O'Connell, "Jonson and Shakespeare," p. 125.

[60] O'Connell suggests that the mechanicals' playlet both raises the issue of vision and its failings, not merely in relation to iconoclastic rhetoric but also with respect to "the real concerns that the theater must always raise," such as the potential of frightening the ladies in the audience. Moreover, and importantly, O'Connell shows how the mechanicals address these visual concerns by supplementing them with the addition of verbal/aural elements: "he [Bottom] has solutions to these problems, solutions that go to the heart of the phenomenology of theater: *verbally*, let a prologue tell that Pyramus is really Bottom the Weaver and that his suicide is feigned; *visually*, let just enough of Snug's face show through the lion's neck, and if that's not enough, let Snug also reassure the ladies *in words*." O'Connell, "Jonson and Shakespeare," p. 131, emphasis mine.

humor[61]—but rather that "the types were [simply] not absolute."[62] As such, there was more mobility in form, character, and matter in medieval English and Elizabethan plays than there was in Classical and neo-Classical drama, with multiple settings and longer time periods available to playwrights, and with the social classes able to meet on stage and, potentially, even to exceed the expectations of their respective "types." For example, though Oberon and Puck belong to separate social classes and therefore separate narrative modes[63]—the former noble and thus tragic, the latter "lower class" and comic—their greatest influence comes from their conjoined efforts, a team endeavor that allows them to have a more substantial effect on the lives of the human characters than they would have had separately. It is largely through Puck and Oberon's cross-class collaboration that the play's narrative and the lives of the human characters develop, just as it is through the otherworld that the tragic fate of the Athenian lovers is rewritten as a farcical romp.[64] In thus enmeshing modes, *MND* experiments with the productivity of integrating dualities, merging associated forms and considering not just what a play is and can be, but also the degree to which a play can represent the essence and messiness of human living accurately and productively on the stage.

That a play might reflect a broad swath of human experience, both tragic and comic, is, of course, not surprising to one familiar with total theatre. In blurring the distinctions often made between dramatic modes and other sociocultural creations and conceptions, *MND* brings the truths

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[61] I am not here saying that humor is anathema to tragedy or that tragedy cannot have or admit moments of levity, but rather that the *Pyramus and Thisbe* story itself—as found, for example, in Ovid—is a decidedly un-funny one. The needless deaths of teenagers is not a subject many find terribly hilarious—or at least that is my great hope—and, as such, the mechanicals' ability to make of this tragedy a "tragical mirth" both adds to the comedy and is, at the same time, the very essence of the joke.

[62] Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 51.

[63] For humanists, as well as for Classical playwrights and philosophers of drama, a key reason for keeping tragedy and comedy separate was the need to keep the different social classes distinct; Cooper notes that: "humanist critics particularly objected to the mingling of clowns and kings, the bringing of different social classes on stage together," particularly as "Classical theorists had insisted on their separation: tragedies should be concerned with princes, comedies with the lower classes, each with their own distinct kinds of plot, style and language." Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 50.

[64] Cooper, moreover, notes that "Shakespeare's own dramaturgy had focused increasingly on such an integration [of comedy and tragedy], and a refusal to separate them out as humanist theory required." This tendency on Shakespeare's part has, however, been mostly commonly discussed with respect to Shakespeare's later works, such as *A Winter's Tale* or *The Tempest*.[64] For example, Ira Clark has suggested that Shakespeare's "problem comedies … appeared as Elizabeth's reign was giving way to James's." These satiric or dark tragicomedies are, she argues, in part characterized by "their extraordinary mangling of generic horizons of expectation, even for a dramatic period that reveled in generic mongrelization." However, I would argue that *MND* is already calling attention to such modal oppositions only to play with and even combine these and other supposed binaries. Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 227; and Ira Clark, "Apologia and Acknowledgements," in *Rhetorical Readings, Dark Comedies, and Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), p. vii [vii- x].

and complexities of living in a messy and transitory world into the fictive domain presented on the stage, proclaiming the power that art has to depict the fullness of lived-reality. For instance, *MND* is a play fascinated with tensions and oppositions, and, as such, it repeatedly invokes perceived dialectics—such as comedy and tragedy, forest and city, imagination and reality, and even performance space and "real" space—only to promptly undercut and muddle those self-same dualities. As the play progresses, these seeming opposites are quickly revealed to be, more accurately, individual sides of a single coin: dependent portions of a more complex union. Further, Brian Gibbons claims that Shakespeare's "readiness to 'mingle' different generic and stylistic elements in his plays" is particularly "Elizabethan," noting that the playwright "deploys a wide range of contrasting codes, varying his choice[s] and interweaving them in patterns that are for each play unique."[65] In *MND*, for instance, Shakespeare notes the narratively and socially disruptive potential of fairies, which is most conspicuous in Puck's temporary misdirection of Oberon's original matchmaking plan, but which also is registered in the natural chaos Titania links to her discord with her husband: "with thy brawls thou hast distub'd our sport. / Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain, / As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea / Contagious fogs" (II.i.87-90). *MND* then uses the fairies' creative and chaotic potential to fashion a tale that disrupts the very type of story being told, instead weaving together ostensibly disparate poles, like tragedy and comedy, to make something new, shaping the play from the stuff of day-to-day reality. In essence, *MND* makes permeable the mental and cultural membranes separating these various "opposites," and, in so doing, creates a magical world that is not just drawn from, but that is in fact more representative of the lived reality inhabited by the creative works' spectators, actors, and playwright. Human experience is, after all, neither all tragic nor all comic, even if it may, from an individual perspective, feel at times as though it is.

One of the primary dualities invoked and quickly complicated by *MND* is, as suggested, the alleged opposition between tragedy and comedy. Though fairies will not be discussed directly for a time, it should be noted that they are a primary means by which Shakespeare achieves the complication of modes in *MND*, and that I will return to this point later in the section.[66] The first

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[65] Brian Gibbons, "Dramaturgy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 258 [258-275].

[66] A key difference between play and drama is the difficulty of easily or strictly applying the dramatic genres of tragedy or comedy to a play. For humanists, as well as for Classical playwrights and philosophers of drama, a key reason for keeping tragedy and comedy separate was the need to keep the different social classes distinct; Cooper notes that: "humanist critics particularly objected to the mingling of clowns and kings, the bringing of different social classes on

Act of *MND* begins with the preparations for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding, an ostensibly joyful or ordered origin from which the narrative then quickly departs, rapidly descending into turmoil upon the introduction of a star-crossed couple: Hermia and Lysander. Not only is the love between these two opposed both by Hermia's father and by his chosen son-in-law-to-be, Demetrius, but Demetrius is, himself, the beloved of Hermia's friend Helena. Moreover, Theseus, asked by Hermia's father to intervene, presents the young Athenian with a harsh choice: "fair Hermia, question your desires, / … / Whether (if you yield not to your father's choice) / You can endure the livery of a nun, / For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd, / To live a barren sister all your life, / Chaunting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" (I.i.67, 69-73). It would certainly not be wrong in this moment to associate Hermia and Lysander with the ill-fated Romeo and Juliet.[67] Indeed, scholars have compellingly argued that *Romeo and Juliet* pre-dates *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,[68] suggesting that the connection would have been made by Shakespeare's contemporary audiences as well. Further, as noted by multiple researchers,[69] were *MND* to, from this point onward, adhere to audience expectations and familiar narrative patterns, the ensuing action would predictably relate the tragic deaths of the star-crossed pair. As Lysander himself warns: "The course of true love never did run smooth" (I.i.134). In addition, the plot of what seems to be the primary narrative of *MND* is not only reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, it also draws rather clearly

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stage together," particularly as "Classical theorists had insisted on their separation: tragedies should be concerned with princes, comedies with the lower classes, each with their own distinct kinds of plot, style and language." *MND* may itself at first seem to be ascribing to this general sense of class-driven generic separations, introducing the characters, as Michiru Sasaki notes, "in the order of the social hierarchy" and thereby suggesting the existence of a modal division between the noble and rustic plots that will unfold. However, the forest interlude that follows both throws the classes together—most dramatically by having the fairy queen briefly fall for Bottom, one of the mechanicals—and undoes any clear sense of predictable divisions between tragic and comic modes. Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 50; and Michiru Sasaki, "The Metamorphoses of the Moon: Folk Belief in Lunar Influence on Life and the Symbolic Scheme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Studies (Tokyo)* 23 (1984): 69 [59-93].

[67] Interestingly, *Romeo and Juliet* itself engages in some modal slight of hand, beginning as an ostensible comedy that, Brian Gibbons suggests, takes a sudden, tragic turn: "The insistent colliding of different generic rules is a calculated element in Shakespeare's grander ambition, to produce, on the one hand, an excitingly unpredictable switchback of lifelike accident and coincidence, and on the other, the almost Kydian frame-plot bolstered by a Chorus, bluntly insisting that the fault lies in their stars and not in themselves." Gibbons, "Dramaturgy," pp. 260-261.

[68] Amy J. Reiss and George Walton Williams argue that *Romeo and Juliet* pre-dates *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and that "Shakespeare used the events and the language of tragedy to increase the mirth of comedy," so that, for example, the *Pyramis and Thisbe* playlet in *MND* is written as a parody of Shakespeare's own work in *Romeo and Juliet*, just as "Shakespeare [also] parodies his own work in … *1 Henry IV*." Amy J. Reiss and George Walton Williams, "'Tragical Mirth': From *Romeo* to *Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43.2 (1992): 214, 218 [214-218].

[69] For example, R.W. Dent similarly notes that the mechanical's choice of play—*Pyramus and Thisbe*—would ensure that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s spectators "would at once recognize in the familiar story parallels, actual and potential, to what had begun in I.i. Like Hermia and Lysander, Pyramus and Thisbe would run off to the woods in the night, frantically hoping to escape the obstacles to their true love." Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," p. 94.

from two, earlier tragedies—the first, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the second, Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the latter of which also serves as a source for the aforementioned *Romeo and Juliet*. These source texts both clearly indicate the tragic direction that the primary action of *MND* would be expected to take, and the fact that Elizabethan audiences would also have recognized these connections and expected tragedy from the play's unfolding action is further reinforced by the explicit mention of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in Act I as the mechanicals begin their rehearsals.

The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is, without question, a devastating one, ending both in the deaths of the star-crossed young lovers and in the permanent transformation of the natural world—here the color of the mulberry—in perpetual witness to the youths' ill fate. That this disastrous narrative could ever be performed as a comedy seems itself laughable, yet the playlet contained in and concluding *MND* is, despite the gruesome deaths of its fictive young lovers, pure comedic gold. In particular, the humor of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* interlude as it is presented in the final Act of *MND* stems primarily from the mechanicals' interpretation, direction, and performance thereof, rather than from the material or plot of the production. Indeed, the interlude includes everything from ostensibly mis-punctuated prologues, to actors taking the roles of property (for example, Wall), to moments such as Bottom's/Pyramus' accidental early dismissal of Moonlight during Pyramus' death speech.[70] And, throughout *MND*, the mechanicals signal an inability (or, more accurately, I believe, an unwillingness) to keep tragic and comic modes distinct,[71] a trait they share with the fairies (as we shall see) and one which reinforces the associations being drawn between the mechanicals/players, the fairies, and the imagination. Further, the mechanicals' early discussion of their play prefigures the modal muddling that will soon occur within the larger play; for example, when Quince first introduces their subject to his fellow players, he states that their

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[70] "Thus die I, thus, thus, thus. / Now am I dead, / Now am I fled; / My soul is in the sky. / Tongue, lose thy light, / Moon, take thy flight, [*Exit Moonshine*.] / Now die, die, die, die, die" (V.i.300-306)

[71] Interesting, Patricia Parker points out that "rude," the epithet Puck applies to the mechanicals, does not simply mean lower class, it can also suggest "something shapeless and needing to be formed," so that, "As a term for the unshaped and unrefined, as well as the ungoverned or ungovernable, rude was thus a term linking the unruliness of unshaped *materia* (or nature) to the lexicon of class distinction." "Mechanical," furthermore, "was explicitly a term for artisan, one who worked with the material, manual labor, or the work of the hand." These "rude mechanicals" are thus in need of shaping and yet also shapers, unformed and yet capable of giving form. Both terms convey class associations that, along with the ostensible bungling of their playlet, certainly makes it easy for audiences to dismiss the mechanicals and their influence, but it is worth remembering that "Shakespeare himself" is "a playwright risen from the ranks of players and artisans," and, as Montrose argues, "resonating through the dramatic persona of Nick Bottom … are not only a generalized common voice but also the particular socioeconomic and cultural origins of Master William Shakespeare." These creators and joiners, formers and constructors, may thus not be aristocratic, but they should not be so easily written off as lacking influence, skill, or significance to the play or to their society. Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins*, pp. 84-85; and Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, pp. 181-182.

"play is *The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby*," a decision Bottom commends, declaring the play: "A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry" (I.ii.11-14). The incongruous notion of a "lamentable comedy" might be easy to write off as a humorous blunder on the part of a lower-class comedic figure, yet Bottom's ensuing approbation here, whether or not it is a typical malaprop on his part, preserves the modally enmeshed description, proving, through the playlet's later performance, to be, in fact, a prescient characterization. The later production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* aptly reinforces this sense of modal interweaving, using verse to present a stately tragedy that is, at the same time, an unavoidably "low-class comedy." For instance, Wall's semi-rhyming couplets—which pair "Thisby" with "secretly" (V.i.159-160) and "sinister" with "whisper" (V.i.163-164)—amusingly deny the living property[72] the very sense of gravitas with which they, as verse, are intended to imbue him/it. As Anne Barton argues, the performance of the playlet is "tragic in intention, although not in execution," so that the mechanicals "recapitulate the development of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole, reenacting its movement from potential calamity to an ending in which quick bright things come not to confusion, as once seemed inevitable, but to joy,"[73] or at least, I would argue, to greater joy than existed at the beginning, as well as to the hope of generative potential. When performed, the *Pyramus and Thisbe* interlude does indeed become a very "tragical mirth" (V.i.57), and, as a functioning compilation of seeming contradictions, the playlet in many ways also reflects the modal "confusion" that I suggest more subtly characterizes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* proper.

Here, and with *MND* as a whole, expectations of modal division and stability are not so much inverted as they are mixed up in and intertwined with each other. As a result, *MND* does not only rewrite seemingly inevitable tragedies like Ovid's *Pyramis and Thisbe*, refiguring them as unexpectedly frolicsome comedies, it also embraces a tragic note that always undergirds this delight: a subtle yet tangible aura of death that permeates the unfolding action. Furthermore, the verisimilitude of this constant potential for comedy to turn tragic and vice versa allows the play— itself an imaginative and creative work—to engage with and represent human reality, broadly speaking, in a fictive world, whether that experience matches the particulars of this individual

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[72] "Propertry," now more commonly "props," are generally inanimate objects; however, the mechanicals' decision to instead cast actors in the role of Wall adds to the humor of their production as well as to its complex relationship with its primary context and its communication regarding what playing can accomplish.

[73] Barton, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* Introduction," p. 254.

play's plot or not. In particular, this modal enmeshment suggests an element of cyclicality that connects it not only to the day-to-day experiences of the human audience, but also to the Wheel of Fortune.[74] The sense that comedy can at any time turn to tragedy and then back again belongs, thus, not only to the subject matter of this particular play, but also to the pattern which the human world follows, whether it be in the individual lives of each spectator or in the risings and fallings of human history. As a result, the modal fluctuations of *MND* align with and reflect the concept of total theatre, and the implicit sense of cyclicality suggested by this alternation is further reinforced by the presence, within the play, of the moon and its affiliation with both the triple goddess and the fairies.

The moon—who appears throughout *MND* both as a character and as an actor, mirroring Puck's role at the play's end (a point to which I will return)—is, at first, a subtle presence who enters with Theseus and Hippolyta in Act I, scene I when Theseus calls attention, in the third line of his opening speech, to the waning moon and its relationship to the too-slow passage of time as his wedding draws near: "Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour / Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in / Another moon; but O, methinks, how slow / This old moon [wanes]! She lingers my desires, / Like to a step-dame, or a dowager, / Long withering out a young man's revenue" (I.i.1-6). Though not portrayed at this point by an actual player, the moon here becomes an active presence, one that influences the characters, "linger[ing]" Theseus' desire,[75] and touching the events of the Duke's and the other characters' lives (and loves). The passage, moreover, presents us with not one but with two moons. There is the first moon: the new moon that "draws on apace," "bringing in" the "nuptial hour" in "Four happy days." This is a comic moon—one that Theseus, at least, associates with happy occurrences. But there is also a second moon: the current, "old moon" that wanes, forestalling Theseus' anticipated comedy and "withering out a young man's revenue."

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[74] A concept that was particularly popular in the Middle Ages, but which remains with us to this day (see, for example, Journey's "Wheel in the Sky"). To my knowledge, few if any scholars have discussed the concept of Fortune's Wheel in relation to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but Raymond Chapman has written about Shakespeare's use of the Wheel in his history plays, stating that: "The idea that kings are the sport of Fortune is strongly developed in the first half of the sixteenth century," so that the medieval concept is taken up in the early modern period, with "The plays written in the half-century from 1570 to 1620 [being] full of references to the power of Fortune over men in great place." Raymond Chapman, "The Wheel of Fortune in Shakespeare's Historical Plays," *The Review of English Studies* 1.1 (1950): 2-3 [1-7].

[75] The fact that Hippolyta is a prize and her marriage to Theseus is a direct result of his martial triumph over her people, the Amazons, should not, to my mind, be overlooked or dismissed. The proclamation of the coming happy occasion is only ever made by Theseus and, even if this "happy end" pleases him, it likely constitutes a tragic conclusion for Hippolyta.

That second moon opposes the fecundity of the nuptial moon, but only temporarily. As such, these two moons are decidedly distinct and opposed, and yet, at the same time, they unavoidably belong to one another, existing in the grander scope of things as a single moon that changes, alternating between aspects and modes, and, in so doing, linking those opposites and intertwining them in a natural harmony.

The phases of the moon and their contrasting yet connected characters also conjures up the moon's associations with the multiple aspects of the Greco-Roman "triple goddess," whose three parts include, in some form, Diana, Luciana, and, Persephone (or Hecate), all of whom appear in some guise in *MND*. Diana is, as Jacqueline de Weever writes, "the goddess of many names,"[76] and her identity is somewhat otherworldly: labile and difficult to define, characterized by change and, in particular, by both increase and decrease. The moon and her goddess(es), are, in other words, inherently resistant to binary opposition; they are defined by the presence and balance of both loss and gain, wax and wane, and show both to be necessary to the operation of the natural world and the marking of time. In addition, the name(s) by which the moon goddess(es) appear in a narrative—monikers that may shift any number of times as the tale progresses, as, indeed, they do in *MND*—suggest certain key traits of the goddess(es), those ones that are coming to the fore in that particular moment. The names and their exchange thus indicate the "particular aspect of the goddess"[77] that is, in that instance, being made manifest. Often, however, the various "aspects" of the goddess do not clearly or emphatically adhere to audience expectations and the aspects can, as such, seem to be "contradictory"[78] or capricious. For example, in her role on earth as Diana, the triple goddess represents a "chaste goddess of the woodlands and the hunt," while, in the heavens, she can become "Lucina, the bright moon goddess protecting women from the pains of childbirth."[79] In addition, a third aspect, Proserpina, characterizes the goddess when she is "below," "queen of the underworld"[80]; this aspect is "the fearful one" and is commonly associated not with brightness or light, but with "the darkness of the underworld" where Proserpina rules with her

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[76] Jacqueline de Weever, "Chaucer's Moon: *Cinthia*, *Diana*, *Latona*, *Lucina*, *Proserpina*," *Names* 34.2 (1986): 154 [154-174].
[77] de Weever, "Chaucer's Moon," 155.
[78] de Weever, "Chaucer's Moon," 156.
[79] Marta Powell Harley, "Chaucer's Use of the Proserpina Myth in 'The Knight's Tale' and 'The Merchant's Tale,'" in *Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature*, ed. Elizabeth T. Hayes (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 21 [20-31]. See also, de Weever, "Chaucer's Moon," 164-170.
[80] Harley, "Chaucer's Use of the Proserpina Myth," in *Images of Persephone*, p. 21.

husband and abductor, Pluto.[81] Further, Hecate is likewise associated with the darker aspect of the goddess and is often connected to or serves as a stand-in for Proserpina. Invoked by Medea in Ovid, Hecate is the side of the triple goddess most commonly associated with witchcraft,[82] a practice that, as noted, was frequently linked in the early modern period to fraternization with the fay. Indeed, Puck himself appeals to Hecate in *MND*,[83] uttering, in the final Act, a sort of *memento mori* just prior to Oberon's entrance: "Now it is the time of night / That the graves, all gaping wide, / Every one lets forth his sprite, / In the church-way paths to glide. / And we fairies, that do run / By the triple Hecat's team / From the presence of the sun, / Following darkness like a dream, / Now are frolic" (V.i.379-387). The fairies Puck describes here do not seem quite like the cheering and gamesome ones we have previously encountered in *MND*, the ones who, for example, "Hop in [Bottom's] walks and gambol in his eyes; / Feed[ing] him with apricocks and dewberries" (III.ii.165-166), or those that later work to further life, blessing the nobles and their future progeny. Here, we encounter instead the dark side of the otherworldly, one associated not with the demonic per se, but with death and its unavoidable nearness. This darkness, moreover, is just as much the fairies' nature as is their other, more frolicsome face; like the dreams that follow darkness, these fay can be both a passing fancy and a substantial portent; they blend opposites, belonging to both death and life, and emphasizing their disentangleable nature. As such, the fay are as natural yet fluctuating as the moon. Indeed, the name of Shakespeare's fairy queen, Titania, is also a name

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[81] de Weever, "Chaucer's Moon," 170-1.

[82] "The Greeks," Michael Bailey notes, "had their own gods of magic, including Artemis, known as Diana to the Romans, but most especially Hecate, a goddess of the moon, magic, and witchcraft. She was (or became) a horrifying figure. The third-century BCE poet Theocritus describes her, in his *Idylls*, creeping through burial sites while frightened dogs quake at her approach, and she is also depicted killing women in childbirth. Among her priestesses was the foreign princess Medea, a sorceress who performed monstrous deeds during her unhappy marriage to the Greek hero Jason, including in some versions of the myth killing her own children." Michael D. Bailey, *Magic: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 10.

[83] It is worth noting that, as Briggs points out, the mention of Hecate seems to contrast with the fact that the fairies are as benevolent towards humans as they are mischievous and disruptive. Indeed, Titania and her fairies "drive away the owls, snakes, spiders, newts and bats, all creatures that are associated with witchcraft," and "Oberon … distinguishes himself from the ghosts and night-wandering spirits that cannot bear the day." Shakespeare's fairies, in other words, are complex and polyvalent, reducible neither to comic whimsy nor to demonic terror, but instead composed, fundamentally, of both. Briggs, *Anatomy of Puck*, p. 46.

that Ovid associates with Diana,[84] so that the moon and the fay seem, throughout *MND*, to be explicitly linked: made residents of a night-world of dreams, magic, and mystery.[85]

Like the moon and her aspects, the fairies of *MND* are labile, notably unaffected by mode—tragic or comic—and able to move between poles. In fact, their influence in large part produces the modal complications that primarily define the play's unfolding action. In addition, the fairy connection to the moon is tangled up with their similar association with modal blurring and caprice. Throughout *MND*, the moon appears in and shifts between her various aspects, in one moment furthering the young love of Hermia and Lysander (I.i.30) by serving both to light and to conceal their flight from Athens,[86] and, in the next, "quench[ing]" in its "chaste beams" the "fiery shaft" of Cupid (II.i.155-172). The variable and transitory nature of the moon goddess(es) does not, then, simply register the transitory nature of the sublunary, rather it likewise emphasizes the presence of both comic and tragic modes in one figure and, implicitly, in the lives and loves of all those under its sway (which is, of course, all of us).

Indeed, even in the play's opening moments—where the focus is on the purportedly joyful preparations for Theseus' "nuptial hour"—the comedy and order of the city realm are tinged with elements of tragedy and chaos and with the implicit presence of the moon and of Faerie. For instance, Theseus urges his master of the revels, Philostrate, to "Stir up the Athenian youth to

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[84] Purkiss, for instance, notes that, "Titania is Diana, goddess of childbirth, and the one who determines whether women in childbirth live or die." Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden*, p. 178. See also Sasaki, "The Metamorphoses of the Moon," 80; Ernest Schanzer, "The Moon and the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 24.3 (1955): 241 [234-246]; and Brown, "Chaucer and Shakespeare," 226.

[85] Walters likewise suggests that the "the moon, a feminine body that signifies change and flux" is connected to Faerie in *MND* because "Fairyland was often perceived as a feminine domain, since therein the queen was generally portrayed as the centre of power." In addition, I would note that the moon and the fairies are also connected by their influence over the natural world. In Classical and medieval thought, as well as in many of their early modern their descendants, the moon was believed to have an effect on the lives of humans, its phases related to the changes that the terrestrial world, and those occupying it, experience on a regular basis. Though I do not agree with all of Sasaki's conclusions, her intriguing article raises some productive questions regarding the influential role of the moon in *MND*, noting that "The phases of the moon exert an influence not only on the growth of things, but also on the fortunes of human life." Further, Sasaki suggests that *MND* is organized by the moon, with her changes "dominat[ing] the whole movement of the play, which is divided into three parts according to her three phases," beginning with a waning moon that corresponds to "a certain sense of descent" in the action, with star-crossed lovers, as we have seen, appearing to race toward inevitable destruction and tragedy. As a result, the fairies' influence on the natural world and the lives of the human characters can be seen as similar to and even reflective of the influential power of the waxing and waning, tragicomic moon. For example, the fight between Titania and Oberon has a direct effect on the natural world. The effects their fight wreaks, moreover, is directly related to the rhythms, the order of the natural world, much as the moon determines the tides and its changing phases denote the cyclical passage of time and seasons. Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 124; and Sasaki, "The Metamorphoses of the Moon," 60-61, 64, and 68.

[86] "To-morrow night, when Phoebe doth behold / Her silver visage in the wat'ry glass, / Decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass / (A time that lovers' flights doth still conceal), / Through Athens gates have we devis'd to steal" (I.i.209-213).

merriments, / Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth, / Turn melancholy forth to funerals: / The pale companion is not for our pomp" (I.i.12-15), orders which are clearly intended to divide mirth, comedy, and theatrical pomp, on the one hand, from death, sorrow, or tragedy, on the other, arguing that youth, merriment, and the nuptial revels ought not to admit the "melancholy" or those "pale companions" who ought to be, instead, turned "forth to funerals." At the same time, however, the Duke here undermines his own efforts to order his realm and to delineate separate spaces, practices, and modes by unconsciously invoking the destabilizing and integrating influences of the otherworld. For example, though Theseus is, of course, intending to urge Philostrate to summon the youth and joy of Athens to his and Hippolyta's celebrations when he asks that the "pert and nimble spirit of mirth" be awakened, that phrase also calls to mind those mirthful, fay spirits that the Athenian youth will soon encounter in the forest outside Athens and its law. Indeed, these orders suggest that Theseus himself unintentionally brings the fairies and their generative chaos into the scope of the narrative and, eventually, into his own marital revels. Further, the "pale companion" who is "not for our pomp" refers, on the surface, to those melancholy individuals whom the Duke requires be excluded from the comic pageantry he is seeking to produce and revel in; however, the phrase also suggests the presence and influence of the moon, who, as Theseus has earlier claimed, delays the joy of the wedding and "lingers" the Duke's desires. The moon's fluctuations between increase and decrease, comedy and tragedy, ascent and descent, thus question the possibility of maintaining the very separations Theseus works here to define, just as the moon's connection to the fairies complicates the sense that the otherworldly are merely pert and full of jollity, suggesting instead that they are dynamic and complex creatures of both darkness and light, both mournfulness and mirth.

In essence, while Theseus works to establish order and to separate his realm into discrete categories, the fairies and the forest as otherworld allow instead for intermingling and enmeshment, a point furthered by the consistent presence of the moon and Moonlight across forest, city, and playing spaces within *MND*. Just as the joyful faces of the triple goddess cannot be separated from the sorrowful ones, the city's order cannot remain distinct from the influences of its sylvan neighbor, nor can the comic fairies of *MND* be successfully distinguished from those in Puck's speech who run, by the light of moon in her aspect as Hecate, "From the presence of the sun, / Following darkness like a dream" (V.i.385-386). That entangling of life and death, moreover, defines the experience of living in an unstable, terrestrial world, for, in humans' lived-realities, the

tragic and comic modes are, in fact, inseparable, their alternation bringing hope to times of tragedy and meaning and gravitas to more "comic" experiences. As an imaginative production, *MND* thus presents its spectators with the scope of reality, neither obscuring nor eliding its difficulties; instead, by bodying forth this reality in all its totality, the play helps its spectators to see a grander and more promising pattern in and to their own lives. Theatre is not here held to be separate from reality; rather, it is a lens through which experiences can be viewed and understood afresh.

5.3   Playing the Stage: Shakespeare on Imagining Reality and Realizing Imagination

Not only is the commerce between opposed concepts like tragedy and comedy more representative of everyday reality, but it also allows *MND* to represent and consider the intertwined relationship existing between imagination and reality by placing art, playing, and creativity, on the one hand, in partial contrast with the lived-experiences of, on the other hand, the Athenians and of the players, spectators, and playwright(s) in and of *MND*. In essence, the fairies make evident the impossibility of keeping imagination and "reality" separate, and, in so doing, they allow Shakespeare to comment on the similar inseparability of early modern playing from its physical and cultural context. By engaging with the perceived tensions between "reality" and "imagination," *MND* thus reveals the ways in which the enmeshment of those professed opposites also better reflects and illuminates human experience: in this case, the reciprocal relationship between quotidian reality and imaginative productions. Most notably, the play engages with questions regarding whether an imaginative product is real or a hallucination; whether a creative work can have substance; and whether imagination and its workings are wholly separate from the realm of the rational—which is in part equated with the realm of the audience—or not. Whether explicitly named or no, the fairies, as capricious beings whose existence is more contentious in early modern England than it was in the Middle Ages, interact with imagination and its discussions throughout the play, so that the actions of Faerie, the forest, playing, love, poetry, and even madness come, within *MND*, to relate to and with one another. In particular, *MND* repeatedly questions the "sensibleness" and "realness" of the lovers, the fairies, and their night-time adventures, pitting the fantastic nature of these be-spelled happenings against Athens' alleged reality and order and Theseus' apparent rationality. Further, the fantastic and forest elements in this play together serve as a means for complicating the distinction between an imaginative product and quotidian existence, weaving together the multiple elements that compose the play and its complex worlds.

At first blush, there are several moments in *MND* that seem to allege that both *a* play and *this* play are insubstantial nothings—mere shadows of reality. That charge is, however, complicated almost as soon as it is raised. First, Theseus, as the most vocal member of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* playlet's audience, colors the *MND* spectators' perceptions of the mechanicals' performance through his commentary, describing the best actors as "but shadows; and the worst … no worse, if imagination amend them" (V.i.211-212). The Athenian Duke's commentary, on one level, dismisses all plays, including Shakespeare's own, as shadows: flimsy, dimension-less facsimiles of reality. On another level, however, Theseus' claim also signals the power of imagination—the contribution of real audiences to the production of a dramatic work—to shape and make "real" the stuff of a play. Moreover, these sentiments follow Theseus' more extensive discussion of imagination and its products in a speech that predisposes audiences to view the play they are watching and, implicitly, the fairies who have steered it, as a flimsy fantasy, an "aery nothing" (V.i.16).

Though the fairies exist just beyond the epistemological reach of Theseus and the other Athenians (Bottom excepted), the otherworld's connection to imagination and playing— connections upon which I shall expand later in this chapter—indicate the need to consider the humans' discussions regarding the operations of these other, related elements, as part of *MND*'s overall engagement with and consideration of art's relationship to lived-experience. As such, at the beginning of Act V, discounting the woodland fairy happenings and the adventures related by the four young Athenians, Theseus declares:

> More strange than true. I never may believe / These antic fables, nor these fairy toys. / Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends. / The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact. / One sees more devils than vast hell can hold; / That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic, / Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt. / The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, / Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven; / And as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing / A local habitation and a name. / Such tricks hath strong imagination, / That if it would but apprehend some joy, / It comprehends some bringer of that joy; / Or in the night, imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear! (V.i.2-22)

In a speech that Adam Rzepka argues constitutes Theseus' attempt to assert his "sovereignty over both the psychological faculties of his wayward subjects and … [over] the production of poetic

images"[87] more broadly, Athens' Duke here equates poets and lovers with madmen, suggesting that, not only are the four youths the victims of "seething brains," but also that the play as a whole is, as the work of a poet, an "aery nothing," one ultimately "more strange than true." Theseus' declamation brings together the influences that have infused the plot of *MND* to this point, invoking not only emotion (lovers), the moon (lunacy), and the fay ("fairy toys"), but also the relationship, if any, between reality and imagination—including the possibility that the imagination may, Puck-like, mislead the reason. Theseus here sets that which is strange in opposition to that which is true, suggesting that the products of the imagination, as well as anything which is transformative or changeable, are antithetical to realism and rationality. Thus, those who are "of imagination all compact"—the lover, lunatic, and poet—are not simply made of imagination, they are seemingly packed to the brim with the stuff, and, as such, their minds are suspect and their wits easily muddled.[88] The speech, moreover, contrasts apprehension with comprehension, casting the former as a foolish reliance on the senses, while the latter allegedly defines the Duke and his "cool reason." Apprehension, per Theseus, leaves an irrational human vulnerable to the workings of imagination and of "shaping fantasies," so that the lunatic, the lover, and the poet become victims of their senses, enslaved by their eyes, just as those humans upon whom Puck administered the flower's elixir find themselves left without reason,[89] their wills overthrown. Indeed, some form of either "see" or "eye" is used by Theseus in each description of

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[87] Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 308.

[88] Further, Rzepka provocatively notes that "compact" here could also refer to a compact, an agreement between these three roles, something that links and unites them so that "The conceit that 'The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination *all compact*' has a doubled force in this sense, describing the imaginative faculty both as a kind of homogenous governing substance within each type and as a bond of complicity between them—a compact—that blurs any significant differences between the three 'seething brains.'" Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 309.

[89] Scholars have noted that the love-in-idleness flower that Oberon has Puck use to ensnare the impressions and affections of his queen along with Demetrius and (by accident) Lysander is, in fact, the pansy. The pansy, moreover, was commonly linked in Elizabethan thought to the French word for "thought," *pensée*, a connection that also appears in *Hamlet*. Walters suggest the connections made between thought and "sexual disorder" via the influence of the pansy and its use in *MND* makes evident the fact that "Thoughts are also potentially threatening to authority," both by making Titania love a commoner and through the anxiety regarding imagination expressed in Theseus' dismissal of lovers, poets, and lunatics. I would go a step further and argue that in fact the pansy's effects link apprehension and image, via the imagination, to comprehension and internal reason or belief, thereby signaling, early in the play, those anxieties and dangers regarding imagination and its power that the work will explore and engage. Moreover, the pansy is not, as Mary Floyd-Wilson notes, an "exotic" plant, but rather one "available in any local garden" in England, just as both the homely fay who intrude on English houses and the stuff of imagination writ large cannot be kept from quotidian reality, whether those imaginative things be theatre, poetry, love, or dreams. Walters, "Monstrous Births and Imaginations," 130; Floyd-Wilson, "Potions, Passion, and Fairy Knowledge," p. 187; and see also Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," 90.

the altered minds of the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, both echoing elements of early modern iconoclastic discourse and reinforcing the Duke's claim that those individuals are deluded, led by altered perceptions away from the realms of judgment and logic.

Theseus' assertion here that reason and reality are both superior to and distinct from the stuff of imagination—a claim he makes by directly contrasting rationality with the workings of fantasy—effectively reinstates the reliance on binary oppositions which the play had earlier complicated. However, coming as it does at the end of a play that consistently questions the veracity of such dualities, working instead toward their enmeshment, this move appears somewhat suspect. Indeed, the Duke's speech betrays a foolishness and misunderstanding of the true workings of the mind that further undercuts its censure. For instance, like the other binaries invoked by the play, apprehension and comprehension are, in truth, conceivable as interrelated mental processes, ones that, in relation to natural philosophy, arguably cannot—or at least should not—be separated from one another or from the imagination. Apprehension, on the one hand, refers to "[t]he action of learning, the laying hold or acquirement of knowledge," "the action of grasping with the intellect; the forming of an idea; conception; intellection," and, as Shakespeare himself uses it earlier in *MND* (III.ii.179), as "the action of laying hold of with the senses; conscious perception."[90] In other words, one takes in stimuli through the senses in order to acquire knowledge, understanding, or an idea: to apprehend. Comprehension, on the other hand, refers in the "earliest sense in English" to the action or process of "grasp[ing] with the mind, conceiv[ing] fully or adequately, understand[ing], and 'tak[ing] in,'"[91] thereby indicating an internal mental working that strives to grasp and fully comprehend an idea, including one which has been received through the senses: one that has been apprehended.

The processes of apprehension and comprehension are, moreover, intertwined with the polyvalent and dynamic term: "imagination." Indeed, Rzepka argues that Theseus' catalogue conveys the diversity of meanings "imagination" connotes even while trying to erase them, so that: "To read the play assuming that the imagination is an essentially uniform faculty is to make the same mistake that Theseus does, consolidating a sense of our critical sovereignty over the theatrical

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[90] *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), "apprehension, *n*."
http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.purdue.edu/view/Entry/9808?redirectedFrom=apprehension#eid, Accessed July 30, 2018.
[91] OED, "comprehend, *v*."
http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.purdue.edu/view/Entry/37847?redirectedFrom=comprehend#eid, Accessed July 30, 2018.

imagination as a 'compact' function in place of the play's interest in its productive differentiation."[92] Such a sense of imagination's complexity as both a force and a concept is, moreover, also reflected in older, Middle English definitions of the term and in many Classical, medieval, and early modern models of the operations of the brain. As such, imagination, "As a restless image-making and image-handling faculty,"[93] evokes for early modern audiences (as it did for their medieval precursors) not one but *two* overall senses. The first aligns with what we, as more modern readers, might expect: that of something that has been imagined, "a fantasy, delusion, presumption, [or] dream."[94] The suggestion here is that the thing imagined lacks realness, that it, as the creation of the human mind, is in direct opposition to everyday human happenings; in this sense, imagination is no more than the "experiencing of illusions,"[95] and its products are little more than a fantastic dream. However, those familiar with medieval philosophy and science would be aware that there are multiple types of dreams—several of which are, in actuality, defined by their "trueness" and their connection to and even prediction of human reality and experience. Moreover, this understanding of dreams precedes the Middle Ages and extends past it, with "good Elizabethans," as R.W. Dent writes, "remember[ing] that not all dreams are the product of [a] disordered, passion-stimulated, never-sleeping imagination. Some dreams are the divine revelations of truth, however difficult to expound…. Some dreams are yielding."[96]

In addition, the second sense of "imagination," as represented in Aristotelian thought and its descendants, refers not solely to fantasies, but also to those mental processes necessary to the formation of memories.[97] Here "imagination" refers to "the faculty of forming mental images from

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[92] Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 310.
[93] Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 309.
[94] *The Middle English Dictionary* (MED), "imăǧināciǒun (n.)," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED22016, Accessed July 30, 2018.
[95] MED, "imăǧināciǒun."
[96] Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," p. 93. Similarly, Thelma Greenfield notes that that there is "A widespread and time-honored tradition [that] regards dreams as purveyors of secret information, [ones that are] engineered externally or from the self and asking for ingenious decodings," a tradition that, I would note, is expansive enough to include Hebrew patriarchs and prophets like Joseph; Greco-Roman and medieval texts including *The Dream of Scipio*; and many other traditions and tales besides. Further, Greenfield emphasizes Shakespeare's consistency with respect to this tradition, arguing that "dreams abound in the Shakespeare corpus" and regularly serve to "play an important structural part or powerfully to express a tormented mind or for (sometimes wildly misread) foretellings and omens…. Though often ill-advisedly, many of the speakers dismiss dreams as idle, false, foolish, quickly vanishing." Thelma N. Greenfield, "Our Nightly Madness: Shakespeare's *Dream* Without *The Interpretation of Dreams*," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Critical Essays, ed. Dorothea Kehler (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 331, 335-336 [331-344].
[97] Perhaps another useful way of thinking about these "senses" of the term "imagination" might be found in Adam Rzepka's assertion that the early modern view of the imagination constitutes a spectrum stretching from "imagination … seen primarily as playing an important role in normal perception—a faculty thoroughly engaged with the distributed

sense data and of retaining them either immediately or when recalled from memory" as well as to the "power of forming mental images of things not experienced, e.g. of future or past events, of spirits, etc."[98] Though individual models may vary slightly, Aristotle's work[99]—as mediated through the writings of Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Hugh of St. Victor, and others—suggests that "memories" begin with sensory perception. The corporeal senses take in or *apprehend* stimuli in some way (through hearing, touch, sight, etc.), and that perception is then received (in the body/brain) by the *sensus communis* (common sense) which then passes these "sense impressions" on to the *imaginatio* (imagination).[100] The imagination itself, moreover, consists of two parts or "compartments": the "lower 'imaginatio vel formalis', where images passed on from the common sense are merely stored as a kind of visual archive; and a higher imagination, … the 'estimativa','" whose "function … is to recall images in order to judge whether present situations are to be desired or shunned."[101] Generally speaking, the imagination is where

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material world"—to, at the other end, an "emphasis … on the imagination's capacity to generate disorienting fantasies that ruptured connections between the subject and the lived environment." Approaching these dual senses as ends of a spectrum begins to get at the sort of both/and quality that *MND* is presenting to its spectators: revealing how many supposed opposites are more intertwined than is often acknowledged. Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 313.

[98] MED, "imăğināciŏun"

[99] Aristotle's theories were more popular in the late Middle Ages, whereas James Simpson has noted that Neoplatonism "came to dominate in the sixteenth century." These Neoplatonist strands, moreover, align with and were invoked by those late-medieval and early modern "marginal theological currents that were … also expressing hostility to the corporeal and to the imaginative." While this does not mean that the models and descendants of Aristotelian natural philosophy disappeared or were inaccessible to early modern people, it does indicate one source of the devaluation of the imagination as well as the possibility that Aristotelian models themselves might be somewhat devalued, associated instead with the Renaissance/Reformation-created Middle Ages as well as with socially inferior and purportedly "irrational" entities. For instance, Simpson notes that late medieval and early modern "mainstream theological discourse" often looks down upon the imagination, viewing it as a tool for the laity, so that "Orthodox works written for the laity at the height of the Lollard controversy," for example, "exhort readers to remain within the realm of the imagination, since such readers are incapable of abstract thought." Moreover, the disdain with which reformers and Reformation theology might at times treat the imagination can conceivably be tied to the very power possessed and represented by the imagination, so that, by "repeatedly deny[ing] that the images have life in them," reformers "expose[d] the suggestion that the images still have power to move, even as they are subject to destruction." As such, the opposition of imagination and reason can, if one attends to the importance of the role of the imagination in memory formation as well as in cogitation—as described by medieval natural philosophers, among others—be seen as a false distinction, but this distinction was one asserted and vehemently maintained by some vocal segments of late medieval and early modern England. That dualistic tension, like the others explored and complicated in and throughout *MND*, is, moreover, one that I would argue reflects, on some level, Elizabethan culture's vexed relationship to the visual: perceiving the eye, as Michael O'Connell notes, to be a thing that both reveals and conceals. James Simpson, "The Rules of Medieval Imagination," in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 16-18, and 23 [4-24]; and O'Connell, "Jonson and Shakespeare," p. 118.

[100] On the formation of memories and the physiology of the brain discussed here, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 60-68.

[101] Simpson, "Medieval Imagination," p. 7.

phantasmata (memory images) are formed, but the human imagination does not just learn, it also "rationaliz[es]," meaning that "humans are not just moved by imagination's products, they also judge and form opinions about them."[102] As a result, "The imagination in turn feeds the reason."[103] In the end, sensory information, including that taken in by the spectator of a play, can, via the imagination, become memory images which are then imprinted on the brain. Indeed, as Louis Montrose contends, Hamlet himself represents this process in his suggestion that plays "that are well written and well performed imprint exemplary images of virtuous and vicious behavior upon the minds of their audiences,"[104] a statement that cites the mental processes of memory formation and thereby indicates, I would argue, that the recall of memories formed while viewing a play can later influence the comprehension, reason, and ethical behavior of a play's spectators.

Comprehension is thus, to an extent, dependent (via the imagination) on apprehension, and yet, Theseus himself suggests (albeit uneasily) that the reverse might also be possible. The poet, Theseus states, apprehends the world with his/her/their eye "in a fine frenzy rolling" (V.i.12), but

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[102] Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 63. The modeling of these systems and the role of the imagination in apprehension and comprehension is not a solely medieval concept. For instance, admitting to some overgeneralization, R.W. Dent describes the Elizabethan view of the imagination and its function thus:

> the Elizabethan the imagination ideally functioned as an essential servant to the understanding, whether as a reporter (the most emphasized function, that of transmitting accurate images of sense data, present or absent) or as a creator or inventor. When, as too frequently happened, it became dominated by passions in conflict with reason, it became a false reporter and/or inventor…. In watching the lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we tend to be aware of the imagination's activity only when it is thus failing in its proper function. At such times we can scarcely attribute the folly to love or imagination alone, obviously; it derives from their interaction.

While such a characterization in part supports Theseus' description of the imagination as both easily misled and effectively misleading, it also emphasizes the continued importance of medieval science/natural philosophy's understanding of the imagination as a key component in the processes of memory formation, a process that, as Carruthers notes, is vital both to learning and to ethical decision-making. Further, Adam Rzepka notes that, in the early modern period, "the imagination was clearly understood … as having a material basis," with "Early modern *scientia de anima* treatises tend[ing] to reify Aristotelian distinctions between the potentialities of the soul as distinct parts." However, there was, Rzepka notes, also a spectrum of understanding and definition when it came to early modern conceptions of the imagination, a range that extends from the fantastic, "aery nothings" sense discussed above to the alternate sense mentioned in which "imagination could be seen primarily as playing an important role in normal perception." It is worth noting then that imagination can, like the visual sense to which it is tied, lead an individual to misperceive, but it is, nonetheless, also key to the processes of rational thinking. In other words, rational and critical thought are driven by the imagination just as they are, upon occasion, deluded by phantasms, the imagination's other "side." R.W. Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," p. 86; and Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 312-313.

[103] Simpson, "Medieval Imagination," p. 7.

[104] Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, p. 43. It should also be noted that Montrose expands on Hamlet's assertion, making clear that, while Hamlet may wish for drama that is "ethically unequivocal in its purpose and force," the play, *Hamlet*, "also continually and ironically undermines Hamlet's wishes and expectations," showing that "The playwright's perspective on the purpose of playing is more capacious, popular, and equivocal than that of the Prince." Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, pp. 43-44.

here the work that Theseus seems committed to dismissing comes from within, from the imagination, which "comprehends" something new, imagining a "form of [and for] things unknown," and then, through the creative power of the poet's pen, turns that insubstantial "nothing" into a substantial "shape" or "body" that can, like a play, be apprehended by the public. The imagination, as such, may draw from reality in creating an artistic product[105]—shaping things from both joy and fear—but it also possesses the ability to "body" these creations forth, giving them to an audience, exposing them to the senses—the apprehensions—and the imaginations of others. Theseus' speech betrays a sort of anxiety or sense of vulnerability to those imaginative products—to that which is strange and outside the realms of reason—an apprehensiveness that in turn undercuts the Duke's reassertion of binaristic thinking as exceptionally rational and reflective of reality. Theseus' need to reinforce the boundaries between his "civilized" and "rational" polis and the wild otherworld of imagination suggests both a desire to block out the capricious products of fantasy and a fear of imagination's potential to affect the "real" world. Certainly, poetic products might be mere fantasies or "aery nothings," but, as the Duke's speech here anxiously also implies, those fantasies can also, through the power of imagination, be given a shape, "a local habitation[,] and a name" in the primary world of their creator and audience. Moreover, and perhaps most alarmingly, the lover, the poet, and the lunatic can all grasp something which is outside of Theseus' own reason, thereby both apprehending *and* comprehending truths that exceed the Duke's realm and elude his grasp. This, then, is a power that Theseus can neither access nor understand, and, as such, it belongs to a realm that he can neither dominate nor control.[106] In the end, the implicit anxiety that Theseus' denunciation of the imagination and its products here suggests—namely, that, if the imagination can delude, then the reason can be deluded—makes plain the power of the very thing it wishes to dismiss.[107]

Further, Hippolyta's response to Theseus' lecture heightens the sense of ridiculousness that attends the Duke's dismissal of love, imagination, and all their kith and kin. After her husband

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[105] In his work on aesthetics in *MND*, Hugh Grady similarly notes that reality has the potential to feed a work of art, if you will, noting that "what is 'in' the artwork comes 'from' … society." Grady, "Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics," 280.

[106] This aligns in many ways with Barnaby's argument that *MND* invokes 1 Corinthians 2 in order to draw an "analog[ous] … distinction drawn in the play between the 'princes of this worlde' and those who, esteemed foolish in the ways of human wisdom, wield no worldly authority," individuals who, I would suggest, include lunatics, lovers, poets, and, implicitly, actors. Barnaby, "1 Corinthians and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," 4.

[107] Similarly, Simpson contends that "The imagination is an unstable and unsettling category precisely because it lies outside rational governance." Simpson, "Medieval Imagination," p. 23.

applies his reason to a lengthy dismissal of the fairies and their work—a speech also undercutting the workings of love and poetry—Hippolyta, in a few brief lines, highlights the perversity of Theseus' logic, stating: "But all the story of the night told over, / And all their minds transfigur'd so together, / More witnesseth than fancy's images, / And grows to something of great constancy; / But howsoever, strange and admirable" (V.i.23-27). Hippolyta, who can admit the possibility of strange fairy encounters and the existence of the "more things in heaven and earth" with which Hamlet later rebukes Horatio, [108] nonetheless martials more cool reason than her husband, compellingly noting the unlikeliness of a mass hallucination in this case. In so doing, Hippolyta reveals that Theseus, the seeming proponent of logic and discernment, is, in fact, illogical—a move that also renders suspect the Duke's dismissals of those who are "of imagination all compact" (V.i.8). As a result, we are reminded that imagination, with its "divided allegiances within the psyche," belonging as it does "on the one hand to the senses and on the other to the reason," [109] is necessary to both logical thought and to the generative creativity of poetry and love. Unable to recognize this fact, Theseus no longer fits the role of moderate and logical lord of Athens—if in fact he ever did—while Hippolyta and her rebuke instead highlight the power and positive potential of that which is strange and uncontrollable. In addition, Hippolyta's rhetorical prowess complicates the very functions of language that Theseus dismissed in his description of the poet, showing that language can, indeed, illuminate the truth just as effectively as it can create and shape "aery nothings."

Finally, the spectator is reminded that Theseus' speech—to comedic effect—has lambasted not only the work of poets generally, but also the work of Shakespeare, the very poet who has crafted the Duke and composed the speech wherein the Duke dismisses both Shakespeare, as a poet, and Theseus, as a poetic creation. In essence, then, the refutation of imagination and its works is made possible only through the production of one such fantasy, a move that effectively questions both *MND* and the seeming rationality that would dismiss such a play. Similarly, Hippolyta's speech, while pointing out the absurdity of Theseus' claims when they are applied only to the world within *MND*, also subtly suggests that a group indeed *may* be "transfigur'd so together" if they are, as a community, engaged in watching a play. The primary effect and import of these

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[108] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), I.5.167-8.
[109] Simpson, "Medieval Imagination," p. 10.

doubled moments is that they call attention to both the reality represented in and by the narrative and to the fact that *MND* is still a fictive creation, an imaginative world being encountered and developed by the minds of a real-world audience, just as it was created by a real-world poet. The play can be both art and true, its experience can be drawn from reality while also shaping that reality within the playhouse space and in the play's later recollection by its spectators. In essence, then, the final act of *MND*—in part, as we shall see, through the influence of Faerie—calls attention to the boundaries between the imaginative world of the play and the actual world of the audience, and, in so doing, reaches past those boundaries, making them less fixed by the very act of drawing attention to their shape and existence within the context of the fictional plot.

In this way, *MND* relates imagination, its products, and its denizens not just to "reality" writ broadly, but also, in particular, to playing and the theatre, joining the forest otherworld and its fairies to the stage and its players. Because *MND* is an imaginative production, its spectators are, as R.W. Dent notes, held in and by the fictional world created by the play—a world that includes both the "imagination-dominated 'dreams,'" of the lovers' forest antics and also those scenes in Athens where "reality" and "reason" ostensibly rule the day.[110] The production of *MND* thus creates a permeable but identifiable division—both conceptual and spatial—within the larger, imaginative context of the play. Moreover, by locating that division within the context of an imaginative production, I would suggest that *MND* also asserts the falseness of such distinctions, prefiguring the moment in the play's concluding actions when the residents of the imaginative otherworld enter Athens, the realm of reality, blurring any remaining sense that a division exists between "dreams" and "waking life."

The stage, *MND* reveals, is not sealed off from the spectator's reality any more than, in practice, tragedy is from comedy or imagination is from reason. Creativity, a force both chaotic and difficult to constrain, is in fact vital to and inseparable from "reality." Art and play—seen most clearly in the destabilizing and generative powers of the fairies as they work on and through the human characters—have the potential to alter human perceptions and to disrupt human society, possessing the creative power to break down and re-write what is, for good or for ill. The underlying truth is that art, creativity, and imagination belong to and are intertwined with reality, existing as part of a reciprocal exchange, with creative fantasies inspired by and composed of elements from actuality, just as those imaginings can then act on and shape their "real world."

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[110] Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," p. 93.

Such a conclusion would, moreover, not have been outside the realm of contemporary thinking (and sometimes anxiety) regarding early modern theatre; Anne Barton, for instance, shows that, "As the Elizabethan theatre matured, creating imaginary worlds of increasing naturalism and depth, its adherents came to believe quite firmly in the power which illusion could exercise over reality…. Both the champions and the enemies of the theatre thought that it could change men's lives."[111] Arguably, *MND* proclaims the power of art and playing, showing that both draw inspiration from and at times mimic reality while also possessing the ability to (re)form that reality and even to "body forth" new realities. As such, *MND* is more than merely lighthearted or silly, it is a work that reflects on and has the power to influence human lived-experience, revealing the reciprocal relationship existing between imagination and "reality." These and similar conceptual oppositions are, moreover, not only addressed by *MND* but are also mapped onto the spatial relationships in and of the play, the interactions and negotiations of which add a degree of complexity to the work that further illuminates the interrelationships of art and reality being considered by the play.

5.4   Staging the Stage: Mapping Conceptual and Playing Space in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

As Mullaney notes, "drama … is an art of space as well as words,"[112] and, predictably, space and its uses are a significant part of *MND*. For instance, both the work's fictive realms and the playhouse or hall in which it is performed are given connotative meanings, most often being associated either with the city, reason, and reality, on one hand, or with imagination, the otherworld, and creativity, on the other. Similarly, because fairies are defined most clearly by their association with a place—they are residents of Faerie: the/an otherworld—the actions and effects of fay chaos are, in *MND*, frequently related spatially and via movement, particularly with respect to the forest otherworld and its boundary with the city. In essence, the concepts opposed (and promptly melded) by the play are, early in the work, mapped onto the realms in the narrative and the spaces in and around the playhouse or hall, with the relationships between those places serving to represent and then complicate the dualities with which the play is interested. Thus, while the sylvan and ludic realm in *MND* at first contrasts starkly with the Athenian realm of "civilization" and "reason"[113]—

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[111] Barton, *The Idea of the Play*, pp. 81-82.
[112] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p. 7.
[113] Hugh Grady similarly sees the forest in *MND* as a realm of fiction and aesthetics, drawing on Northrop Frye's description of "green-world comedies" to suggest that *MND*'s otherworld, the green wood, represents a "kind of

a polarization of settings that is mirrored in the other dualities, such as tragedy and comedy, reality and imagination, and human and fairy, raised by the play—the lovers' and mechanicals' movement from Athens and its law to the forest otherworld and its creative chaos begins the process of enmeshing the realms even as it, initially, draws a boundary between them.

In *MND*, the ostensibly clear and definitive divide between the space of the "real," on the one hand, and the space of play and imagination, on the other, seems at first to represent the "two-world condition" that Mikhail Bakhtin ascribes to medieval and early modern society,[114] and, indeed, the play's forest otherworld has been discussed as a site of carnival. However, I would argue that, rather than allowing the Athenian nobles or the spectators of *MND* to experience "an escape from the usual official way of life" and to be "temporar[ily] liberat[ed] from the prevailing truth and from the established order"[115] of Athenian or Elizabethan society, the forest otherworld and its fairies are delicately and necessarily imbricated in and with the order and substance of "officialdom" or quotidian reality. The forest may be intended as an escape from the city, but it is not so much "a parody of the extracarnival life, a 'world inside out,'"[116] as it is an illuminating intervention, a means of illustrating the unavoidable and beneficial enmeshment of the creative and imaginative realm with that of every-day experience.

As such, the interweaving of concepts like tragedy and comedy or imagination and reality exhibited in *MND* is in many ways represented through the physical and spatial negotiations of the intertwined realms within and surrounding the play. The early physical separation of Athens from the forest otherworld allows the action of the play, as it unfolds, to then complicate and interweave the conceptual dualities that have been mapped onto those respective spaces through the crossing of linked, physical boundaries [see Figure 4]. Thus, though there is a clear division that firmly

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freedom from many of the oppressive social norms that had created the play's comic dilemma." In addition, Grady suggests that the play holds the aesthetic, to a degree, separate from the reality it mirrors, although "the barrier between them [the two realms], like Wall in the inset play, has chinks in it, and within each separate domain there are traces of its excluded Other," and that it is through the interplay between the two that "the play produces an implicit theory of the aesthetic within itself." I would, however, expand this claim to suggest that Shakespeare's play makes clear that the imaginative realm and its products cannot and should not be kept separate from the stuff of reality, that the two realms are productively enmeshed, acting on and influencing each other. As a result, *MND* does not simply theorize art, it theorizes arts relationship in and necessity to its society. Grady, "Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics," 282.

[114] In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argues that medieval and early modern society "built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year," and that, "If we fail to take into consideration this two-world condition, neither medieval cultural consciousness nor the culture of the Renaissance can be understood." Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984 [1968]), p. 6.

[115] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 8, 10.

[116] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 11.

separates one world from its seeming antithesis, it is through the trespass of that boundary that the

conceptual divides are effectively complicated. As Thomas Moisan has also noted, it is in the forest that "'rude' juxtapositions notoriously transgress boundaries and elide categories simultaneously literary and social."[117] The forest is thus the *first* and most prominent place where boundaries start to break down; the first place where we see playing (with the mechanicals meeting there to rehearse their interlude); and the first place where the intertwining of perceived opposites, such as tragedy and comedy, occurs. As the play progresses and, in turn, further transgresses conceptual and ontological boundaries, the *MND* spectators likewise become more and more aware of the fact
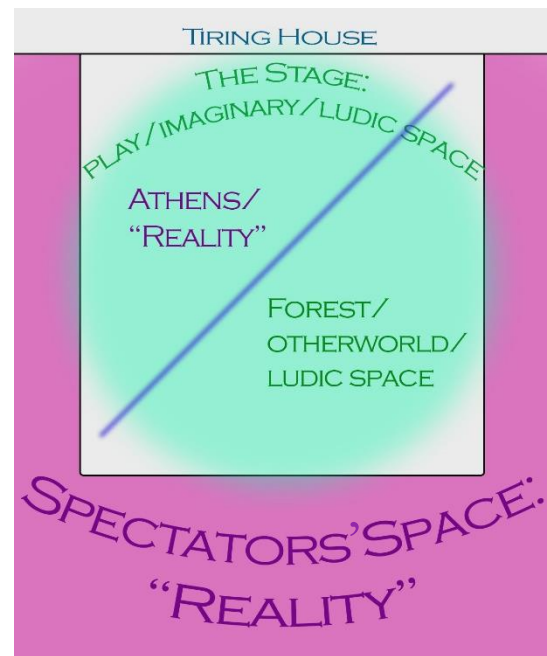

Figure 4. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s Conceptual Landscape

that the spatial separation of Athens from the forest—and the corresponding divisions between "real" and "imaginary," "human civilization" and "ludic otherworld," "tragedy" and "comedy"— is reflected in the division of the performance space itself. Whether it be a physical stage that divides the space occupied by the players from the area inhabited by the "groundling" spectators, or, instead, a more amorphous space created through the gaze and mental agreement of spectators at a wedding or festival, a performance erects a mental boundary between the playing area— distinguished by the imaginative, ludic action of the play and players—and the "real world"—the space populated by the audience (and the actors once again as they step off the stage and out of their roles). However, the physical and ideological organization of space within both the play world and within the playhouse is complicated and blurred by *MND* just as are the other binaries invoked by the play. The frontier does not remain clear and solid, it is instead blurred and complicated by the play, and the most dramatic instance of this blurring occurs in the final moments of Act V when the otherworld physically permeates the "rational" and "real" space of

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[117] Thomas Moisan, "Antique Fables, Fairy Toys: Elisions, Allusion, and Translation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Critical Essays, ed. Dorothea Kehler (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 277 [275-298].

Athens. In this moment, these fantastic and fanciful beings do not simply intrude on the "rational" civilization of Athens, they also work on that realm, casting what we can only conclude will be actual, effective boons for the lovers and their future offspring.

In discussing the architecture of early modern playhouses, Kent T. van den Berg suggests that, because these structures are "bounded, coherent place[s], to which one withdraws from the surrounding world, usually with a specific purpose," the playhouse creates a space that is distinct from and defined by its difference to the world outside its enclosure, which is coded as its opposite: reality.[118] Unlike medieval plays—which were often performed in public spaces, with, as Tom Pettitt notes, "little by way of stage, scenery, or lighting to set off the play world from the domestic context of performance"—early modern playing instead had "a wider range of mimetic resources for creating an independent play world (not least scenery and lighting),"[119] elements that arguably enable the play-world to be thought of and imagined as a distinct space separate from its immediate temporal context. Further, because, for both medieval and early modern plays, "the stage was [assumed to be] as large as the audience's imagination,"[120] the performance space within a playhouse can, to a degree, be viewed as coterminous with the spectators' minds, rendering it, on one level, infinitely expansive. However, it is also important to note that the spectators also have physical bodies that, like the player's forms when they are not on stage, occupy space within a playhouse, hall, courtyard, or similar. The spectator's space is not an imaginative or fantastic area the way the stage is, but, it is "designed to focus attention on the actor,"[121] thereby, Van den Berg suggests, linking the conceptual separateness of the playhouse to the organization and construction of the building itself. In many ways, a playhouse turns attention both inward and outward. Thought

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[118] Kent T. van den Berg, *Playhouse and Cosmos: Shakespearean Theater as Metaphor* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), p. 26.

[119] Pettitt, "Dramaturgical Machinery," p. 212. Further, Barton has shown that "Elizabethans were constantly being reminded of the fact that life tends to imitate the theatre," linking the two in common thought and culture so that "Comparisons between the world and the stage were so common as to become, in many instances, almost automatic, an unconscious trick of speech." Anne Barton, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962), p. 83.

[120] Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 44.

[121] van den Berg, *Playhouse and Cosmos*, p. 27. Though it is possible that *MND* was first composed for and performed at a private wedding, I would suggest that the focus on the actor even in a non-playhouse space would similarly encourage audience re-definition of the enclosed space (whether it be a hall, a courtyard, or another such space) as imbued with an imaginative and fictive otherness. Further, as discussed in a later note, Dorothea Kehler suggests that evidence from the first quarto edition shows that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was "publicly performed on several occasions by the Lord Chamberlain's Men." Dorothea Kehler, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: A Bibliographic Survey of the Criticism," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Critical Essays, ed. Dorothea Kehler (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 50 [3-76].

about the structure revolves around the stage and the narratives it does or will display, and the plays then draw that same attention onward and outward, into another, fictive world. The narrative world and the stage on which it is produced act, then, as imaginative otherworlds, realms populated by workers of a different, but equally powerful, kind of magic.

Further, because the outer walls of the playhouse or the hall physically separate both the playing and the audience areas from their quotidian reality, the spectators' space is a degree removed from its external context, meaning that it cannot be fully definable as "reality" any more than it can, conversely, be rightly or fully excluded from that reality. By "shut[ting] out the external world and focus[ing] attention on … an image of life that acts out possibilities, impulses, or aspirations seldom fully realized, or even clearly envisaged, in actuality,"[122] playing is, at least in part, "a physical displacement of reality by make-believe."[123] While this description helps to show by what means and for what purposes the interior of a playhouse or similar structure is spatially othered—treated as different from and thus not belonging to reality—the physical displacement of reality is, at the same time, impossible, particularly given the degree to which the creation of a play depends on the mental contributions of its audience. In many ways, the spectator-space within the playhouse occupies a position relative to reality that is analogous to the position the playhouses and the Liberties occupied with respect to London; however, it also belongs—mentally and imaginatively—to the fictive expanse generated by the play. As such, I would suggest that *MND* uses the spatial relationships foregrounded in both its story and its production to show that the spatial and mental interactions existing between an artistic work and its cultural context are more intertwined than is often recognized, emphasizing, in particular, the degree to which reality and creativity mutually influence and draw life from one another.

Indeed, the final Act of *MND* as a whole calls particular attention to the spatial divisions between the play and its spectators by doubling the performance space and asking the *MND* audience to be spectators not only of *MND* itself but also of the mechanicals' playlet. As a result, Shakespeare's audience members become spectators of spectators, watching the Athenian nobles as *they* watch the playlet. If a dramatic production divides an enclosed guildhall, courtyard, or playhouse—a space already set-off from its surroundings by walls—into spaces further distinguished for performing, on the one hand, or viewing that performance, on the other, then Act

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[122] van den Berg, *Playhouse and Cosmos*, p. 28.
[123] van den Berg, *Playhouse and Cosmos*, p. 30.

V of *MND* literalizes the division of space that a production temporarily creates by representing that division as it is produced within the play's own narrative space and by the play's own narrative action [see Figure 5]. In thus displaying the spatial relationships and separations generated by a performance, however, *MND* also erodes those same boundaries, exposing their physical and temporal ephemerality and revealing their permeability. Additionally, those moments during the production of the playlet in which the mechanicals directly address their noble audience further serve to reinforce the sense that the boundary between the space of the audience and the space of the players is neither firm nor impenetrable. For

Figure 5. The Play's Permeable Boundaries

instance, during the mechanicals' interlude, the following exchange between Pyramus/Bottom and Theseus unexpectedly occurs:

> *Pyr.* "O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss!
>   Curs'd be thy stones for thus deceiving me!"
> *The.* "The wall methinks, being sensible, should curse again."
> *Pyr.* "No, in truth, sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisby's cue. She is to enter
>   now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see it will fall pat as I
>   told you. Yonder she comes." (V.i.180-187)

Theseus' comments are not directed toward Pyramus or Bottom in this moment; they are instead clearly meant to remain within the audience-space that the Duke and the other nobles inhabit, accessible only to him and his fellow spectators—yet they do not do so. The humor in this exchange is most obviously directed at Bottom, who uncovers the dramatic machinery of the interlude, explaining how the actors use cues to navigate the playing space; however, it is also, if less obviously, a moment that pokes fun at Theseus' reliance on a spatial separation or boundary that is so plainly indistinct and permeable. This is not a mere moment of a break in the "fourth wall"; rather, this exchange shows that, whether or not the audience may wish to recognize it, the
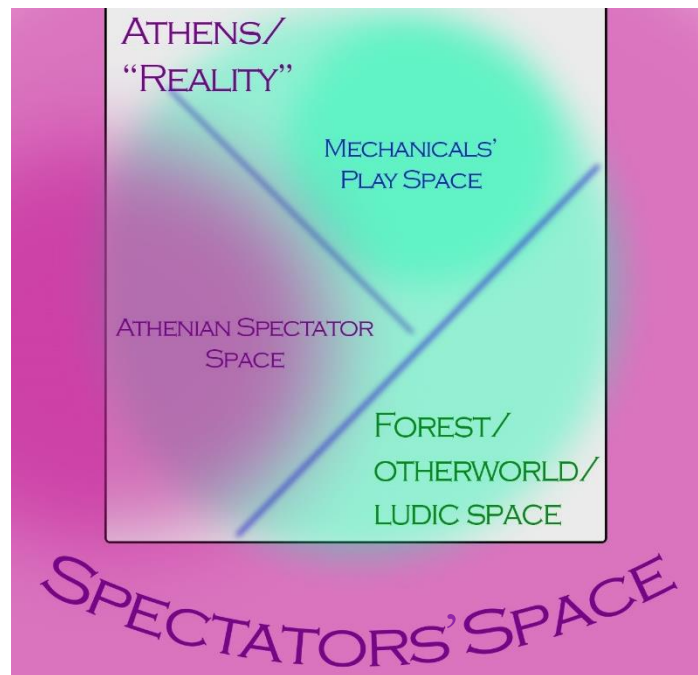
exchange between the play's imaginative space and the "real" space of the spectator goes in two directions (although ideally the contributions of the spectators come from their imaginations, not their mouths). Further, the exchange suggests the foolishness of assuming a separateness to and for the audience, making clear that the audience is participating in the creation of the play, whether they acknowledge it or not. The two spaces are clearly not as divided as they might seem to be when the players are more professional, and, as such, it becomes clear that, within a playhouse, imagination and reality cannot be kept distinct.

Furthermore, it is not the humorous gaffs of the mechanicals alone that reveal how indistinct and porous the spatial separations of performance space and spectator space are; instead, the production of the playlet in Act V also brings the *MND* spectators into the actual world of the play to a degree, making them synonymous with the playlet's other audience: the fictive Athenian nobles. Indeed, several scholars have suggested that *MND* was first performed at a wedding,[124] making the identification of the Athenian nobles with the actual, physical audience of *MND* even more likely. In addition, this move calls attention to the tripartite structure of play production, further emphasizing the significant, if less-visible, role of the audience in the creation of the play. In essence, the *Pyramus and Thisbe* playlet's performance helps to reveal the imaginative and collaborative processes generating the play as a whole: showing, in particular, the necessity of the "effective use of the imagination by the author, the producers, and the audience"[125] in that production. The recognition of the need for imaginative contributions from playwright, actors, and audience, as a result, simultaneously draws the spectators into the play's performance space just as it extends the play as a production outwards into the space of the audience. The expansion of the performance space into the space of the spectator is, moreover, only furthered as the final act unfolds, and, in the play's last moments, fairy intervention, followed by Puck's final speech, stretches this now-diffuse performance space a degree further, complicating the more solid sense

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[124] For example, William Hunter makes this argument, contending that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was "[o]riginally written for the second marriage of the widowed mother of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, to Thomas Heneage on May 2, 1594," and that the play was staged again for the 1596 "wedding of Elizabeth Carey, the granddaughter of his company's patron, to Thomas Berkeley." See William B. Hunter, "New Readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *ANQ* 15.4 (2002): 3 [3-10] and William B. Hunter, "Performance and Text: The Evidence of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *ANQ* 11 (1998): 7-11. However, Dorothea Kehler makes clear that, whether or not it is the case that, as "is generally thought, notwithstanding a lack of hard evidence, that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was composed for a private wedding in the mid-1590s," the play was also performed in playhouses, a conclusions she bases on "the first quarto edition of 1600[, which] indicates it [*MND*] had already been publicly performed on several occasions by the Lord Chamberlain's Men." Kehler, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*," p. 50.

[125] Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," p. 96.

of division between a playhouse-type space and the reality to which the audience and players must return.

5.5 What the Actual Puck: Dreams, Shadows, and a Final Appeal

Puck's closing speech most radically expands the magical and creative realm of the play-proper, capturing the playing- and audience-spaces together in a sort of twilight realm that is both play and reality. Building on the conceptual and spatial mapping that occurs within the play, *MND* in this final moment swells outwards, calling attention both to the similarly complicated relationship between the ludic world of the performance and the "real" space of the audience, and to the playhouses' complex relationship with its own purpose and community, placed, as the early modern theatres were, in a space at once outside and inside the City [see Figure 6]. [126] By thus uncovering the entwining, rather than the separation, of those perceived dualities, *MND* bodies forth on the stage the complex truths of lived, human experience. Further, by playing (pun intended) with the impossibility of maintaining binaries and boundaries, *MND* also has the
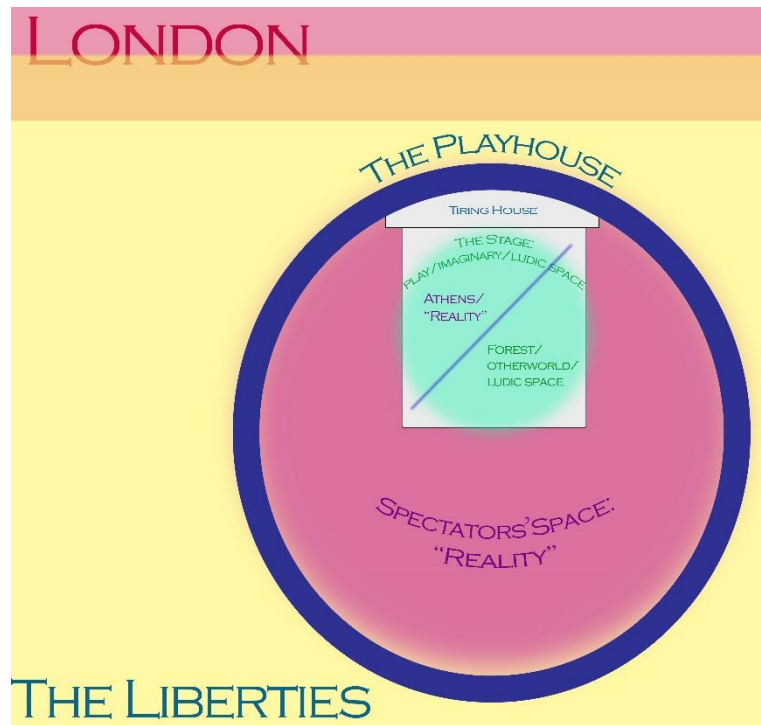

Figure 6. The Playhouse Context

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[126] Early modern playhouses had a "marginal" or "liminal" relationship to the London metropolis, they belonged to the city yet were placed outside the Roman wall in the Liberties or across the Thames on the Bankside. These liminal areas, Steven Mullaney argues, possess a "more ambivalent order. What was lodged outside the city was excluded, yet retained; denied a place within the community, yet not merely exiled." Further, the narrative unfolding on the stage was often as socially and ideologically complex as the geographical placement of the playhouses themselves, often mingling dominant and marginal elements into a complex whole. For instance, Patricia Parker writes that "The popular theater in particular … was a threateningly liminal space, whose 'mingling of kings and clowns' (in the famous phrase of Sidney) blurred a whole range of distinctions, evoking the specter of adulterating, crossbreeding, and hybridity." Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 15; and Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p. 22.

consequence of returning to and expanding the sense of art's relationship with society, speaking both to the anxious desire to keep chaotic and destabilizing forces contained and ruled, and to the beneficial impossibility of separating the space of the two either physically or conceptually.

Puck in particular effects many of the complicating and intertwining efforts in the play, not only causing mischief and confusion in the world of the performance, but also serving to complicate the boundaries between performance and reality. As the play ends, Puck comes forward and utters the following epilogue, a speech which Tom Pettitt describes as having a "distinctly experimental feel"[127]:

> If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended, / That you have but slumb'red here / While these visions did appear, / And this weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream, / Gentles, do not reprehend. / If you pardon, we will mend. / And, as I am an honest Puck, / If we have unearned luck / Now to scape the serpent's tongue, / We will make amends ere long; / Else the Puck a liar call. / So, good night unto you all. / Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin shall restore amends. [*Exit*.] (V.i.423-438)

First, the use of "shadows" here recalls and joins two earlier uses of the word, fusing them together. The earliest such use occurs when Puck refers to Oberon as "king of shadows" (III.ii.347)—using "shadow" to designate the inhabitants of Faerie—while the second appears in a passage in which Theseus refers to the best actors as "but shadows" (V.i.211). By so explicitly bringing actors and fairies together here, Puck signals the imaginative and creative space in which players—those involved in the play's physical production—stand. Indeed, Ronald F. Miller suggests that *MND* represents to its spectators "various levels of reality," with the stage or performance space "bear[ing] a significant resemblance to the world of the fairies," as, in particular, "Both define a mode of existence separate from but interacting with quotidian existence."[128] Further, like the modally fluid fairies, players, playwrights, and playing companies can also alternate between tragedy and comedy, just as they can imaginatively blend the two—as Shakespeare is doing here. Moreover, the use of "shadows" is interesting; on the one hand, by referring to the players as shadows, Puck and *MND* suggest that part of the job of a player is to be—as a separate individual—

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[127] In particular, Pettitt links this sense of theatrical experiment to the fact that Puck's conventional appeal on behalf of us (acting) company is uttered while he still "emphatically remains in character," and, I would further note, as a member of an additional company—the company of fairies who have just entered the ducal palace. Tom Pettitt, "'Perchance you Wonder at this Show': Dramaturgical Machinery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and 'Pyramus and Thisbe,'" in *The Narrator, the Expositor, and the Prompter in European Medieval Theatre*, ed. Philip Butterworth, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 17 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007), p. 233 [211-234].

[128] Miller, "The Fairies, Bottom, and the Mystery of Things," 255 and 260.

insubstantial, with a player's "real" identity giving way to the person and character of their role, a transformation that then gives veracity to the role one bodies forth on stage. On the other hand, the spectators are aware that the players have physical forms and that those forms continue to exist and to have substance even when they are not on stage or playing a part in the ludic world. Indeed, Puck's appeal in many ways rests on the fact that the actors are not simply embodied, but that those bodies need food, shelter, and basic securities: needs that only continued audience good will can ensure. For instance, when mentioning the players' desire to escape the "serpent's tongue," Puck alludes to possible consequences that are very real and that belong very certainly to the world outside the play-space, just as the promise to "make amends ere long" implies a reciprocal relationship between the players and their community while also making a case for the spectators' attendance at the company's future productions.[129] Further, the indication of a hope that the audience will return for another production also has the effect of suggesting that the players are a part of their larger social context: members of the "real world" community that surrounds the space of the hall or playhouse.

In the end, the actors are not *actually* shadows, they are shadows only within the play-world, while, conversely, the fairies are not *only* shadows, they instead become, implicitly, slightly more solid or "real" through their connection to the irrefutably substantial forms of the players. In this way, Puck's speech subtly suggests to the spectators that those who trade in imagination are also, inextricably, part of the spectators' quotidian reality and, at the same time, that the denizens of the imagination have more substance and "realness" than we may always admit. Indeed, by joining the two "shadows" in this final, liminal moment, Puck subtly suggests that, unlike shadows, neither players nor their creative productions evaporate when confronted with direct sunlight. Thus, by joining the creative and imaginative work of the players to the presence of the fairies as imaginative creations, Puck's appeal, made as it is by one who is, in this moment, both a fairy and an actor, subtly reinforces the sense that the actual and the fantastic are more inseparable than we might always recognize them to be.

Further, Puck's appeal depends on and plays with doubles—multiplying, as Adam Rzepka suggests, the number of dreamers in the play so that, in these final moments, the category extends to also include *MND*'s audience, thereby "align[ing] … the lovers' experience in the woods with

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[129] Wall similarly notes the practical undertones to these aspects of Puck's appeal, noting that they invoke the reality of commercial theater, namely, "the stage's reliance on revenue." Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep," 85.

the audience's experience at the play."[130] This multiplication of the category of dreamer through the inclusion of the spectators has the additional effect of implicating the play's spectators in the production and its imaginative world, asking them to consider how they know what they know and whether the play they have been enjoying is any less real or capable of affecting them and their lived realities merely because it is an imaginative work. Moreover, Puck's speech reinforces the sense that imaginative fictions can seem to be insubstantial—being "No more yielding but a dream"—yet also be productive. In particular, Rzepka notes the polyvalence of the term "yielding," stating that it "can mean giving in or giving way—losing substantiality—as easily as it can mean generating something."[131] Differing slightly from Rzepka's reading of this line, I would also suggest that the intertwined and polyvalent multiplications occurring throughout Puck's appeal in fact make clear that, whether or not an imaginative product is written off as insubstantial, it still has the potential to yield to (produce or generate) something actual in the minds and lives of its spectators.

Additionally, Puck's speech occurs in a sort of liminal moment as the play is in the process of ending but has not yet ended. In particular, Puck's appeal to the audience re-emphasizes the existence of a spatial divide between the play world and the real world, signaling that the play is itself moving toward that moment when the real world returns, overcoming the imaginative space that *MND* has occupied and, during its performance, created both within the physical space of the playhouse and also within the mental space of its spectators' cognizance. During this final speech in particular, Puck is both a character acting on other characters within the play and, at the same time, a player calling attention to his and his fellow players' roles in "bodying forth" the imaginative productions of the poet/playwright, presenting themselves to the spectators for detection and, ideally, also for compassion. Cooper grants to Puck a "doubling of role," placing him, like "Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Prospero in *The Tempest* …[, both] inside and outside

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[130] Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 326.

[131] Rzepka goes on to suggest that the "second sense of the line then becomes either that the performance is no *less* substantial than a dream or that here, at the end of the play, it ceases to yield and becomes firmly fixed—the performance is a dream that cannot be altered, much less erased." While I agree that Puck's speech reinforces the sense that imaginative works can be part of and "persist… as an imaginary remainder in the quotidian world," I would suggest that the importance of this is not so much in the "staying power" that the imaginative works are revealed to have—their fixedness—but more that the imaginative, as part of and enmeshed with reality, have the ability to produce ideas, changes, and so forth in that reality. In other words, that art can beneficially effect the reality of the spectators just as much as it is drawn from and inspired by the "quotidian world" of the playwright. Rzepka, "Differentiating Imaginative Production," 326-327.

their own plays."[132] In bringing to the foreground both his doubled status and its connection to the creation and success of the play, Puck, in this final moment, dilates the "zone" between play and not play, holding those on the stage and those in the audience together in a moment that belongs to the fictive world while also acknowledging and even emphasizing that fiction's existence within and connection to the actors' and spectators' primary reality. In so doing, this moment comes to encompass and embrace not only the characters and the actors, but also the spectators who participate in the creation of the play but who exist in the world of "not play" that also houses the players as players. The speech thus unites those within the total play-space, whether it be a hall, courtyard, or a playhouse, in a fleeting moment that is both conceptual and spatial, a sort of instant of shared inhalation.

In addition, Puck is not, in this moment, so much a bridge connecting two distinct domains—the imaginative, play world and the "realistic" space of reality—but rather, a liminal figure who belongs to both spaces at once, just as the playhouses situated within the Liberties belong both to London and to "not London." It is particularly appropriate for a fairy to serve this purpose as fairies are, in particular, defined by their indefinableness: they are human-like but also inherently "other" to primary, human reality, and they are able to transgress the boundaries between our world and theirs with ease and at their whimsy. Moreover, Puck (a.k.a Robin Goodfellow) carries particular, homely English connotations that make him impossible to alienate from the external, quotidian realities of *MND*'s audience and actors. By placing this speech in the mouth of a character known for "perform[ing] … particularly onerous household tasks,"[133] Shakespeare reminds the *MND* spectators that their own homes might be intruded upon by the self-same Robin Goodfellow who now addresses them, thereby joining the fiction they are witnessing

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[132] Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 78. Similarly, Puck's relationship to the play and to its spectators can be likened to that of the prompter as discussed by Philip Butterworth. Butterworth describes the prompter as a figure who "operate[s] simultaneously both 'inside' and 'outside' the action of the play in its communication." As such, the prompter has the ability "to move in and out of the action, and thus [of] different realities…. The same fascination exists in relation to roles of the narrator and the expositor who can also operate simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the action of given plays even though the roles may embody different purpose, form, and function…. These figures are of pivotal significance in the communication of those plays in which they operate." Philip Butterworth, "Introduction," in *The Narrator, The Expositor, and The Prompter in European Medieval Theatre*, ed. Philip Butterworth, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 17 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007), p. 1 [1-9].

[133] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 295. Similarly, Wendy Wall writes that Robin Goodfellow was defined by "central preoccupation … with eroticism and domesticity," and that his domestic actions both furthers and mischievously complicates quotidian rhythms: "Located within the landscape of the household, Robin becomes intimately associated with pots, cheese, and women's beds. Pinching maids, grinding meal, and scrubbing the kitchen, he makes eroticism and work seem natural allies." Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep," 75-76.

to the real context to which they will return and encouraging them to take their memories of this play back with them. Puck is neither ethereal nor fantastic in the way Oberon, Titania, or even Titania's miniature elves are, and, as such, he has a solidity and a quality of everydayness that is harder to dismiss as an insubstantial fantasy. As an emphatically English fairy,[134] Puck/Robin Goodfellow returns the spectators to their true context, emphasizing the fact that the reality to which the play has been alluding is not Classical Athens, but Elizabethan England. In making these points and in suggesting that the actors respond to and seek to please those who come to view their work, this ending speech brings reality into the playhouse or hall, revealing a porousness to the ostensibly solid walls that set the playhouse apart, making it seem to be a fantastical realm separate from its surroundings. The playhouse is, in the end, not so distinct from the city as it may at first seem to be, and, despite such houses' marginalized positioning, the play—as a creation of actors, audience, and playwright together—leaves with its creators, shaping the quotidian world to which they return, just as that world in turn, both consciously and unconsciously, shapes the next such "fancy."

MND and, in particular, its final Act, thus reveals the ways in which reality and imaginative production are necessarily and productively intertwined. A play, as an imaginative creation, is capable of reflecting the complexities of reality, including the enmeshment of perceived opposites. In addition, the spatial relationships mapped in and complicated by the action of *MND* make clear that the exchange between reality and imagination is necessarily reciprocal. The contrasting of imaginative or performance space with its ostensible antithesis, the space of primary reality, serves then as the first and most primary opposition asserted by and structuring *MND*, and, like all the other such binaries that follow, this first duality is made visible only to be muddied, first within the space of the hall or playhouse, and then, as the play reaches out to incorporate the spectators in its dramatic action, and again, finally, when the play expands dramatically outwards in its ending, continuing as an imaginative product even as it becomes part of a world that is perceived to be its opposite: to be real and concrete. Puck's speech, in particular, reminds the spectators that they, like the actors, can for a brief moment occupy both imaginative and real spaces at once, just as it

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[134] Wendy Wall similarly notes Goodfellow's Englishness and suggests that, "As Puck assumes the part of the very English Robin Goodfellow, the exotic mythological realm to which he is attached expands to include local and domestic associations," (although Wall contends that those associations "reverberate oddly with the flexible civic monarchy that founds social order in *Dream*"). Further, Wall shows that Goodfellow's Englishness would be clear to *MND*'s audience, arguing that "figures, such as Robin Goodfellow, … were hailed as 'native English' stock." Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep," 67 and 74.

reiterates the implication that actors are not only mere shadows but also actual humans with human needs. Reality and art are here represented as entwined, with art both drawing from and able to influence the quotidian existence of its creators.

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