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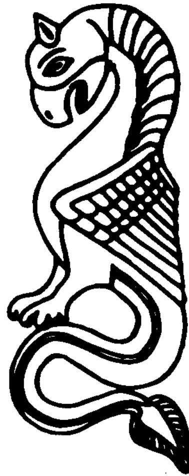

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Reviews

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Contents

Kinsmen Before Christ, Part II: The Anglo-Saxon Transmission — 1
P. S. Langeslag — *University of Göttingen*

Saint as Seer: Structure and Style in Ælfric's Life of St Cuthbert — 19
Hiroshi Ogawa — *University of Tokyo (emeritus)*

The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of Saint Frideswide — 38
Gary S. Fuller — *Brigham Young University*

The Terror of the Threshold: Liminality and the Fairies of *Sir Orfeo* — 57
Piotr Spyra — *University of Łódź*

Þjalar-Jóns saga: A Translation and Introduction — 73
Philip Lavender — *University of Copenhagen*

Reviews:

Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland*. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014 — 115
[Sheryl McDonald Werronen]

Carolyn P. Collette, *Rethinking Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women'*. York: York Medieval Press, 2014 — 117
[Pelia Werth]

Elizabeth Cox, Liz Herbert McAvoy and Roberta Magnani, *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2015 — 119
[Benjamin Pohl]

The Terror of the Threshold: Liminality and the Fairies of *Sir Orfeo*

Piotr Spyra

Although fairies are not very difficult to find in the extant body of medieval English romances, there is something about the Middle English lay of *Sir Orfeo* that makes it a particularly good starting point for exploring the romance fairy tradition. *Sir Orfeo* boasts not only characters whose fairy identity, contrary to that of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the dancing ladies of Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', is never to be doubted, but also a full-fledged vision of the fairy otherworld, 'more concretely evoked [...] than in any other romance'.[1] While the descriptions of Sir Bertilak or the Loathly Lady only hint at their true nature, or their realms of origin, *Sir Orfeo* has it all: an explicit case of fairy abduction, a woodland encounter with the fairy cavalcade, not merely one but two different portals leading to the land of Faerie,[2] and the fairy king himself (perhaps atypically so, in light of the more usual, though by no means exclusive, references to fairy queens, as in Chaucer's parody of the genre in the tale of Sir Thopas).

One common approach to the study of fairies in both literature and folklore is to invoke the notion of liminality. Derived from Latin *limen* ('threshold'), the term *liminality* has often been applied in both fairy scholarship in general and the criticism of *Sir Orfeo* in particular; in fact, the majority of the sources cited in this article make use of the concept to a greater or lesser degree. It denotes a space, time or state that can be best characterized as being 'betwixt and between'.[3] Originating in anthropology, it has found its way into both cultural and literary studies, and can serve as a useful tool for capturing the sense of ambiguity that, according to the post-New Critical paradigm, defines the nature of literature.[4] As a useful piece of critical vocabulary, it does come with a caveat, however. Just as the notions of irony or paradox in

1 Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2001), p. 228.

2 The term as used here, capitalized and in the Spenserian spelling, refers to the land, or kingdom of fairies. With regard to the creatures inhabiting this realm, the standard dictionary spelling shall be used.

3 Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2001), p. 17. The phrase is a reference to a seminal article by Victor Turner — see below.

4 As a term in literary criticism, liminality may be seen as a modern variant of the notions of ambiguity, tension, or paradox, all of which have become a staple mark of post-New Critical literary hermeneutics. William Empson's seminal *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930) may itself be read as an unwitting exploration of the interpretive fringes of liminality and an attempt at classifying its role and function in literary texts.

the early days of modern literary criticism, it can be applied sweepingly to a whole array of texts and interpretive problems. In an overview of the applications of liminality in literary studies, Manuel Aguirre provides a lengthy list of problems addressed by the concept; these include ideas as diverse as literary investigations of the theological notion of the Numinous, structuralist analyses of the fantastic in literature, the very nature of postmodernism, concepts of heteroglossia and paratexts, and various others issues that cut across theoretical paradigms and historical periods.[5]

In this article my aim is to show that liminality can serve as a particularly potent tool for understanding the reader's hermeneutic encounter with the text of the lay of Orfeo — indeed, that the text not only consistently incorporates the idea of the liminal in its various formulations but that it also forces its readers to engage with the idea. The concept of liminality has often guided *Orfeo* scholarship in terms of its thematic preoccupation. Much has already been made, for instance, of the grafting of the tree from under which the fairies snatch Queen Heurodis[6] or of the uncertain nature of her madness.[7] This article investigates and re-examines these and a number of other issues to posit liminality as a principle that underlies and permeates the entire fabric of the tale. Not only does it argue that taking recourse to the notion of liminality is a useful and productive practice in dealing with the text of *Sir Orfeo*, which has already been suggested by earlier criticism, but it also suggests that invoking liminality is virtually indispensible if one wishes to understand how all the elements of this particular story fit together. The choice of the theoretical apparatus will therefore be shown to be invited by the text itself. This approach will not only help to appreciate the complexity of the ways in which *Sir Orfeo* exposes the reader to the liminal, but also posit the tale as a unified whole, where even those details which apparently have little to do with the presence of fairies in the story do, under closer scrutiny, appear to spring directly from it.

Although the term *liminality* originally derives from the work of the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, it was the British scholar Victor Turner who formulated the idea in a way that lent itself easily to applications beyond the study of proper rites of passage.[8] Describing the position of neophytes within the dynamics of such rites, he notes that they 'are neither living nor dead from one aspect and both living and dead from another'.[9] This is a key issue, and a striking feature of liminality itself at work, for a commonsensical approach would require that one favours either one reading or the other, rather than the conclusion that the neophytes are *both* and *neither* living and/or dead. Still, Turner suggests that to understand the ritualism in question one has to entertain both readings at the same time, and this insight into the mechanics of liminality, together with the logical tension it brings, will be shown to permeate the lay of Orfeo far beyond the context of rites of passage themselves.

Before dealing with how the fairy element intertwines with the idea of liminality in the lay, it is useful to look at the general interconnections between fairies and the liminal, as attested by folklore studies. Thus fairies are to be found in locations that belong neither wholly

5 Manuel Aguirre, 'The Lure of the Limen', *Trellis Papers*, 1 (2006), 3–16.

6 Curtis E. H. Jirsa, 'In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre: Arboreal Folklore in *Sir Orfeo*', *English Studies*, 89 (2008), 141–51.

7 Ellen M. Caldwell, 'The Heroism of Heurodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in *Sir Orfeo*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 43 (2007), 291–310.

8 See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) [first published in 1909] for the original formulation.

9 Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*', in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 93–111 (p. 97).

to the familiar world nor to the unfamiliar — borderland areas, whose relationship to their surroundings is in some way problematic. This conclusion can be corroborated by observations pertaining to different historical periods. For instance, the status of fairy mounds in Ireland, which in many cases escaped destruction over the centuries owing to the unwillingness of the local population to interfere with them, provides a good example: the ambivalent status of these places guaranteed their survival to a large degree and may be compared with the immunity conferred on modern day diplomatic missions in foreign countries by virtue of their recognized special status.[10] The ambivalence here arises primarily from the combination of alien and familiar characteristics which such places exhibit. Very often they lie immediately beyond the familiar world of the home, school or church, and yet, there is an aura about them of something 'very special'.[11] Margaret Bennett managed to capture this duality in writing of the mysterious 'fairy knowe'[12] behind the church in Balquhidder, the Scottish village where the Reverend Robert Kirk (1644–92), author of *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, lived before allegedly being taken away by the same mysterious race whose secret society he investigated.[13] It was, as the Balquhidder children that she interviewed knew very well, a place where Kirk had seen the fairies, and the knoll was even suspected by some of the pupils of the local school of harbouring 'a secret hollow in the bottom' or a graveyard. Still, it was for them as well 'a favourite place to visit during the leisurely lunch break'.[14]

Although definitely marked as different from their surroundings,[15] such haunts of fairies hardly ever lie beyond the easy reach of the local population. In these traditions, the land of fairies is never the far-off country of literary fairytales that requires a seven-league-boots journey across distant mountains; quite the opposite, it is right there, right next to the most familiar, or even mundane spaces of everyday life, and may perhaps best be visualized as a sort of a parallel universe, to which places such as fairy mounds or local hilltops provide immediate access.[16] Folk beliefs have in this respect changed very little over the centuries; Kirk himself wrote in the late seventeenth century about the subterranean fairy realm that was, in geographical terms, clearly identified as local, or, in his words, 'Scotish-Irish', with a 'Fayrie-hill' to be found beside practically 'everie Churchyard'.[17] With his many references to people

[10] Patricia Lysaght, 'Fairylore from the Midlands of Ireland', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1376 (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 22–46 (pp. 31, 45). By referring to mounds that have survived until the present day, the author seems to be suggesting that the taboo surrounding the violation of fairy ground has continuously been at work and still persists.

[11] Margaret Bennett, 'Balquhidder Revisited: Fairylore in the Scottish Highlands 1690–1990', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1376 (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 94–115 (p. 106).

[12] Local term for hillock.

[13] For an account of the alleged fairy abduction, see Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), pp. 89–90. Evans-Wentz reports the story to have long been in oral circulation in the area as part of the local tradition (p. 89).

[14] Bennett, pp. 106–8 (quoting p. 108).

[15] One often finds that places with particularly lush vegetation are believed to be fairy circles. Cairns or hillocks are also likely candidates for fairy haunts. In all cases the particular place stands out in one way or another. See Bennett, p. 108. Cf. Robin Gwyndaf, 'Fairylore: Memorates and Legends from Welsh Oral Tradition', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. Peter Narváez, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1376 (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 155–95 (p. 180).

[16] Katharine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 2002), pp. 23–24. All the stories about people abruptly disappearing in fairy circles only to reappear suddenly after months or even years also strongly suggest that the fairy realm is to be understood as being directly adjacent to ours. Cf. Briggs, pp. 124–25.

[17] Robert Kirk, 'The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies', in *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science*

endowed with second sight suddenly catching a glimpse of the otherworld by encountering fairies face to face,[18] Kirk leaves his readers in no doubt whatsoever that the underground world he describes may be 'secret' and hidden, but actually lies closer than one may suspect, being both distinctly alien and uncannily familiar.

In literature, liminal spaces are often marked as such in more than one way at a time. The popular ballad of 'Tam Lin' furnishes a good example with its mention of a well in the woods and a crossroads.[19] That Tam Lin appears to Janet by the well is probably connected with the belief in fairies often making their presence felt next to a body of water, usually running water, as in *Lanval* by Marie de France. Folklorists have recorded numerous stories about encountering fairies by a brook,[20] and the border-like, liminal quality of running water seems self-explanatory: interestingly, crossing a stream is actually often believed to have apotropaic properties and guarantees safety in the event of being chased by a supernatural force,[21] which suspends rivers and streams half-way between danger and safety, both inviting a menace and dispelling it — a good instance of the liminal. What makes 'Tam Lin' a particularly good example of how liminal spaces can function in literature is that its various versions testify to the importance of the notion of in-betweenness in the ballad. Where Child's A version has Janet meet the fairy cavalcade at Miles Cross,[22] the F text mentions Chester Bridge.[23] It appears that what matters is the liminal character of the place, more than its particular realization in a given telling of the story.[24] This may also shed some light on the curious detail of mills being a preferred haunt of both fairies[25] and brownies,[26] for not unlike bridges, which invite wayfarers to enter a space existing 'betwixt and between' the two river banks they connect, mills are the locus of transformation, as within their walls grain *becomes* flour. The numerous bridge and river-ford guardians we find in medieval romance[27] may thus originate

and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland, ed. by Michael Hunter (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), pp. 77–106 (pp. 78, 80, 85).

18 Kirk, p. 84.

19 'Tam Lin', in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. by Francis James Child, 5 vols (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, [1882–98]), ɪ, pp. 335–58. The well is to be found in Child 39A, 39B and 39I, the crossroads in Child 39A, 39B, 39D, 39I, 39J and 39K.

20 Evans-Wentz, pp. 124–25, 182. See also Barbara Rieti, ' "The Blast" in Newfoundland Fairy Tradition', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1376 (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 284–97 (p. 284).

21 Evans-Wentz, p. 38. See also Peter Narváez, 'Newfoundland Berry Pickers "In the Fairies": Maintaining Spatial, Temporal and Moral Boundaries Through Legendry', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1376 (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 336–68 (p. 348).

22 'Tam Lin', p. 342.

23 'Tam Lin', p. 349.

24 In most variants of the ballad the place is known as Miles Cross (sometimes in a corrupted form, such as 'Miles-Corse' in Child 39G or 'Blackstock' in Child 39E). Version F is the only one to provide an alternative to the crossroads.

25 Briggs, p. 119. Briggs mentions Rothley Mill in Northumberland as an example.

26 Briggs, p. 35. While Briggs refers to the English tradition, there is also the continental belief in the Killmoulis, a species of brownies to be found uniquely in mills. The belief was attested in Belgium, Germany and Holland. See Theresa Bane, *Encyclopedia of Fairies in World Folklore and Literature* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), p. 200.

27 These abound already in Chretien's works, and *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* includes a memorable episode of the absent-minded Lancelot being set upon by one without even noticing. There are also plenty of these in Malory's *Morte*, but perhaps the best indication of how widespread the romance convention of having most fords guarded by belligerent figures was comes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ll. 715–16). There, in a passage that plays with the convention on a meta-level and pushes it logically to the extreme, the narrator remarks that it was indeed a wonder ('ferly') if there was a ford or river crossing during Gawain's journey that had no guardian awaiting armed struggle.

from the same notion as the industrious mill brownies of British folklore — an understanding of both kinds of places as inherently liminal.

Instances of temporal liminality also tend to overlap in the ballads. Janet attempts to rescue Tam Lin not just on any night, but on Halloween,[28] and naturally at midnight.[29] This too has its source directly in folklore:

> the times for seeing fairies or getting into Fairyland are May Day and Hallowmas […]. The time of the full moon and the days before and after it are important to the fairies. Certain times of day belong to them — twilight, midnight and full moon are times when fairies are to be seen.[30]

One has the impression that what cuts through the thin veil separating the two worlds is precisely the liminality of the spatial and temporal alignments of a given setting, which overlap and thus enable mortals to interact with fairies and their realm.

The people who find themselves involved with fairies and the fairies themselves can too, however, be viewed as distinctly liminal. Diane Purkiss observes that 'fairies […] are like people who have become trapped at a certain indeterminate phase of life'[31] and provides numerous examples, such as that of fairy-like Greek nymphs forever poised on the cusp of womanhood.[32] One may also invoke the notion of 'fairy dependence', a defining mark of all fairy creatures according to Katharine Briggs.[33] Briggs devotes a lot of space to the issue, arguing that fairies ought not to be seen as living independently of ordinary people; instead, they are constantly observed to be in need of something that only human beings can provide — be it food, lovers, midwives or children — which is precisely what furnishes narrative material in stories of human-fairy interactions. Ontologically speaking, fairies are thus neither of this nor, in fact, of a different world, hovering for ever on the liminal fringes of reality. Helen Cooper, who analyzed the constructions of the fairy race in medieval romances, agreed with Briggs; in her view, fairies are 'an anomaly in the divine order of creation, and romances are rarely interested in defining their precise metaphysical or theological status except in terms of what it is not'.[34] Ontologically liminal, fairies also clearly belong to the spaces of 'betwixt and between' on the moral continuum, being neither angelic nor demonic, neither good nor evil. The famous description of not two but three roads in the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, the first two leading, predictably, to heaven and hell, and the third one winding in a snake-like manner towards the land of Faerie, is perhaps the clearest manifestation of this popular belief. One should remember that if fairies have often been referred to as 'the good people', this is not because they are inherently good but rather out of fear of invoking their generic name and thus provoking them into action.[35]

[28] This detail is to be found in all main versions collected by Child (39A–K).

[29] Some variants do not mention the exact time, but if they do then it is invariably midnight, or the time between midnight and one, 'the dead hour o the night', as version 39I has it. Interestingly, in version 39H the fairy queen says that if only she had known about Janet's plan to rescue Tam Lin at noon, she would have prevented the attempt. Thus both midnight and midday are involved.

[30] Briggs, p. 125.

[31] Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), p. 48.

[32] Purkiss, pp. 38–45.

[33] Briggs, pp. 113–22.

[34] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 179.

[35] This rationale behind the use of the name has long been known, with Kirk voicing it in the very first sentence of

Liminality may also be said to characterize the status of human beings at the moment when they encounter fairies. Whether a given's person transitional state provokes contacts with fairies or is a result of their intervention in the stories in question is often difficult to gauge, yet this could, in fact, be a misguided question. What matters is that the liminal is not only to be seen as an external force that invades the human world but an essential element of the human experience as well, sometimes evident even prior to the fairy encounter. This is well illustrated by Marie's *Lanval*, where the knight who chances upon the fairy lady is simultaneously a member of the inner court and an outcast from an alien land forgotten by Arthur in his act of distributing largesse, still living in an inn and unable to become fully integrated into the court, neither its full-fledged member nor an outcast. In Marie's *Yonec*, in turn, the female protagonist may not immediately seem to be liminal in any sense of the word at the point when she is visited by her fairy lover, yet with her husband's decision to imprison her immediately upon marrying her, she is deprived of a life as such and seems forever frozen in time at the moment of her transition to womanhood, no longer a maid, yet not fully a wife either. The liminal status of human beings thus often appears to be a prerequisite for any involvement with fairies. Apart from finding oneself at the right place or time, it is a given's person transitional state that provokes contacts with fairies, often against the individual's will. Anthropological theories of liminality help understand the mechanics of fairy beliefs, and most tales of encounters involve a 'connection with critical junctures in the life cycle, among them the "liminal", in-between, transitional periods that occur during an individual's movement from one status to another' as understood by Arnold van Gennep.[36] Van Gennep's theory of liminality is founded on a double negative: one going through the liminal stage is neither what he or she used to be, nor the new entity he or she is yet to become. Victor Turner elaborated on this idea, stressing that 'the structural invisibility of liminal personae has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified'.[37] This is why initiands in ceremonies of rites of passage are, as Mary Douglas pointed out, endowed with great power, tapping into the energies inherent in the formlessness of the state they are in.[38] According to Douglas, people in the liminal phase also tend to behave in anti-social ways, and 'for the duration of the rite they have no place in society. Sometimes they actually go to live far outside it'.[39]

Skjelbred mentions the 'churching' of women as a good example of such a rite of passage. She writes about a Norwegian custom following the period of isolation connected with labour, which included

> leading the woman who had given birth into church [...] The belief was that during her confinement the woman was not a worthy member of the church, although she was both christened and confirmed.[40]

the initial chapter of his 'Secret Commonwealth': 'These siths or fairies, they call [...] the good people: (it would seem, to prevent the dint of their ill attempts: for the Irish use to bless all they fear harme of)' (Kirk, p. 79).

[36] Ann Helene Bolstad Skjelbred, 'Rites of Passage as Meeting Place: Christianity and Fairylore in Connection with the Unclean Woman and the Unchristened Child', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1376 (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 215–23 (p. 215).

[37] Turner, p. 96.

[38] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 95–98.

[39] Douglas, p. 97.

[40] Skjelbred, p. 217.

There was something dangerous about such women, something 'heathen', as they were sometimes referred to, that required a special ritualistic remedy.[41] And indeed, according to Diane Purkiss, the notions of birth and infanthood are the conceptual nexus from which the world's beliefs in fairies and analogous creatures spring; Purkiss points to ancient Mesopotamian beliefs about stillborn demons 'trapped between states of being' as symptoms of the same anxiety that produced the idea of a changeling.[42] It should not come as a surprise that of all children it was those who were still awaiting baptism that were particularly prone, according to folklore, to being substituted by a fairy.[43] The same was observed with regard to children who were not yet given a name;[44] in both cases it was the liminal status of the infants, no longer in the womb of the mother but not part of the society as yet, that apparently invited the danger of fairy intervention.

Whether one deals with folklore or literature, liminality emerges as the single and most characteristic defining mark of fairies. While this could in truth be said of a number of other supernatural beings, what makes references to fairies unique in this respect is the sheer number of the overlapping senses of liminality which all work together to structure literary tales of fairy encounters, of which *Sir Orfeo* is a particularly apt example. What directs the reader's attention to the issue of in-betweenness in the tale is naturally the coexistence of the mortal world and Faerie, as well as Orfeo's and Heurodis's special, though unwitting, relations with the otherworld, which effectively render the royal couple liminal personae that belong neither fully to the human nor to the fairy plane. There is also the grafted tree, and this is where an analysis of how the text of the poem exposes its readers to the liminal must naturally begin. The first thing that happens in the tale is that, sleeping under the tree, Queen Heurodis suddenly awakes, only to startle her ladies-in-waiting with an ominous fit of madness:

> Ac, as sone as sche gan awake,
> Sche crid, & lothli 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)[45]

The poem keeps the readers ignorant as to the actual course of events until the queen is taken to a chamber, where her husband solicits her to account for the terror she succumbed to. Only then is it revealed that in her sleep she became an inadvertent object of interest of the king of Faerie. Appearing in a fairy cavalcade,[46] he has forced her to accompany him on a quick tour of his domain and apprised her of his plans to abduct her. The meeting, she reports, concluded

41 Skjelbred, p. 217.

42 Purkiss, p. 15.

43 Skjelbred, p. 219.

44 Joyce Underwood Munro, 'The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1376 (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 251–83 (pp. 275–76).

45 *Sir Orfeo*, ed. by A. J. Bliss, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). The text is that of the Auchinleck manuscript. Since the article delves into the essential hermeneutic ambiguity of the text, only one version of *Sir Orfeo* is referred to in order to avoid focusing on interpretive problems arising solely out of the multiplicity of versions.

46 See William Butler Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (London: Scott, [1888]). The term is glossed by Yeats as a translation of the Irish *Marcra shee* (p. 23). Since the favourite sport of fairies is hunting, such processions on horseback are also known under the name of the Wild Hunt (Briggs, p. 59).

with the queen being commanded on pain of death to return to the tree on the following day, forever to depart from her lands.

Despite mustering a thousand knights in full battle gear and deploying them around the tree, Heurodis's husband fails to prevent the abduction. What follows is Orfeo's decision to abandon the life of a monarch, the story of his life in the wilderness and his eventual encounter with the fairy hunt, which he sees years later in the forest that he took for his hermitage. It is by following the fairy king's train that he arrives in the otherworld, passing through a huge rock that acts as a portal. Having made his way to the castle of the king, he beholds the lost Heurodis 'slepe vnder an ympe-tre' (l. 407). The text does not specify that it is the same tree, but does provide subtle hints that this is the case. The other people Orfeo sees in the castle, all of them frozen in time, were brought to the otherworld just before the moment of their death, or, if one reads the identification of Faerie with the classical Orphean Hades as far-going enough,[47] precisely at that moment:

> Sum stode wiþ-outen hade,
> & sum non armes nade,
> & sum þurth the 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 ther lay on child-bedde,
> Sum ded & sum awedde. (ll. 391–400)

The picture Orfeo sees thus represents the actual scene from which they were all abducted, and just like the knights transported to the other side on horseback, Heurodis seems to have been taken together with the tree, with the general image of the queen and the other victims of the fairies acting like a grim tableau, faithfully reflecting the circumstances of their deathly capture. This would suggest that the tree Orfeo finds her under is the one she went to sleep under in the first place, and there she remains motionless, neither fully alive nor dead.

The text, however, in no way mentions that the tree in Orfeo's palace grounds disappeared. This apparent contradiction is further strengthened by an implied suggestion that the two trees are actually one, for in both cases the adjective 'ympe'[48] is used. Superficially, the detail seems hardly relevant, but its repetition in the story in its key moments foregrounds it and intimates that it has greater bearing on the tale than may be immediately obvious. And if there is just one tree, one has to conclude that it is growing in two places at the same time. Of course, this is quite a literal way of putting it, and one needs to inquire into what this might actually mean. The real issue here is whether or not Heurodis and the other figures Orfeo sees are dead, and this has proved to be a contentious issue in *Orfeo* scholarship. Peter Lucas argues strongly against reading these figures as dead, noting that the text itself tells us that Heurodis is to 'liue' with the fairy king 'euer-mo' (l. 168).[49] Such literal readings fail, however, to reconcile all the elements of the text, for one might just as easily note that some of the figures were

[47] Katharine Briggs points to the coalescence of beliefs in trooping faeries and the cavalcade of the dead; the association of Faerie with the land of the dead is not merely a result of the *Orfeo* poet's juxtaposition of Elfland with the notion of Hades from Greek sources, but features in Celtic lore itself (Briggs, pp. 58–65).

[48] ME *ympe*, OE *impa*, from *impian* (v.), 'to graft' (Jirsa, p. 142).

[49] Peter J. Lucas, 'An Interpretation of *Sir Orfeo*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n. s. 6 (1979), 1–9 (p. 3).

beheaded, and thus quite dead.[50] A look at the presentation of the fairy realm can help the reader understand the text's overall strategy.

It is tempting to read the fairy intruders as fiends, which is what John Block Friedman attempted in his investigation of a possible allegorical interpretation of the story. Friedman even goes so far as to state 'that the *Orfeo* poet has a conception of [Heurodis] which *required* her to be attacked by Satan'.[51] On the other hand, it has also been pointed out that the description of the fairy realm, and especially the castle of the fairy king, owes a lot to the imagery of heaven.[52] With its blinding luminosity and precious gems ('riche stones', l. 371), the fairy castle in *Sir Orfeo* is not so different from the city of New Jerusalem in *Pearl*, at least when seen from a distance. It is no wonder then that Orfeo himself thought at first to have found himself at the 'proude court of Paradis' (l. 376). Rather, this is neither heaven nor hell, but the text appears to play with both ideas, never dismissing them fully and prompting the readers to consider not only the possibility that this is neither this nor that, but also that, in some sense, the place is both.[53] This basic feature of liminality, as outlined by Turner, is also at work in the presentation of the still tableau of figures in the castle — they are neither alive nor dead, yet both alive and dead at the same time. This, in turn, serves to accentuate the virtual omnipotence of the fairy intruders, and, if one reads them as forces of fortune, to position the human protagonists, and by extension the human condition as such, *vis a vis* the unfathomable decrees of fate.

James Knapp suggests that *Sir Orfeo* owes a lot to the Boethian tradition,[54] pointing out that both Boethius and King Orfeo 'are seen at some point as suffering a reversal of Fortune' and that Orfeo, 'like Boethius, has been ravished of his happiness by an unexpected stroke of Fortune […] which is baffling to him in its apparent senselessness'.[55] The poem indeed underscores the futility of human endeavours, as it is through submission to the decrees of fate rather than engaging in full-scale search efforts that the king reclaims his wife; he spots the fairy cavalcade by mere accident and the earlier attempts to stop the abduction with the help of his army reveal how utterly powerless he is. *Sir Orfeo* presents a world where calamities pose a terrifyingly real threat to human security and continually taint the sense of peace and order,

[50] Bruce Mitchell sees the text's lack of clarity as to whether these figures are alive or dead as evidence for the passage (present in roughly the same form in the Auchinleck and Ashmole MSS and missing from the Harley MS.) being a 'wildly incongruous' interpolation that ruins the harmony of the original narrative. His argument is that it is difficult to accept the paradox of the figures being both alive and dead, just as it is difficult to reconcile the 'sinister chill' of Faerie with images that suggest it is a rather pleasant place. See Bruce Mitchell, 'The Faery World of *Sir Orfeo*', *Neophilologus*, 48 (1964), 155–59. The present article aims to present a reading of the Auchinleck text of *Sir Orfeo* that allows one to avoid such definitive statements and to appreciate the contradictory character of the narrative and the moral ambiguity of the fairies in their own right.

[51] John Block Friedman, 'Eurydice, Heurodis, and the Noon-Day Demon', *Speculum*, 41 (1966), 22–29 (p. 26). Emphasis original.

[52] Ad Putter, 'The Influence of Visions of the Otherworld on Some Medieval Romances', in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture, 6 (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 237–51 (pp. 240–41).

[53] A similar tension is at work in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with some critics reading the Green Knight as a devilish agent and other as a God-figure. For the former view, see Brian Stone, 'The Common Enemy of Man', in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. by Brian Stone, corr. repr. (London: Penguin, 1974), pp. 116–28; see also Claude Luttrell, 'The Folk-Tale Element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Studies in Philology*, 77 (1980), 105–27; for the latter, see Gerald Morgan, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Idea of Righteousness* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1991). The Knight's fairy status seems to invite and provide for such an ambiguity of interpretations.

[54] It might be of significance that *The Consolation of Philosophy* itself contains an account of the story of Orpheus.

[55] James F. Knapp, 'The Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 29 (1968), 263–73 (p. 266).

a world which in this respect mirrors the nature of human life, contingent upon unfathomable decrees of fate, embodied here in the king of Faerie and his whim to possess Heurodis.

Liminality helps to hyperbolize the power of fairies even more than the idea of fairy magic being unstoppable. Investigating the figures frozen in time in the fairy castle, Anne Marie D'Arcy points to the tradition of imperial displays of spoils of war and argues that 'in the manner of Xerxes, Alexander, Marcellus, Ptolemy Soter or Constantine, [the fairy king's] seizures are displayed as testament to the superior power of the Faerie realm and to his own imperium'.[56] This display of power amounts, however, to more than just a 'translation' of statues to a site of conquest, for in a sense Heurodis has not really moved — there she remains, under the same tree, still asleep in a kind of a dazed stupor — and yet, in another sense, she is free to leave the place to join the fairy cavalcade. This makes her recovery even more of a challenge than retrieving her from the court of Alexander or Constantine would, for 'there' escapes clear temporal and spatial, or even logical, approximations.

Whether the queen was taken with the palace tree or transported to under another tree is a very literal question that is difficult to avoid, even if no answer can fully satisfy the curiosity of the reader. What can be ascertained about it is that the *ympe-tre* acts as a portal that links the two worlds, similarly to the huge rocky portal that Orfeo discovers following the cavalcade. Unlike the other gateway, however, it is not always open and the difficulty in getting to the other side does not lie in establishing its location, which is clearly well known, for it lies in the homely palace grounds. Its liminal character is only activated by the 'vndrentide' (l. 65), the noontime that sees Heurodis repose under the boughs, as well as the queen's sleep, a condition in which she finds herself halfway between life and death.[57] It also seems very likely that, in the first place, it is made possible by the grafting, the coexistence of two organisms within one bark mirroring the simultaneous presence of the tree in the two worlds. The combination of these factors allows the tree to function as a portal and explains the fairy king's command for the queen to return to the tree at noon on the following day.[58] In line with both the folk and literary fairy tradition, the gateway to Faerie remains easily available yet closed until various liminalities — spatial, temporal and ontological — overlap and force it open, taking Heurodis completely unawares.

Orfeo and his wife may also be seen as liminal figures themselves, though admittedly this is more of a consequence of their interactions with fairies than the original trigger of the encounter. Insanity, or rather the readers' possible interpretation of both the king and queen's behaviour as insane, is the vehicle which the narrative uses to endow the royal couple with liminality. In fact, what at first glance appears to be the queen's fit of madness prompted by the terror of the abduction can also be read in quite a different way.[59] One may wonder what

[56] Anne Marie D'Arcy, 'The Faerie King's *Kunstkammer*: Imperial Discourse and the Wondrous in *Sir Orfeo*', *Review of English Studies*, 58/233 (2007), 10–33 (p. 21).

[57] *Vndrentide*, or *vnder-tide*, could refer either to noon or to 'tierce, the third hour of the canonical day, which ends at nine o'clock in the morning' (*Old English Dictionary* quoted in Jirsa, p. 141). Jirsa suggests that the text invokes the former meaning, as indicated by the phrase 'hot vnder-tides' in line 282 (p. 142).

[58] The queen does not mention the fairy king specifying the exact time, but the text features the time of *vnder-tide* again in its description of the knights' preparations on the following day and of their anticipation of the abduction attempt.

[59] For an informed reading of the tale which not only identifies the queen's affliction as madness but also points to its schizophrenic quality, see A. C. Spearing, 'Madness and Gender', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. by Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 258–72. See also Derek Pearsall, 'Madness in *Sir Orfeo*', in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills*, ed. Jennifer Fellows and others (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 51–63. My approach does

the fairy king actually wants from Heurodis. Keeble observes that, unlike in other Breton lays, 'no specifically amorous motive is attributed to the fairy', but at the same time acknowledges the importance of the spring setting

> when miri & hot is þe day,
> & o-way beþ winter-schours,
> & eueri feld is ful of flours. (ll. 58–60)[60]

It is in the 'comessing of May' (l. 57) that Heurodis reposes under the tree, and so, although no direct motivation for the abduction is given, the informed readers of medieval romances, familiar with the convention, are likely to assume that this is yet another case of a fairy looking for a lover. The same interpretation of the setting may also easily be ascribed to Heurodis, for as a representative of the human plane of reality in the tale, she belongs to a world the medieval readers would likely identify with and be a part of.

When John Block Friedman noted the curious omission of the motive for the abduction in *Sir Orfeo*, he found this particularly puzzling given the overall level of detail in the story.[61] If this omission is indeed meaningful, then its meaning actually forecloses any attempt to determine the exact nature of the fairy king's true intentions and the rationale (or its lack, that is madness) behind the reaction of Heurodis. On the one hand, the intention of the fairy king seems rather obvious, for the notion of fairy lovers, or even rapists, who set upon mortals was widespread. One may mention here the story of *Sir Degaré* or Chaucer's ironic treatment of the theme in the Wife of Bath's tale, where friars seem to have supplanted fairies in being the ones who act as 'incubi' towards women.[62] On the other hand, the fairy king in no way consummates the relationship, and when Orfeo visits his castle he seems preoccupied with other business than taking advantage of Heurodis. The motive for the abduction thus remains both essentially obvious and inherently enigmatic. This ambiguity as to the reason behind the abduction, in turn, has a bearing on the interpretation of the condition of Heurodis.

As Katherine Briggs notes, the belief in mortals serving as fairy wives or husbands has been one of the most widespread and characteristic elements of fairy lore.[63] This initial assumption may have been strong enough to prompt the queen to disfigure herself in order to discourage the fairy king from acting on what she may have believed to be at least partly desire.[64] Caldwell argues that 'Heurodis's self-mutilation [...] connects her to a tradition of holy and chaste women in the early Middle Ages' who used 'deliberate disfigurement . . . to prevent their being raped by invaders. The preferable form of mutilation was something highly visible and easily accomplished', which Heurodis's 'crached visage' (l. 80) clearly conforms to.[65] From the reader's hermeneutical perspective, the queen's intentions hover between madness and

not in any way contradict readings that acknowledge the madness of Heurodis or construct coherent readings of the poem around it. Instead, it points to the fact that whatever arguments one brings into the discussion to posit madness as a key notion in the lay, the text never allows one to settle the matter for good.

60 N. H. Keeble, 'The Narrative Achievement of Sir Orfeo', *English Studies*, 56 (1975), 193–206 (pp. 195–96).

61 Friedman, p. 22. Friedman notes that passages about Orfeo growing a beard in the woods serve an important structural function, as the beard allows him to enter his castle *incognito* upon his return.

62 'In every bussh or under every tree / There is noon oother incubus but he': Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 84 (ll. 879–80 of Fragment III). Note the reference to assaulting women under a tree. For a comprehensive treatment of the subject, see Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*.

63 Briggs, pp. 146–54.

64 Caldwell, pp. 291–92.

65 Caldwell, pp. 291, 295.

clever forethought, and it is impossible to establish beyond any doubt whether what Heurodis does upon awakening amounts to a case of total mental collapse or is merely a symptom of a premeditated, though self-injurious and ultimately ineffective, defence strategy. In effect, neither the fairy king's, nor the queen's intentions seem clear.

With Orfeo and his sojourns in the wood, the readers face the same kind of interpretive hesitation. The problem here is not so much the king's decision to live the life of a beggar as the fact that many a time he chances upon the fairy hunt:

> He miȝt se him bisides
> (Oft in hot vnder-tides)
> Þe king o fairy wiþ his rout
> Com to hunt him al about
> Wiþ dim cri & bloweing,
> & houndes also wiþ him berking;
> Ac no best þai no nome,
> No neuer he nist whider þai bi-come. (ll. 281–88)

Knapp is right in pointing out that 'the text provides no evidence whatsoever that this fairy world is a creation of Orfeo's disturbed mind' and the concreteness of this experience is further strengthened by the fact that it is by following the fairies that Orfeo reaches their world.[66] There is nothing, however, that would thoroughly dismiss D. M. Hill's interpretation that 'the passage constitutes a representation of the threat of madness: an objectifying of a mental state',[67] and that we can 'see the hunt as part of a pictorial representation of the threat of insanity in the form of hallucination'.[68] After all, the text makes it clear that the visions of the fairy cavalcade come to Orfeo 'in hot vnder-tides', and the readers may reasonably attempt to dismiss the experience as post-traumatic hallucinations or visions induced by sunstroke. Curiously enough, if they do so, they run into the paradox of having to account for Orfeo's discovery of the rocky gateway upon following the hunt and have little choice but to resign to the realization that the case is hermeneutically irresolvable; on the other hand, if they take the visions at face value, they accept the significance of the temporal liminality of midday which apparently prompts the experience. Just like Heurodis's self-mutilation, which lies half-way between madness and pragmatism, Orfeo's woodland visions are liminal — somewhere between dream and reality. And in an analogous fashion, the rhetorical structure of the tale leaves its readers no choice but to face and accept the liminal on one level or another.

There is more to be said about Orfeo's journey into the wilderness, but the presence of this kind of an interpretive trap set for the readers calls for a closer look at *Sir Orfeo* from a metaliterary perspective. For the transgression from one domain to the other is at the root of not just the plot of this poem, but also of its generic self-identification as a Breton lay. Keeble observes that 'the first twenty-four lines of the poem [...] constitute the fullest Middle English account we have of the Breton lays'.[69] They are indeed laden with information about the lays, providing something of a working definition of the genre. The text describes the lays as tales of magic and adventure, both serious and humorous, but in most cases indebted to fairy lore in one way or another:

[66] Knapp, p. 265.
[67] Cited in Knapp, p. 264.
[68] Cited in Knapp, p. 265.
[69] Keeble, p. 194.

Layes þat ben in harping
Ben y-founde of ferli þing:
Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo,
& sum of ioie & mirþe al-so,
& sum of trecherie & of gile,
Of old auentours that fel while,
& sum of bourdes & ribaudy,
& mani þer beþ of fairy;
[…]
In Breteyne þis layes were wrouȝt,
[First y-founde & forth y-brouȝt,
Of auentours þat fel bi dayes,
Wher-of Bretouns maked her layes.] (ll. 3–10, 13–16)

One is struck by the contrast between the repetitive 'sum' and the insistence that within this hotchpotch of themes '*mani* þer beþ of fairy'. Keeble believes, however, that 'we need to notice that the point that the poet is making' by ascribing authorship of the tale to others, Bretons in this case, 'is a Medieval commonplace'.[70]

While medieval literature abounds in such references to sources, true or fictional, the remark in *Sir Orfeo* curiously positions the text halfway between Brittany and England. At the same time, the plot itself merges the ancient and the medieval, situating the action neither fully in the Roman province of Thrace nor medieval England. Instead, Orfeo reigns over Inglond from his kingly seat in Traciens, identified by the text as Winchester (ll. 49–50). Conflation and confusion of sources may be common among medieval authors, but *Sir Orfeo* is quite unique in this respect in the way the poet does this. A look at the opening lines of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suffices to emphasise the difference:

Hit was Ennias the athel and his highe kynde
That sithen depreced provinces, and patrounes bicome
Welneghe of al the wele in the West Iles:
Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swythe,
With gret bobbaunce that burghe he biges upon fyrst,
And nevenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
Ticius to Tuskan, and teldes bigynnes;
Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes up homes;
And fer over the French flod Felix Brutus
On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settes
wyth wynne. (ll. 5–15)[71]

The basic idea here is one of progeny and the transfer of culture to far-off regions, which forges links between them and their distant points of origin. Such was the official ideological foundation of Ancient Rome, as attested by Virgil's *Aeneid*, which saw Aeneas, mentioned here by the *Gawain*-Poet, flee Troy to settle upon the Tiber. This conventional kind of linkage is evident in the tale of King Orfeo in the way the text posits itself stretched across the English Channel, fusing the Breton tradition of lays with the still developing Middle English poetics.

The curious mixture of ancient Thrace with the capital of Wessex, however, strikes a somewhat different note, as the two do not merely maintain a connection over a large distance,

[70] Keeble, p. 194.

[71] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by A. C.

as Troy and Rome would, but actually merge in this tale, though without losing their own identity. Traciens is still Thrace and Winchester remains a city in Inglond, but the text allows them to coexist on one plane of reality. This move, fundamentally alien to both the *Gawain*-poet and Virgil, is at the core of the poem and structures it on all levels. The mortal world and Faerie coexist within the fabric of the tale just like the ancient and medieval threads from which the fabric was woven.

To uncover more of the tale's indebtedness to liminality, one may also invoke the more theoretical, or anthropological, formulations of the notion associated with rites of passage. It is never explained in the poem why Orfeo abdicates, leaving his kingdom in the hands of the steward, and removes himself to the woods. It has been argued that the loss of Heurodis and the loss of kingly power may be connected, one triggering the other.[72] This may be read as an expression of the integrity of the whole experience of the fairy intervention, with the abduction of Heurodis effectively enforcing a liminal state upon Orfeo and pushing him away from his royal duties, the society and all the categories that had thitherto defined his existence. Deep in the heart of darkness, not just that of the forest but also of his inner self, he has to shape himself anew out of the raw elemental energies that the text so strongly emphasizes in its descriptions of his lying 'on hard hethe' (l. 243), or on the moss with 'wilde wormes' (l. 252), from which, in his unkempt condition, he seems hardly differentiated. And it is in the woods that he rediscovers his talent for the harp, which gives him a different identity, that of a minstrel, and the powers to outsmart the fairy king and regain both his wife and, eventually, the throne. He never sheds off this identity, ushering himself into his long-abandoned palace to the accompaniment of his own harp, and as he reclaims the crown and undergoes ritualistic ablution and ceremonial hair-cutting — as they 'baþed him, & schaued his berd' (l. 585) — the text leaves the readers with the image of an enthroned minstrel-king, this reincorporation of Orfeo with the now-altered identity into the social and administrative structure of the court concluding his rite of passage.

One other theoretically-oriented approach to *Sir Orfeo* has been to invoke the notion of abjection. James Wade refers to this idea in his discussion of the numerous mutilated bodies arrested in their motion in the fairy castle.[73] He reads the arbitrariness of the fairy king's whim in 'keeping such abjections'[74] as the key to the interpretation of this scene, but one may also wonder about the actual nature of abjection itself, which, as Wade puts it, is 'a physical manifestation of the ambiguous, of that which disturbs identity, system, order' and 'traumatically shows us our own death'.[75] One of the original examples of the abject given by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* is indeed the dead body,[76] but the mechanics of the particular feeling of horror which Kristeva termed abjection are better revealed through the study of the way the human mind fails to make sense of bodily integrity and separation. Kristeva's example is that of nausea and vomit,[77] wherein the expulsion of matter from one's digestive system does not effect a proper 'othering' and separation but amounts to expelling what remains part of oneself, producing a horrifying blurring of boundaries that momentarily

Cawley and J. J. Anderson (London: Dent, 1976), pp. 157–254.

72 For more on this connection, see Oren Falk, 'The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30 (2000), 247–74.

73 James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 76–80.

74 Wade, p. 80.

75 Wade, p. 80.

76 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

77 Kristeva, pp. 2–3.

renders the categories of self and other, familiar and unfamiliar, or those of inside and outside, invalid.

Kristeva's psychoanalytic inclinations strongly suggest one more example, perhaps the true origin of the abject as such — the separation of mother and child, where the categories of 'I' and 'other' also falter. In *Sir Orfeo*, the abject understood in this way merges with the liminal, showing that the two notions approximate in their meaning the same phenomenon. Diane Purkiss rightly points out that the vision of bodies in the fairy castle is 'a collective spectacle of horror, but it is also a portrait of those whose deaths have come through a violent assault on the body's integrity, whether from within or without, by another'.[78] This is indeed what connects people 'with-outen hade' (l. 391), or those who 'þurth þe bodi hadde wounde' (l. 393), with 'wives […] on child-bedde' (l. 399). All these people, liminally positioned between life and death but no longer subject to either of the two, are at the same time pure abjections, not only because they are corpses in the eyes of Orfeo and may induce in him, or the readers, this particular feeling of horror,[79] but also because their condition reflects the underlying principles of abjection — the confusion of self and other, and the violation done to the stability of bodily integrity. One cannot help but agree with Wade that whatever really happened to Heurodis, she was subjected to 'a kind of psychological ravishing',[80] which the violated bodies of the fairy king's victims, the queen among them, metaphorically imply.

It is also possible to connect this conflux of liminality and abjection with a very common trope in fairy beliefs, namely the notion of bodily contamination. The idea that eating fairy food somehow conditions the perpetual entrapment of the foolish mortal is well known,[81] but, as Purkiss argues, it may also manifest itself through the prohibition of speaking:

> To speak is to give something of yourself away, and there are powers eager to make use of what you have. To speak is also to open the body. Just as one must not eat the fairy food, so one must close one's mouth on words.[82]

> Like eating the fairy food, speaking opens the mouth and allows change to become permanent; once the boundaries of the body have been breached, magic can be done.[83]

This may help explain the speechless gazes of Orfeo and Heurodis upon their encounter in the woods (ll. 323–24); while the lack of words between the two may easily be read psychologically, it might also reflect their instinctive recalcitrance towards further enslavement by fairies.

The impression left by the story is, in the end, essentially optimistic, despite the rather pessimistic vision of human life subject to the whims of fortune. The boundary between possession and loss in an individual's life may be traversed at any moment, even within the palace grounds which, of all places, ought to be a safe haven for the royal couple, and until Orfeo and Heurodis complete their rite of passage, events move in one direction only, which is symbolically mirrored by the *ympe-tre* portal, which too only works one way. The entropy

78 Purkiss, p. 77.

79 D'Arcy (p. 11) is right to note that 'the narrator does not register horror on the part of Orfeo, even after he sees [Heurodis], but rather a sense of strangely detached wonder' (ll. 405–6, 409–10). My argument is therefore that abjection has more to do here with the violation of bodily integrity than any immediate emotion of fear or disgust.

80 Wade, p. 77.

81 Carole G. Silver, 'Tabu: Eating and Drinking, Motifs C200–C299', in *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, ed. by Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy (Armonk, New York: Sharpe, 2005), pp. 103–7.

82 Purkiss, p. 57.

83 Purkiss, p. 112.

of the world seems invulnerable to resistance on man's part, and yet King Orfeo manages to regain what was lost. Conscious efforts and kingly might amount to nothing, but the power of his inner strength, his music, and his love for Heurodis are enough to supply a denouement that for once overcomes the liminal and contingent nature of man's existence. Yet the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* are definitely more than just embodiments of fate or fortune. They are the pure figures of liminality, and alongside unsettling the lives of Orfeo and his wife, their presence in the narrative undermines the solidity of basic conceptual categories such as the self and the other, or the familiar and the alien. Beneath the story of King Orfeo weeping for his beloved wife lies the horror of the maddening blurring of categories and the dread of the disintegration of one's identity.

What this article has shown is that liminality is more than just a major theme underlying the narrative of *Sir Orfeo*. It is also, hauntingly so, a dynamic principle underlying the structuring of the tale's hermeneutic reception, shaping the readers' experience of the text. Their grasp of what they are exposed to is as confused as that of Orfeo or Heurodis, and they struggle as much as the tale's human protagonists in trying to discover the fairy king's true intentions or to ascertain his moral alignment. Fairies produce a change in the life of Orfeo just as much as they affect the hermeneutic process of the tale's interpretation. In an analogous fashion to Orfeo being pushed against his will into a liminal state from which he has to re-emerge, the readers of the romance are made to piece together a number of overlapping liminalities in an attempt to produce a coherent understanding of the text. Their experience is one that brings them face to face with the terror of the threshold embodied by the fairies.